The catastrophic events of the First World War plunged the global order into crisis. The great dynasties that had structured European and world relations for centuries met sudden and violent ends. The collapse of their empires – German, Ottoman, Habsburg, and Russian alike – left power vacuums and great uncertainty across Central Europe, the Middle East, large parts of Africa, and the Pacific. At the same time, a host of transnational problems – from refugees and endemic disease to human trafficking and financial collapse – cried out for international coordination and international solutions. Faced with this multi-sided crisis, men and women from around the world set out to remake the foundations of international order. Their successes – and their failures – shaped the global order we know today.

This seminar will introduce students to the major contours of the “new international order” of 1919 and the explosion of new historical writing about it. We will explore the range of schemes, projects, and visions developed for a world order reborn, spanning path-breaking humanitarian campaigns, new international organizations like the ILO, and innovative new legal forms like the minorities treaties and the mandate system. These projects crossed the political spectrum and revealed the range of ways of imagining the world’s political order: while some sought to shore up the legitimacy of empire, others sought to challenge it; while some sought new authority for international law and the proclamation of international rights, others saw reason to make state sovereignty more powerful than ever before.

At the centre of many of these schemes and battles stood the League of Nations – the first permanent, multi-issue international organization and the predecessor of the United Nations. The League represented a grand departure in both style and substance: it established the first international civil service – turning its Geneva headquarters into a cosmopolitan social and political experiment – and pioneered the international governance of state economies, minority rights, the transnational drug trade, global communications, intellectual cooperation, refugee rights, public health emergencies, colonial
rule, and much else besides. The range of these endeavours, and the fresh approaches of current historians, allow us to explore the interwar international order not only as a question of political and legal history, but also social, cultural, intellectual, and economic history. As they develop their junior paper research projects, students will be invited to consider this new world order from various geographical and conceptual standpoints, “from above” and “from below.” Students will have the opportunity to make use of Princeton’s rich collection of primary sources relating to the League and other aspects of the new order for their junior papers.

The seminar doubles as an introduction to the methods and problems of international history more generally, which will be useful for those considering “international” topics for their subsequent independent work.

Sample readings:


