

On the coattails of Empire. Norway and imperial internationalism in the time of the League of Nations¹

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¹ This article is partly based on my PhD thesis defended at the University of Oslo in 2017, though the perspective has been expanded and new literature and additional archival sources have been consulted. See M. Stachurska-Kounta, *Norway and the League of Nations 1919-1939. A Small State's Quest for International Peace*, PhD diss., University of Oslo 2017. The first version of the paper was presented at the workshop “Scandinavian Multilateral Diplomacy: From the League of Nations to post-war IOs” which took place 2-4 September 2020. The workshop was part of the NOS-HS funded project Scandinavian Internationalist Diplomacy, 1920s-1970s. I want also to thank Professor Emeritus Helge Pharo from the University of Oslo and two anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments.

Abstract

The popular perception concerning Norway's particular commitment to peace and impartiality in international politics has from time to time been bracketed with the fact that the country has no colonial past. Such understanding fails to address Norway's rise to a major position in the global shipping system and maritime trade during the colonial era and that this economic expansion would have not been possible without Britain's liberal trade policy and imperial rule. The article shows that reliance on Britain's global leadership moulded Norway's vision of the emerging international order in the aftermath of World War I and was one of the most crucial arguments when the country became member of the League of Nations. It argues that Norway's advocacy of free trade as a key to international peace in the interwar period has to be seen in the light of the country's commercial interests and assumptions about Britain's civilizing mission.

Key words: Norwegian peace tradition, British empire, League of Nations, British liberalism, free trade, imperial internationalism, civilizing mission

Introduction

In the Norwegian public sphere there is a widespread perception concerning Norway's particular commitment to the promotion of peaceful international relations based on a just international order.² This perception is usually related to an idea about a Norwegian peace tradition dating back to the end of the union with Sweden and highlighted by such aspects as the peaceful dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway in 1905; the fact that the Nobel Peace Prize has been awarded in Norway; Nansen's humanitarian work; and the Norwegian support and promotion of arbitration treaties from the end of the nineteenth century.³ Many Norwegians also tend to associate this perception about Norway's particular commitment to peace and impartiality in international politics with the fact that Norway, as a sovereign state, did not have colonies.⁴

By exploring how Norway's reliance on Britain's global leadership moulded the country's vision of the emerging international order in the aftermath of World War I, this article aims at

² H. Pharo, "Den norske fredstradisjonen – et forskningsprosjekt", in: *Historisk tidsskrift* 84 (2005) 2, 239.

³ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁴ Compare B. Enge Bertelsen, "Introduction", in: K. Alsaker Kjerland and Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders. Norwegian Entrepreneurship in Africa and Oceania*, New York & Oxford 2015, 1.

nuancing the popular image of Norway as a country with no colonial past.⁵ The article focuses on Norway's activity in the League in the light of the country's commercial interests and assumptions about the civilizing mission, widely held among the Norwegian foreign policy elites. I argue that while claiming the moral high ground as a defender of free trade, the Norwegian efforts concentrated on fulfilling the security needs and commercial advantages by hanging on to the coattails of the leading empire of the time.

It is certainly plausible to ask here if the term "the leading empire of the time" is correct. Following the conclusion of the Treaty of Versailles signed in 1919, the British Empire reached its territorial peak. Nevertheless, despite its global territorial size and the Allied victory, the empire came out of the war weakened. The Great War inflicted on the British economy huge damage which continued to accrue throughout the post-war period. Britain had also to gradually acknowledge the ascent of the United States as the world's new super power, both in economic and military terms. Still, in the eyes of many contemporaries, the Norwegian foreign policy leaders included, despite the many signs of the passing of the pre-war world order, Great Britain remained the leading empire of the time.⁶ As I show in this article, the perception of Britain's hegemonic position continued to mould Norway's understanding of the premises for international politics at least until the mid-1930's.

The historiography on Norway in the League of Nations has until recently highlighted primarily the issues of neutrality and security as well as the support for disarmament and arbitration.⁷ Norway's western orientation, seen as one of the main reasons for joining the League, was first of all considered in terms of the country's reliance on an implicit British guarantee in the event of aggression against Norwegian territory. This has contributed to a somehow skewed vision of Norway's activity in the League, neglecting, most importantly, the country's advocacy of free

⁵ Parallel to this popular image of the colonial non-participation, there is, however, a growing literature which, by highlighting the manifold ways of involvement of the Nordic countries, Norway included, in colonial projects, challenges a view of these countries as outsiders to the European colonialism. See for example M. Palmberg, "The Nordic Colonial Mind" in S. Keskinen, S. Tuori, S. Irni and D. Mulinari (eds.), *Complying with Colonialism. Gender, Race and Ethnicity in the Nordic Region*, London and New York 2009, 35-50; E. Eidsvik, "Colonial Discourse and Ambivalence: Norwegian Participants on the Colonial Arena in South Africa" in: K. Loftsdóttir and L. Jensen (eds.), *Whiteness and Postcolonialism in the Nordic Region. Exceptionalism, Migrant Others and National Identities*, Farnham and Burlington 2012, 13-28.

⁶ Compare J. Darwin, *The Empire Project: The Rise and Fall of the British World System, 1830-1970*, Cambridge 2009, 474-475.

⁷ See for example S. Shepard Jones, *The Scandinavian States and the League of Nations*, New York 1939; N. Ørvik, *Sikkerhetspolitikken 1920-1939: fra forhistorien til 9. april 1940*, Oslo 1960, 1961; O-B. Fure, *Mellomkrigstid 1920-1940*, Oslo 1996; K. E. Haug, *Folkeforbundet og krigens bekjempelse. Norsk utenrikspolitikk mellom realisme og idealisme*, PhD diss., Norwegian University of Science and Technology 2012.

trade as a key to international peace, and how this policy was related to reliance on Britain's global leadership and preservation of the imperial world order.

By adopting the concept of imperial internationalism⁸ as an analytical and conceptual tool, the article highlights a link between free trade and civilizing mission and draws on ideas and perceptions of the Norwegian foreign policy elite who embraced the League as an organizational and ideological extension of the British Empire and an instrument for a global civilizing mission. While this article concerns especially Britain's civilizing mission, the term "civilizing mission" refers more generally to the specific normative project of the leading nineteenth century powers based on an unwarranted self-righteousness and confidence in their right and duty to rule and transform the world.⁹

In this regard, depicting Norwegian aspects of the colonial era does not only serve to explain how Norway became an eager recipient of the liberal ideas, but also how the Norwegian involvement in European imperial expansion moulded understanding of the premises for international peace and the role of the League of Nations. Accordingly, the first part of the article depicts the country's rise to a major position in the global shipping system and maritime trade during the colonial era. It serves as a background for the discussion in the second and third parts, which explore Norway's support for liberalization of trade relations and the country's attitude to colonial appeasement in the 1930s.

Under the British imperial umbrella

When Adam Smith published *An inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* in 1776 Western European economies were dominated by the theory of mercantilism whereby a state's prosperity and security depends on its government's control of foreign trade. In opposition to this belief, Smith argued, economic prosperity was rather a result of rational self-interest and competition, two fundamental components of a free trade policy.¹⁰ Since linking the state's security with control of foreign trade was a cause of the frequent wars in early modern Europe, advocates of liberal ideas came to the conclusion that international trade, by causing

⁸ Compare M. Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace. The End of Empire and the Ideological Origins of the United Nations*, Princeton and London 2013, 61.

⁹ B. Barth and R. Hobson (eds.), *Civilizing Missions in the Twentieth Century*, Leiden and Boston 2020.

