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From Pacifism to Nuclear Deterrence: Norman Angell and the Founding of NATO

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On April 4, 1949, the foreign ministers of the United States, Canada and ten Western European countries met in Washington to sign a defense pact. Barely four years after the end of the Second World War, the United States committed itself to the military protection of Western Europe. While some observers on both sides of the Atlantic were deeply skeptical about this new arrangement, others felt that the Washington Treaty and all it symbolized were truly historic achievements. U.S. political commentator Walter Lippman put it best when he wrote that the new pact described a community of interests that was much older than the conflict with the Soviet Union and would therefore outlast it.¹ Lippman was proven right. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) that emerged from the Washington Treaty outlasted the Cold War and the Soviet Union and remains the world's most tightly-knit security alliance.

Another enthusiastic supporter of this new pact was Sir Norman Angell (1872-1967), journalist, peace activist, politician, best-selling author and 1933 Nobel Peace Prize laureate. His support for a defense community of Western democracies against the Soviet threat marked the end of a lifelong search for a recipe to overcome war. Over the course of Angell's political life, he went from being a pacifist and advocate of disarmament, to an advocate of collective security, the Atlantic Alliance and nuclear deterrence. This remarkable transformation can be viewed as a journey through the tragic first half of the 20th century. After witnessing how excessive nationalism and totalitarian ideologies had plunged Europe into two major wars, the world's most famous peace activist had to realize that an alliance of likeminded Western democracies was the best model for securing peace in an imperfect world.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 582 | April 4, 2024

Ralph Norman Angell Lane was an urbane British journalist who had spent several years in the United States, and France. Always keen to attract public attention, the author of 40 books dropped his surname "Lane" early on and went by the euphonious name "Angell". In 1909, he self-published a pamphlet entitled "Europe's Optical Illusion," in which he argued that due to the ever-close economic interdependence of nations, modern war had become pointless: even for the victor the costs would exceed any conceivable benefit. Barely a year later, the expanded manuscript was published as a book and it became a bestseller. *The Great Illusion* was translated into 15 languages and sold two million copies.² At a time when the European powers were preparing for a major war and nationalism was running high, Angell's rational arguments, with which he attempted to explain that the expected benefits of war were a great illusion, seemed like a long-awaited appeal to human reason. W.M. Hughes, Acting Premier of Australia, called *The Great Illusion* a "glorious book to read ... pregnant with the brightest promise to the future of civilized man." The German *Kölnische Zeitung* wrote that never before had the financial interdependencies of nations been laid out so well. And the *Königsberger Allgemeine Zeitung* praised the book as proving convincingly that wars of conquest with the aim of achieving material gain had become impossible.³ In March 1912, Strickland, the cartoonist of the British Magazine "Vanity Fair," referred to him as an "Angel of Peace."⁴

In Great Britain, Angell's theses resonated tremendously. At Britain's major universities, students founded associations of "Angellists" who would propagate the message about the futility of war. Although Angell had never claimed that wars had become impossible, the fear of an impending war in Europe had led many contemporary observers to over-interpret his theses. Many also believed that Angell's views of the futility of war would be shared outside Britain - an assumption that others considered naïve. For example, in 1912, when Angell delivered a lecture before representatives of the British Banking Association, the audience argued that his theories would only lead to world peace if all nations shared his opinion on the unprofitability of war. Particularly with regard to the German Empire, doubts were justified.

However, many "Angellists" were convinced that warnings against German militarism were exaggerated. Lord Esher, President of the Imperial Defence Committee, opined that war was becoming "every day more difficult and improbable." Lord Esher was also convinced that Germany was "as receptive as Great Britain to the doctrine of Norman Angell."⁵ Angell himself held similar views, although his lecture tour in Germany in February 1913 should have taught him otherwise.⁶ In Göttingen, fraternities complained about the use of the English language at a German university, and in Berlin there were scuffles between Angell's supporters and opponents. Angell had managed to garner much publicity in Germany, yet the good sales of his book obfuscated the fact that unlike in Britain, where pacifism had become a true movement, pacifism in Germany remained limited to a small section of the political elite. Angell himself later admitted that it would probably have taken several more years of intensive education to raise awareness in Germany of the futility of war between the European powers.

