By 1938 the heyday of liberal internationalism was apparently over. A resurgence of moral indignation in 1939 played a major part in the liberal internationalist’s belief that the attack on Poland required a British declaration of war, but the League machinery which had once inspired confidence had broken down. As a result, the social movement clamoured for Covenant reforms, for alternative security arrangements or for none at all. Even the LNU leaders conceded the desirability of some reform to the system, though the usual defence was to point out that a workable system had been betrayed by governments. Yet to some extent, the demands for reform signified that other chickens were coming home to roost. Furthermore, Cecil had not been burdened with undue modesty about the League’s potential for securing peace – in spite of the fact that the disarmament negotiations and the crises in Asia and Africa had already exposed its limitations and the continued pursuit of national interests. Following so quickly after the Peace Ballot, discontent was aimed as much at the LNU as at the British and other governments.

This concluding chapter surveys the reassessment that occurred in the liberal internationalist domains, focusing first on the geographical and ideological concepts of reconstruction. Second, it indicates the consideration given to reform of the League Covenant. Third, it indicates liberal internationalism’s subjugation to the pre-Great War solution to interstate competition, an alliance for war. Finally, the chapter appraises the social movement as producer of innovation in identifying peace with a liberal governmental framework.

Geographical and ideological reconstitution

Of course, the antecedents of the reform controversy were as old as the League itself, and the broad outline of dispute between those who
wished to see collective security strengthened and those who wanted it narrowly defined had been evident, in the 1920s and debates over Locarno. Further, as noted in Chapter 3, a demand for the total elimination of Article 16 had gained currency among the Round Table group after the completion of the Kellogg–Briand Pact. These detractions made little impression, however, while the movement’s attention remained firmly fixed on disarmament. To the contrary, a Labour government had signed various ‘paper guarantees’, such as the Optional Clause, with the aim of strengthening the international system and improving the prospects for a disarmament treaty. Far more powerful opposition to the League, especially from socialist and pacifist war resisters, had developed after the Manchurian crisis and Germany’s departure from the Disarmament Conference. On the right, too, some observers had welcomed Mussolini’s demands at the end of 1933 for League reform and, like the Morning Post (24 November 1933), had argued that there would have to be a new, less-ambitious League. On the other side, liberal internationalists had usually challenged any proposal which even remotely threatened to undermine the Covenant. In the News Chronicle (21 December 1933), Cecil castigated ‘reformers’ for setting out to wreck the League. Only once had he deviated – at the International Federation of the League of Nations Societies meeting in 1934 when he aired a Tardieu-type security arrangement of geographical liabilities.\footnote{Leif-wing internationalists had occasionally gone further and advocated reorganisation, not according to geographical distinctions, but on the basis of ideological compatibility, anticipating that the League would have to shrink into a group of progressive and socialist states prepared to work against fascism.\footnote{In the early months of the Ethiopian crisis, however, talk of reform and reorganisation abated – only to become more difficult for liberal internationalists to address the following year.}} Core liberal internationalism encountered resistances in civil society, notably from the Peace Pledge Union (PPU). After a lull in its activities, the PPU held mass meetings in London, Glasgow and Birmingham in November 1936; increased its membership to 10,000 by the end of the year; and enlarged its network of local groups from 183 in October 1936 to more than 500 by March 1937.\footnote{Resistance to the League’s security provisions intensified, not with the aim of withdrawal from the League, but of reforming the Covenant. As Aldous Huxley put it, ‘Morality and common sense are at one in demanding that Article XVI should be omitted from the covenant and that the League should concentrate on active cooperative work for removing the causes of war’.\footnote{Others were less circumspect and the PPU’s campaign incited a great deal of}}