

The League of Nations

During the First World War several world leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Jan Smuts, began advocating the need for an international organization to preserve peace and settle disputes by arbitration. In September, 1916, Robert Cecil, a member of the British government, wrote a memorandum where he argued that civilisation could survive only if it could develop an international system that would insure peace.

When peace negotiations began in October, 1918, Woodrow Wilson insisted that his Fourteen Points should serve as a basis for the signing of the Armistice. This included the formation of the League of Nations.

The constitution of the League of Nations was adopted by the Paris Peace Conference in April, 1919. The League's headquarters were in Geneva and its first secretary-general was Sir Eric Drummond. The Covenant (Constitution) of the League of Nations called for collective security and the peaceful settlement of disputes by arbitration. It was decided that any country that resorted to war would be subjected to economic sanctions.

The main organs of the League of Nations were the General Assembly, the Council and the Secretariat. The General Assembly, which met once a year, consisted of representatives of all the member states and decided on the organization's policy. The Council included four permanent members (Britain, France, Italy and Japan) and four (later nine) others elected by the General Assembly every three years. The Secretariat prepared the agenda and published reports of meetings.

As a result of the decision by the US Congress not to ratify the Versailles Treaty, the United States never joined the League of Nations. Others joined but later left the organization: Brazil (1926), Japan (1933), Italy (1937). Germany was only a member from 1926 to 1933, and the Soviet Union from 1934 to 1940.

The League of Nations had no armed forces and had to rely on boycotts (sanctions) to control the behaviour of member states. In January 1923 France occupied the Ruhr. Six months later Italy bombed the Greek island of Corfu. When the League of Nations discussed these events, the governments of France and Italy threatened to withdraw from the organization. As a result, the League of Nations

decided not to take any action. Konni Zilliacus, a member of the Information Section of the League Secretariat, wrote to his friend Norman Angell: "I feel depressed and fed up. Who could have imagined things would turn out as badly as this?"

In 1924 the League of Nations was given a boost when James Ramsay MacDonald, Arthur Henderson and Edouard Herriot, leading politicians in Britain and France, visited Geneva in 1924. Hugh Dalton, wrote enthusiastically, "The League seemed to have come to life again, and to have gained a new significance."

The League of Nations also had success in averting wars in the border disputes between Bulgaria-Greece (1925), Iraq-Turkey (1925-26) and Poland-Lithuania (1927). The League of Nations also had noticeable success in the areas of drugs control, refugee work and famine relief.

In 1929 foreign ministers of all the main European nations attended meetings of the League of Nations. Mary Hamilton, a Labour Party delegate to the League of Nations wrote: "Geneva in 1929 and 1930 was a genuine International clearing-house of ideas... There was hard work, and there was goodwill."

The League of Nations faced a fresh crisis in September 1931 when the Japanese Army occupied large areas of Manchuria, a province of China. The Chinese government appealed to the League of Nations under Article 11 of the Covenant. China also appealed to the United States as a signatory of the Kellogg Pact.

Robert Cecil, Britain's official delegate to the League of Nations, proposed an inquiry to deal with the dispute. Henry L. Stimson, the US Secretary of State, advised against this as he believed it would upset the Japanese government. However, eventually it was agreed that the League of Nations would establish a commission of inquiry under the chairmanship of Lord Lytton.

In March 1932 Japan renamed Manchuria as Manchukuo ("land of the Manchus"). Only Germany and Italy recognised the new state. The Lytton Report was published six months later. The report acknowledged that Japan had legitimate grievances against the Chinese Government. However, the report condemned the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and refused to recognise Manchukuo as an independent state. When the League adopted the report Japan resigned from the organization.

Konni Zilliacus, an official of the League of Nations, believed that Germany and Italy posed the greatest threat to world peace. He argued for the creation of an "inner ring" of states within the League of Nations, led by Britain, France and the Soviet Union. He also proposed the election by proportional representation of a new international debating chamber of the League of Nations. His views influenced some leading British politicians such as Arthur Henderson, Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison and Hugh Dalton, but the idea was rejected by the government led by Stanley Baldwin.

