

# Effect of the league of nations on disarmament and peacekeeping



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To what extent was the League of Nations successful in achieving its aims of disarmament and international peacekeeping?

Focus Questions:

- What was the structure and aims of the League of Nations?
- What did the League do to achieve these aims and what was the result?
- What lasting legacy has the League's actions left on modern international relations?

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The former president of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, advocated the need in his Fourteen Points of 1918 for a League of Nations to restore world peace. Draft statutes of the League's Covenant were formulated at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, where there was a mutual goal in international peacekeeping and disarmament. It was inaugurated on the 10th January 1920, simultaneously with the Treaty of Versailles. The organisation was mostly successful in its dealings in the 1920s, but historians argue that there are a number of causes which resulted in the League's dissolving into the United Nations in 1945, including the ineffectiveness during specific disputes due to the self-interest of nations, and its poor administration with unclear authority and peacekeeping force. Despite this, the League was quite successful in exercising its own power in resolving some conflicts and built the philosophy of internationalism for which the UN is built upon. Hence, there are many factors that must be considered in judging the extent of success of the League in achieving its aims, but it is the enduring impact that the League has left through the work of internal non-political agencies to

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enhance modern international relations that accentuate the organisation's significance.

One of the factors that contributed to the League's failure was its ineffectiveness during specific disputes. In particular, the Abyssinia crisis of 1935 was a key illustration of the reluctance from the major powers to act decisively in response to aggression. Fascist leader of Italy, Benito Mussolini, idealised a restoration of a Roman Empire, and justified his 1935 invasion of Abyssinia among other African states as he felt his people deserved a better life with more territory, which could not be achieved through the restrictions imposed by the League (Dennett & Dixon, 2008, p553). The League Council's decision to impose economic sanctions on Italy was inadequate, as it did not restrict the use of oil, and the expansion regime of Mussolini that continued exemplifies a weakness of the League in appeasement exercised in an effort to deter nations from disturbing the peace, rather than forcefully enacting the articles of the Covenant and protecting the minorities who were more vulnerable to superior domination (United Nations, 2009). The reluctance of the powers of Britain and France to challenge Mussolini may have resulted from their desire to retain him as an ally against Germany's Hitler rather than to incite more violence and disorder, as the League was criticised for their sanctions and level of authority over these smaller states (Lowe, 1982). However, it was only when Mussolini forced Britain and France to war that the powers acted so that Ethiopia could finally reclaim their rightful territory and maintain self-governance (United Nations, 2009). Theoretically, the League should have responded by imposing forceful penalties on Italy to force their surrender of their regime, as Ethiopia was a member state, but

the League's own objective of collective security that it was built upon was outweighed by the interests of France and Britain in maintaining the Treaty of Versailles (Merriman, 1996, p1221). Thus a flaw in the League was exposed through this notion of *collective security*, that although there was a call to act against Italy, the consequences for the Powers hesitating to act had to be equally taken into consideration with the various possibilities of what could eventuate. For instance, supporting collective security could force Mussolini to join Hitler, yet the rise of Japan and Hitler to dominate Asia and Europe respectively was inevitable, but the humanitarian responsibility to prevent aggression was disregarded, the prime concern in global peace (Murray, 1948, p192). Traynor explains (1988) A. J. P. Taylor's statement cited in *The Origins of the Second World War* of 1961 that the German movement into the Rhineland "marked the end of the devices for security which had been set up after the First World War," with the League "a shadow," as the Locarno Pact was destroyed and Germany was able to rebuild their army. The only possible solution to this would be sending in forces to retake control of Rhineland, as sanctions as previously seen were ineffective, and a nonchalant approach as seen here inspired Hitler to continue his regime (Traynor, 1988, p32). The Manchuria crisis of 1931 expresses a further reluctance to hold liable and impose restrictions on powers, as Japan continued conflict and failed to withdraw their invasion despite Chinese appeals (United Nations, 2009). The establishment of the Lytton Commission to investigate was meaningless as Japan eventually withdrew from the League, and invaded China again in 1937 (League of Nations, 1937), with no intervention from Britain or France because a trade boycott would undoubtedly result in war and increase devastation in their

