



AUSTRALIAN LEAGUE OF NATIONS UNION AND WAR REFUGEES

Internationalism and Humanitarianism, 1930–39

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N'ever since the days of the Great War', stated the New South Wales (NSW) branch of the Australian League of Nations Union in its *Bulletin* in 1932, 'have the international waters been so troubled.'¹ The branch noted that just 'when it seemed that the League was handling current international problems with a considerable measure of success' issues were emerging to create a 'multitude of new problems'. One of the 'new' and 'multiple' problems that escalated during the 1930s was the growing number of refugees from various international conflicts. Refugees flowed from the Spanish Civil War of 1936; the Sino-Japanese war of 1937; and finally, in 1938, on the eve of the outbreak of the Second World War, an unprecedented refugee crisis was developing in Czechoslovakia and across Europe.

The branches of the Australian League of Nations Union (hereafter Union) — formed to promote the values and aims of the League of Nations — responded to the growing international refugee crisis with a range of measures and actions. I explore three distinctive aspects of this response, as a way of considering the role of the Union branches in attempting to foster within Australia an international and humanitarian outlook towards the plight of war refugees during the interwar years.

First, how these Union branches began to coalesce their activities in the 1930s around a language of refugees and humanitarian aid that

over time developed into a coherent narrative. Most notably, this became apparent with the indirect and then direct challenge to the White Australia policy from Union members as they became more assertive in their demands for government to take in refugees from war zones.

Second, how Union branches shifted from being educative groups to ones more directly involved in political agitation and active lobbying. Related to this is a key argument of this essay: that we can identify a shift by the Union from supporting specific and individual causes to adopting a defined liberal internationalist position on humanitarian refugee relief. This can be traced over the period from 1936–1939, when a wider and broader campaign developed in support of a more liberal refugee policy.

Third, why a focus on this period is significant for historiographical reasons. In histories of refugees, the 1930s are often seen as simply a prelude to, and dress rehearsal for, the Second World War. But this period warrants closer attention especially in relation to the NSW and Victorian branches of the League of Nations Union and their shifting response to the growing refugee crisis during the 1930s.

The broader significance of focusing on the 1930s is, I also suggest, to be found in the history of government administration. It is crucial to recall that, at this time, issues of immigration were dealt with in the External Affairs branch of the Prime Minister's Department, which in

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Montage, Australian League of Nations Union members, 1938 (p. 73).

1935 became a separate Department of External Affairs. The Department of Immigration was not established until 1945. Why was this important? In having the two areas coupled administratively, we see a merging of international relations with issues of immigration where international diplomacy became focused on refugee and migration policy and vice versa. This became significant I argue because, flowing from this, Union members began to insist on the independent and separate Australian response to the international crisis that Australia's membership of the League of Nations allowed. Immigration became, in this context, about Australia taking the lead in international diplomacy and international relations.

The 1930s are significant for shifts in immigration policy itself, so I will very briefly comment on this, before moving on to the growing agitation by the Union on the question of refugees.

By the early 1930s, as the events in Europe began to escalate, there was increasing pressure on Australia to accept more non-British migrants. At this time, landing permits were required for non-British immigrants, normally given to those

who were able to procure an Australian sponsor or provide landing money. By the mid to late 1930s refugee movements became a wider public issue when applications for Jewish immigration began to increase with the rise of Nazism and the consequent flood of applications pouring in after 1933. Leaders within the Jewish community in Australia mobilised to contribute to refugee relief and lobbied governments to accept greater numbers of Jewish refugees. Following the destruction and violence of *Kristallnacht*, the refugee issue escalated world-wide. In 1938 the Australian Government announced that a quota of 15,000 refugees would be received over three years, beginning in 1939.²

One of the key tasks of the League of Nations from its inception in January 1920 was to protect minorities and offer help to the continuous waves of refugees.³ In 1920, Russian refugees were supported following the Russian revolution and the conflicts thereafter.⁴ The exchange of populations between Greece and Turkey was also a major focus for the efforts of the League, and it recorded that between 1924 and 1928, it had helped to settle over 200,000 families.⁵ Refugees were at the centre of Stanley Bruce's report to the Australian parliament in November 1935, outlining the aid and assistance



(left)
Australian League of Nations Union members attending the annual meeting, Canberra, January 1938.

