

The Failure of the League of Nations

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Despite being far too ambitious and ultimately failing in many of its initial goals, the League of Nations was a worthy attempt at creating an international power and remains to be a critical stepping stone for the future formation of the United Nations, improving international relationships, and the prevention of future conflicts.

For most, if not all of the world, a peaceful society could not exist. That it was simply impossible to create a group of nations that were once, and maybe still are, enemies. And yet the world had a dream, that one day this peaceful society could exist. Where compromise was encouraged, and conflict was looked down on. Where all the nations of this wonderful world could come together and have talks of compromise, not commissions of conflict. This idea has been thrown around for a while before its creation. An international organization with the goal to prevent future wars and conflicts? Who wouldn't want to agree to it? Well... we'll get to that later. Anyway, this idea had gained large support mainly in Great Britain and the U.S. In fact, a British political scientist by the name of Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson had already coined the term "League of Nations" and created a prototype or rough draft of what the organization could be like. Together along with James Bryce, a British ambassador to the U.S and fellow British politician, they created the Bryce group, which later came to be known as the League of Nations Union. The group slowly gained popularity among the public and with it more influence, to the point where the proposals made by the group was heard both in England and the US. Moreover, a group in the US inspired by the proposals was formed: The League to Enforce Peace, a group created by a group of Americans including former US president William Taft to enforce the idea of limiting conflicts and acting against aggressive nations. However, it wasn't until near the end of World War I that Woodrow Wilson, president of the United States at the time, announced his fourteen points. These points were essentially Wilson's draft of the main points to be addressed

during the peace conference at the end of the war, and it was in these points where it was stated by Wilson that “A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.” (Woodrow Wilson’s Fourteen Points) Which in turn, essentially lit the flames on the kindling that many others had gathered. Despite Wilson’s relatively well received fourteen points prior to the peace conference held in Paris, only one point went through, due to many criticizing its excess length: “The good Lord only had ten!” (French Politician George Clemenceau) however, it was also the one most hopeful for the future of the world, the creation of the League of Nations.

There was a total of 42 founding members including France, Great Britain, Italy, and Belgium just to name a few, with a maximum of 58 countries at one point with Germany, the Soviet Union, and other countries being admitted for a short period. However, despite President Wilson’s heartfelt attempts, the United States never joined the league. An occurrence that some could say started the downfall of the League before it even began. The main reason why the US didn’t join was the ability to declare war and how the fact that the League itself declares when we go to war and not Congress. This unnerved many members of Congress to the point where voting against joining the League became a majority: “I have loved but one flag and I can not share that devotion and give affection to the mongrel banner invented for a league.” (U.S Senator Henry Cabot Lodge) Tragically, Wilson spent the rest of his life traveling the United States in his attempts to convince the people of America to join the league. Unfortunately, it was all in vain. Some say that the stress got to him, for he suffered a severe stroke, was forced to retire, and passed away five years later with the United States still separated from the League. In honor of his critical efforts towards the formation of the League, the first official headquarters of the

League of Nations, located in Geneva, Switzerland, was named the Palais Wilson. The United States opting out of the League was the first conflict about the organization that was built with the idea of compromise, and was a big problem due to the fact that the US had just established itself as a major global powerhouse in the recent WWI and was a critical flaw that essentially left the foundation of the League filled with a huge hole that the United States created, yet refused to fill.

After the end of WWI, there were many issues left to be settled, such as concluding the exact position of national boundaries and settling territorial disputes. Other matters included reducing armaments to the lowest level with the intention to exchange knowledge of their existing armaments and projects for the future, as well as suppressing private arms manufacturers. However, many countries disapproved of this rule and others outright expressed their unwillingness to disarm in fear of their vulnerability of attacks from rising powers, such as Germany, slowly rising from the ashes led by Hitler himself causing many disagreements within the League with some countries who refused to disarm leave the League briefly. Things reached a standoff at one point early in the League's life when Italy, led by Mussolini, briefly invaded Greece to force Greece's government to pay compensation when Italian officials were killed on Greek soil. This was the first conflict where the League might have been forced to use their collective security and many anticipated this would spell the end for the League as Italy had clearly overstepped their bounds and breaking the covenant, a set of rules agreed upon when the League was formed. Fortunately, after being subject to intense pressure by all sides of the League, Mussolini was forced evacuate Greece much earlier than he had planned, showing that the League was indeed capable of driving away aggressors, even if it wasn't exactly the quickest decision making.