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own countries (Lowe, 1982, p143). Conflict intensified in 1937 with the Japanese invasion of China, and the League of Nations was asked to intervene with Ecuador's delegate Quevedo arguing (1937), "What hope can there be in similar cases in the future of help from the League of Nations for other weaker and less wealthy countries, in which other States do not stand to lose anything and have no special interests at stake?" The report delivered by the League's Far East Advisory Committee to the Assembly condemned Japan's occupation and promoted humanitarian support to China in restoring peace and independence (League of Nations, 1937), however as Japan was now a non-member, it had no overarching influence on them, and the Japanese Empire continued their aggression in their quest to dominate over Asia, taking over Hong Kong, Singapore and Indochina, and threatening the peace of Australia. Thus the League was seen somewhat as unsuccessful in achieving its aims due to the unclear methods of conflict resolution among powers that took into account the interest of all nations.

Further, another influence for the eventual disintegration of the League was the poor administration of the League and the poor interest from members or non-members. For example, the non-participation of the United States despite the advocacy of Wilson is a major contributor, because of the American desire for an isolationist ideology away from conflict involvement, and the subsequent inability to obtain the full support of his own party to pass the vote through the majority of the Senate (Ostrower, 1996, p27). This was devastating to the League as the United States could have had a major influence in making important military and economic decisions and perhaps been more forceful in delivering decisions regarding sanctions unlike that of

Britain and France. This was evidenced through the Russian revolutionary belief maintained by Lenin and Trotsky that “peace must be made on a basis of no annexations and no indemnities,” (Walters, 1960). In this way, it supports how the League’s organisation and lack of movement by the leaders exposed it to its fall due to relaxation in punishing offenders such as Hitler and Mussolini in order to appease them and prevent the inevitable war (Walters, 1960). Further, the restriction of Germany’s and the USSR’s participation in the League until a later stage and their eventual withdrawal along with Japan is also important because it highlights the overarching ideology of nationalism and sovereignty among the stronger nations. It was this dominance that suppressed the focus on peace and allowed the battlefront of warfare to initiate and take precedence over Europe and Asia. In addition, there were flaws in the Covenant itself which contradicted the purpose of collective security and prevented the League from reaching its full potential in decision making (Lowe, 1982). The absence of a sole-purpose peacekeeping force and the difficulty in reaching decisions unless there is a unanimous agreement among members was unacceptable, but the Covenant itself was difficult to amend due to the flaw in the voting process (Lowe, 1982). The Covenant was unrealistic in nations submitting to sacrificing their independence in making foreign policy decisions to an international body, where there was an undefined level of action to guarantee the safety of states, which would be difficult for developing states (Dennett & Dixon, 2008, p554). For example, Article 16 of the Covenant states that all members, when presented with conflict, are all responsible for imposing force against an aggressor, but an individual state would be incapable of challenging it, remaining vulnerable to attack due to the reluctance of other

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states to protect it; yet minorities that are protected are still under threat due to the lack of force that would actually eventuate (Ostrower, 1996, p32).

There was also a lack of common beliefs among nations regarding the notion of peace: Germany wanted to use the organisation so that the terms of the Versailles Treaty could be altered to suit their own interest, Britain wanted to eventually incorporate Germany back into Europe, while the French wanted the enforcement of the Versailles Treaty and their military desires and Japan remaining generally uninterested (Ostrower, 1996, p115). This lack of consensus meant that Articles 10 to 16 of the Covenant were void due to the inability to reach common grounds of agreement between powers, and the ambiguous definition of authority within bodies of the League made it difficult for the Assembly to resolve disputes with high efficiency and the Council to be more influential in resolving Covenant contraventions (Ostrower, 1996, p116). These flaws in the League were mostly not in the control of the League itself, but through the influences of other nations, as it could not force the US to join, expect countries to give up sovereignty and sacrifice armies for collective security or please all the interests of member nations, it would be an impossible feat as evidenced here (Ostrower, 1996, p117). Therefore, as a result of these factors, the League of Nations can be argued to have been somewhat unsuccessful.

On the contrary, one must acknowledge the various successes the League has had in its contribution to a lasting legacy for modern international relations. One of the successes of the League was in its work in the resolution of minor disputes. For example, the 1925 Greco-Bulgarian conflict almost intensified into war, but the appeal of Bulgaria to the League for action

allowed a consensus to be reached and for British, French and Italian forces to be deployed to enforce the League's order of an immediate ceasefire within 60 hours otherwise severe sanctions would be imposed, which resulted in an end to the conflict (United Nations, 2009). This was a monumental decision for the League as the dispute between two members of its own was suppressed with unique urgency by the powers to restore order and both parties allocated appropriate fault for their actions, with Greece fined 45,000 pounds for breaching the Covenant, and Bulgaria ordered to pay compensation for the death of an opposing militant, and the allocation of two officers who were responsible for settling further disputes (Scott, 1973 p130). In addition, the League was able to resolve disputes between Sweden and Finland regarding the Åland Islands in 1920, and allowing the equal distribution of the Upper Silesia region between Germany and Poland in 1921 before further escalation (United Nations, 2009). Also, the League was successful in controlling the Saar territory for 15 years from its formation, until the state obtained its right for self-governance in 1935, and the maintenance of the Free City of Danzig with special harbour rights accessed by Poland (United Nations, 2009). As historian Francis Walters states, "No power could claim to be exempt from public debate on its external actions and in this debate the smallest state had the same rights as the greatest," and revolutionised the idea of international relations after the Great War (Traynor, 1988, p20). Thus, it can be seen how effective management of disputes on a smaller scale allowed the League to flourish in the restoration of peace and order.



Moreover, the League is seen to have been influential as it has shaped the philosophy of internationalism which defines the current work of the United Nations.

The League's structural organisation was transformed through the formation of the United Nations, and lessons learned from the poor administration of it were acknowledged so improvements could be made accordingly. For example, the League Assembly was an annual meeting for discussing issues concerning peace, altering the Covenant reform and electing new members (United Nations, 2009), which then evolved into the corresponding UN General Assembly, a parliament of nations with equal votes and can only make proposals to cases for Council consideration if enough support is received (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p315). The League Council met 3 times annually and were focused on taking measures to resolve conflict (United Nations, 2009), but was transformed into the UN Security Council with the similar goal of maintaining international peace and security, however decisions were irrevocable, and the five permanent members had the power of veto to reject any proposal that was not in the best interest of all as they have the most influence in operations (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p313). The League's Permanent Secretariat worked as an administrator of international relations in enacting treaties and investigating issues (United Nations, 2009), whose role is similarly performed by the UN's Secretariat (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p315). The Permanent Court of International Justice was developed for 15 judges to resolve and enforce any legal decisions regarding resolution of conflict between nations and breach of international regulations (United Nations, 2009), which has evolved into the

work of the International Court of Justice in the Hague (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p316). The Mandate Commission created regulations to allow the controlling and growth of developing nations under the power of developed states until they reached a point of self-determination, such as Australia in control of New Guinea (Hudson, 1980, p133). This work continues in the UN's Trusteeship Council which assists this same process for a state moving to self-governance (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p316). Workers in the non-political agencies of the League actively employed their expertise in making influential changes in the fields of economics, health, law, finance, communications, refugees, labour and international relations (Ostrower, 1996, p113). The Economic Committee was responsible for resolving financial issues and reducing tariffs post WWI, as seen in their provision of a £26 million loan to the Republic of Austria to stabilise the budget of the newly-formed nation; while the Communications and Transit Department explored issues concerning maritime, rail, roads, power and communications (United Nations, 2009). The World Health Organisation for developing vaccines and preventing transmission of serious epidemics; the International Labour Organisation worked to improve working conditions for those in the workforce; and a substantial amount of prisoners-of-war were rescued after European conflict by a League Commission (United Nations, 2009). These activities all highlight the organisation's work towards a better world for humanity and their relations with those in other nations, which continue to occur through the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in implementing initiatives surrounding current global issues of human rights, health, urbanisation and refugees (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p316). In

these ways, it can be seen how the work of the United Nations is a direct benefit of the underlying principles of the League of Nations.