¹⁰ A. Smith, *An inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, Oxford 2008/1776.

interdependence, discouraged conflicts.¹¹ Britain, the earliest beneficiary of the Industrial Revolution and the most prominent trading nation, took a lead in promoting more liberal commercial relations. And although Britain's leading commercial position was challenged by Napoleon, his ultimate defeat only made the belief in trade as a fundamental source of amity among nations even more widespread.¹²

Situated on Europe's north-western periphery, with the vast coastline stretching from the Skagerrak in the south to the Barents Sea in the north, Norway had always been a highly trade-dependent country.¹³ From the 1840s, alongside the rapid industrialization of Europe, Norwegian shipping, fish and timber exports contributed strongly to Norway's own economic development. Since the transformation and prosperity of the Norwegian economy were so closely related to the progress of international liberalization, this dependence on international trade encouraged the pursuit of more liberal commercial relations.¹⁴ Still, the factors that made Norway extremely trade-dependent prevented the primary sector and small and medium sized manufacturing industries from achieving competitive parity with their European counterparts. Yet even as protectionist sentiments started to increase at the turn of the twentieth century, the liberal foundation of the Norwegian economy remained undisputed.¹⁵

In this period Norway remained in a personal union with Sweden, which lasted from 1914 until the peaceful dissolution in 1905. The countries had common foreign policy, which was controlled from Stockholm, but steadily more divergent commercial interests as Norway's growing dependence on free trade ran counter to Sweden's more protectionist approach.¹⁶ Along the expansion of the trade areas, the Norwegian governments insisted therefore on establishing a separate Norwegian consular service. One reason was that Norwegians wanted stronger consular presence in the overseas territories as a means of support for their commercial fleet operating on world-wide trade routes. Another was that consular representation was seen as instrumental in grasping opportunities which opened for Norwegian trade in the colonial

¹¹ This looks different to Marxists and neo-realists who assume that trade increases conflict. Some scholars, notably Katherine Barbieri, argue thus for a positive relationship between the salience of trade ties and conflict. See K. Barbieri, *The Liberal Illusion: Does Trade Promote Peace?* Ann Arbor 2002.

¹² Mazower, *Governing the World*, 42.

¹³ E. Lange and H. Pharo, "Have your Cake and Eat it too. National Policy and Private Interest in a Small Open Economy: The Case of Norway", in: M. Müller and T. Myllyntaus (eds.), *Pathbreakers. Small European Countries Responding to Globalisation and Deglobalisation*, Bern 2008.

¹⁴ Lange and Pharo, "Have your Cake and Eat it too", 152.

¹⁵ Lange and Pharo, "Have your Cake and Eat it too", 153, 156-158.

¹⁶ N. Bjørgo, Ø. Rian and A. Kaartvedt, *Selvstendighet og union. Fra middelalderen til 1905*, Oslo 1995, 343-348.

parts of the world.¹⁷ Although the attempt to establish a separate consular service failed, Norway's liberal orientation, both in economic and ideological terms, was one of the main factors contributing to the country's independence gained in 1905.

At the same time, it is necessary to emphasize that Norway's relatively liberal trade policy could be upheld primarily thanks to Britain's interest in sustaining a free flow of goods, services and capital. In this regard, Norway's commercial dependence on Great Britain was twofold. First of all, Britain was Norway's main trading partner with a preponderant share both of exports and imports. In the years 1900-04, for instance, 42 percent of Norwegian exports went to Britain, which in turn accounted for 29 percent Norway's imports.¹⁸ By the turn of the century this dependency was reinforced by a broadly based return to a less liberal European order. Although originally Norway was engaged primarily in intra-European trade, the protectionist tendencies on the Continent from the 1870s onwards slowed the development of Norwegian exports to countries like Germany, Russia and Sweden.¹⁹ Yet even more importantly, in the wake of the repeal of the British Navigation Acts in 1849, Norway saw a remarkable increase in its exports to overseas countries and territories, as well as an expansion of the shipping sector, which hugely relied on its ability to serve the needs of the British market.²⁰

Indeed, Great Britain's imperial hegemony was crucial for boosting Norway's considerable role in the global shipping system and maritime trade upon which the new imperialism was premised. As soon as Great Britain entered a policy of relative free trade by abolishing the Navigation Act, Norwegian foreign shipping experienced an unprecedented growth. In the years 1865-1900 Great Britain and British possessions alone received together about 40 percent of all arrivals of Norwegian ships, declining to just about a third in the beginning of the twentieth century.²¹ In 1866 Norway became the most dominant foreign nation in the shipping trade with the British empire. Gradually Norwegian ships became one of the major global charterers of cargo.²² Between the 1860s and the beginning of World War I the Norwegian

¹⁷ S. I. Angell, "The Consular Affairs Issue and Colonialism", in: Alsaker Kjerland and Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders*, 159-160.

¹⁸ F. Hodne and O. Honningdal Grytten, *Norsk Økonomi 1900-1990*, Oslo 1992, 49.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

²⁰ E. Merok and E. Ekberg, "Partners in world trade. Anglo-Norwegian shipping networks, 1855-1905", in: H. Ø. Pharo and P. Salmon, *Britain and Norway: special relationships*, Oslo 2011, 85; K. M. Nygaard, "Interconnecting the British Empire: Swedish and Norwegian Shipping to South Africa, 1850-1914", in: Alsaker Kjerland and Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders*, 39-40.

²¹ Compare Merok and Ekberg, "Partners in world trade", 83.

²² Nygaard, "Interconnecting the British Empire", 39. Quoted after F. Hodne, *Norges økonomiske historie 1815-1970*, Oslo 1981, 145.

tonnage grew almost fivefold.²³ As a result, around 1880 Norway was home to the world's third-largest merchant fleet, outranked only by the United States and Great Britain.²⁴ The country's economic expansion between 1860 and 1914 indicates that Norwegian entrepreneurs took an active part in world business and thrived economically in the period of colonial expansion by Western European powers, when world trade expanded by 400 per cent.²⁵

Behind these numbers we can discern a somewhat ambiguous, in-between role of Norwegian entrepreneurs and diplomats.²⁶ The predominantly transnational character of business and trade within colonial orders made it possible for Norwegians to integrate smoothly with local elites and consequently paved the way for their involvement in the unfolding, upkeep and, in some cases, implementation of colonial rule and domination.²⁷ Although Norwegian entrepreneurship in the colonies was for a long time not perceived in terms of colonial involvement, the new studies of Norwegian trading and enterprises in the colonial parts of the world show how Norwegian investments would contribute to strengthen colonial rule. The most illustrative example in this regard is the Norwegian owned company Madal, which played a crucial role as a colonizing and pacifying force in Portuguese East Africa.²⁸

Norwegians profited also from the so called unequal treaties imposed on China by the colonial powers.²⁹ In 1847, just five years after the Treaty of Nanking, which ended the First Opium War between Great Britain and China and forced China to open certain Chinese ports to foreign trade and residence, Sweden-Norway signed a separate treaty with the Qing dynasty. Apart from significant increase in Norwegian shipping to China, the treaty allowed for opening consulates in Guangzhou (1851) and Shanghai (1853) and gave rise to the import of Norwegian commodities. Although at this time Norway as a junior partner in the union with Sweden lacked full sovereignty, the treaty remained legally binding also after the peaceful dissolution of the

²³ Enge Bertelsen, "Introduction", 13.

²⁴ Nygaard, "Interconnecting the British Empire", 40.

²⁵ K. Alsaker Kjerland, "Preface", in: Alsaker Kjerland and Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders*, xvi.

²⁶ It is relevant to add that Norway also used to be a major missionary provider in the colonial period and Norwegian ideas of non-European peoples were strongly influenced by accounts provided by missionaries. Missionaries generally shared a belief in Europe's cultural superiority and civilizing mission in the world and Christian missions were important tools for colonial governments as they could facilitate trade and economic penetration. See R. Berg, "The missionary impulse in Norwegian history" in: *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* 36 (2010) 1, 5.

²⁷ See Alsaker Kjerland and Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders*.

