Introduction

The peace settlement following World War I gave birth to the League of Nations. Japanese diplomats labored with those of other victorious powers to fashion the constitution of the League, and the Empire of Japan joined the organization in 1920 as one of forty-two charter members and one of four permanent members of the League of Nations Council. Japan was active in League political, humanitarian, and judicial affairs until it announced its withdrawal in 1933. When its resignation took effect two years later, Japan retained affiliation with the organization's subsidiary bodies until it severed all ties in 1938. Before conflict arose between Japan and the world body over the Manchurian Incident, the League was a centerpiece of Japan's sincere policy to maintain accommodation with the powers and to function cooperatively in institutions for international order. League involvement inspired many Japanese—officials, diplomats, and citizenry alike—to believe that Japan could achieve its national aspiration to be a regional power without confrontation with other leading states, and that a global mechanism for the peaceful settlement of international disputes could succeed.

The picture of Japan as a positive contributor to international order and comity is not the conventional view of Japan in the early and mid-twentieth century. Rather, this period is usually depicted in Japan and abroad alike as a history of incremental imperialism and intensifying militarism, culminating in war in China and the Pacific. The account continues after 1945 as a reaction to and recovery from that war. In other words, World War II in Asia is center stage, deeply coloring all that precedes and follows it. Even Japan’s interface with the League of Nations is typically addressed only at the nodes of confrontation: the 1919 debates over racial equality and Shandong as the League Covenant was drafted, and the 1931–1933 League challenge to the Japanese seizure of Manchuria. What this book assays to accomplish is to fill in the space before, between, and after those nodes, and to accord a full picture of the League relationship its legitimate place in Japanese international history in the 1920s and 1930s. It also argues that the League connection has long-term implications that were not obviated by the interlude of war.
Japanese cooperative international behavior in the decades after the Pacific War bears marked continuity with the mainstream international accommodationism of the League years.

It is true that most Japanese had serious misgivings about the League of Nations during the months of its gestation and the fifteen years of membership. Japan's awkward adjustments to such now-conventional systems as multilateral diplomacy, mandated territories, arbitration, sanctions, disarmament, a world court, and the International Labor Organization involved a great deal of internal debate, which this study elucidates. League standards regarding labor confronted social policies at home. The status quo underpinnings of the League represented a fundamental challenge to Japanese aspirations to achieve major powerhood through expanding its economic and political influence on the mainland. Nonetheless, Japanese leaders believed that the League was a viable place where the Empire could negotiate expanded power and international standing with the leading nations of Europe. These Japanese were schooled in realpolitik. They had few delusions that the European colonial powers would subordinate their imperialistic prerogatives to the decisions of a global body. During the 1920s, Japan observed ample cases where the powers reached major accommodations among themselves away from Geneva. Japan rightly saw itself as a normal power — albeit a latecomer — an adherent of the “respectable imperialism” that avoided challenging the special interests of other powers. Even those Japanese — whose lives the reader will enter in the following chapters — most dedicated to the ideals of the “Geneva spirit” sincerely believed that Japan could have the League and regional predominance. For them, Japan's separation from Geneva brought deep grief. For the nation, the opportunities presented by post-Mukden autonomy were accompanied by a painful crisis of diplomatic isolation.

Japan was a relative latecomer to the League of Nations project. As the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 approached, Japanese planners for the postwar settlement had to scurry to apprehend the proposal and formulate Japanese approaches. Japanese popular support did not at all compare to the feverish enthusiasm that characterized League movements in the West. Of the three nations most crucial, then and now, to Japan's external affairs — China, Russia, and the United States — only China shared League membership with Japan. Japan's testy departure from Geneva in the wake of the Manchurian Incident lends credence to the presumption, long unchallenged, that the League of Nations was a subordinate factor in Japanese foreign policy.