In October 1935 Benito Mussolini sent in General Pietro Badoglio and the Italian Army into Ethiopia. The League of Nations condemned Italy's aggression and in November imposed sanctions. This included an attempt to ban countries from selling arms, rubber and some metals to Italy. Some political leaders in France and Britain opposed sanctions arguing that it might persuade Mussolini to form an alliance with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Over 400,000 Italian troops fought in Ethiopia. The poorly armed Ethiopians were no match for Italy's modern tanks and aeroplanes. The Italians even used mustard gas on the home forces and were able to capture Addis Ababa, the capital of the country, in May 1936, forcing Emperor Haile Selassie to flee to England.

In September 1938, Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, met Adolf Hitler at his home in Berchtesgaden. Hitler threatened to invade Czechoslovakia unless Britain supported Germany's plans to takeover the Sudetenland. After discussing the issue with the Edouard Daladier (France) and Eduard Benes (Czechoslovakia), Chamberlain informed Hitler that his proposals were unacceptable.

Benito Mussolini suggested to Adolf Hitler that one way of solving this issue was to hold a four-power conference of Germany, Britain, France and Italy. This would exclude both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, and therefore increasing the possibility of reaching an agreement and undermine the solidarity that was developing against Germany.

The meeting took place in Munich on 29th September, 1938. Desperate to avoid war, and anxious to avoid an alliance with Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union, Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier agreed that Germany could have the Sudetenland. In return, Hitler promised not to make any further territorial demands in Europe.

Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain, Edouard Daladier and Benito Mussolini now signed the Munich Agreement which transferred the Sudetenland to Germany. The League of Nations remained silent on the invasion.

Joseph Stalin now became concerned about the Soviet Union being invaded from the West. Stalin argued that Leningrad was only thirty-two kilometres from the Finnish border and its 3.5 million population, were vulnerable to artillery fire from Nazi Germany. After attempts to negotiate the stationing of Soviet troops in Finland failed, Stalin ordered the Red Army to invade on 30th November 1939. This time the League of Nations decided to take action and expelled the Soviet Union.

The League of Nations did not meet during the Second World War. In 1946 the responsibilities of the League of Nations was handed over to the United Nations

**Original Members of the League of Nations -
January 10, 1920**

ARGENTINA, AUSTRALIA, BELGIUM, BOLIVIA, BRAZIL, CANADA, CHILE, CHINA, COLOMBIA, CUBA, CZECHOSLOVAKIA, DENMARK, EL SALVADOR, FRANCE, GREECE, GUATEMALA, HAITI, HONDURAS, INDIA, ITALY, JAPAN, LIBERIA, NETHERLANDS, NEW ZEALAND NICARAGUA, NORWAY, PANAMA, PARAGUAY, PERSIA, PERU POLAND, PORTUGAL, RUMANIA, SIAM, SPAIN, SWEDEN, SWITZERLAND, SOUTH AFRICA, UNITED KINGDOM, URUGUAY VENEZUELA, YUGOSLAVIA

1920 ALBANIA, AUSTRIA, BULGARIA, COSTA RICA, FINLAND, LUXEMBOURG are admitted to the League

1921 ESTONIA, LATVIA, LITHUANIA are admitted to the League

1922 HUNGARY is admitted to the League

1923 ETHIOPIA, **IRELAND** are admitted to the League

1924 DOMINICAN REPUBLIC is admitted to the League

1925 COSTA RICA withdraws from the League

1926 GERMANY is admitted to the League
BRAZIL withdraws from the League

1931 MEXICO is admitted to the League

1932 IRAQ, TURKEY are admitted to the League

1933 GERMANY, JAPAN withdraw from the League

1934 AFGHANISTAN, ECUADOR, UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS are admitted to the League

1935 PARAGUAY withdraws from the League

1936 GUATEMALA, HONDURAS, NICARAGUA withdraw from the League

1937 EGYPT is admitted to the League
EL SALVADOR, ITALY withdraw from the League

1938 CHILE, VENEZUELA withdraw from the League
AUSTRIA is annexed by GERMANY

1939 HUNGARY, PERU, SPAIN withdraw from the League
ALBANIA is annexed by ITALY

UNION OF SOVIET SOCIALIST REPUBLICS is expelled from the League

1940 RUMANIA withdraws from the League

1942 HAITI withdraws from the League

League of Nations

Background

The League of Nations came into being after the end of World War One. The League of Nation's task was simple - to ensure that war never broke out again. After the turmoil caused by the Versailles Treaty, many looked to the League to bring stability to the world.

