1995 saw the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the founding of the United Nations. Those in attendance had much with which to congratulate themselves: despite the inevitable controversies, the successes of the United Nations, and particularly those of its humanitarian agencies, represented a significant improvement on the work of its predecessor, the League of Nations, which began by being disowned by the American Senate and ended after a world war it had been unable to prevent. The UN Charter, formulated in the autumn of 1944, represented, in part, an attempt to avoid these and other mistakes of the past. Adopted and signed by the representatives of fifty states gathered together at the United Nations Conference on International Organization in April 1945, by 1992 it had been signed by 179 nations.¹

The Charter’s League of Nations counterpart – the Covenant of the League of Nations – was a controversial document, if, indeed, it could be characterized as a document at all: its twenty-six articles (setting out its constitution) formed the first part of the Treaty of Versailles which effectively ended the First World War, and although a contemporary observer saw the Covenant as ‘the most important international treaty ever made’ it was never published by the League as a discrete item.² This arrangement was the result of political manoeuvring on the part of the League’s most fervent exponent, the American President Woodrow Wilson, who, according to one of his senior advisers, made the setting up of a League inevitable by insisting that it form part of the final peace treaty.³ Hans Aufricht in his exhaustive bibliography of League of Nations publications shows that only the amendments to the Covenant were ever distributed as official League documents.⁴ A number of printings of the Covenant alone are recorded in contemporary accounts, but most of these appear to have been successive drafts made for the use of a special drafting committee, the Commission on a League of Nations.

In 1995 the British Library Overseas English Section purchased from Bertram Rota a printing of the Covenant, annotated by the American journalist J. Lincoln Steffens (1866–1936). An unprepossessing publication in brown stiffened paper covers, stapled through the sides with metal staples and consisting of six leaves printed on wood pulp paper on the recto only, the document carries little bibliographical information. On the cover, Lincoln Steffens has written in ink ‘The original final press print of the “Covenant” as reported to the full Conference of Peace on Feb. 14, 1919. The markings
in pencil are mine, made as I followed the President’s reading’. It is signed ‘Lincoln Steffens’ (fig. 1). There are two (unfortunately illegible) annotations.

This provisional text joins a number of texts of the Covenant held by the British Library and catalogued in the General Catalogue of Printed Books under the heading ‘VERSAILLES, Treaty of. – Peace Conference’; others being held in the Department of Manuscripts. None of these has official League status, even though some of them derive from the League in Geneva. The earliest in the printed books catalogue, interestingly enough, is the Kontrakto de la Ligo de Nacioj (shelfmark 8425.w.13) which consists of a text in Esperanto, English and French, and which was published in 1919 by the Office Central Esperantiste in Paris. Its text is a translation of the final draft of the Covenant which was agreed by the Peace Conference in April 1919. The two items with Geneva imprints consist of a text in English and French, published in 1922 (UN.D. 216), and a text in English alone (08028.a.47), which incorporates amendments in the process of ratification and which was published by the Information Section of the League of Nations Secretariat, probably in 1924. Again, the latter, despite its imprint, is not an official document and its preface takes pains to make this clear, describing it as a ‘Pamphlet...one of a short series issued by the Information Section of the League of Nations on various aspects of League work...[and]...issued for information only’. A later series of texts, dating from the 1930s and published under the aegis of the British Foreign Office, are also listed, as are a number of texts with commentaries in Danish, German and English.

David Hunter Miller, one of Woodrow Wilson’s senior advisers, comments that all the drafts of the Covenant printed in Paris were in ‘the same style, size of type...had no distinguishing marks and were not dated or numbered’. Fortunately, the history of these draft printings has been described in some detail by several contemporary observers including Miller and two members of the American delegation, Ray Stannard
Baker and Florence Wilson. President Woodrow Wilson himself collected a substantial archive of material relating to the negotiations, including his own and other people’s memoranda, reports and resolutions, minutes of meetings, letters and petitions. The British Library itself is fortunate to hold an interesting collection of the draft printings in Add. MS. 51116, part of the papers of Lord Robert Cecil, afterwards Viscount Cecil of Chelwood, who was one of the British representatives at the Conference.

Wilson arrived in Paris with a reasonably clear idea of how a League of Nations might be constituted. He had already invested his principal adviser Colonel House with the task of drawing up an early draft of a covenant based on reports made to both the French and British Governments by political advisers. After discussion, a series of what are known as ‘Paris’ drafts were then produced, each incorporating suggestions and comments by a variety of individuals. The fourth draft was drawn up by the newly formed Commission on a League of Nations in the course of ten meetings over eleven days (3–13 February) and presented to the Plenary Session of the Peace Conference on 14 February 1919. Steffens’s copy is this fourth Paris draft, which is also known as the ‘Commission Text’ (fig. 2). It should be noted, however, that although formally presented to the Peace Conference, the fourth draft was not intended to be voted upon: as David Hunter Miller explains, it was ‘really submitted to the World for comment’, and he adds that it received more than its due; ‘comment came in a flood of criticism and suggestion of all kinds, and from all quarters, friendly and hostile, important and unimportant.’