This study provides counterevidence that Japan attached importance to its membership in the League of Nations. Japan regularly sent to meetings of the League Assembly and Council its ranking diplomats in Europe, for whom service in Geneva was an asset in rising careers. Moreover, some of Japan's most talented
bureaucrats and jurists were posted to the League Secretariat and the World Court. Japan took pains to demonstrate that its political and financial roles in the organization were commensurate with the status of a major power. Japan had consequential input in the drafting of the League Covenant and the Geneva Protocol, the formulation of disarmament concepts and plans, and the settlement of border disputes in Europe. Japanese representatives in the humanitarian offices of the League were commended for their responsible and effective service. As the only permanent member of the League Council among Asian members of the League, Japan could represent Oriental interests before the world, press the issue of national equality, and speak with impartiality on European questions. In Geneva affairs, Japan was no “silent partner.” League engagement was also the highlight of the careers of noteworthy diplomatic and intellectual figures. The legacies of Makino Nobuaki, Ishii Kikujirō, Nitobe Inazō, and Matsuoka Yōsuke are deeply intertwined with the League of Nations.

The advent of the League of Nations after World War I encouraged the rise of internationalist movements among the Japanese public. The organization was, in the words of Japanese international historian Akira Iriye, “the most spectacular instance of postwar internationalism.” Academic, labor, business, and religious leaders advocated adherence to the global trends of pacifism and democracy that seemed to be embodied in the League. Their opinions recorded in the press and magazines are frequently cited throughout the study. A Japan League of Nations Association, funded by the Foreign Ministry and led by top business and diplomatic figures, publicized the ideals of international organization throughout the nation. Even after Japan withdrew from the League and policies of autonomy began to displace accommodationism, the vestiges of universal order remained strong. Proposals by Japanese in the 1930s for regional systems to replace the defunct League of Nations in East Asia commonly borrowed principles and even wording from the League Covenant. After the dark valley of the Pacific War years, this internationalism would reemerge in public attitudes on war and peace, support for the United Nations, and the cooperative diplomatic policies of postwar cabinets—some of which were led by men with League experience.

Considerable space is devoted to the backgrounds, ideas, and careers of key internationalist figures. We see how the League project ushered them to world citizenship and inspired them to build bridges across boundaries and cultures. Their minds and careers also illustrate the competing loyalties of nation and world and the indelible imprint of past experiences of discrimination and service to the state. Their internationalism should not be misconstrued as pacifism. Nor was internationalism in their minds incompatible with the pattern of incremental economic and territorial expansion that they observed in the recent histories of all the world’s major powers, particularly the United States. New diplomatic values released by
the First World War and the Russian Revolution and articulated most notably by Woodrow Wilson challenged their inherent nationalism, gave them new concepts and vocabulary, and emboldened them to embrace new visions for a world peace organization. While some internationalists were ideologically committed to multilateralism and nonviolent solutions, this study applies the term “international accommodationism” to the internationalist posture of cabinets and the Foreign Ministry during the League era. This wording is drawn from the Japanese phrase “taisei junnō” (conformity to world trends), ubiquitous in the period, and the need deeply felt by leaders of the time to acquiesce in the world program of the powers. The counterviews of militarists and ultranationalists are noted but not treated extensively, and are found in the existing literature.3

The research for this book began in the author’s graduate school days and has been expanded through three decades of documentary inquiry and interviews in Japan, Geneva, London, and North America. Primary sources utilized in this inquiry include the unpublished manuscripts and published diaries of Japanese diplomats, political figures, and military leaders. The private papers and memoirs of Paris Peace Conference plenipotentiary Makino Nobuaki and the minutes of the Advisory Council on Foreign Relations shed important light on Japan’s entry into and early policies toward the League. The papers of League undersecretary-general Nitobe Inazō and documents in the League of Nations Archives in Geneva were useful for understanding Japan’s activity within the organization. The published and unpublished documents of the Japanese Foreign Ministry and the Japanese National Archives contributed information concerning official policy on League questions. The Public Record Office in London provided correspondence and documents of British diplomats. Newspapers and magazines of the period were used in the assessment of elite opinion in the public sector. Some elderly diplomats and journalists with direct League experience were available for interviews when this study began. In the United States, materials were gathered from records of the Department of State, the presidential papers of Woodrow Wilson, and private papers of such diplomatic officers as Roland S. Morris, Stanley K. Hornbeck, and Joseph W. Ballantine.