The League of Nations: how was it organised?

Learning objectives
In this chapter you will learn about:
- how the League of Nations was organised
- how the work of the League extended beyond peacekeeping.

Collective security
The League of Nations was established in 1919 during the Versailles conference. At the conference, President Wilson of the United States had pushed hard for an international organisation to increase international co-operation and prevent the horrors of the First World War being repeated. The Covenant of the League (a set of 26 Articles that all members agreed to follow) was written into each of the individual treaties drawn up after the war. These articles set out how nations could avoid future war. How was this to be done?
- Nations agreed to work together to protect any member threatened by another country. This was called collective security.
- If any member country went to war, other countries would stop trading with it. Military action might also be taken.
- All member countries were encouraged to disarm.
- There was to be increased co-operation between countries in business, trade, and improving the living and working conditions of people across the world.

The organisation of the League
The League was to be based in Geneva, Switzerland. All nations were invited to join, except those which had been defeated in the First World War (including Germany, Austria and Turkey). Russia was also excluded because other countries would not recognise its communist government. Although the League was the idea of President Wilson, his own country, the USA, refused to join. In the 1921 presidential election, the Americans chose Warren Harding, who promised to keep America out of European politics - a policy later called ‘isolationism’. So in its first meeting, the League of Nations comprised 42 nations.

The International Labour Organisation
This existed to bring about the League’s aim of improving working conditions around the world. Representatives of governments, workers and employers met annually to set minimum standards and persuade member nations to adopt them.

The Commissions
As well as its main organisations, the League also had a large number of commissions to carry out specialist work. Some of these commissions existed for a short time; for example, the Refugees Commission was tasked with helping First World War refugees return to their home country. Other commissions were more permanent, such as those set up to deal with slavery or health.

Activities
1. Below is a list of problems for the League to deal with. Explain which organisation within the League you think would deal with that problem.
   - There are still millions of people dying of malaria.
   - Country A has complained that Country B has invaded it and is calling for action.
   - A trade union organisation has complained that its members are not being given their rights.
   - The president of one of the member countries wants to be sent details of a recent discussion in the Assembly so that he can discuss it with his government.
   - One of the member states has complained that the League is spending too much on dealing with the problem of world health.
   - A member country says it is being forced to pay unfair duties on goods it sells to another member country.
2. If in 1919 you had to pick one part of the League which you thought was most likely to be successful, which part would you choose? Explain your choice.

The structure of the League of Nations
- The Secretariat
  - The permanent ‘civil service’ of the League.
  - It carried out decisions taken by the Council.
- Assembly
  - Met once a year. All member nations of the League had one vote here.
- Council of the League
  - A committee that took major decisions. Most major nations were members.
- Permanent Court of Justice
  - Fifteen judges met at the Hague in the Netherlands. They settled international disputes, e.g. over frontiers or fishing rights.

Special Commissions
- Drug addiction
- Health
- Slavery
- Help for underdeveloped nations
- Refugees
- Minorities
- Mandates
- Women
The League of Nations in action

Learning objectives
In this chapter you will learn about:
- the political actions of the League in the 1920s
- the valuable work of the commissions.

Settling disputes
During the 1920s the League became involved in a number of disputes around Europe. In some of these the new international peacekeeper seemed to be doing really well. In others, it looked weak and ineffective.

The commissions
The Slavery Commission
Although slavery had been illegal for many years, it was still practised in a number of countries, particularly in Africa. The Slavery Commission was set up to abolish slavery and also the practice of forcing women into prostitution. Its greatest success was in freeing 200,000 slaves in Sierra Leone and in fighting forced labour in Ethiopia, Liberia and other African states. Despite its excellent work, slavery, forced labour and forced prostitution continued.

The Commission for Refugees
After the First World War, there were around 500,000 prisoners of war who needed to be returned to their homelands. The Council of the League appointed Privy Councillor Nansen, a famous Norwegian explorer, to organise this work.

Nansen was extremely successful: in less than two years almost all the prisoners were sent home. He also established the Nansen Passports as a means of identification for stateless people, and later became high commissioner of the Commission for Refugees, set up in 1921. After his death in 1930, the commission became known as the Nansen International Office for Refugees and continued to help refugees, in particular those fleeing from Nazi policies.

The Mandates Commission
After the First World War, 14 territories which had previously been governed by the defeated powers were placed under the control of one of the victorious powers. The territories were divided into three classes:

Class A mandates were considered sufficiently advanced to be able to achieve independence after guidance from the governing power. All Class A mandates, such as Lebanon, had reached full independence by 1949.

Class B mandates were the former German-ruled African colonies of Tanganyika, parts of Togoland and the Cameroons, and Ruanda-Urundi. These were to be administered by Britain, France and Belgium.

Class C mandates were German-held territories that were absorbed into other countries. The most important of these were South West Africa (now Namibia) assigned to South Africa; New Guinea, assigned to Australia; and Western Samoa (now Samoa) assigned to New Zealand.

In theory the League supervised the running of these mandates, but in reality it had no way of enforcing its will on the controlling powers.