Ray Stannard Baker, the organizer of the American Delegation’s Press Bureau at the Place de la Concorde in Paris, gives a detailed account of the ad hoc arrangements made for printing and disseminating information. Not only had the American delegation set up its ‘own hard-working printing plant, handling the considerable printing necessities of the Commission’ but there was also a ‘department of photography and history to make the record of the work done’. The printers themselves, who were actually American soldiers, frequently worked overnight to produce the draft covenants for consideration the following day: the first Paris draft was printed overnight on 10/11 January 1919, and the second on the 20/21 of the same month. A third draft was printed on 3 February in a print run of fifty copies and the fourth Paris draft was printed late on the night of 13/14 February for distribution the following day in a print run of 500 copies. An account by Whitney H. Shepardson gives some idea of the esprit de corps which accompanied these endeavours: ‘The printing press was busy all through the night so that the amended draft might be on the table the next morning. In addition to the satisfaction of a job well done, the American soldiers who set the type and corrected proof and ran the press will treasure a letter of thanks which the President sent them.’ The 500 copies were made available to all the delegations and also to members of the Press.

The publicizing of the fourth Paris draft alleviated some of the Press anger at what was perceived by many, particularly Lincoln Steffens, as the secretive deliberations of the representatives of the victorious Powers. For his part, Woodrow Wilson was inclined to espouse a policy of openness and had been happy to make his tours to the European capitals in the immediate aftermath of the war in the company of a bandwagon of some
Covenant

Preamble

In order to promote international co-operation and to secure international peace and security by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war, by the prescription of open, just and honorable relations between nations, by the true establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among governments, and by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organized peoples with one another, the Powers signatory to this Covenant adopt this constitution of the League of Nations.

Article I.

The action of the High Contracting Parties under the terms of this Covenant shall be effected through the instrumentality of meetings of a Body of Delegates representing the High Contracting Parties, of meetings at more frequent intervals of an Executive Council, and of a permanent international Secretariat to be established at the Seat of the League.

Article II.

Meetings of the Body of Delegates shall be held at stated intervals and from time to time as occasion may require for the purpose of dealing with matters within the sphere of action of the League. Meetings of the Body of Delegates shall be held at the Seat of the League or at such other place as may be found convenient and shall consist of representatives of the High Contracting Parties. Each of the High Contracting Parties shall have one vote but may have not more than three representatives.

Article III.

The Executive Council shall consist of representatives of the United States of America, the British Empire, France, Italy and Japan, together with representatives of four other States, members of the League. The selection of these four States shall be made by the Body of Delegates on such principles and in such manner as they think fit. Pending the appointment of these representatives of the other States, representatives of the United States shall be members of the Executive Council.

Meetings of the Council shall be held from time to time as occasion may require and at least once a year at whatever place may be decided on, or at any such decision at the Seat of the League, and any matter within the sphere of action of the League or affecting the peace of the world may be dealt with at such meetings.

Invitations shall be sent to any Power to attend a meeting of the Council at which matters directly affecting its interests are to be discussed and no decision taken at any meeting will be binding on such Power unless so invited.

Article IV.

All matters of procedure at meetings of the Body of Delegates or the Executive Council including the appointment of Committees to investigate particular matters shall be regulated by the Body of Delegates or the Executive Council.

Fig. 2. The first page of Steffens's copy of the fourth Paris draft of the Covenant

150 journalists. Many of these, including Steffens, followed the President to Paris where they settled in to lobby the American delegation at the Hotel Crillon where it was quartered.\textsuperscript{15} As Head of the Press Bureau, Ray Stannard Baker claims to have been eager
to provide channels of information for the correspondents, but his zeal was somewhat tempered by what he perceived to be their ignorance and sensationalism. They wrote about the Peace Conference, he complained, as if it were ‘a kind of a circus’ and failed to behave with the proper humility: ‘they had come, not begging but demanding. They sat at every doorway, they looked over every shoulder, they wanted every resolution and report and wanted it immediately.’ Steffens had his own amused observations to record: ‘the correspondents hung around the lobbies, traded gossip, cultivated links,’ he wrote in his best-selling autobiography of 1931.