America entered World War One in 1917. The country as a whole and the president - Woodrow Wilson in particular - was horrified by the slaughter that had taken place in what was meant to be a civilised part of the world. The only way to avoid a repetition of such a disaster, was to create an international body whose sole purpose was to maintain world peace and which would sort out international disputes as and when they occurred. This would be the task of the League of Nations.

After the devastation of the war, support for such a good idea was great (except in America where isolationism was taking root).

The Organisation of the League of Nations

The League of Nations was to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. This choice was natural as Switzerland was a neutral country and had not fought in World War One. No one could dispute this choice especially as an international organisation such as the Red Cross was already based in Switzerland.

If a dispute did occur, the League, under its Covenant, could do three things - these were known as its sanctions: It could call on the states in dispute to sit down and discuss the problem in an orderly and peaceful manner. This would be done in the League's Assembly - which was essentially the League's parliament which would listen to disputes and come to a decision on how to proceed. If one nation was seen to be the offender, the League could introduce verbal sanctions - warning an aggressor nation that she would need to leave another nation's territory or face the consequences. If the states in dispute failed to listen to the Assembly's decision, the League could introduce economic sanctions. This would be arranged by the League's Council. The purpose of this sanction was to financially hit the aggressor nation so that she would have to do as the League required. The logic behind it was to push an aggressor nation towards bankruptcy, so that the people in that state would take out their anger on their government forcing them to accept the League's decision. The League could order League members not to do any trade with an aggressor nation in an effort to bring that aggressor nation to heel.

If this failed, the League could introduce physical sanctions. This meant that military force would be used to put into place the League's decision. However, the League did not have a military force at its disposal and no member of the League had to provide one under the terms of joining - unlike the current United Nations. Therefore, it could not carry out any threats and any country defying its authority would have been very aware of this weakness. The only two countries in the League that could have provided any military might were Britain and France and both had been severely depleted strength-wise in World War One and could not provide the League with the backing it needed. Also both Britain and France were not in a position to use their finances to pay for an expanded army as both were financially hit very hard by World War One.

The League also had other weaknesses:

The country, whose president, Woodrow Wilson, had dreamt up the idea of the League - America - refused to join it. As America was the world's most powerful nation, this was a serious blow to the prestige of the League. However, America's refusal to join the League, fitted in with her desire to have an isolationist policy throughout the world.

Germany was not allowed to join the League in 1919. As Germany had started the war, according to the Treaty of Versailles, one of her punishments was that she was not considered to be a member of the international community and, therefore, she was not invited to join. This was a great blow to Germany but it also meant that the League could not use whatever strength Germany had to support its campaign against aggressor nations. Russia was also not allowed to join as in 1917, she had a communist government that generated fear in western Europe, and in 1918, the Russian royal family - the Romanovs - was murdered. Such a country could not be allowed to take its place in the League.

Therefore, three of the world's most powerful nations (potentially for Russia and Germany) played no part in supporting the League. The two most powerful members were Britain and France - both had suffered financially and militarily during the war - and neither was enthusiastic to get involved in disputes that did not affect western Europe. Therefore, the League had a fine ideal - to end war for good. However, if an aggressor nation was determined enough to ignore the League's verbal warnings, all the League could do was enforce economic sanctions and hope that these worked as it had no chance or enforcing its decisions using military might.

The Successes of the League of Nations

In view of the League's desire to end war, the only criteria that can be used to classify a success, was whether war was avoided and a peaceful settlement formulated after a crisis between two nations.