²⁸ E. Reiersen, "Scandinavians in Colonial Trading Companies and Capital-Intensive Networks: The Case of Christian Thames" and B. E. Bertelsen, "Colonialism in Norwegian and Portuguese: Madal in Mozambique", in: Alsaker Kjerland and Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders*, 267-290, 291-320.

²⁹ C. Brautaset, M. Gregersen and K. Hestad Skeie (eds.), *Møter med Kina. Norsk diplomati, næringsliv og misjon 1880-1937*, Oslo 2018.

union in 1905 and would be referred to by Norwegian diplomats as “the Norwegian-Chinese treaty”.³⁰

The Norwegian economic growth in the nineteenth century was highly dependent on Britain’s liberal trade policy and imperial rule. British Empire allowed Norway to expand its trade and shipping worldwide without military backing. One may argue that Norway’s trade policy developed in tandem with, though several steps behind, the liberal policy adopted by Great Britain. It is therefore not surprising that British influence manifested also in ideological terms. One of the best known advocates of the benefits of free trade, the Manchester Liberal MP Richard Cobden, became an inspirational figure for Norwegian foreign policy thinking, especially in the Norwegian Liberal Party. Peace between nations, Cobden maintained, could be achieved through free trade, neutrality and arbitration. His ideas were crucial in shaping the Norwegian understanding of the premises for international peace and continued to exert impact on the Norwegian foreign policy elite also after Norway had joined the League of Nations.³¹

Although, it may be argued, the most obvious position to take for doctrinaire free-traders was anti-imperialist, Cobdenite liberalism came into being and worked within the established framework of the British Empire.³² Britain’s control of the key maritime trade routes and its unchallenged sea power were pivotal in extending commercial relations, supposedly leading to peace between nations. However, the successfulness of the ideas promoted by Cobden’s free trade movement turned out in the end, according to the historian Mark Mazower, to be “a mixed blessing” for the movement itself.³³ Once taken up by politicians, free trade would evolve from its peace movement origins to become an inherent aspect of the imperial vision. Lacking the capacity as well as the inclination to push for the liberalization of commerce by forcibly opening other states’ economies, the liberally oriented Norwegian elites, however, could maintain the perception of promoting free trade in accordance with Cobden’s original message of spreading

³⁰ Royal Norwegian Consulate General in Shanghai to Utenriksdepartementet, 15 October 1920, Riksarkivet (RA), Utenriksdepartementets arkiv (UDA), Box 6291, File 2b/22.

³¹ See Stachurska-Kounta, *Norway and the League of Nations 1919-1939*. A similar conclusion has been reached by the authors of a history of Norwegian foreign policy thinking, see T. L. Knutsen, H. Leira and I. B. Neumann, *Norsk utenrikspolitisk idéhistorie 1890-1940*, Oslo 2016.

³² For the debate on how much free trade was in tune with imperialism or not see J. Gallagher and R. Robinson, “The Imperialism of Free Trade”, in: *The Economic History Review*, New Series 6 (1953) 1, 1-15; O. MacDonagh, “The Anti-Imperialism of Free Trade”, in: *The Economic History Review*, New Series 14 (1962) 3, 489-501; D. C. M. Platt, “The Imperialism of Free Trade: Some Reservations”, *The Economic History Review*, New Series 21 (1968) 2, 296-306.

³³ M. Mazower, *Governing the World. The History of an Idea*, New York and London 2012, 42.

peace between nations.³⁴ But although Norway did not have colonial possessions, the country did profit from the imperial world order, albeit only in economic terms.³⁵

The League of Nations – breathing new life to Pax Britannica

For many small states the establishment of the League of Nations was seen to represent an opportunity to secure independence and obtain additional protection through the system of collective security provided by the League. This was true especially of the new small states established on the ruins of the empires of Central and Eastern Europe. However, ex-neutral countries such as Norway saw membership as a security risk rather than a security gain. Both opponents and proponents of Norway's membership of the League used security-related arguments, although their visions of Norway's strategic position differed fundamentally. Those who supported joining the League unconditionally saw no persuasive reason to fear the emergence of two antagonistic great power groupings. Those who considered membership a potential risk, continued to believe that Norway would be able to survive a future war by declaring neutrality.

The Norwegian leadership's divergent opinions in this matter depended largely on their perception of Norway's situation during World War I. Although Norway remained officially neutral, Britain's economic warfare against Germany put Norwegian neutrality at the extreme pressure. In particular, the British government was not pleased with Norwegian exports of fish and copper to Germany. Despite the Norwegian government's efforts to continue to trade with both belligerents, Britain's embargo on coal export, issued two days before Christmas 1916, forced Norway to comply with the British blockade measures and, to use a term coined by Norwegian historian Olav Riste, become Britain's "neutral ally".³⁶

The new international setting highlighted also other aspects of Norway's membership in the League. Mazower portrays the organization as "a fusion of American missionary zeal and British imperial calculation, a combination of powers and perspectives that turned the League into a bridge between the world of 19th century empire and the 20th century rise of the nation-

³⁴ This argument fits well with the new historiography of the British Empire, seen rather as a commercial system that extended far beyond the formal bounds of colonial rule. See for example Darwin, *The Empire Project*.

³⁵ F. Sejersted, *Demokratisk kapitalisme*, Oslo 1993, 89.

³⁶ O. Riste, *Norway's Foreign Relation – A History*, Oslo 2005, 101; O. Riste, *The neutral ally. Norway's relations with belligerent powers in the First World War*, Oslo 1965.

state”.³⁷ The description reflects also Norwegian expectations towards the emerging international order in the aftermath of World War I.

On the one hand, among the Norwegian political elites there existed a perception that Norway had a particular interest in and duty to promote peace. The specially appointed Norwegian study committee recommending Norway’s adherence to the Covenant of the League highlighted two dimensions of this mission. The first was based on a sense of belonging to the group of the ex-neutral small states, which “have a special task with regard to creating a secure and just foundation for the future of international relations”.³⁸ The other was grounded in a view of membership in the League as “a self-evident continuation of the arbitration and peace policy that Norwegian governments have pursued”.³⁹ This perception was consistent with traditional liberal ideals in referring both to arbitration and the special status of neutrality.

On the other hand, the motivation to join the League was of a pragmatic character. In this regard, apart from the security concerns, Norwegian foreign policy makers referred to Norway’s trade interests. Staying outside the emerging organization could potentially isolate Norway from the majority of European states, above all the other Scandinavian countries and Great Britain, the most friendly of the great powers.

This was something Norway for obvious reasons could not afford to risk.⁴⁰ “By remaining outside”, the study committee argued, “our country would be put in a position of great uncertainty in the competitive race that will be unleashed by the conclusion of peace”.⁴¹ The argument alluded to Article XXIII of the Covenant which stipulated “equitable treatment for the commerce of all members of the League”.⁴² Norwegian foreign policy makers believed that staying outside such an area of equal commercial treatment, especially when Great Britain was in, would cause incalculable damage to the Norwegian economy. Yet the Norwegian view of the emerging international order was not only about observing Britain’s attitude. Following the establishment of the League of Nations, the organization’s role, Norwegian Prime and Foreign Minister Johan Ludvig Mowinckel declared, was to “build the world’s and the future’s hope on

³⁷ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 119.

³⁸ Stortingsproposisjon (Proposition to the Storting) (St. prp.) nr. 33 (1920), 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁰ Findlay to Curzon, 23 May 1919, The National Archives, Kew (TNA), Foreign Office (FO) 608/242. See also O. Riste, *Norway’s Foreign Relation – A History*, Oslo 2005, 130.

⁴¹ St. prp. nr. 33 (1920), 7.

⁴² Article XXIII of the Covenant of the League of Nations.