Other commissions
There were many other commissions carrying out very valuable work.
- A Permanent Central Opium Board worked to control the use of opium (an addictive drug).
- A Health Organisation Commission focused on trying to end leprosy and launched a huge mosquito extermination campaign to try to end malaria and yellow fever. It distributed medical information around the world and played a major part developing vaccines.
- A Disarmament Commission was set up and was successful in winning agreement from Britain, France, Japan and Italy to limit the size of their navies. It also helped set up the Kellogg-Briand Pact (see page 40). It is true, however, that in the end disarmament failed.

Activities
1. From what you have read on these pages, explain whether you agree with the following statements.
   a. The League settled all the political problems well in the 1920s.
   b. The best work the League did in the 1920s was through its commissions.

2. What mark out of 10 would you give the League for its work up to 1929? Explain why you gave this mark.
The League of Nations: doomed to failure?

Learning objectives
In this chapter you will learn about:
- the weaknesses of the League of Nations
- how those weaknesses hindered the work of the League.

The League had some successes in the 1920s, but some historians have argued that it was doomed to failure from the start. You may have noticed in the last chapter that there were times when the League’s actions seemed to go against its principles of taking steps against countries which carried out acts of aggression. This is partly explained by looking at the weaknesses which existed in the League – and which were eventually to lead to its failure as an international peacekeeping organisation.

Reputation
The League of Nations was the idea of President Wilson of the USA. It was formed as a result of the Versailles conference and its rules were incorporated into each of the treaties agreed at the conference. The defeated nations had no say in the treaties and were not invited to join the League. So these countries saw the League as in some way connected to the hated peace treaties.

Membership
It was not only the defeated nations who were not members of the League. Russia was also excluded because it was a communist country and the other powers feared communism. Most importantly, however, the United States chose not to join. By 1919 the USA was the most powerful and richest nation in the world. Without it the League was a much weaker organisation. Although there were 52 members in the League and that number grew over the years, the League was never an organisation of all states. Indeed, some people called it ‘the league of some nations’.

Organisation
The League’s organisation made it difficult for it to act effectively. Each country, no matter how large or small it was, had a vote in the Assembly, and all decisions had to be unanimous. The Council was a smaller body of more important nations, but here, too, decisions had to be unanimous. All it took was for one country to say ‘no’ and a policy could not be implemented.

‘Self-first’ policies
A major weakness of the League was that it was dominated by France and Britain, and each nation had different ideas of how the League should act. France wanted the League to enforce the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. Britain saw the League as a useful place for nations to discuss issues, but didn’t believe that it should take real action. Furthermore, whatever Britain and France may have seen as the role of the League, neither was prepared to see it take action which would damage its own interests. So they were happy to see Poland take Vilna and did not oppose Mussolini in Corfu. In the 1930s this ‘self-first’ policy was to destroy the League.

Left the League

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>Never joined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>March 1933</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>Admitted 1926</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>October 1933</td>
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<tr>
<td>USSR</td>
<td>Admitted 1934</td>
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<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>December 1939</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Britain</td>
<td>June 1940</td>
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Lack of power
Even if Britain and France had shown full commitment to the League, it still faced the problem that countries could not be forced to accept its decisions. Article 16 of the Covenant said that when a nation refused to accept the League’s decision, moral pressure should be applied to try to embarrass it into complying. If that did not work, economic sanctions would be applied: no country would trade with the wrongdoer. But during the 1930s, the world went into an economic recession and countries were reluctant to take action that might harm their own economy. The last measure possible was for the members of the League to raise an army and take military action. The major powers were never prepared to do that.

Activities
You have been asked to explain the art of cartoon drawing. With a partner, explain why the 1920 cartoon on this page is so clever. Here are some ideas to get you started:
- Who does the cartoonist say designed the bridge?
- What is special about the missing stone?
- Who is stopping the missing stone being put in place?
- What will happen to the bridge without the stone?

The League of Nations: doomed to failure?

Exam question: Explain why the League found it difficult to be fully effective in the 1920s. (12 marks)

The examiner is looking for relevant points, supported by specific examples, with a clear focus on how each factor led to the situation described.

In each level, the number of statements you make will affect your mark. For example, in level 2, a single developed statement is unlikely to get more than 5 marks, whereas three developed statements will achieve 8 or 8 marks.

- A basic answer (level 1) is correct, but does not have details to support it. For example:
  One reason is because it didn’t have all the countries in it.

- A good answer (level 2) provides the details as well:
  One reason is because it didn’t have all the countries in it. For example, Germany was not allowed to join because it had lost the war.

- A better answer (level 3) shows the links between reasons or shows why one is more important. For example:
  I think a major reason is that some of the great powers were happy to use the League to settle disputes which were only minor, but were not prepared to take measures which might affect them by ruining their relations with each other. So Mussolini was allowed to bully Greece over Corfu.

- An excellent answer (full marks) shows how three reasons are inter-linked and reaches a judgement about their relative importance.
  I think a major reason is that some of the great powers were happy to use the League to settle disputes which were only minor, but were not prepared to take measures which might affect them by ruining their relations with each other. So Mussolini was allowed to bully Greece over Corfu. In some ways this is linked to the fact that the League was weakened because not everyone was in it. The United States, for example, did not join. How did anyone think the League would solve world problems without the USA? So it became a weak body dominated by Britain and France.