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Jerome D. Frank
(U. S. A.)

PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDIES OF THE CAUSES AND MEANS OF RESOLVING
INTERNATIONAL CONFLICTS

The ultimate goal of the Pugwash Conferences on Science and World Affairs, the elimination of war, will require, among other things, considerable improvement in the effectiveness of non-military means of settling international conflicts. The purpose of this paper is to contribute to this end by calling attention to some segments of the slowly growing body of empirical and experimental knowledge about psychological causes of conflict and its resolution. Although the information gained so far is for the most part trivial or obvious or both, it does indicate that the problems are researchable, and suggests certain ways of improving international negotiations that may be worth further exploration.

The primary sources of conflicts between groups do not lie in the attributes of individual members or in those of the groups themselves, but in the relations between them. The necessary and sufficient cause of group conflict is pursuit of a goal by both that one can reach only at the other's expense. This source of conflict will, I believe, always exist because of the nature of human beings. We are impelled to aggrandize ourselves and the groups to which we belong by trying to bend the environment to our will. Humans have performed prodigies of endurance and ingenuity in progressively subduing the non-human environment, and display these same characteristics in attempting to subdue each other. These activities take the form of struggles for dominance and wealth within societies, and for territorial or ideological expansion between them. In both cases, individuals and groups aggrandize themselves until they are checked by external forces. Within groups these are group codes, expectations and institutions; between them, the power of rival groups.

Many conflicts are over tangible national interests, such as control of territory, human labour, natural resources or financial wealth, but these are intertwined with psychological ones, determined by national world-views, formed by each nation's past history and current power position. Strictly speaking, of course, nations cannot have world-views since they have no sense organs or minds. The term "national world-view" is a convenient way of indicating the common features of the world-views of most of the citizens of a nation and especially those who make and execute its policies. Thus, the conquest of Ethiopia did not serve Italy's economic national interest because by that time colonies had become economic liabilities, but it was required by Italy's world-view at the time. Mussolini's motive seemed to be his image of Italy as a major power and his belief, which he persuaded many of his countrymen to share, that a nation could not be a major power without a colonial empire.