British liberalism”.⁴³ To a degree his sentiments echoed those of Lloyd George, who emphatically declared himself in support of the League in 1918: “I am for a league of nations. In fact the league of nations has begun. The British Empire is a league of nations”.⁴⁴

For the most part Norwegian policy makers shared also a widespread belief that the best remedy for the economic troubles was a return to the pre-war system. In this regard, notwithstanding the significance of other countries, they acknowledged above all the paramount importance of Great Britain and its empire. As the Norwegian chargé d'affaires in London, W. M. Johannessen, put it in his response to the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in which he recommended joining the League of Nations:

All of our most vital interests – political, economic, social and civilizational – lead us constantly to Great Britain, to Canada, to Australia, to the South Africa etc.; our foreign policy, our trade, our social policy do not allow us to overlook the fundamental importance of the British Empire.⁴⁵

The remark clearly indicates the main direction of Norwegian commercial interests. Although in the interwar period Norway's rank fell to the fourth place worldwide, the country maintained its position as a major shipping nation.⁴⁶ Traditionally westward- and seaborne-oriented, Norwegians therefore did not regard Europe as a region with shared interests, certainly not if Norwegian interests were taken into consideration. These sentiments surfaced again following the French proposal in 1929 to create a United States of Europe. Commenting on the proposal the legal adviser to the Norwegian Foreign Ministry Frede Catberg questioned why Norway's ties to the Balkan countries, for example, should be regarded as more important than those with the British Dominions.⁴⁷ Without doubt, Norway was anxious to maintain ties with its traditional trading partners, including members of the British Empire and the Commonwealth. Norway's negative attitude to the French proposal therefore must also have been strengthened by Britain's resistance to European integration tendencies.⁴⁸

At the same time, along the developing multilateral framework under the auspices of the League of Nations in the 1920s some British diplomats were under impression that Norway was

⁴³ Interview with Mowinckel in *Verdens Gang*, 1 April 1921, quoted after: T. Øksnevad, *Joh. Ludw. Mowinckel*, Bergen 1963, 63.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Mazower, *Governing the World*, 128.

⁴⁵ Johannessen to Utenriksdepartement (UD), “Nationernes Forbund: spm. Norges tiltrædelse”, Stortingsdokument (Document of the Storting) (St. dok.) nr. 7 (1920), 4.

⁴⁶ Stortingsmelding (Report to the Storting) (St. med.) nr. 3 (1934), 76.

⁴⁷ Frede Castberg to UD, “Europeisk föderal union-ordning”, 4 June 1930, RA, UDA, Box 6414, File 04/26.

⁴⁸ R. Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization*, New York 2009, 270.

“becoming less apt to look for guidance to Great Britain”.⁴⁹ Such perceptions could be fuelled by the Norwegian government’s abrogation of the Treaty of Integrity of 1907, according to which Great Britain was one of the guarantee providers, or Norway’s firm position in the disputes over fishery limits and whaling.⁵⁰ The most critical stage of the conflict over the extent of the fishery limits along the Norwegian coast came in 1935 when the British government officially threatened Norway with naval reprisals as a response to the Norwegian law sanctioning an expansive interpretation. But although the dispute undoubtedly troubled the Anglo-Norwegian relations, Norway did not assume the role of an equal partner in collisions with any other great power, the way it did with Great Britain. The apparent reason was that the disputes with Great Britain were not regarded as a threat to the country’s integrity. In reality, in spite of Norway’s attempts to pursue a more independent foreign policy on the international scene, especially in the 1920s, Britain’s special position within Norwegian foreign policy during the interwar period was never seriously threatened.⁵¹

Norway’s constant reliance on British leadership is best exemplified by the Norwegian strenuous efforts to entice Britain to embark on closer collaboration on trade liberalization. Article XXIII of the League’s Covenant urged the member states to “make provision to secure and maintain freedom of communication and of transit and equitable treatment for the commerce of all Members of the League”.⁵² Following the post-war speculative boom and subsequent collapse, Norway’s liberal policy was severely tested in the early 1920s by the growing protectionist tendencies in international trade. However, until the early 1930s Norway did not enact any direct measures to limit imports, the level of protection remained comparatively low, and Norway could still be considered a mainly free trade country. In contrast to quantitative protectionist measures like quotas and clearing agreements, which amounted to bilateral trade, tariff barriers were still reconcilable with a multilateral trading system and market regulated transactions.⁵³

Yet from the Norwegian point of view not all international projects on economic collaboration deserved unconditional support. In case of the previously mentioned French proposal to create a European union, the Norwegian reluctance was first of all motivated by the unwillingness to

⁴⁹ Francis Lindley, “Annual Report on Norway, 1927”, 7 February 1928. Quoted in M. Stachurska-Kounta, “‘Twisting the lion’s tail with impunity’? Norway, Great Britain and the League of Nations”, in: Pharo and Salmon, *Britain and Norway: special relationships*, 162.

⁵⁰ Compare Stachurska, “‘Twisting the lion’s tail with impunity’?”.

⁵¹ Riste, *Norway’s Foreign Relation*, 132.

⁵² Article XXIII of the Covenant of the League of Nations.

⁵³ Fure, *Mellomkrigstid*, 153.

engage in any schemes which could threaten to undermine a feeling of remoteness from the conflict areas of the great powers. But the economic aspects of the French plan were seen as at least as much controversial. Although the reduction of the intra-European trade barriers was regarded favourably, the Norwegians were afraid of new barriers raised at the union's outer frontiers.⁵⁴ Norway's traditionally stronger ties to the British Empire than to continental Europe were thus crucial for adopting a distanced attitude to the idea of a European union.

Norway's reservations to the French proposal combined with a desire to promote a multilateral trade system, better suited to Norwegian commercial interests, resulted in an initiative to stage a tariff agreement between six small European countries. All of them were highly trade dependent, and for all but one of them Great Britain was the largest export market and chief source of foreign earnings.⁵⁵ Signed in December 1930, one year after Black Tuesday on Wall Street, the Oslo Convention would put into practice the League of Nations' recommendations, embodied particularly in the Commercial Convention of 24 March 1930.⁵⁶ The League's Commercial Convention obliged the signatory states not to increase their protective duties or impose new ones.⁵⁷ Since by the autumn of 1930 the odds were against it coming into force, the Oslo Convention became an option if the Commercial Convention failed.⁵⁸ In a joint protocol, the governments of the five states expressed their support of "international efforts to reduce trade barriers and improve general conditions for trade."⁵⁹ Because the signatory states did not denounce the right to raise import duties or impose new duties, but were solely obliged to inform the states concerned at least 15 days in advance, the Oslo Convention was not a trade agreement in the proper sense but rather a "declaration of intention and solidarity".⁶⁰ Yet it was hailed by its initiator, Mowinckel, as "a moral barrier against the politics of strife and isolation".⁶¹ The Convention was thus promoted in the spirit of "economic disarmament" – a term used generally with regard to the reduction of protectionist trade barriers. An official at the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was, however, more specific when he wrote in a

⁵⁴ Compare a comment by Arnold Ræstad, "Det franske memorandum og en analyse av det", November 1930, RA, UDA, Box 6415, File 04/26.

⁵⁵ R. Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads, 1919–1932. A Study in Politics, Economics, and International Relations*, Cambridge 1987, 321; see also Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis*, 260.

⁵⁶ Compare St. prp. nr. 20, Supplement 1 (1931), 5. Texts of "Convention de rapprochement économique" and "Protocole" are attached to the proposition.

⁵⁷ League of Nations, *Preliminary Conference with a view to Concerted Economic Action. Commercial Convention*, Geneva, 24 March 1930.

⁵⁸ G. van Roon, *Small States in years of depression. The Oslo alliance 1930-1940*, Assen/Maastricht 1989, 8.

⁵⁹ St. prp. nr. 20, Supplement 2 (1931), 9.

⁶⁰ van Roon, *Small States in years of depression*, 13.