Predictably, Angell's theses provoked considerable opposition. Alfred Thayer Mahan, the leading American thinker on naval strategy, accused Angell of arguing too materialistically and of conveniently ignoring non-quantifiable factors. He agreed that the cost-benefit ratio of



wars was questionable, but insisted that wars did not arise merely from cold cost-benefit considerations: "Nations are under no illusion as to the unprofitableness of war in itself; but they recognize that different views of right and wrong in international transactions may provoke collision, against which the only safeguard is armament."⁷ Mahan agreed with Angell that the disruption a war would cause to the international economic and financial system would also harm the victor. But merely acknowledging this fact did not mean the end of war. Nor could human behavior simply be reduced to mere self-interest: "Ambition, self-respect, resentment of injustice, sympathy with the oppressed, hatred of oppression" were factors that had to be considered as well. Because Angell excluded such factors, his "Great Illusion" was itself an illusion because it was based on a "profound misinterpretation of human action."⁸ Numerous other critics also considered Angell's almost exclusively economic argumentation to be too narrow. When listening to Angell, a German reviewer noted in 1911, "one might think that the whole controversy of mankind revolves around stock shares ..."⁹

Angell's book was an attempt to counter the widespread fatalism in Great Britain regarding an "inevitable" war with Germany. He wanted to introduce rational arguments into a debate that he felt had become irrational. For example, when cabinet member Winston Churchill argued at a British university in 1913 that the best way to achieve security was to be stronger than one's opponent, a visibly annoyed Norman Angell put him on the spot by asking him whether he would give the same advice to Germany.¹⁰ This episode was typical of the rather shy but rhetorically brilliant peace activist. However, the fact that he over-generalized his arguments, which were originally derived from his analysis of Anglo-German relations, lent his theses a degree of seemingly universal validity that the rather rambling collection of thoughts of *The Great Illusion* did not provide. Moreover, although Angell had never claimed that war was impossible, but only that the calculated use of military power had become counterproductive and unprofitable, the apparent plausibility of his reasoning and his tendency to exaggerate his arguments soon blinded him to reality. In October 1913, the American magazine *Life* quoted him as saying:

[T]he cessation of military conflict between powers like France and Germany, or Germany and England, or Russia and Germany . . . has come already ... [I]t has been visible to all who have eyes to see during the last six months that far from these great nations being ready to fly at one another's throats, nothing will induce them to take the immense risks of using their preposterous military instruments if they can possibly avoid it. ... Armed Europe is at present engaged in spending most of its time and energy rehearsing a performance which all concerned know is never likely to come off.¹¹

The extent to which this naïve optimism had superseded rational considerations among British liberals was not evident only in Angell's statements, the reflex to ignore the challenges ahead was also prevalent in parliamentary circles. When, during the July Crisis of 1914, a Liberal MP approached Foreign Secretary Edward Grey to demand that Britain stay neutral under any circumstances, Grey asked him what should be done in the event of a German



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 582 | April 4, 2024

violation of Belgium's neutrality. "For a moment," Grey wrote in his memoirs, "he paused, like one who, running at speed, is confronted with an obstacle, unexpected and unforeseen. Then he said with emphasis, 'She won't do it'. 'I don't say she will, but supposing she does.' 'She won't do it' he repeated confidently, and with that assurance he left me."¹² As much as the pacifists and internationalists tried to de-romanticize war, as much as they opposed a view of world politics as a Darwinian struggle for power and survival, they could not deny the fact that the European powers were on a collision course.

The outbreak of the First World War discredited naïve pacifism. Economic arguments and philosophical debates had not prevented the war. However, Angell's popularity did not suffer. The immense destruction brought about by the "Great War" confirmed his thesis that the economic consequences of major wars would only produce losers. Angell remained a respected campaigner for international understanding and for a rational foreign policy. None of his subsequent books would achieve the popularity of *The Great Illusion*, but through his numerous essays Angell ensured his continuing visibility in the international debate. When he was knighted in 1931, one of his fellow campaigners felt that it was "the first knighthood for pacifism."¹³ Angell, who had left school at the age of 14, had worked as a cowboy in California, and who, despite his eloquence, suffered throughout his life from a lack of academic honors, had made it to the top of British society. The "cowboy philosopher" - the title of a 1936 interview - had finally become a respected intellectual.