PHOTO: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA, [HTTP://NLA.GOV.AU/NLA.OBJ-138082183](http://nla.gov.au/nla OBJ-138082183).

provided by the League of which Australia was an active member.⁶ But Australia's own record on this issue reflected its commitment to the Immigration Act of 1901 designed to limit migration to Australia and to protect a 'white' Australia by ensuring that it remained uncontaminated by those not of British stock. While governments were prepared to provide material support for refugees, it was quite another matter when it came to accommodating them in Australia. During the ongoing crisis in Armenia, for instance, the League of Nations requested that Australia take a certain number of refugees, but this request was declined on racial and economic grounds.⁷

(below)

Newspaper article from *The Mercury* detailing the address given by Ms Fabian Chow, Thursday 24 March, 1938.

PHOTO: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA. [HTTP://TROVE.NLA.GOV.AU/NEWSPAPER/ARTICLE/25501429](http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/25501429).

In Australia, Union branches had been formed across the country to promote the values and aims of the League which included upholding peace and security, international law, and the settlement of disputes through arbitration, negotiation and disarmament.⁸ The Victorian and NSW branches played a central role from 1936 to 1938 in supporting refugees, initially by assisting individual causes through fund raising and education. This gradually began to change.

With the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 Union branches offered similar support, most of it in the form of endorsing the efforts of others, such as Spanish relief aid organisations, as well as the Federal Government's allocation of £3000 to both sides of the conflict. In April 1938, the Victorian Branch of the League of Nations Union resolved to write to Prime Minister Lyons 'congratulating the Government on the grant of £3000 for Refugee Relief in Spain.'¹⁰ The Joint Spanish Aid Council worked with Union branches to co-ordinate the relief of Spanish refugees and orphaned children. They also supported the efforts by the Republican government to establish children's 'cities' where orphaned and refugee children were cared for and educated with aid from the Joint Spanish Aid Council.¹¹

But when it came to actively agitating for a cause, it was the Sino-Japanese war of 1937 that mobilised Union members into direct activity. The visit of Mrs Fabian Chow, originally from Victoria and ex-President of the Chinese Women's Club of Shanghai which carried out relief work for women and children in China, and Elsie Lee Soong, also a member of the Chinese Women's Club,¹² helped promote the need for financial aid for refugees from this war¹³ and the Union supported their efforts through fund raising. In June 1938, it raised £116 at a public meeting.¹⁴ The Victorian branch took up the cause of Chinese refugees with particular enthusiasm and energy to support humanitarian efforts. A boycott of Japanese goods was recommended to the Secretary-General in Geneva by the Victorian branch,¹⁵ but the wider executive of the Australian League organisation opposed such actions.¹⁶

In November 1937, the League of Nations provided much needed medical supplies.¹⁷ At the annual meeting of the Victorian Branch in mid-1938, the success of the China Relief Appeal was prominent with the branch having collected £2470 in Victoria, an astonishing achievement.¹⁸

By the time of the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Germany in 1938, both the NSW and Victorian branches had become actively involved in lobbying the Federal Government. For the first time they began to direct their energies into calling for assistance in bringing refugees to Australia. In October 1938, the Victorian



In July 1936, following the attack by Italy on Ethiopia, Union branches believed sanctions should be imposed on Italy to assert the authority of the League of Nations while it was also working to secure a peaceful settlement. The attack pointed not to the failure of the League, they argued, but to the failure of member states who had not used the machinery of the League effectively.⁹ But apart from expressions of outrage and this call for sanctions, Union branches took little action.

branch sought to pressure the Government to facilitate the immigration of Czech and German refugees.¹⁹ As the international crisis escalated, the branch became more assertive in its demands and made its own position clear publicly:

It needs little imagination to get some idea of the magnitude of the suffering and distress resulting from the cession of Czech territory to Germany. Many thousands of people, both Czechs and anti-Nazi Germans, are being rendered homeless, thousands of industrialists are being forced to migrate and so become unemployed. ... We British people have been saved, we hope finally, from the unspeakable horrors of a world war — but the cost of that escape has been borne in large measure by the people of Czechoslovakia.²⁰