⁶¹ Mowinckel's speech at the opening of the customs peace conference, 18 December 1930, RA, UDA, Box 6114, File 20h/20. Quoted also in van Roon, *Small States in Years of Depression*, 11.

report that the Convention “represented support for liberal trade policies, in the British Empire in particular that have offered the necessary protection for our shipping and trade to flourish”.⁶² In this regard, the initiative was intended to counterbalance “strong forces demanding increased protection” in Great Britain.⁶³

Yet Norway’s hopes that “England could see the convention as a manifestation in favour of a more liberal trade policy”⁶⁴ did not produce the intended outcome.⁶⁵ Although in 1929 the Board of Trade submitted a proposal of a tariff truce to the economic section of the League of Nations, which was more far-reaching than the Commercial Convention of March 1930,⁶⁶ not to mention the Oslo Convention, in 1931 it refused even to contemplate the possibility of Britain’s accession to the Oslo group.⁶⁷ The economic crisis provoked by the Wall Street Crash of 1929 led Great Britain to reconsider its until then relatively liberal policy. First, in September 1931, Britain effectively abandoned the gold standard, assumed to be one of the principal pillars of free trade. Then, in 1932, the British Empire Economic Conference in Ottawa established a zone of limited tariffs within the British Empire, but with high tariffs against the rest of the world, finally dashing Norwegian hopes to get Britain involved in the Oslo group. The latter move would not come totally unexpectedly since pressure for imperial preference, especially from the Dominions and the Conservative Party leaders, was mounting throughout the 1920s.⁶⁸ And as the economic crisis deepened the support for the protective and preferential system grew also among the Tories and the Labour government.⁶⁹ Yet for Mowinkel, who eagerly sought British membership in order to increase the impact of this small-state liberal initiative, Britain’s unwillingness to join the agreement was a great disappointment.⁷⁰ In spite of his efforts to present the Oslo states as “a very big commercial power”,⁷¹ small-state cooperation would have little impact in the face of Great Britain’s departure from the free trade regime and the Norwegian economy’s dependence on Great Britain.

⁶² Comment by Rolf Andvord, “Bemerkninger i anledning av det foreliggende utkast til innstilling fra Utenriks- og Konstitusjonskomiteen angående ratifisering av Oslo-konvensjonen”, 30 April 1931, RA, UDA, Box 6112, File 20f/20.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization*, 283.

⁶⁶ League of Nations, *International Conference for the Conclusion of Tariff Truce. Preliminary draft convention drawn up by the Economic Committee*, Geneva, 1 November 1929.

⁶⁷ Boyce, *British Capitalism at the Crossroads*, 321.

⁶⁸ I. M. Drummond, *British Economic Policy and the Empire 1919-1939*, London 1972, 32.

⁶⁹ Boyce, *The Great Interwar Crisis and the Collapse of Globalization*, 259.

⁷⁰ van Roon, *Small States in years of depression*, 21.

⁷¹ Stortingstidende (Stenographic report from the sittings in the Storting) (St. tid.) 1932, 1826.

The Wall Street crash had decreased the total value of world trade significantly and prompted a shift away from a multilateral to a bilateral pattern. As a result, income from Norwegian exports fell in 1931 by 30 percent.⁷² The World Economic Conference, convened in London in 1933, was seen as a last chance to reach an international agreement concerning currency stabilization.⁷³ But if anybody still nourished some hopes, they were quickly dashed. Because of the disagreements between the great powers the conference failed to stabilize exchange rates or boost international trade. The most significant moment of the conference took place on 3 July when delegates received the so-called “bombshell message” from American president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, declaring his unwillingness to sign any artificial currency stabilization agreement.⁷⁴ Although the conference’s final resolution acknowledged the role of the gold standard system, it was up to every state to decide when and to what extent it would restore parity. In face of Britain’s position, the Bank of Norway no longer regarded the option of returning to the gold standard as favourable and decided instead to link the value of the crown to the pound at a set rate. Although not formally, Norway thus *de facto* became a member of the Sterling Area, and averted exclusion from the British market.⁷⁵ The British economy’s global character made it virtually impossible for Norway to maintain a sound liberal trade policy on its own. As an official of the Bank of England put it:

Their already close connections with this country brought the Scandinavian countries into the sterling area, where they have in some ways a privileged position. In trade affairs they hang on the coat-tails of the Dominions; their access to British Markets is assured for they have bought themselves in.⁷⁶

Although highly paternalistic, the remark was a better reflection of reality than Mowinckel’s speech had been one year earlier. Whereas Britain was busy sorting out pragmatic measures to shield its own economy, Mowinckel persisted in claiming the moral high ground for Norway as a defender of free trade:

⁷² Statistisk sentralbyrå, *Statistisk økonomisk oversikt over året 1931*, Oslo 1932. Quoted in T. Petersen, *Da Norge forlot gullet. Norges Bank og kurspolitikken 1931-1933*, MA diss., University of Oslo 2011, 22.

⁷³ P. Clavin, *Securing the World Economy. The Reinvention of the League of Nations 1920-1946*, Oxford 2013, 84.

⁷⁴ Clavin, *Securing the World Economy*, 120.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 89. Compare also Z. Steiner, *The Lights that Failed. European International History 1919-1933*, Oxford 2005, 695, and Darwin, *The Empire Project*, 435.

⁷⁶ “Scandinavia and the sterling area” (21 February 1934) Bank of England Archives. OV 26/2 quoted in Petersen, *Da Norge forlot gullet*, 91.

We need not, e.g. in the relationship with England, feel inferior. In reality we approach England with quite favourable cards. In the first place we have maintained a quite sound free trade policy, which England has and still profits from, and furthermore we are willing to maintain this policy. What we desire is to the greatest possible degree have others join us, if some that are mightier and bigger invite us to join them in a really trade liberating policy, they will find we are willing to accept the invitation.⁷⁷

In 1934 Mowinckel renewed his invitation to Great Britain to take part in consultations without formally joining the Oslo Convention. At the subsequent meeting with Anthony Eden, currently Minister for the League of Nations in the Conservative Government of Stanley Baldwin, Mowinckel heard, however, that London had to take into consideration the empire and that joining the Oslo states would be in conflict with Britain's present commercial policy.⁷⁸ To put Mowinckel's efforts into perspective, after Britain abandoned the gold standard in 1931 and signed the Imperial Preferential Agreement in Ottawa in August 1932, even US Secretary of State Cordell Hull failed to bring the British government to green light the first Anglo-American reciprocal tariff agreement.⁷⁹

The failure of the 1933 World Economic Conference marked the definitive end to multilateral economic cooperation under the League's auspices before World War II.⁸⁰ It implied also the ultimate shift from economic internationalism predicated on gold standard orthodoxy and free trade.⁸¹ Britain's move towards protectionism profoundly compromised Britain's claim to leadership in the League's economic and financial activity.⁸² On a more general level, however, it also heralded the collapse of a global order based on British liberalism, the year 1933, in which the World Economic Conference convened, being the culminating point. The League was losing ground due to its inability to respond to Japan's aggression in Manchuria. The Disarmament Conference was no longer about the reduction of armaments, but at best about controlled rearmament. Two of the permanent members of the Council, Germany and Japan, withdrew from the organization. The League's marginalization and Britain's turn towards

⁷⁷ St. tid. (1933), 101.

⁷⁸ P.M. by Mowinckel, 19 October 1934, RA, UDA, Box 6395, File 01/25. See also Minutes from the meeting of the Storting's Extended Committee of Foreign and Constitutional Affairs, 6 December 1934, Stortingsarkivet (SA).

⁷⁹ P. Clavin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929-1939*, Basingstoke 2000, 162.

⁸⁰ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 151.

⁸¹ Clavin, *Securing the World Economy*, 125.