However, "Sir Great Illusion," as some of his friends now called him with a mix of admiration and irony, had long since begun to question some of his pacifist arguments. In 1933, when Angell received the Nobel Peace Prize, he was a mature, middle-aged man who no longer believed in the war-preventing power of economic interdependence. Worried by the rise of totalitarian ideologies, he had become interested in the principle of collective security. As a leading member of the British League of Nations Union, he advocated the principle of international dispute settlement. In this context, Angell argued that the refusal of arbitration by a third party constituted an act of aggression that should be punished. However, Angell, like many of his contemporaries, shied away from arguing for military punishment. Given British war-weariness, his focus was on economic sanctions - a mistake, as he later admitted, because this meant that collective security was misunderstood as an alternative to military action.

The pacifist thus became sceptical of his own earlier positions. He had come to realize that his theses from *The Great Illusion* had not only become partially obsolete, but even counterproductive. All too often, his key statements were reduced to the simple formula that wars were no longer worthwhile. However, as Angell increasingly realized, this promoted the erroneous conclusion that peace could be secured simply by educating people about the irrationality of war. When Japan occupied Manchuria in 1931, threatening a new era of wars of conquest, some of Angell's earlier theories seemed hopelessly naïve. Angell also took issue with the perennial pacifist argument that war was a consequence of capitalism. The opponents of sanctions against Japan, he wrote in 1932, were primarily businessmen who feared for their lucrative trade with the Asian empire. From the mid-1930s, Angell consistently warned of the



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 582 | April 4, 2024

danger posed by Hitler's Germany, and he came out in favor of British rearmament. He no longer repeated his view, expressed shortly after the First World War, that Germany should have been granted access to raw materials in order to avoid war. He now considered concessions to a potential aggressor, as still propagated by the classical pacifists, to be disastrous. In July 1914 he had hastily set up a "Neutrality League" to keep Britain out of the war. Now, at the beginning of the Second World War, he sided with his government's policy.

Angell was aware that Britain owed its victory in the Second World War largely to the support of the United States. For the former Labour MP, the anti-Americanism that had started to spread among the British Left, was anathema. Angell, who held British and U.S. dual citizenship, was also concerned about the isolationism that was spreading in the United States. In 1917, at the urging of his fellow U.S. journalist Walter Lippmann, Angell had written an essay in which he called on the United States to enter the war. Now, after the Second World War, it was obvious to the convinced Atlanticist that the new political and military challenge posed by the Soviet Union could only be met by an alliance of like-minded democracies.

When negotiations on a transatlantic defense pact began in 1948, they met with Angell's approval. Such a pact, he argued in February 1949, a few weeks before the signing of the Washington Treaty, should serve as a bulwark against Soviet expansionism. He argued that if Germany had known what a high price it would have to pay for its aggression, the two world wars would probably never have happened. The same logic, he said, also applied to the Soviet Union. If Moscow was made aware of the resistance against its aggressive policies, the Third World War would not take place, either.¹⁴ This argument was a far cry from the pacifist ideas on which *The Great Illusion* was based. However, the repeatedly revised passages for the numerous new editions of this book had already indicated that his views were evolving. Pacifism, he suggested, may be based on morally noble convictions, but could lead to deeply immoral results.