The League experienced success in:

The Aaland Islands (1921)

These islands are near enough equal distant between Finland and Sweden. They had traditionally belonged to Finland but most of the islanders wanted to be governed by Sweden. Neither Sweden nor Finland could come to a decision as to who owned the islands and in 1921 they asked the League to adjudicate. The League's decision was that they should remain with Finland but that no weapons should ever be kept there. Both countries accepted the decision and it remains in force to this day.

Upper Silesia (1921)

The Treaty of Versailles had given the people of Upper Silesia the right to have a referendum on whether they wanted to be part of Germany or part of Poland. In this referendum, 700,000 voted for Germany and 500,000 for Poland. This close result resulted in rioting between those who expected Silesia to be made part of Germany and those who wanted to be part of Poland. The League was asked to settle this dispute. After a six-week inquiry, the League decided to split Upper Silesia between Germany and Poland. The League's decision was accepted by both countries and by the people in Upper Silesia.

Memel (1923)

Memel was/is a port in Lithuania. Most people who lived in Memel were Lithuanians and, therefore, the government of Lithuania believed that the port should be governed by it. However, the Treaty of Versailles had put Memel and the land surrounding the port under the control of the League. For three years, a French general acted as a governor of the port but in 1923 the Lithuanians invaded the port. The League intervened and gave the area surrounding Memel to Lithuania but they made the port an "international zone". Lithuania agreed to this decision. Though this can be seen as a League success - as the issue was settled - a counter argument is that what happened was the result of the use of force and that the League responded in a positive manner to those (the Lithuanians) who had used force.

Turkey (1923)

The League failed to stop a bloody war in Turkey (see League failures) but it did respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by this war.

1,400,000 refugees had been created by this war with 80% of them being women and children. Typhoid and cholera were rampant. The League sent doctors from the Health Organisation to check the spread of disease and it spent £10 million on building farms, homes etc for the refugees. Money was also invested in seeds, wells and digging tools and by 1926, work was found for 600,000 people.

A member of the League called this work "the greatest work of mercy which mankind has undertaken."

Greece and Bulgaria (1925)

Both these nations have a common border. In 1925, sentries patrolling this border fired on one another and a Greek soldier was killed. The Greek army invaded Bulgaria as a result. The Bulgarians asked the League for help and the League ordered both armies to stop fighting and that the Greeks should pull out of Bulgaria. The League then sent experts to the area and decided that Greece was to blame and fined her £45,000. Both nations accepted the decision. The failures of the League of Nations

Article 11 of the League's Covenant stated:

"Any war or threat of war is a matter of concern to the whole League and the League shall take action that may safely guard peace."

Therefore, any conflict between nations which ended in war and the victor of one over the other must be considered a League failure.

Italy (1919)

In 1919, Italian nationalists, angered that the "Big Three" had, in their opinion, broken promises to Italy at the Treaty of Versailles, captured the small port of Fiume. This port had been given to Yugoslavia by the Treaty of Versailles. For 15 months, Fiume was governed by an Italian nationalist called d'Annunzio. The newly created League did nothing. The situation was solved by the Italian government who could not accept that d'Annunzio was seemingly more popular than they were - so they bombarded the port of Fiume and enforced a surrender. In all this the League played no part despite the fact that it had just been set up with the specific task of maintaining peace.

Teschen (1919)

Teschen was a small town between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Its main importance was that it had valuable coal mines there which both the Poles and the Czechs wanted. As both were newly created nations, both wanted to make their respective economies as strong as possible and the acquisition of rich coal mines would certainly help in this respect.

In January 1919, Polish and Czech troops fought in the streets of Teschen. Many died. The League was called on to help and decided that the bulk of the town should go to Poland while Czechoslovakia should have one of Teschen's suburbs. This suburb contained the most valuable coal mines and the Poles refused to accept this decision. Though no more wholesale violence took place, the two countries continued to argue over the issue for the next twenty years.

Vilna (1920)

Many years before 1920, Vilna had been taken over by Russia. Historically, Vilna had been the capital of Lithuania when the state had existed in the Middle Ages. After World War One, Lithuania had been re-established and Vilna seemed the natural choice for its capital.

