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BOOK REVIEW

A Sacred Trust: The League of Nations and Africa, 1929-1946. Michael D. Callahan. Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 2004. 318 pp.

From the third quarter of the 19th century, the different European powers began their scramble for Africa. The 1884-85 Berlin Conference between the different colonial powers formalised this brutal process. By the time the First World War broke out in 1914, almost all of Africa—save Liberia and Ethiopia—had been occupied by the different European powers, including France, Britain and Germany. Defeated in the war, the 1919 Treaty of Versailles knocked Germany out of Africa and the victorious powers insisted on it being deprived of its occupied African territories. The Treaty of Versailles also led to the formation of the League of Nations. These territories were thus to be administered by Britain and France as a “sacred trust” under the mandates system of the League of Nations.

How did the mandates system work from 1929 to the end of the Second World War? Not being the same as pure colonialism according to the mandates provisions, what impact did it have on European colonialism? Since both Germany, which was deprived its colonies, and Italy, which never got any mandated territory, later joined the League, what effect did this have on the system? How did the two main mandatory powers differ in their respect of the legal and humanitarian provisions of the mandates system? These are some of the critical questions that Michael D. Callahan attempts to answer in *A Sacred Trust*, and does it quite brilliantly.

The author begins by highlighting the moral contradictions of European colonialism in Africa and elsewhere in what is now known as the Third World. Having discussed the racist underpinnings of colonialism, he enquires into the impact of the mandates system on European perceptions of race, development and civilization. He does this particularly in relation to the status and nationals of the two independent African states, Ethiopia and Liberia, both of whom were members of the League and whose nationals were by the virtue of the mandates system allowed to travel within and live in any mandated territory enjoying all the rights that nationals of any other member state of the League, including the mandatory power, were accorded.

Most Africans do not see much difference between colonialism and the mandates system as far as their philosophical underpinnings are concerned. Both derived from the illusory conviction that Africans were not civilized and could not govern themselves and thus had to be governed by white people. There is no better illustration of this than entrusting the German South West Africa (now Namibia) to the Union of South Africa with its despicable white supremacist regime. Pretoria was to administer Namibia on behalf of Britain. This issue does not elude the author and he provides many quotations and public and private statements by the different European officials of the League supporting this. While acknowledging some breaches of some provisions of the mandates system, especially in French mandatory territories, the author argues that the system was by and large respected by the mandatory powers. He points out, however, that this was mainly because Germany and Italy were pressing for it and failure to do so would have deprived France and Britain of their argument for continuing refusal to return Germany's former African colonies.

Since Germany, Italy, and also the United States (although not a member of the League), insisted on the full respect of the provisions of the mandates system, the mandatory powers had no choice but to play by the rules though grudgingly at times. This apparently gave more influence to Geneva. There were also some European liberals who joined their voices with those of Germany and Italy, though with different motives, for a strict respect of the mandates system. This too gave some weight to public opinion in London and Paris. The author was therefore expected to take account of the views and activities of all these forces and assess their impact on the mandates system in Africa. Yet not only did he succeed in providing the reader with a detailed account of how life went on in the mandated territories between their African inhabitants and the mandatory powers; but he also looks at how these powers dealt with the system in London and Paris on the one hand, and how both Britain and France acted in

concert vis-à-vis Germany and Italy and the wider League membership. In the book's seven chapters, the author succeeds in providing a truly comprehensive study of the labyrinthine subject that was the mandates system, as it related to Africa.

One could have passed judgment on the book's frequent reproduction of quite long quotations and statements without an equally rigorous analytical study of these statements or quotations. However, looking at the book quite critically, it becomes apparent that the author could not have done differently and still produce such an outstanding history book. Contrary to the preferred approach of most modern scholars of the League of Nations who tend to concentrate on the organization's wider political problems, Michael D. Callahan delimitates the purview of his study to the specific case of the mandates system as it relates to Africa. In the volume under review, he further narrows down the scope to the period between 1929 and 1946. I believe this allows the book to have a much focused scope than it may have had otherwise.

In my opinion, *A Sacred Trust* is extremely interesting and well researched. Written in most parts from rare primary sources, Callahan's book can truly be considered a classical book and one that many historians of the League of Nations' relationship with Africa and European colonialism in the interwar period would find useful to consult. It should be an essential reference for any researcher on these subjects.

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