

## **The development of international organisations before 1919**

The profound changes in the political, economic and social landscape during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were instrumental both in establishing a favourable climate for the proliferation of international organisations and in determining their agenda. This is most obvious in the fields of trade and international communications. The massive increase in production sparked off by the Industrial Revolution led to an equally heavy growth in trade; with the coming of steam this trade was carried on at ever-faster rates on land and sea. As more and more of the globe was penetrated by European imperialism, so a highly complex worldwide economic network emerged. This influenced the growth of international institutions in four distinct ways. Firstly, the greater number of international transactions increased the risk of war arising out of some trivial conflict. This was one factor behind the growing tendency during the nineteenth century for states to accept international arbitration of various types of disputes where, as the standard formula ran, 'neither honour nor vital interests' were involved. Secondly, agreed regulations and common standards had to be determined for such purposes as patenting inventions, classifying goods for customs duties and deciding exchange rates between currencies. What were then termed 'public international unions' were established to deal with such matters, and by the end of the nineteenth century the movement towards international standardisation had begun in less technical and more obviously political fields, such as the protection of workers and children. Thirdly, the traditional insistence by states upon a rigid interpretation of their sovereign rights became an increasingly serious barrier to the efficient conduct of international business. The classic illustration of this concerned the transmission of postal items across frontiers. Before the establishment of the General Postal Union in 1875 and its successor, the Universal Postal Union in 1878, international postal communication was governed by numerous bilateral treaties rather than by a single convention. The objective of each state was to ensure that the balance of financial advantage deriving from these treaties was in its favour, which led to extremely high foreign postage rates being charged by all. As charges were levied at each frontier, the cost of sending a postal item from one country to another varied according to the route taken, with a 1/2 oz letter from the United States to Australia costing anything from 5 cents to 1.02 USD. Fourthly, the economies of the major powers were becoming increasingly interdependent, which provided them with certain mutual interests to set against their many rivalries. The nineteenth century saw the first attempts to translate this interdependence into institutional form through the establishment of international commissions to regulate the trade of specific commodities, such as sugar.<sup>1</sup> Another effect of interdependence was that it helped to internationalise issues - to turn what would once have been purely national questions into matters of general concern. The control of disease was one such area, in which several international unions had been set up by the end of the century. The first of these, in 1838, was the Conseil Supérieur de Santé at Constantinople, whose aim was to prevent the introduction of cholera into Turkey. This was followed by sanitary councils in Tangier, Teheran, Alexandria and elsewhere and eventually by the important Sanitary Convention of 1903 and the establishment of the International Office of Public Hygiene in 1907.

None of these landmarks in the history of international organisation had an untroubled birth, nor did they hint at any prospect of more ambitious undertakings

being successful. France, fearing possible financial losses, had delayed the formation of the postal union; Britain had resisted for many years any attempt to sign a sanitary convention on the grounds that this might harm its maritime interests. The sanitary councils had themselves been arenas for the conflicts of great power interests that went on throughout the nineteenth century.

The continuing influence of national rivalries may be illustrated further by two of the most acclaimed events of the turn of the century: the Hague Conferences of 1899 and 1907. These originated from a proposal for a disarmament conference made by Tsar Nicholas II and marked the high point in the history of inter-national arbitration. They were also the most widely attended conferences to date, with delegates from Europe, North and South America and Asia, their popularity being a clear response to the interdependence that many now felt to be a crucial factor in international relations. As the President of the first Conference put it: 'We perceive that there is a community of material and moral interests between nations, which is constantly increasing. . . . If a nation wished to remain isolated it could not . . . It is part of a single organism.' The most important implication of this interdependence was, he felt, that 'when a dispute arises between two or more nations, the others, without being directly involved, are seriously affected'. This in turn meant that further machinery for states to submit their disputes for mediation, conciliation or arbitration needed to be developed.

Although many delegates echoed these sentiments, they found it more difficult to agree upon the concrete obligations their states would have to accept if these principles were to be given substance. The discussions at the Hague Conferences consisted of a curious amalgam of idealistic statements of purpose and careful disavowals by everyone that they were undertaking any binding commitments. Hence the specific achievements of the first Conference were few: a so-called Permanent Court of Arbitration and some provision for the use of International Commissions of Inquiry in certain disputes. The second Conference revised the conventions that had been agreed by the first and added ten new ones. Somewhat ominously these mostly concerned the laws of war. No significant progress was made in the area of disarmament - the original occasion of the Conferences.

The Hague agreements were hailed at the time as a new beginning in international relations but they achieved little, and when the League of Nations was being constructed at the Paris Peace Conference, the Hague experience was generally ignored. Concerned about this, Léon Bourgeois, the French delegate to the Paris Commission responsible for drafting the Covenant, who had played a notable part at The Hague, made several attempts to link the Covenant to the work of the Hague Conferences.