One must also consider the important lessons that can be drawn from the League as they have allowed for the development of international relations and can provide inspiration for effective peacekeeping. The League was beneficial for Australia itself as it notably advanced the nation's involvement in international relations and politics, growing in governing stature without any significant pressure by the British influence to act beyond its desired level of involvement (Hudson, 1980, p186-7). For example, the League of Nations Unions promoted social movements despite the loss of public support for the League itself (Burgess, 2016), as leaders endeavoured to enhance public understanding of the League's ideas, and build support to pressure the government in seeking peace (International School History, 2011). Hence, the League was significant as the annual assemblies inspired the government to take decisive action on important policies, knowledgeable people became aware of the diversified Australian foreign presence and of political circumstances in the surrounding world so that they could pursue areas of concern (Hudson, 1980, p189). The League allowed the development of Briand's notion of a European Union to deal with European affairs and promote free trade and movement within the region, which remains in prevalence today as a positive source of international cooperation (United Nations, 2009). The United Nations drew knowledge from the ineffective League incorporation of treaties in policy, and developed their Charter independent of agreements so that they could be successfully enforced, and the Security Council has a broader authority to consider the expertise of all

with interest in the conflict, rather than the League Council's general focus on European matters (Goodrich, 1947). One can learn from the Corfu case and the lack of power in Article 10 that if the Council came to a consensus and the Powers were willing to resolve the dispute, there would be more confidence in the League and perhaps political circumstances in Europe may have been different, rather than the existent avoidance of the Powers which led to the gradual weakening of power that it was unable to deal with a situation of the magnitude of the Rhineland (Bassett, 1930, p374). What also can be learned from is the leadership of transitory Secretary-General Avenol in contrast to the strength of predecessor Drummond in his optimism and positive relations with staff; Avenol's political inexperience was evident and made him incompetent in making positive diplomatic decisions, only putting the patriotic interest of France at the forefront of his agenda, which eventually led to his voluntary resignation (Gill, 1996, p108-9). As renowned League historian Francis Walters explains was the greatest weakness of the League (1960), "The experts did not want it. The peoples were enthusiastically behind it: ..." (p16). He provides some further historical insight that when the Treaty of Versailles was created, the international system was meant to prevent another Great War from occurring, however the decision making and support of a League of Nations was rushed into, without knowledge of effective international governance, meaning that "their purposes were therefore liable to become uncertain and confused" (Walters, 1960, p16). It was the lack of experience of the idea of internationalism at the time that prevented the League from effectively acting in times of hardship, but through the lessons learned of the League, the UN has capitalised on the newfound understanding to work for a better world. For example, the United

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Nations was effective in their ability to deploy peacekeeping forces around the world, redevelop European relations and defensive alliances, and provide initiatives for the arbitration of conflict, despite the US and USSR powers being at the forefront of the Cold War (Merriman, 1996, p1296). The UN experienced hardship through the post-WWII partitioning of Palestine, as well as in the Congo and Somalia operations (Townshend, 2011), however it has been realised that throughout history, any international organisation will inevitably be threatened and face opposition, and it is the gradual work in protecting human rights with appropriate force applied in the specific circumstances which would generate desirable outcomes. In a modern world where technological advancements and imperialism have forced globalisation and the duality between independence and collaboration between nations, resolution to conflict is essential in any form – arbitration, armistice after war, imposing embargo, international operations or member involvement using “all necessary means” to enforce decisions and maintain peace (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p106). Conflict resolution and peacekeeping is critical, as an absence of order within one country can lead to international disorder (Baylis, Owens & Smith, 2011, p317), and all nations, especially those that are developed have the prime responsibility to act and protect global peace in an age of extreme terrorism and political uprising. Thus, it is the sense of internationalism which was virtually non-existent prior to 1919 that is taken for granted in the modern world, as it remains the underlying principle of existing legal and political systems for many countries and the source of international cooperation.

Therefore, it can be seen that through the analysis of a variety of factors the League of Nations can be assessed in its effectiveness in achieving its predestined objectives of international peacekeeping and disarmament. In one sense, the League is viewed by historians in its failure to reach a stage of global peace, as a result of ineffective resolution of disputes including Manchuria, Abyssinia and the Rhineland, poor management of the League through ambiguous authority defined in the Covenant and a lack of motivated involvement from countries within or outside of the League. Alternatively, one must acknowledge these flaws and recognise its various successes which cannot be underestimated in their significance. Despite its limitations, the League effectively resolved some disputes and generated a sense of internationalism which paved the way for the UN in shaping a better modern world, through the ongoing work of various agencies that were developed including the Permanent International Court of Justice, International Labour Organisation and World Health Organisation. Thus, it is this foundation of cooperation between nations which the League has helped to establish, that prevails as the answer to any question of dispute in contemporary society which threatens to disturb international peace and order.

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