Leonard Woolf: Anti-Imperialist and Advocate of International Peace

“I had been born in an age of imperialism, . . . and felt sure that its days were already numbered.”
—Leonard Woolf

The beginning of the 20th century was washed by a boiling wave of unrest throughout the world that broke into the First World War in 1914. Not only did the war take millions of innocent lives, but it also proved the failure of political powers to solve conflicts without a major forceful intrusion. The time demanded peaceful intervention; it desperately sought another Moses—somebody who could lead people towards the light, out of the twisting spiral of brutal conflicts and fatal misunderstandings.

Such a person was Leonard Sidney Woolf. This prolific 20th-century political analyst, journalist and politician knocked on people’s hearts, wishing to open them to his idea of world peace through international government. Although most critics describe his works as utopian, my paper presents an alternate reflection on Woolf’s contributions and shows that his ideas are vital in modern society.

Woolf realized that “gratuitous inhumanity” and “spontaneous malevolence” characterized British imperialism (qtd. in Meyerowitz 33). His strong anti-imperialist beliefs were presented in The Village in the Jungle, Empire and Commerce in Africa, and Economic Imperialism. His view on imperialism as a destructive, impractical and negative phenomenon in the early 20th century was quite radical; however, most critics who envisioned the collapse of the great empire supported it.

Furthermore, Woolf pioneered and painstakingly fostered the concept of international government, which influenced contemporary international relations. He presented an alternative to war, expressing the need for an international government or some global authority such as an international organization to prevent war and conflict by correlating countries’ interests and plans in different areas. His writing even influenced the governing documents of the League of Nations.

Woolf’s contribution to international relations before and during the First World War had a broad and direct effect. His works on imperialism, such as The Village in the Jungle, Empire and Commerce in Africa, and Economic Imperialism, promoted the collapse of the British colonial system. His International Government and The Framework of the Lasting Peace represent the key works which contributed to the establishment of the League of Nations and later influenced the formation of the United Nations.

The echo of Woolf’s ideas still sounds in the modern world. His brilliant legacy in international relations demands further examination, and his impact should not be underestimated in modern studies.
Works Cited and Consulted


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