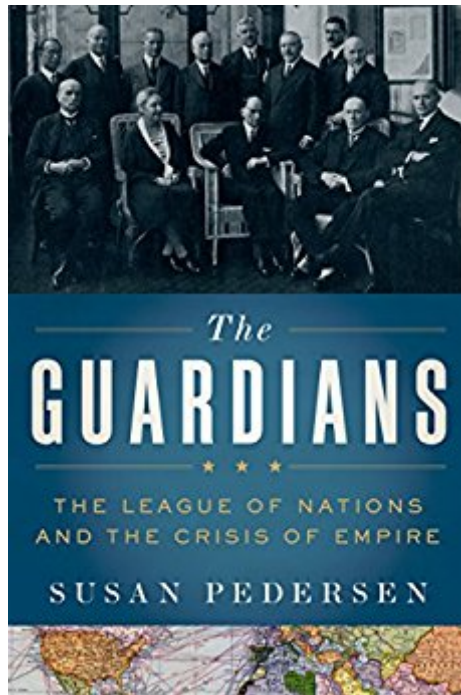


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The Guardians: The League Of Nations And The Crisis Of Empire



Synopsis

Winner of the Cundill Prize in Historical Literature Shortlisted for the Lionel Gelber PrizeAt the end of the First World War, the Paris Peace Conference saw a battle over the future of empire. The victorious allied powers wanted to annex the Ottoman territories and German colonies they had occupied; Woodrow Wilson and a groundswell of anti-imperialist activism stood in their way. France, Belgium, Japan and the British dominions reluctantly agreed to an Anglo-American proposal to hold and administer those allied conquests under "mandate" from the new League of Nations. In the end, fourteen mandated territories were set up across the Middle East, Africa and the Pacific. Against all odds, these disparate and far-flung territories became the site and the vehicle of global transformation. In this masterful history of the mandates system, Susan Pedersen illuminates the role the League of Nations played in creating the modern world. Tracing the system from its creation in 1920 until its demise in 1939, Pedersen examines its workings from the realm of international diplomacy; the viewpoints of the League's experts and officials; and the arena of local struggles within the territories themselves. Featuring a cast of larger-than-life figures, including Lord Lugard, King Faisal, Chaim Weizmann and Ralph Bunche, the narrative sweeps across the globe-from windswept scrublands along the Orange River to famine-blighted hilltops in Rwanda to Damascus under French bombardment-but always returns to Switzerland and the sometimes vicious battles over ideas of civilization, independence, economic relations, and sovereignty in the Geneva headquarters. As Pedersen shows, although the architects and officials of the mandates system always sought to uphold imperial authority, colonial nationalists, German revisionists, African-American intellectuals and others were able to use the platform Geneva offered to challenge their claims. Amid this cacophony, imperial statesmen began exploring new means - client states, economic concessions - of securing Western hegemony. In the end, the mandate system helped to create the world in which we now live. A riveting work of global history, *The Guardians* enables us to look back at the League with new eyes, and in doing so, appreciate how complex, multivalent, and consequential this first great experiment in internationalism really was.

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Customer Reviews

In a time when the likes of Downton Abbey has taken the literary world by, well not storm so much as a long (suffering) sigh, this is a wonderful look at the period that gets tossed around fictionally a bit too much. By this I mean that it seems that every Edwardian novel has to have WWI looming. Changing. Horrifying. Yet it comes off glib and the changes that took place after seem more in tune to making sure the heroine gets a job, bobs her hair and dances to ragtime. I know true historians are probably clicking off this review by now. If you stay I can say that Pedersen is sharp and detailed and explores territory that I found fresh and yet substantive. This is a wonderfully close and personal look at the figures that helped set up the stage not just for the next conflict but also the more successful attempt to prevent a third. It also looks at how the old guard and the emerging new guard saw the world and how it should, could and would change. And how it shouldn't, couldn't and wouldn't. These are larger than life individuals who alone could support a biography of interest. Bringing them together in one study though doesn't detract any and paints the larger picture with plenty of small detail. This is a historical study that reads as fast and sure as many fiction and shows why television and film often so much fails in capturing the fascinating elements that make history. And of course make history come alive. For me it was a book that not only had me scrambling to see what Wikipedia had to say but also find as many old maps of the time as well.

The founding of the League of Nations in 1920 owed much to the powerful support of the American President of the time, Woodrow Wilson. (He received the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts.)

But the United States Senate opposed American membership, Wilson's term as President ended in 1921 and the United States remained on the outside. The Soviet Union was also absent. So too " until 1926 " was Germany. So the league was not only essentially of the victors of the First World War, but was, as Susan Pedersen puts it, a "League of Empires" | not only Britain and France, but Italy, Japan and Belgium, the Netherlands and Portugal as well " set the tone. The League contributed little or nothing towards prevention of a Second World War, and even whilst that war was still underway (and the League continued in Geneva with a skeleton staff), plans were laid for its replacement with the United Nations, to be established in New York. Susan Pedersen's impressively researched book covers the structural history of the League of Nations from 1920 to 1946 essentially as background information; her chief interest is in the mandated territories administered by Britain, France, South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Japan, and overseen by the League's Mandates Commission. The mandated territories were former German and Ottoman colonies and were located in Africa, the Middle East and the South West Pacific. She covers developments in the period 1920 to 1940 in great detail, following the principal figures on the Mandates Commission and other key players so closely that as readers we come to know them rather well.

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