

Was the league of nations a success or failure?



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In what ways was the League of Nations a predecessor to the UN? Was the League successful in it's goal of protecting minorities throughout Europe in the wake of WWI?

While the League of Nations was created after the end of World War One to prevent war from ever breaking out again, a few years later World War Two broke out shocking the world with its lack of response to defuse the situation. Though many people only discuss the epic failure of the League of Nations it is important to realize that the League of Nations was semi-successful in it's goal of protecting minorities throughout Europe after World War One and was a predecessor to the United Nations.

To understand the League of Nations it is important to go over the reasons why it was created and it's organizational structure. Based on President Woodrow Wilson's, 1918 address to the United States Congress, where he spoke of his desire " to create a world dedicated to justice and fair dealing"(Wilson 1918) which later became the Fourteen Points program. This program included explicit references to the rights to self-determination and statehoods for nations seeking freedom (Wilson 1918). The League of Nations was created after the end of World War One to prevent war from ever breaking out again. After the turmoil, the Versailles Treaty in 1919 established the League of Nations to bring stability to the world. The world was horrified by the slaughter that had taken place in what was meant to be in the civilized part of the world. The only way to avoid having such atrocities to repeat, a need for an international body whose sole purpose was to maintain world peace and sort out international dilemmas when and if they ever occurred again was needed (Clapham 2007). Other than the United

States, who was too busy with the root of isolationism, support for the League of Nations was strong.

The League of Nations was to be based in Geneva, Switzerland as it was a neutral county and had not been involved in World War One. With it's establishment the League of Nations and it's Covenant, addressed the rights of minorities, workers' rights, right of women and children, refugees and slavery (Freeman 2005). Also according to the League of Nations Covenant there were three things that could be done to resolve a dispute. One way it states to resolve this dispute is to have the states in the dispute sit and discuss their problems in an orderly fashion in the League's Assembly, which is similar to a parliament or the current United Nations parliament. If there is an aggressor then the League would and can verbally warn the aggressor nation. If nothing came from the Assembly's decision then the League of Nations could propose to introduce economic sanctions against the aggressor nation (Covenant 1919). The logic behind this action was to financially aggravate the aggressor country so they would follow and give into the League of Nations and their requirements. The League of Nations could order other League Members to not trade with an aggressor nation and if this failed as well then militarily force would be used to put the aggressor nation into place. The only problem with this concept was that the League of Nations did not have a military force that they could use and no member of the new League of Nations was required to provide any military help under the terms of joining which is different from the current United Nations where if joined with the United Nations military help is a requirement. This lead to the League not being able to carry out any of its threats. Due to the

atrocities and severe depletion of many major armies it was hard for even first world nations such as Great Britain and France to provide military strength to help the League of Nations.

Another weakness that the League of Nations had was the lack of support from the founding fathers country; the United States. Though Woodrow Wilson came up with the the foundation of the League of Nations with his “Fourteen Points” speech, he refused to join the League of Nations as the United States was fulling its desire for isolation. This was a serious blow to the prestige of the League.

A few other problems with the League of Nations was that Germany was not allowed to join because it had started World War One, according to the Versailles treaty. This was a great low point for both the League of Nations and Germany, as they both could not help each other out again other aggressor nations such as Russia and Japan. Russia was not allowed to join because in 1917 there was a communist government that created fear in western Europe. This also created a hole in the League of Nations because this depleted them of another potential military power to help keep order in the world.

Though the weaknesses were mentioned earlier in the paper is it important to remember the successes that the League of Nations also had. The League aimed to promote international cooperation in economic and social affairs. Under the League of Nations the council was active in the protection of workers rights. Their goal of “ fair and humane conditions of labor for all men, women and children” (Covenant 1919) became the central focus of the

International Labor Organization (ILO) which still continues to be one of the United Nations specialized agencies (Clapham 2007). Workers rights were to be recognized and protected even though they were in place by governments for their own state interests rather than individual interests. Some governments feared their population would turn communist and thus recognized workers rights. The League of Nations was also successful in setting up a commission on slavery and adopted the 1926 Slavery convention, putting an end to slavery. They also developed conventions on the traffic of women and children (Clapham 2007)

A few of the League of Nations decisions protected the rights of minorities in Europe while it was in existence. In the Aaland Islands, 1921, near Finland and Sweden, most of the islanders wanted to be governed by Sweden even though traditionally it had always been governed by Finland. 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. Though the minorities did not get as they wanted they were given the opportunity to speak up to the League and help make a decision peacefully. The fact that the decision is still in force today is a wonderful concept.

Though the League of Nations was a political failure it established a groundwork for the current United Nations and its strong commitment to Human Rights.

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 safe 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.

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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.

“ In order to promote international cooperation and to achieve international peace and security by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war, by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations, by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and by the maintenance of <https://assignbuster.com/was-the-league-of-nations-a-success-or-failure/>

justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another, Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations.”