⁸² Clavin, *The Great Depression*, 125.

imperial trade preferences, though caused by a range of different factors, were mutually reinforcing and symbolized the end of a certain vision of international order.

At the same time, a momentous event passed virtually unnoticed by the Norwegian foreign policy elite. In 1934, the United States joined the International Labour Organization (ILO). The American decision to join ILO dealt a blow to the hierarchy established at the Paris peace conference in 1919 as it reinforced ILO's autonomy and undermined the authority of the already weakened League.⁸³ The further failures of the League in the sphere of security strengthened tendencies to focus on economic and social issues and resulted in the elaboration of a reform plan put forward by the committee led by Stanley Bruce in August 1939.⁸⁴ The proposals advanced by the Bruce committee in its report reflected the evolving understanding of the terms of international cooperation. This process culminated in 1944 when the idea of incorporating development goals in post-war international plans defined the agendas of the conferences at Bretton Woods and Dumbarton Oaks.⁸⁵

From the Norwegian perspective, the collapse of the international order based on British liberalism had far-reaching implications for the country's foreign policy framework. In many ways the impact of Britain's retreat to imperial protectionism in the long run went beyond mere economic concerns. This was especially salient with regard to Mowinckel's efforts to use the League as a forum to promote peace based on traditional liberal ideals. In economic terms, in contrast to the original assumptions, the Norwegian economy, thanks to measures stimulating domestic production along with preferential trade agreements with Great Britain, gradually succeeded in adapting itself to the new circumstances.⁸⁶ In ideological terms though, Britain's protectionist move in reality put paid to the fundamental assumptions of the Norwegian Liberal Party's foreign policy. Although the "imperial preference" had consequences primarily for international trade, it also heralded the demise of classic liberal thinking based on Great Britain's global dominance.⁸⁷

⁸³ Compare L. Tournès, *Les États-Unis et la Société des Nations (1914–1946): le système international face à l'émergence d'une Superpuissance*, Berne 2016.

⁸⁴ Clavin, *Securing the World Economy*, 250.

⁸⁵ Mazower, *Governing the World*, 206. See also E. Helleiner, *Forgotten Foundations of Bretton Woods: International Development and the Making of the Postwar Order*, London and New York 2014.

⁸⁶ Lange and Pharo, "Have your Cake and Eat it too," 161.

⁸⁷ Though, it is necessary to bear in mind that the late establishment of the UN did not necessarily herald a departure from the imperial conception of world governance. According to Mazower, the Atlantic Charter combined indeed "an international commitment to dismantle the European empires (the American view) and a reaffirmation (for Britain) of the Victorian idea that Europeans were fit for sovereignty and others not." Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, 55. See also G. Sluga, *Internationalism in the Age of Nationalism*, Philadelphia 2013, 93.

In the spirit of the civilizing mission

Halvdan Koht, Labour's Foreign Minister from March 1935, shared most of his predecessor's assumptions about the importance of international trade to peace. However, he made a significant distinction between the liberal and the socialist approach.⁸⁸ While he acknowledged the value of economic disarmament understood as the liberalization of commercial relations between states, it should be accompanied by "planning" at the national level, he said. In conformity with socialist thought, Koht regarded capitalist competition as one of the main threats to international peace.⁸⁹ Nonetheless, although he represented a totally different political option from Mowinckel, his vision of international economic cooperation relied in reality on the same pillars: Great Britain's leadership and the imperial order.⁹⁰

Accordingly, in a letter to the Secretary-General of the League in 1936, Koht pointed to the general stabilization of currencies as one of the conditions for better international cooperation.⁹¹ At that particular moment, however, it was premature in his opinion to expect any progress in the near future. Instead the League should deal with the question of access to resources from colonies, something he regarded as a potential source of conflict between states. Koht referred in the letter to the British position on the conflict between Italy and Ethiopia and should therefore be understood as expressing support for the idea of economic and colonial appeasement that was generating a lot of attention between 1936 and 1938. The idea, applauded by many British internationalists of the time, was supposed to provide a solution to the underlying cause of the political tensions in Europe.⁹² Wrapped in gracious words about

⁸⁸ H. Koht, "Handels- og Fredspolitik", *Samtiden* 50 (1939) 1, 1-16.

⁸⁹ See Å. Svendsen, *Halvdan Koht. Veien mot framtiden. En biografi*, Oslo 2013, 223 and the subsequent endnotes.

⁹⁰ Indeed, Jakubovitsj, Russian envoy in Oslo, had no illusions where the socialist Koht would look for guidance. In 1936 he reported to Moscow: "We must not, however, forget the British influence. At the end of the day, Koht will not take a decisive step without some sort of consultations with the British government." Jakubovitsj to Krestinskij, 9 June 1936, *Norge og Sovjetunionen 1917-1955. En utenrikspolitisk dokumentasjon*, Oslo 1995, 238-241.

⁹¹ "Pressemelding. Noti frå den norske utanriksministeren til generalsekretæren for Folkeforbundet frå 29. august 1936", RA, UDA, Box 6140, File 16a/20. The same document in English: Application of the Principles of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Communication from the Government of Norway, 1 September 1936, League of Nations Archives (LON), Box R5731, File 50/ 25380/8871.

⁹² S. Pedersen, *The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Oxford 2015, 324-355. See also R. S. Grayson, *Liberals, International Relations and Appeasement: The Liberal Party, 1919-1939*, London and New York 2001; Ch. Waters, *Australia and Appeasement: Imperial Foreign Policy and the Origins of the World War II*, London 2011.

securing peace through internationalization of the colonial system, the idea boiled down to granting Germany access to its former colonies, and letting Italy into Ethiopia.

Norwegian support for the internationalization of colonial system demonstrates that Norwegian foreign policy leaders regarded the imperial order not only as providing favourable conditions for economic prosperity, but also as a guarantee for peace and international stability. Although Koht did not refer expressly to the idea of colonial appeasement, he clearly shared the underlying assumption that the settlement of the colonial problem might help preserve peace in Europe.⁹³ Norway's delegate and former secretary general of the Interparliamentary Union Christian Louis Lange was apparently more explicit during a discussion of the mandated territories in the Sixth Committee of the Assembly in 1935. Lange argued that the deteriorating international situation made it necessary to "seek the possibilities of appeasement opened up by a broad and plain application of the mandates system".⁹⁴ In his opinion the extension of the League's mandate system was a way to mitigate economic causes of war. While giving credit to the Mandate Commission for their efforts to eliminate abuses by the colonial authorities, his main argument concerned the issue of equality of treatment in commerce.

Officially based on tutelage and designed to promote social progress in the former German and Ottoman territories, the mandates system in reality justified imperial rule.⁹⁵ The paternalistic ideals about uplifting "backward peoples" towards a civilizational advance went hand in hand with suppressing the claims to self-determination. This "productive symbiosis between benevolence and autocracy" was so ingrained that few challenged its nature.⁹⁶ The Norwegian attitude was representative of such thinking. The Mandate Commission's two female members throughout the whole period were Scandinavian. While Anna Bugge-Wicksell and Valentine Dannevig, both native Norwegians, seemed to be genuinely committed to the improvement of social conditions in the mandated territories, and were not afraid of getting under the skin of the mandate powers by actively seeking independent information, they would never take up political rights of the mandated peoples.⁹⁷

⁹³ See also Svendsen, *Halvdan Koht*, 231.

⁹⁴ "Discours de M. Lange sur les mandats. 6e commission", RA, UDA, Box 6200, File 16/21 ("rechercher les possibilités d'apaisement ouvertes par une application large et littérale du principe des mandats").

⁹⁵ S. Pedersen, "Empires, States and the League of Nations", in: G. Sluga and P. Clavin (eds.), *Internationalisms. A Twentieth-Century History*, Cambridge and New York 2017, 118.

