



# Jane Cowan on the Origins of 'Minority'

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Jane Cowan, the Jane and Aatos Erkko Visiting Professor in Studies on Contemporary Society at the Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies for the academic year 2018-2019, is currently investigating historical junctures concerning international human rights, the rights of minorities and minority citizenship. Jane is particularly familiar with the situation in the region of Macedonia.



*Jane Cowan has been researching minority citizenship in the context of the League of Nations as part of the pre-history of the current human rights system.*

The League of Nations was an international organisation established after the First World War whose aims included disarmament, international dispute settlement and the improvement of living standards. After the Second World War, the League of Nations was succeeded by the United Nations.

Diplomats and League of Nations international civil servants cooperated with European states with the aim of maintaining regional stability and guaranteeing a permanent peace.

From 1920 to 1935, the League supervised what were known as “minority states”, mainly located on the eastern borders of Europe. After the First World War, these states were compelled to accept treaties concerning the rights and protections of those citizens who differed from the majority by virtue of their language, religion or ethnicity. This moment thus saw the introduction of the term ‘minority’ as a political-legal category.

## **Why was the minority supervision mechanism of the League of Nations set up?**

“The supervision mechanism and indeed, the League of Nations itself, was set up at a moment of fundamental transformation in Europe from empires to nation-states. The Hapsburg, Ottoman, Hohenzollern and Romanov empires, all of them multi-religious and multilingual, were under stress from nationalist movements,” says Cowan, professor of social anthropology.

*The goal for supporters of nationalism was for people who were ‘similar’ to live as a ‘nation’, a distinct political entity with territory of its own.*



“Finland was one such nation, achieving independence in 1917,” Cowan points out.

Following the First World War, the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 consolidated the political development of a Europe of nation-states.

“Faced with having to determine and confirm new state borders, the diplomats realised that this ideal of a pure nation-state was impossible, whether defined by criteria of language, religion or ethnicity,” says Cowan.

This observation resulted in the idea that certain nations should sign a treaty to affirm full political and civil rights to the ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities living in their territory, and also to give them some special rights related to the use of their own language.

“By 1924, fifteen states had accepted minority treaty obligations: Albania, Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Turkey, the Serbo-Croat-Slovene Kingdom and Germany,” Cowan lists.

## **Selective supervision**

The League of Nations were responsible to ensure that the signatories complied with the treaties. The objective of the supervision mechanism was to prevent inter-state conflicts.

League supervision was nonetheless very selective. Only certain states were required to sign the legal treaties promising fair treatment of minorities. These obligations did not apply to other countries, such as Great Britain, wrestling at the same time with its Irish question.

*According to Cowan, some revolutionary groups also used the supervision mechanisms for their own purposes: rather than accepting being described as a minority, they used it to continue their ongoing struggle for self-determination.*



“Until recently, the dominant narrative dismissed the League of Nations as a ‘failure’ and described human rights, and the United Nations’ human rights system, as if they were created *ex nihilo*. Yet it is easy to see that many of the League’s institutional structures and procedures were adapted from the League to the United Nations,” Cowan explains.

## **Minority rights or human rights?**

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948, signified the reformulation of minority rights.

“It was felt that minority rights as such were no longer needed, because the new set of human rights covered everything,” Cowan says.

In practice, equality for minorities on the national level has proven challenging, so minority rights remain an issue for the UN.

“Even today, there is not a fully agreed definition of the term ‘minority’ at the UN,” she points out.

## **The case of Macedonia - background for the naming dispute**

In her research on the minority supervision mechanism of the League of Nations, Cowan has paid particular attention to the complex situation of Macedonia. The book *Macedonia: The politics of identity and difference* (Pluto 2000), edited by Cowan, is one of the fruits of her labour.

*“The territorial extent of Macedonia as a region has long been disputed. There have been several elements to the contestation over what Macedonia is and to whom it belongs,” Cowan explains.*

During antiquity, the region was not understood in terms of the kinds of distinct



borders now in use. When nationalist movements were on the rise in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the region was under the control of the Ottoman Empire.

“In that time, supporters of the Bulgarian, Greek and Serbian movements, and also a ‘Macedonia for Macedonians’ movement, all claimed that Macedonia should be ‘theirs’,” Cowan adds.

The different nationalist groups based their justifications on language, religion, ethnic origin, national consciousness or history, selecting the criterion that best supported their claim.

According to Cowan, the current controversy over who has the right to use the word ‘Macedonia’ is related to unresolved issues in the interwar period, though also to later events such as the Greek Civil War. The right to use the name is linked with territorial claims, which have escalated at various points of time into violent armed conflicts. Most recently, the territorial borders changed in connection with the break-up of the Yugoslav Federation.

“Finally, the name issue is also about identity and history. Many Greeks feel that Macedonia is historically Greek because of Greeks being there before the Slavs. As long-time inhabitants of the territory, citizens of the Republic of Macedonia believe, equally strongly, that they have, at long last, the right to be recognised as an independent state by the international community. Although many in both countries support the currently negotiated compromise name of ‘Republic of North Macedonia’, nationalists on both sides are outraged,” says Cowan.

## **Historical archives through the eyes of an anthropologist**

Jane Cowan will give her inaugural lecture, *An anthropologist in the archives: Reading letters to the League of Nations on minorities and Macedonia*, on 27 November at the University of Helsinki. The lecture will explore the struggles around minorities and minority citizenship in the Balkans, especially in



Macedonia, as seen through letters to the League of Nations and the encounters they generated.

*“In my lecture, I will explain how letters and petitions addressed to the League of Nations were processed at the time by a small team of bureaucrats, how the term ‘minority’ was defined, asserted and resisted by the various parties, and the effects this had on subject-making processes.*

“Over forty years of field work experience in the Balkans has affected my reading of archival records. I am aware that although the letters I am studying portray the boundaries between groups as clear and absolute, people in the region do not necessarily think this way. The ways they describe themselves may change depending on context and audience, and also may change over time,” says Cowan.

*The interview was originally published on 12 November 2018 on [the Helsinki Collegium of Advanced Studies website](#).*

*[Featured image](#) by Mika Federley.*