Steffens himself was a journalist with a reputation. Starting his career as a ‘gentleman reporter’ on the New York Evening Post and subsequently as editor of the Commercial Advertiser and contributor to McClure’s Magazine, he became known for his investigative skills in exposing municipal corruption. Indeed, his first article on this theme, ‘The shame of Minneapolis’, started a vogue among journalists for what became known nationwide as ‘muckraking’. Involvement in pioneering journalism of this kind had a significant effect on Steffens’s fundamental beliefs. By 1918 he had developed a philosophy which coupled a healthy scepticism with a readiness to believe in the possibilities of social reform, if necessary by revolutionary means: his appreciation of the Bolsheviks in Russia is well known and he readily accepted an invitation to write a preface to Trotsky’s The Bolsheviki and World Peace which was published in 1918. Gerald W. Johnson in his Liberal’s Progress saw a physical as well as an ideological likeness, describing Steffens as ‘little, lean and goat bearded’ and bearing a ‘striking resemblance to ... Leon Trotsky’. Notwithstanding, Steffens was also able to appreciate what he saw as the vigour of Mussolini, portraying him in his early days as a politician of penetrating intelligence.

Steffens was not overawed by either the Peace Conference in Paris, or by its illustrious protagonists. Unlike his fellow journalists he was firmly against a punitive peace treaty, predicting that attempts to exact vengeance on the defeated powers would result in a further war. Nevertheless, he felt drawn to the life of the thriving American expatriate community in Europe, and did not return to America for good until 1927.

The League Covenant in which Steffens and his contemporaries took so much interest was finally adopted at the Plenary Session of the Peace Conference of 28 April 1919, coming into effect on 10 January 1920 with the deposit of the required ratifications of the Treaty of Versailles. Steffens’s gloomy prognostications about the imminent fate of Europe and about the Treaty itself were eventually borne out, although he did not live to see the final playing out of the tragedy.

3 David Hunter Miller, The Drafting of the
Covenant (New York, 1928), p. 76. It should be noted, however, that Woodrow Wilson was by no means the originator of the idea of a league. Both the League to Enforce Peace, led by William Taft, and the British League of Nations Society predated his espousal of it. Ray Stannard Baker saw Wilson’s relation to the Covenant as ‘mainly that of editor or compiler, selecting or rejecting, recasting or combining the projects that came to him from other sources’ (Baker, see n. 6 below, vol. i, p. 214).


5 David Hunter Miller, op. cit., p. 75.

6 Ray Stannard Baker (1870–1946) was a journalist and author. An admirer of President Wilson, he was made Head of the Press Bureau of the American Delegation. His account of the Peace Conference at Paris, Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement (London, 1923), drew on his own recollections as well as the substantial archive of material collected by Woodrow Wilson himself.

7 Florence Wilson was a librarian and a member of the group of experts brought to Paris by Colonel House (President Wilson’s principal adviser) to assist in the formulation of the Treaty. Her description of the drawing up of the Covenant (see n. 2 above) is the most detailed source.

8 Add. MS. 51116 contains the following printed drafts: – (a) 1st. ff. 1–5v; – (b) 2nd. ff. 20–29; – (c) 3rd. ff. 46–50; – (d) 4th. ff. 51–57, 59–65; – (e) 5th. ff. 67–74; – (f) 6th. ff. 76v–104. (The annotations on these and the ensuing drafts in the Cecil Papers give a different enumeration to that detailed by David Hunter Miller, probably being partly based on Woodrow Wilson’s own system of numbering which began with a draft drawn up in Washington before the Peace Conference.)

9 An official commission led by M. Ribot had been set up by the French Government in 1917 to report on the possibilities of a league of nations, while in Great Britain a similar report – by the Phillimore Committee – had also been produced. Both these reports were made available to the American President. The final draft of the Covenant was, in the event, based on the Anglo-American drafts although points raised in the French submissions were incorporated.

10 Colonel House was instrumental in organizing the writing of successive drafts of the Covenant. The opinions of a number of figures, including General Smuts and Lord Robert Cecil, were also taken into account, although the responsibility for drawing up the later drafts was given to David Hunter Miller and to C. J. B. Hurst of Great Britain.

11 David Hunter Miller, op. cit., p. 276.


13 Quoted in Miller, op. cit., p. 123.

14 Some copies of the third draft may also have been circulated amongst certain members of the Press.

15 In his The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens (London, 1931), pp. 779–80, Steffens claims that the American President wished to adhere to the aim of achieving, as he stated in his famous ‘fourteen points’, ‘open covenants of peace openly arrived at’. The other leaders were not so sanguine.


19 McClure’s Magazine, vol. xx, no. 3 (Jan. 1903).