Government take a new role:

The Government can only be expected to act in these matters if a sufficient number in the community asks for it to act. Such a request for action will only develop if each individual who feels the need for humanitarian action joins with the League of Nations Union in trying to aid these desperately unfortunate people.²⁴

The economic argument was one of the key points marshalled to support refugees. In a program outlined in November 1938 at a gathering at the Melbourne Town Hall, the Victorian branch identified, as a key priority, the assimilation of refugees into the most suitable industries needing workers.²⁵

The Union took its position to the community and to other organisations. In December

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Soon the argument was made that such refugees would contribute to Australia's population and employment needs since their experience in either primary or secondary industry would be particularly suited to Australian conditions, although questions of race were never far from the discussion.²¹ Professor G.L. Wood from the University of Melbourne suggested that

both for humanitarian reasons, and from motives of self-interest we should all [do what] we could to settle some of these refugees in Australia. We need skilled workers for our expanding secondary industries, we need highly trained scientists, and we need people of good stock.²²

Wood agreed with many Australians when he observed that there was a chance 'that an immigrant will keep an Australian out of work'. The solution in his mind was 'careful selection' of those to be brought out, directed towards choosing ones 'with a training that cannot be obtained in Australia.'²³ The Union believed it was the responsibility of their members, along with others of similar views, to insist the

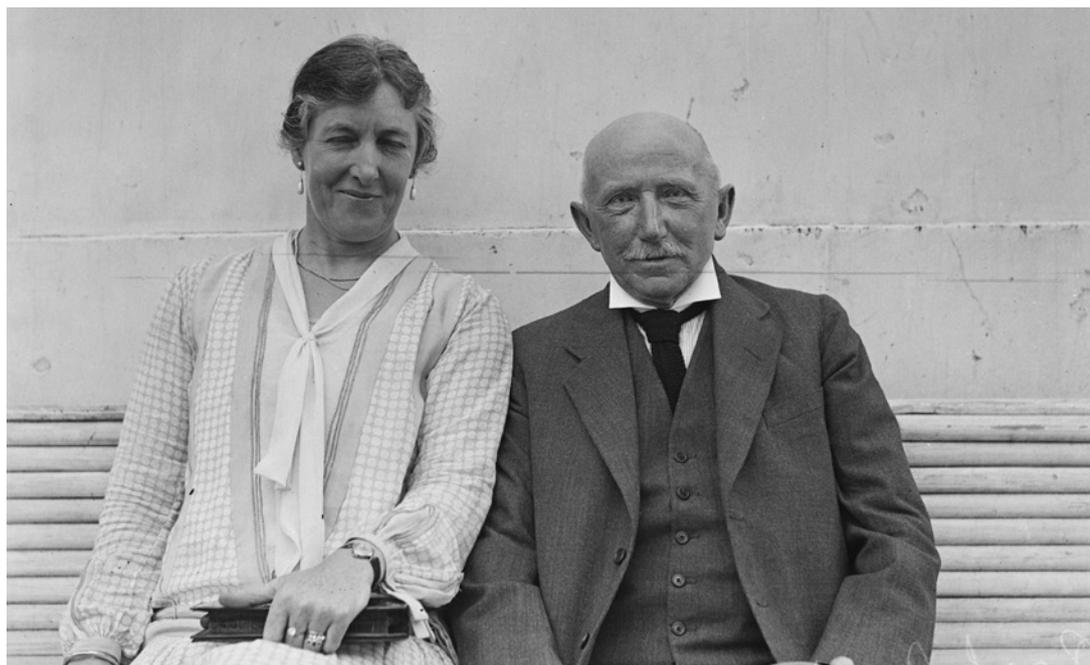
1938, members convened a public meeting that aimed to assist the 'speedy assimilation of refugees', suggesting 'the establishment of a refugee emergency council to co-ordinate and develop the work of existing refugee welfare organisations'. It explicitly expressed 'its sympathy with those who by reason of their race, religion, or political ideas were persecuted and forced to become refugees'. The meeting also supported government efforts to provide a sanctuary for those in need such as 'distressed men, women, and children'. Francis Anderson, the president of the NSW branch, worked with church groups, women's groups, unions, the Workers' Educational Association and the Refugee Committee of the Union and its chairman, Mr F.E. Barralough, to mobilise support.²⁶ Branches of the Union were also involved in initiatives with others to convene a united front of support for refugees, urging the Australian government to adopt such a stance in international affairs.