For Angell, a system of collective security, as he had promoted after the First World War, still remained the best option. But just as Germany could not be integrated into such a system in the 1930s, it was equally impossible to integrate the Soviet Union into such an arrangement in the late 1940s. As much as Angell was pleased with the founding of the United Nations, he was also aware of the limits of this institution. Common security, he argued, could only be organized among like-minded nations. Hence, the new transatlantic defense community, which was enshrined in the Washington Treaty of April 1949, and which soon turned into NATO, came closer to his ideas of a system for maintaining peace than any other model. Unlike some of his pacifist admirers, Angell also understood the logic of nuclear deterrence as an instrument for preventing war. After all, the nuclear revolution meant that "the pleasures of belligerent nationalism" had become "suicidal."¹⁵ Consequently, he harshly criticized the British "Campaign on Nuclear Disarmament" for instrumentalizing nuclear fears in order to pursue an unacceptable policy of "benevolent neutrality" towards the Soviet Union. The erstwhile pacifist was endorsing nuclear deterrence.

It is part of Norman Angell's tragedy that, although he is now regarded as one of the first theorists of modern international relations, his name is still widely associated with a claim that



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 582 | April 4, 2024

he never made: that war had become “impossible” due to the economic interdependence of nations.¹⁶ Angell had instead argued that traditional wars of conquest had become economically ruinous and therefore pointless. But despite his fame and tremendous workload, he ultimately failed in his attempt to argue against what he saw as irrationality in politics and public opinion. Angell’s support for a defense community of Western democracies after the Second World War was an admission that ensuring peace and security required much more than an appeal to human reason.

¹ See Michael Rühle, “NATO at 70: The Way Ahead, National Institute for Public Policy,” *Information Series*, No. 440 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, April 18, 2019), available at https://nipp.org/information_series/ruhle-michael-nato-at-70-the-way-ahead-information-series-no-440/.

² Norman Angell, *The Great Illusion: A Study of the Relation of Military Power in Nations to their Economic and Social Advantage*, 3rd Edition (London: William Heinemann, 1911). The two most comprehensive studies on Angell and his thinking are Martin Ceadel, *Living the Great Illusion: Sir Norman Angell, 1872–1967* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and J.D.B. Miller, *Norman Angell and the Futility of War: Peace and the Public Mind* (London: Macmillan, 1986).

³ For more such praise see the further editions of “The Great Illusion.”

⁴ Strickland, Sir Norman Angell (‘Men of the Day. No. 1311, “an Angel of Peace”’) available at (<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw260098/Sir-Norman-Angell-Men-of-the-Day-No-1311-an-Angel-of-Peace>).

⁵ Quoted in Barbara W. Tuchman, *The Guns of August* (New York: Macmillan, 1962) p. 25.

⁶ See Philip D. Supina, “The Norman Angell Peace Campaign in Germany,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (June 1972), pp. 161-164.

⁷ A. T. Mahan, “The Great Illusion,” *The North American Review*, Vol. 195, No. 676 (March 1912), p. 322; for Angell’s reply see *The North American Review*, Vol. 195, No. 679 (June 1912), pp. 754-772.

⁸ Mahan, p. 332.

⁹ O. Umfrid, *Der Kampf um den Boden, Die Friedens-Warte*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (January 1911), p. 9.

¹⁰ C.E.M. Joad, *Why War?* (Harmondsworth/Middlesex: Penguin, 1939), pp. 71-72.

¹¹ *Life*, October 2, 1913, quoted in Christopher Cerf and Victor Navasky, *The Experts Speak: The Definitive Compendium of Authoritative Misinformation*, 2nd edition (New York: Villard, 1998), p. 110.

¹² Viscount Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty Five Years, 1892-1916*, Vol. 1 (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1925), pp. 327-328.

¹³ George Benson, quoted in Ceadel, op. cit., p. 282.

¹⁴ See “Pact Held a Bar to Soviet Inroads,” *New York Times*, February 22, 1949.

¹⁵ Norman Angell, *The Steep Places. An Examination of Political Tendencies* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1947), pp. 27-28.

¹⁶ Angell himself distinguished between the book’s critical success and its failure “to influence policies to any visible extent. It failed, moreover, in another sense: the case it tried to present not only came to be distorted in the public discussion; some of its basic ideas were turned completely upside down, and it was interpreted as advocating policies which were the exact contrary of what it did advocate.” Norman Angell, *After All: The Autobiography of Norman Angell* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1951), p. 150.



INFORMATION SERIES

Issue No. 582 | April 4, 2024

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