After a few months following the previous incident with Italy, the League of Nations reached its peak stage as for the next seven years, 1924 to 1931, the League became the center of international affairs, and for the time being there were no serious armed conflict with minor conflicts being quickly struck down and usually ending with compromise and unthreatening to both the stability of the League and the rest of the world. It was at this point where an important question was raised: Should Germany join the League? Germany stating that it was a symbol of its recovery towards equality with other great powers and joining would allow Germany to share in the talks of international affairs. In the end Germany was left hanging for a while, however, even then it had the support of the neutral countries and those who wished to reconcile with their former enemies. Germany also stated to cut their armaments in half, however, it is widely believed to be otherwise as more talks of the armament rule came up, including the discussion of needing increased security in order for such a rule to be put into effect and while a treaty was created with this purpose, it was immediately rejected by every principle country except for France. At this point, many governments observing the fact that the League would not act well in a crisis as they would clearly be extremely slowed to the point of being a hindrance due to the conflicting sides of who the aggressor would be and who the victim would be. It eventually boiled down to: the one who refused to answer things peacefully would be labeled the aggressor, and with that, the effort for world disarmament continued. With the combined goals of arbitration, disarmament, and mutual security, a formula was created with these three goals in mind to show that it was not trying to replace the covenant, but rather to reinforce it. It was called the Geneva Protocol, and showed the best version of collective security at the time and was almost immediately approved. France and nine other countries signed it with others including Italy and Japan considering it. However, due to the fear of conflict with the United

States, as well as a change in government, Great Britain rejected it and refused to sign, showing the consequences of the United States staying out of the League.

Shortly afterward, the Locarno Pact, a group of treaties established by Germany, France, Britain, and Italy to compromise and guarantee the protection of the border of Germany and France as well as the disarmament of western Germany, was created. With this, all members of the League were in favor of Germany's admission and Germany became a permanent member of the council with the support of those involved in the Locarno Pact. Unfortunately, there were two main conflicts that required settling at the time, the dispute between Great Britain and Turkey, who were arguing over whether Mosul, a city now located in Iraq, should belong to Turkey or Iraq, and a frontier fight between Greek and Bulgaria. Fortunately, both were settled rather quickly with the entry of Germany. However, things started to go downhill with the start of the economic depression that struck the world, and it struck it hard. Mass poverty and unemployment hit Germany much harder than many, giving rise to old resentments and the lust for revenge, and with the other nations having their own economic difficulties, they had little interest at the time for international affairs as they were far too focused on solving their own problems, and it was at this time that a certain man in Germany began to make his name, a name to be known all around the world, the notorious leader of the Nazis himself, Adolf Hitler. Following the depression, a World Disarmament Conference was held in February 1932 and Germany was the primary target. Due to the rising resentment in Germany, other countries feared what Germany may do if given the time and arsenal. France for one, was insistent on having Germany have fewer armaments than the other countries so that they have safe insurance from future conflict. As talks broke down, the German delegate withdrew in July, only to return in December after receiving assurance that they would have equal rights as the others did. After a

while, Adolf Hitler became the leader of Germany and with the fear and mistrust that was created by the rise of the Nazi party, the Disarmament Conference was grounded to a swift halt and in October 1933, Hitler withdrew Germany from both the conference and the League of Nations and began openly rearming themselves and just like that, all ideas of disarmament were left in the dust. The league was heading downhill and as the leader of the Swedish Social Democratic Party put it, "It is commonplace that the League of Nations is not yet-what its most enthusiastic protagonists intended it to be." (Hjalmar Branting)

More conflict arose as Japan launched an attack on Chinese authorities, clearly an act of war by violating the Covenant. Japan declared that they would remove their troops, however, they created a puppet state, a state supposedly independent yet is in fact controlled by other nations, with Manchukuo, located in China and claimed this removed any intervention the League might attempt to accomplish. In response, many small members of the League demanded an economic boycott of Japan, unfortunately, due to the lack of cooperation with the US and USSR, the sanctions were never put into effect. Negotiations were attempted to be made with Japan, but Japan rejected them and a month later left the League, beginning the Leagues streak of similar failures to follow. The world economic conference, meanwhile, was held to solve the depression, regrettably, each country only wanted to help themselves and the conference was met with a swift and decisive failure, and despite attempts to dissuade them otherwise, Italy invaded Ethiopia, and by the following summer had the entire country under their control. In response, the League, led by the efforts of British leadership, halted the export of arms and raw materials to Italy and stopped all imports from Italian sources. Despite this, they couldn't prevent the Italian victory, signifying the second major failure in the League's history.

In March 1936, Hitler denounced the Locarno Pact, and at that point, all hell broke loose. Germany, Italy, and Japan officially joined forces and expressed extreme aggression towards the League, and because of this, most of the League members saw no reason to continue to be bound by the Covenant, and no further meetings were held during WWII. And while it still functioned as a source for economic and social work, its days as a political powerhouse came to an end.

However, in the last year of the war, the Allied forces had begun discussing plans of a new international organization to rise from the ashes of the previous failure that had failed its most crucial role, and the entire reason for its existence, a second world war. And for the last time on April 19, 1946, a meeting was held, and the League of Nations officially came to an end, and with its death, a new much more reliable organization was born, The United Nations.

The League of Nations was a noble attempt to accomplish what the world previously thought was impossible and despite its failure to accomplish its goal of preventing another world war, allowed its predecessor to learn from its mistakes and be born from the ashes of the League, because even if you are allied and formed together in a League you can never really say you are United, the ultimate compromise.

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