Writing from the Hotel Crillon in April 1919, the Columbia geographer Douglas Johnson had a moment to take stock of the great changes experienced by the academic profession in the preceding years. ‘There is a humorous, or perhaps you will prefer to say tragic, side to the whole matter’, he remarked, ‘when you think of American college professors, near-diplomats, sitting about the table with ... veterans of the diplomatic service and Foreign Office.’ Johnson was in Paris as part of the American delegation to the Peace Conference, one of many experts who had been assembled to conceptualize the terms of the peace and apply their specialist training to the concomitant problems. He added that ‘the future Europe will be very different in many vital respects from what it would have been but for the American “academic intervention.”’

The Paris Peace Conference was an epoch-defining event. It was widely expected that, following the most destructive war in history, a new departure in international politics would be required to ensure that peace endured in the future. University academics were central to this process; an experts’ war would be brought to a conclusion by an experts’ peace. In this respect, the peace conference was the pinnacle of the wartime mobilization of knowledge, confirmation of the rise of the specialist. However, the mobilization of intellect which culminated in Paris had a specific inflection which emerged around 1917. From that year, a remobilization for war took place against the backdrop of growing home front dissent, and, in the French case, battlefield mutinies. This remobilization hinged on the clarification of war aims and the assertion that the war was being fought for democracy and the right to self-determination of national groups. In other words, it looked forward, and conceptualized the specific terms on which peace would

T. Irish, The University at War, 1914–25
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be concluded. University scholars were enlisted to make this proactive policy a reality.

The path to Paris was a long one. Almost from the outbreak of war, scholars, who had traditionally taken a leading role in the international peace movement, put their intellectual energies into conceptualizing mechanisms which would render future wars impossible. By 1918 it was widely understood that an international governing structure would be the primary safeguard mitigating against future conflict; this chapter will trace the emergence of the League of Nations idea and show the importance of academic networks in shaping, disseminating, and implementing it.

The international peace movement before 1914

The decade before 1914 saw an acceleration in international cultural connections and within this movement, a proliferation of organizations which aspired to foster greater understanding as an antidote to rising tension between nation-states. The international peace movement acted as a forum for statesmen, academics, businessmen and other public figures to discuss the mechanics of international peace. There were two specific foci in the period before 1914. First was a desire to avoid war where possible through the use of arbitration in the event of international incidents. Second was the will to make warfare more humane by codifying its laws. The pre-war peace movement was not pacifist in the sense that it did not reject the use of violence outright. War was seen as sometimes necessary but an irrational and inhuman means of settling disputes whose avoidance should be an overriding political priority at all times. However, it was rarely repudiated outright by the mainstream of the peace movement.

The peace movement was organized both nationally and internationally. National organizations had their own manifestations; in Britain, for example, the Quaker influence was traditionally strong while opposition to the South African War of 1899–1902 gave the movement support from Liberal politicians. In France, the movement was supported by left-leaning intellectuals and shaped against the backdrop of the Dreyfus Affair. The American movement became increasingly dominated by international lawyers, while in Germany and Austria-Hungary it remained the preserve of the left, and, consequently, potentially subversive and never fully mainstream. National movements came together in the international peace movement, which was spread across Europe and North America. Most prominent amongst these were the