⁹⁶ S. Pedersen, "Metaphors of the Schoolroom: Women Working the Mandates System of the League of Nations", in: *History Workshop Journal* 66 (2008) 1, 192.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 195-201.

The notion of Europeans' right to exploit other peoples' resources in the name of the civilizing mission was deeply embedded in the worldview of internationalists and liberal progressives of the era. Neither in this regard were Norwegians an exception, even though Norway did not possess colonies. It does not mean however that Norway did not have territorial claims in the interwar period. Norwegian imperialist aspirations, however, were related solely to some uninhabited islands and territories in the Arctic and Antarctic, including, most notably, a successful bid for Svalbard at the Paris peace conference in 1920.⁹⁸ Motivated by protection and expansion of economic interests, primarily whaling, sealing and fishing, Norwegian arctic imperialism was therefore apparently not affected by the notion of the civilizing mission.

The imperial perceptions did however shape Norway's attitude to some ongoing conflicts. With all its declarations of support for peace between nations, Norway remained extremely cautious about taking a clear stance against breaches of international law, particularly during the deteriorating situation of the 1930s. The cabinets of the Farmers' Party, the Liberals and the Socialists followed the same pattern, favouring political solutions even if it implied recognizing *de facto* territorial annexations by aggressor states. Such an attitude was first of all dictated by economic interests and political considerations of security. Yet in the cases of the Manchurian crisis and Italo-Ethiopian conflict, Norway's forbearing attitude to the aggressors was influenced moreover by the notion that the civilizing intentions of the aggressor trumped the rights of the lesser nations.

The Norwegian government's original efforts to remain aloof to Japanese aggression seems to have been based on the assumption that the conflict was in a distant place and merely problem for the great powers. However, when the Japanese occupied Manchuria in September 1931, Norway held one of the temporary seats on the League's Council. As a result, the Norwegian government found itself in a precarious situation, being obliged to take a clear stand on the issue of the ongoing aggression. As far as it was possible the Norwegian government opted for a non-committal strategy. In such controversial issues as the conflict between Japan and China, Foreign Minister Birger Braadland argued, the great powers made the decisions and the small states had no choice but to accept them. The government's primary task was to prevent damage to Norwegian interests. While expressing "keen anxiety", Braadland envisaged therefore a

⁹⁸ Riste, *Norway's Foreign Relation*, 115-26. See also V. Bjørnsen and S. G. Holtsmark, "Strid om selfangst og grenselinjer" in: S. G. Holtsmark (ed.), *Naboer i frykt og forventning. Norge og Russland 1917-2014*, Oslo 2015, 93-111.

solution “with a view to safeguarding peace”, but “without taking sides in any question”.⁹⁹ Even if a few months later he apparently shifted to a more activist stance and argued in favour of the League taking firm action to stop the crisis, without excluding use of sanctions,¹⁰⁰ he still urged “to seek a solution acceptable for all the parties”.¹⁰¹

While the Norwegian government was certainly aware that Japan committed an act of aggression against China, the Norwegian foreign policy leaders and diplomats also looked at the conflict from the perspective of Japan’s civilizing mission. As a great power, industrialized and modernized in the Western manner, and not least a permanent member of the League’s Council, Japan had been seen in Western eyes as more civilized than China. Aggression was therefore justified, to a degree.¹⁰² This perspective, which also later played a significant role in Norway’s response to the Italo-Ethiopian war, implied that the Norwegian vision of world order reflected widely held imperial notions of the rights of civilized as opposed to lesser nations.¹⁰³

In addition, the government could hardly disregard Norway’s presumed vital economic interests. Hjalmar Wessel, the director of the large paper and pulp company Borregaard, personally wrote to Braadland to warn him of the possible devastating impact of Norway’s criticism of Japan’s actions in Manchuria on Japanese orders for Norwegian goods.¹⁰⁴ Disregarding the League’s ideals of solidarity with a victim of aggression, Norway’s policy thus reflected a tradition of prioritising the maintenance of commercial relations with belligerent countries.

Yet the lowest point with regard to expectations that the League would have the capacity to restore peace came with the organization’s failure to stop Italy’s aggression in Ethiopia. After

⁹⁹ See Minutes from the Sixty-Fifth Session of the Council, 22 September 1932 and 24 October 1931, *League of Nations Official Journal* (LNOJ) 12, issue 12 (December 1932), 2272, 2360.

¹⁰⁰ Société des Nations, Actes de la Session Extraordinaire de l’Assemblée convoquée en vertu de l’article 15 du Pacte sur la demande du Gouvernement chinois, Vol. 1, *Journal Officiel*, Supplément Spécial 101 (1932), 47. See also E. Mageli, “A Real Peace Tradition? Norway and the Manchurian Crisis, 1931-1934”, *Contemporary European History* 19 (2010) 1, 26; Fure, *Mellomkrigstid 1920-1940*, 193; H-P. Hem, *Norge, Folkeforbundet og Manchuria-konflikten*, MPhil diss., University of Oslo 1987, 75. Braadland’s speech was based on a note prepared by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 26 February 1932. At a meeting 29 February both Mowinckel and Hambro expressed their support for its content, see Hem, *Norge, Folkeforbundet og Manchuria-konflikten*, 70-71.

¹⁰¹ Société des Nations, Actes de la Session Extraordinaire de l’Assemblée convoquée en vertu de l’article 15 du Pacte sur la demande du Gouvernement chinois, Vol. 1, *Journal Officiel*, Supplément Spécial 101 (1932), 47.

¹⁰² Mageli, “A Real Peace Tradition?”, 28.

¹⁰³ Compare Mazower, *No Enchanted Palace*, 28-65; and B. Bowden, “The Colonial Origins of International Law. European Expansion and the Classical Standard of Civilization”, *Journal of History of International Law* 7 (2005) 1, 19. See also M. Koskenniemi, *The Gentle Civilizer of Nations. The Rise and Fall of International Law 1870-1960*, Cambridge 2008/2001, 98-178.

¹⁰⁴ Mageli, “A Real Peace Tradition?”, 27.

the Italians' attack on Ethiopia in October 1935 Norwegian policymakers wanted again above all to stay out of any conflict. At the same time, however, the League's decision to apply sanctions against Italy, arouse a new, though brief, flicker of hope in the organization's ability to handle aggressor states.

Indeed, Foreign Minister Koht's views were a jumble of contradictory elements. As already mentioned, he sympathized to a degree with "a new look at colonial issues"¹⁰⁵ which aimed at satisfying the "have-not" powers by providing them with access to colonial resources and territories. Even though he rejected colonial policy based on political control because it was anachronistic, he did not question Italy's right to pursue economic interests in Ethiopia. What exercised Koht primarily was Italy's use of military power, not its plans to exploit East Africa economically. He put it quite plainly: "I personally believe that Italy would have made more progress and been met with greater understanding abroad, if that country had fully revealed and discussed its goals".¹⁰⁶ At the same time, while suggesting that the country's social and legal conditions did not fulfil the requirements of western civilization, Koht was quite concerned in case Italy took steps to have Ethiopia thrown out of the League¹⁰⁷ and hoped therefore to find "a solution which will do real justice to both parties and will consequently satisfy our hopes for a lasting peace followed by real progress along the path of civilization".¹⁰⁸

Nevertheless, Koht's reference to the notion of a "civilizing mission" may seem somewhat unexpected since another aspect of the crisis could arguably have been of greater importance to the Norwegian government. Italy was a fascist state and, considering the strong antagonism between socialists and fascists, this fact may have influenced the Labour government.¹⁰⁹ However, Koht refrained from ideological argumentation,¹¹⁰ and stressed on a number of occasions the friendly character of Norway's ties with Italy.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ St. tid. (1936), 65.

¹⁰⁶ St. tid. (1936), 65.

