

The League of Nations

At Versailles, President Wilson had been more bothered about the League than about anything else. The League was his 'parliament' which would solve international disputes by discussion, and do away with war.

The first 26 points of the Treaty of Versailles formed the Articles of the League (known as the 'Covenant'; the principles that every member country promised to follow). These laid down the aims of the League (to stop war, uphold the Treaty of Versailles, organise disarmament, and promote the health and well-being of people via the League's economic and social agencies. The Treaty also laid down the powers/methods of the League – the 'Community of Power' (acting together), arbitration (acting as a referee) and sanctions (stopping trade). The Treaty said the League *could* raise an army, but – since this would have to be paid for by the countries which provided the soldiers, it never did.

The main meetings of the League was the Assembly (held once a year/ decisions only by unanimous vote) – although it had a smaller Council (met 4-5 times a year, with 5 permanent members - Britain, France, Italy, Japan and, after 1936, Germany – each with a veto) which dealt with crises. The League also had a number of 'agencies' to do its economic and social work: the Court of International Justice, the Health Committee (later the WHO), the International Labour Organisation, the Refugees Committee, the Slavery Commission and the Mandates Commission (monitored former German colonies which were being administered by France and Britain).

Successes of the League in the 1920s

Initially, the League seemed to do quite well. It took its authority from the Treaty of Versailles – a treaty agreed to by almost all the countries in the world – and it counted many countries as active members (42 countries at the start, 60 by the 1930s). The leading members – Britain and France, helped by Japan and Italy – were world powers. Four significant successes were:

1. Aaland Islands, 1921: arbitration: the League said the islands should belong to Finland. Both Sweden and Finland agreed.
2. Bulgaria, 1925: moral condemnation: Greece invaded Bulgaria, but withdrew when Bulgaria appealed to the League.
3. Kellogg-Briand Pact, 1928, 65 countries agreed to outlaw war.
4. Other successes: 400,000 Prisoners of War were returned to their homes, and in 1922 the League intervened to help Turkish refugees. The League did a lot of stop leprosy, it closed down some drugs companies in Switzerland, and it organised attacks on slave owners in Africa and Burma.

Weaknesses and Failure

However, the League had serious weaknesses. It was pledged to uphold the Treaty of Versailles, which everybody hated; this made it unpopular. Its Secretariat (which did all administration, including tracking millions of missing persons after the War) was woefully undermanned. Its powers – arbitration and condemnation – were 'moral' arguments that a determined country could ignore, and many countries refused to agree to sanctions because they damaged the member countries as much as the country that was doing wrong. Worst of all, it lacked the support of the really powerful nations; America was never a member, the USSR not until 1934, Germany only in 1926-33, and Britain and France would not use their armies – instead they followed the policy of appeasement. The crisis in Corfu, in 1923, proved to be an omen of things to come: Italy occupied Corfu after a Greek general was murdered. The League ordered Mussolini to leave, but Italy was big and strong enough to ignore it – in the end, the League forced Greece to pay compensation to Italy.

The League depended on nations agreeing. This proved possible to achieve in the prosperous 1920s, but failed in the economic depression of the 1930s. The League therefore failed in the 1930s:

- 1932: A Disarmament Conference was wrecked when Germany demanded equality with other countries.
- 1932: Manchuria: Japan invaded Manchuria. The League sent officials (took a year), then said that Japan ought to return Manchuria – so in February 1933 Japan resigned from the League. The members of the League could not agree to economic sanctions or even an arms sales ban, so nothing was done.
- 1935: Abyssinia: Mussolini invaded Abyssinia. The League objected, but Italy ignored it and Britain and France secretly agreed to give Abyssinia to Italy! Attempts to impose sanctions on arms sales, rubber and metals failed. So nothing happened.
- 1933–1939: Germany: rearmed (1933-), re-occupied Rhineland (1936), Anschluss with Austria (1938), given Sudetenland (1938), invaded Poland (1939).

These failures killed the League – countries lost faith in the League, left and began to prepare for war instead. In this way, the failure of the League was one of the causes of World War Two.