But economic imperatives were never far removed from humanitarian concerns. The needs of Jewish refugees caught the

(right)

Professor Francis Anderson and his wife returning to Sydney by the ship *Port Melbourne*, New South Wales, 15 February 1930.

PHOTO: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA. [HTTP://NLA.GOV.AU/NLA.OBJ-160681036](http://nla.gov.au/nla:obj-160681036).



attention of the Union in 1936.²⁷ In September the Union resolved that it supported

on humanitarian grounds that the administration of the Immigration Act be reasonably relaxed in the case of a limited number of approved Jewish refugees and refers the matter to the Federal Executive to take action as it may deem desirable after making enquiries as to the present conditions.²⁸

Several arguments were put forward to support the immigration of Jewish refugees: 1. 'it would be a humanitarian gesture'; 2. 'members of the League could do something where the refugee movement had failed'; 3. 'it would be an advantage to Australia to import' skilled workers from Germany.²⁹

Throughout the 1930s, then, the Victorian branch led the way in active agitation and support for Australia's acceptance of refugees, using a range of arguments in an attempt to convince the government to do so. This was largely because of two active and committed members: Professor Harold Woodruff, the Victorian president in 1938, and the Victorian secretary, Constance Duncan. The efforts of both Woodruff and Duncan are notable as they were vocal, strident and increasingly insistent that the entry of European war refugees be a high priority for Australia.

Woodruff arrived in Australia from England in 1913 as professor of veterinary pathology at the University of Melbourne. He served in the Australian Imperial Force in the Veterinary Corps in Egypt and France, returning in 1917. After the veterinary school was closed in 1928, Woodruff took up the position of director of the bacteriology department. An advocate for world peace and a practising Methodist, Woodruff spoke against fascism in the 1930s, toured around Victoria warning against racial discrimination and actively advocated the end of the White Australia policy in the 1940s.³⁰

Duncan was a graduate of the University of Melbourne, completing her Bachelor of Arts in 1917 and Master of Arts in 1922. She became Australian secretary of the local branch of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and travelled to Japan where she forged considerable links. There she learnt Japanese and worked for the YWCA in Tokyo. She returned to Australia in 1932, joined the Lyceum Club, and from 1934 to 1941 was the Victorian branch secretary of the League of Nations Union and of the Bureau of Social and International Affairs.

Duncan became directly involved in the refugee question through her role as director of the Victorian International Refugee Emergency Council formed in 1938. She led the move to agitate for more refugees to be allowed to come to Australia. Through the Council, which was sponsored by the League of Nations Union and

the churches, Duncan advocated the admission of more refugees, pressing the need to assist them in settling into Australia and acquainting them with Australian culture, language and customs. She wrote of the need for Australians to adopt a more progressive stance regarding support for refugees: 'People need to be shown that to attack the refugee is really to help Hitler's propaganda.'³¹ In Duncan's association with both organisations she pushed the needs of refugees as an issue of utmost priority that should be of primary concern to the Union.

In particular Duncan promoted the need to assist political refugees, outlining this activity as central to the work of the Union. She believed that

assistance to refugees was an integral part of the League of Nations' Union work, the Union should endeavour to urge the Government to adopt a more definitive policy with regard to granting political refugees an asylum in Australia, and ... select immigrants from amongst the very large number of applicants, choosing those who can best be absorbed into Australian life.³²

This was a major advance in the efforts of the Union. In August 1938, it passed a list of resolutions regarding political refugees. These included: 'the cause of refugees is an integral part of the work of the League', and a 'direct concern'; and the Government should adopt a positive policy towards refugees. It was also stated that '[i]ndifference to the fate of political exiles is not in the British tradition, nor would it be calculated to raise the reputation of Australia in the eyes of international public opinion'. Furthermore, an humanitarian argument was advanced by Duncan:

Merely on humanitarian grounds there is a case for helping refugees. Australia is a democratic country; its sympathies are with oppressed minorities; but sympathies without practical expression are evasions of moral responsibility; Australia is morally committed not only by its membership of the League of Nations, but by its inherent nature as a democratic state to share in the protection of minorities.