¹⁰⁷ Minutes from the meeting of Nordic Foreign Ministers in Oslo, 28-29 August 1935, RA, UDA, Box 7370, File 02c/27.

¹⁰⁸ Société des Nations, Actes de la Seizième Session Ordinaire de l'Assemblée, Séances Plénières, *Journal Officiel*, Supplément Spécial 138 (1935), 57-59.

¹⁰⁹ H. Haave Storhaug, *Norge og Etiopia-konflikten. Særlig til belysning av omleggingen i norsk utenrikspolitikk i 1936*, MPhil diss., University of Oslo 1955, 70.

¹¹⁰ Compare F. I. Mørse Sydengen, *Halvdan Koht, fredstanken og forholdet til stormaktene 1935-1939*, MPhil diss., University of Oslo 2003, 38.

¹¹¹ Minutes from the meeting of the Storting's Extended and Augmented Committee of Foreign and Constitutional Affairs, 5 October 1935, SA.

Still, Norwegian economic interests must have weighed strongly when Koht, immediately after Italy's final victory in Ethiopia on 9 May 1936, argued for recognizing the *de facto* situation.¹¹² A year later the Italian minister in Oslo even approached Koht to inquire whether Norway could propose recognition of Italian annexation of Ethiopia in Geneva, but Koht answered that that initiative belonged to the great powers.¹¹³ In fact, the governments of Great Britain and France were working hard to find a solution that would favour Italy. Apart from the parallel imperial interests of these two great powers, the main reason for British and French benevolence towards Italian expansionism in Africa was their assumption that it could win Mussolini to their side against Nazi Germany's aggressiveness in Europe.

In addition to the fact that Ethiopia was neither a colony nor a mandate territory but a full League member, the idea of colonial appeasement reveals how much of the League's order rested on racial and cultural interests and hierarchies.¹¹⁴ The liberal internationalists who advocated colonial appeasement saw the League as the key instrument in the implementation of such policies. In doing so, they seemed truly oblivious of the fact that the Ethiopian crisis, ironically, might not have been a serious issue at all without the existence of the League.¹¹⁵ In this respect, Koht's attitude was not exceptional but rather in line with those exhibited by many internationalists, particularly those in Great Britain.

Norwegian reactions to the crises that reverberated across the international scene in the 1930s demonstrate the inclination of Norwegian governments, despite their declared commitment to a legally based international order, to seek political solutions even if they implied recognizing *de facto* territorial gains of the aggressor states. This pattern characterized the Norwegian attitude during both the Manchurian crisis and the Italo-Ethiopian war. Later, the Norwegian government chose to respond in a similar way to the civil war in Spain and the Munich crisis.¹¹⁶

Norway's foreign policy elite appears to have agreed on the necessity of stopping hostilities at any cost. They were afraid that further escalation of the conflicts would undermine the League's authority. Their reasoning may have been pragmatic, but in this regard it was not very different from the policies of the great powers' they had been so eager to condemn many times before.

¹¹² Minutes from the meeting of the Storting's Extended Committee of Foreign and Constitutional Affairs, 26 May 1936, SA.

¹¹³ See Minutes from the meeting of Nordic Foreign Ministers in Stockholm, 7-8 September 1937, RA, UDA, Box 6557, File 03/37.

¹¹⁴ S. Pedersen, *The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire*, Oxford 2015, 326.

¹¹⁵ P. M. H. Bell, *The Origins of the Second World War in Europe*, 3rd ed., Harlow 2007, 236.

¹¹⁶ Stachurska-Kounta, *Norway and the League of Nations 1919-1939*.

Moreover, despite referring to the need to preserve the League's authority, they seemed to turn a blind eye to the fact that the desire to make peace at any cost could actually damage the League's reputation. There is no doubt either that the Norwegian foreign policy makers paid a lot of attention to the country's commercial interests. By going for *de facto* recognition of the territorial annexations they were motivated not only by antimilitarist ideas, but also by a desire to return to business as usual as far as their contacts with important trading partners were concerned.

Conclusions

When occasionally the issue of Norwegian colonial nonpresence and nonparticipation is mentioned in the Norwegian historiography, it is not unusual to refer in a somehow anecdotal manner to Norwegian aristocrat and diplomat Fritz Wedel Jarlsberg, who prior to the Paris Peace Conference tried to persuade the Norwegian government to claim the German East Africa colony as a compensation for the loss of men and ships in World War I.¹¹⁷ Although the Norwegian government was not interested, the idea apparently appealed to the circles sympathizing with the Norwegian Farmers' Party. An article in *Nationen*, a newspaper affiliated with the party, suggested in 1929 that the protectorate over the Tanganyika territory in East Africa would be a good opportunity for Norway to eventually obtain some benefits from its membership in the League.¹¹⁸ The article caused in fact some stir, especially in the Belgian and British press,¹¹⁹ but the Norwegian Liberal government considered the suggestion so absurd that it did not even bother to issue an official disclaimer.¹²⁰ Indeed, this expression of imperialistic leanings from sympathizers of the Farmers' Party was not an isolated incident since in 1931 the Farmers' Party government approved the controversial occupation of part of Eastern Greenland.¹²¹ However, although the majority of the Norwegian foreign policy elite did not share the fanciful ideas to claim a share of the German colonies in Africa, recent

¹¹⁷ See Riste, *Norway's Foreign Relations*, 115; Bertelsen, "Introduction", 9.

¹¹⁸ "Ekspertkonferansen – Tanganyikaterritoriet og Norge", in: *Nationen* 8 May 1929.

¹¹⁹ "Notes Coloniales. Les paysans Norvégiens voudraient l'ancien Est-Africain Allemand", in: *L'Echo de la Bourse*, 14 May 1929; "Norway and Tanganyika", in: *African World*, 1 June 1929; "Notes Coloniales. La prétention du parti paysan Norvégien sur l'ex Est-Africain Allemand est repoussée catégoriquement par la presse coloniale anglaise", in: *L'Echo de la Bourse*, 13 June 1929.

¹²⁰ W. M. Johannessen to Utenriksdepartementet, 15 June 1929, RA, UDA, Box 6199, File 16/21.

¹²¹ For more details on the Norwegian annexation of an area of Eastern Greenland see Riste, *Norway's Foreign Relations*, 199-123 and Fure, *Mellomkrigstid*, 118-132.

publications have documented that Norwegian policies of the colonial era are manifold and frequently at variance with post World War II self-perceptions.¹²²

This article shows that Norway's traditional reliance on Britain's hegemonic position had a profound impact on Norwegian notion of the premises for international peace in the interwar period. When the League of Nations was established in 1919, internationally minded political circles in Norway envisaged thus an organization epitomizing the global presence of the British empire which had been materialized through the absence of war and free trade, though especially the first element used to be a highly relative concept and true chiefly from the Eurocentric perspective. Norway's support for the liberalization of international trade under the banner of economic disarmament has therefore to be seen in terms of the liberal project that took the imperial world order for granted. Yet since Norway did not possess formal colonies, the country's engagement in the League of Nations could appear as detached from imperial agenda. However, especially in face of deteriorating international situation in 1930s, Norway's overseas commercial and shipping interests made it impossible for the Norwegian political leadership to shun colonial issues. Norwegian appreciation of colonial appeasement as suitable internationalist strategy of recovery demonstrates how ingrained colonial worldview was among Norwegian politicians and diplomats. By discussing the link between Norway's support for liberal trade relations and widely shared assumptions about the civilizing mission in the time of the League of Nations the article contributes to understanding Norway's engagement in the organization in terms of imperial internationalism and to recognize the importance of studying the colonial era beyond the established discourses that pertain to the former colonial powers.

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¹²² Compare Alsaker Kjerland and Enge Bertelsen (eds.), *Navigating Colonial Orders*; Brautaset, Gregersen and Hestad Skeie (eds.), *Møter med Kina*.