However, by 1920, 30% of the population was from Poland with Lithuanians only making up 2% of the city's population. In 1920, the Poles seized Vilna. Lithuania asked for League help but the Poles could not be persuaded to leave the city. Vilna stayed in Polish hands until the outbreak of World War Two. The use of force by the Poles had won.

War between Russia and Poland (1920 to 1921)

In 1920, Poland invaded land held by the Russians. The Poles quickly overwhelmed the Russian army and made a swift advance into Russia. By 1921, the Russians had no choice but to sign the Treaty of Riga which handed over to Poland nearly 80,000 square kilometres of Russian land. This one treaty all but doubled the size of Poland.

What did the League do about this violation of another country by Poland?

The answer is simple - nothing. Russia by 1919 was communist and this "plague from the East" was greatly feared by the West. In fact, Britain, France and America sent troops to attack Russia after the League had been set up. Winston Churchill, the British War Minister, stated openly that the plan was to strangle Communist Russia at birth. Once again, to outsiders, it seemed as if League members were selecting which countries were acceptable and ones which were not. The Allied invasion of Russia was a failure and it only served to make Communist Russia even more antagonistic to the West.

The invasion of the Ruhr (1923)

The Treaty of Versailles had ordered Weimar Germany to pay reparations for war damages. These could either be paid in money or in kind (goods to the value of a set amount) In 1922, the Germans failed to pay an installment. They claimed that they simply could not rather than did not want to. The Allies refused to accept this and the anti-German feeling at this time was still strong. Both the French and the Belgium's believed that some form of strong action was needed to 'teach Germany a lesson'.

In 1923, contrary to League rules, the French and the Belgium's invaded the Ruhr - Germany's most important industrial zone. Within Europe, France was seen as a senior League member - like Britain - and the anti-German feeling that was felt throughout Europe allowed both France and Belgium to break their own rules as were introduced by the League. Here were two League members clearly breaking League rules and nothing was done about it.

For the League to enforce its will, it needed the support of its major backers in Europe, Britain and France. Yet France was one of the invaders and Britain was a major supporter of her. To other nations, it seemed that if you wanted to break League rules, you could. Few countries criticised what France and Belgium did. But the example they set for others in future years was obvious. The League clearly failed on this occasion, primarily because it was seen to be involved in breaking its own rules.

Italy and Albania (1923)

The border between Italy and Albania was far from clear and the Treaty of Versailles had never really addressed this issue. It was a constant source of irritation between both nations.

In 1923, a mixed nationality survey team was sent out to settle the issue. Whilst travelling to the disputed area, the Italian section of the survey team, became separated from the main party. The five Italians were shot by gunmen who had been in hiding.

Italy accused Greece of planning the whole incident and demanded payment of a large fine. Greece refused to pay up. In response, the Italians sent its navy to the Greek island of Corfu and bombarded the coastline. Greece appealed to the League for help but Italy, lead by Benito Mussolini, persuaded the League via the Conference of Ambassadors, to fine Greece 50 million lire.

To follow up this success, Mussolini invited the Yugoslavian government to discuss ownership of Fiume. The Treaty of Versailles had given Fiume to Yugoslavia but with the evidence of a bombarded Corfu, the Yugoslavs handed over the port to Italy with little argument.

The Social Successes of the League of Nations

At a social level the League did have success and most of this is easily forgotten with its failure at a political level. Many of the groups that work for the United Nations now, grew out of what was established by the League. Teams were sent to the Third World to dig fresh water wells, the Health Organisation started a campaign to wipe out leprosy. This idea - of wiping out from the world a disease - was taken up by the United Nations with its smallpox campaign.

Work was done in the Third World to improve the status of women there and child slave labour was also targeted. Drug addiction and drug smuggling were also attacked.

These problems are still with us in the C21st - so it would be wrong to criticise the League for failing to eradicate them. If we cannot do this now, the League had a far more difficult task then with more limited resources.

The greatest success the League had involving these social issues, was simply informing the world at large that these problems did exist and that they should be tackled. No organisation had done this before the League. These social problems may have continued but the fact that they were now being actively investigated by the League and were then taken onboard by the United Nations must be viewed as a success.