The Victorian branch believed that the question of refugees was not separate from broader concerns. It was a 'serious international problem', it argued in 1938, 'likely if unresolved to have adverse effects upon international relations, with world-wide consequences'. It urged 'the Commonwealth Government to co-operate to the fullest extent possible in the international effort to provide refugees with a new political and economic basis of life.'³³ Immigration and the influx of migrants was seen as a solution to increasing Australia's productivity and its 'sparse population' — both issues which would later shape Australia's immigration policy.³⁴

By June 1939 Duncan and the Victorian branch had become some of the most vocal supporters of refugees. When the 'value of refugee immigrants' was discussed, Duncan argued on economic grounds about the enormous value refugees from Europe would bring to the community.³⁵ She believed that they were not to blame if they knew no English and were more likely to be employers when they settled.³⁶ For these reasons, she personally agitated for assistance to be given to them. In July 1939, she helped in the arrival of a Viennese couple.³⁷ In August 1939, in a speech at the Melbourne Lyceum Club, Duncan asked its graduate women members to act as guarantors for a graduate refugee. She succeeded in raising enough funds for three refugee graduates to be supported.³⁸

As the world plunged into further crisis towards the outbreak of war, Woodruff and Duncan became less measured in their public comments. In a letter published in the *Age* in April 1939, their frustration was palpable when they admitted the League of Nations had failed in its ultimate goal: to create a new and peaceful world order. With deep concern they noted that nations had 'sacrificed justice to their own selfish interests'; the breakdown of the League system meant that the key factor determining international politics was now brute force. The British were not 'blameless': 'we [too] have considered our own narrow and short-term interests in preference to those of the world community', they reflected. If any reprieve from war was to be permanent, then a more effective

body needed to be formed, 'something ... more than a hastily constructed association of nations, united only for the purpose of meeting an immediate threat'. The League must be rebuilt, they believed. No nation was free from responsibility for the current crisis, though they acknowledged that circumstances were beyond the control of individual nations.

For a brief period in the 1930s the Union took an active role of pressuring the Australian Government to change its international policy and accept more refugees from Europe. In doing so, it began pushing the Australian Government into a sphere of independent international diplomacy and relations — one less governed by Imperial interests — a move which was required if a more open immigration policy was to develop. Once Europe became consumed by war it was too late to save many refugees from the catastrophe. Far from despairing, Duncan and other committed members of the Union redoubled their efforts after 1939. Even if peace was lost, or because of its loss, the cause of refugee relief became more urgent and required greater intervention, as the victims of war were increasing in numbers never seen before across Europe. After the war, a new chapter would begin for both the League of Nations, when it later morphed into the United Nations, and for the Australian Government, with the establishment of the Department of Immigration to manage refugees as well as migrants. But this was almost a decade away.

Duncan, Woodruff and their ilk in League of Nations Union branches were amongst those who, in the 1930s, began to lay the foundation for drawing the attention of governments to the importance of the war refugee question to Australia's economy, population growth and issues of international relations. They were not the only advocates of broadening Australia's refugee intake but they played a central role in insisting that Australia act with independence and autonomy on the global stage. We have seen that, in the space of a few years, their voices became louder and more strident as the political terrain became more desperate. Eventually Australian governments would listen, but not before the calamity and devastation of total war had created a refugee crisis on a scale beyond anyone's imagination and comprehension. ¶



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Her latest project is a history of child refugees, humanitarianism and internationalism from 1920 to the present for which she was awarded an Australian Research Council Laureate Fellowship. This research seeks to examine the experiences and impact of child refugees displaced by the wars of the twentieth century.

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