

Collective Security as Grand Strategy: Rebuilding World Order in the Shadow of Total War

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Abstract. In 1919 and, again, in 1945, the victorious great powers determined to rebuild the post-war international order around collective security. Not once before had that strategy appeared in the chronicles of statecraft. From the fourth millennium B.C.E., when the first empires arose in the Fertile Crescent and the Nile Valley, and into the 20th century, military cooperation among rival states invariably coalesced within wider environments of strategic adversity, and, until the League of Nations and United Nations, no attempt had ever been made – at least, no record of such an attempt survives – to subsume that adversity within a universal framework of non-adversarial military cooperation. What prompted the architects of the world-security organizations to break with the precedent of history so unambiguously? How did they, and the many advocates for collective security outside the highest echelons of power, expect that new strategy to operate? Finally, what do their expectations tell us about the broader dynamics of how states manage the potential for violence in the international system? This paper explores these questions.

An extensive scholarly literature, encompassing contributions from political science, global history, and imperial history, explores in some detail the founding of these world-security organizations and the subsequent evolution of the liberal-international order which was, initially, centered around them. However, no work in that literature systematically problematizes the institutional design of security commitments that defined the two organizations. With the infrequent exception of illuminating studies that survey the perspective of one victorious power at one of the two peace conferences, no study has yet conducted a cross-country analysis of alternative blueprints which the victors had drafted in anticipation of the conferences, and, furthermore, no study has yet tested against archival evidence a falsifiable theoretical explanation for the choice of collective security over contemplated alternatives in 1919 and, again, in 1945. That is unsurprising: after all, most political scientists, historians, and national security experts write off the semi-centenarian quest for collective security as mere political theater played out among millenarian prophets and careerist politicians cynically pandering to anti-bellucist sentiments.

In this paper, I argue that, besides some cynics and utopians, there were, in 1919, through the interwar years, and in 1945, many pragmatists who wagered on collective security as the optimal strategy for assuring the national security interests of their states. They did not hide in the shadows. They made no attempt to conceal their rationales. Our inability to spot them in the narrow corridors of the peace conferences or the wider boulevards of public discourse, and our failure to make sense of their strategic calculations, are rather consequences of the theoretical obsolescence of our own thinking about military cooperation and international peace. Statesmen as diverse as Robert Cecil, Lloyd George, Gladwyn Jebb, Vyacheslav Molotov, Petr Stolypin, Sumner Welles, and Woodrow Wilson saw collective security as a necessary and prudent adaptation of conventional military strategies to the unprecedented reality of dense interdependence generated by industrial modernity. They agreed that, with the dawning of the age of

mechanized warfare, it had become more efficient for rival states to pursue their conflicts of interest less through direct confrontation and more through regulative frameworks promising to secure them against intolerable risks of unregulated competition – that, in effect, skillful institutional statecraft had become a great power’s most effective grand strategy.

The paper retraces the evolution of official thinking about international security cooperation during the World Wars in the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia as the three great powers that played the most substantial roles in rebuilding the postwar orders. I also retrace, more briefly, the evolution of unofficial thinking about collective security among public intellectuals in those countries. I supplement secondary research from existing scholarly studies with primary research in public archives in the United States, United Kingdom, and Russia as well as in private archives containing papers of key policymakers who played critical roles in these stories. The resulting narrative – an abridgement of a longer and far more detailed narrative developed in my dissertation on this topic – is panoramic in scope and affords the reader a comprehensive survey of the political trajectories of key individuals, organizations, and blueprints. The narrative unfolds over the course of three empirical sections that retrace the founding of the League of Nations, broader intellectual history of collective security, and founding of the United Nations as three separate empirical episodes.