

population there. Neither government liked the verdict, but both accepted it and, what is more important, made it work.

In the second half of 1921 the League did serve as a useful means of focusing the attention of the great powers on the plight of Albania when it urgently appealed for help against Greek and Yugoslav aggression. As the Conference Ambassadors had not yet finally fixed its frontiers, the Greeks and Yugoslavs were exploiting the ambiguous situation to occupy as much Albanian territory as they could. The Council responded by despatching a commission of enquiry, but it took a telegram from Lloyd George both to galvanise the Conference of Ambassadors into finalising the frontiers and to push the League Council into threatening economic sanctions against Yugoslavia if it did not recognise them. When this was successful, the League was then entrusted with supervising the Yugoslav withdrawal. Thus in this crisis the League had played a useful but again secondary role to the Allied powers. The fact that the Conference of Ambassadors then made Italy the protector of Albania's independence indicates where the real power lay.

In August 1921 the League played a key role in solving the bitter Anglo-French dispute over the Upper Silesia plebiscite, which was referred to the League Council (pages 51–3). It again proved useful in the protracted dispute over Memel. When the Lithuanians objected to the decision by the Conference of Ambassadors to internationalise the port of Memel, and seized the port themselves in 1923, the League was the obvious body to sort out the problem. Its decision for Lithuania was accepted by the Allies.

Attempts by Britain and Sweden to refer the question of the Ruhr occupation of 1923 (see pages 57–9) to the League were blocked by the French, who had no intention of allowing the League to mediate between themselves and the Germans. In the Corfu incident of August–September 1923 the League's efforts to intervene were yet again blocked by a great power. The crisis was triggered by the assassination in Greek territory near the Albanian frontier of three Italians, who were part of an Allied team tracing the Albanian frontiers for the Conference of Ambassadors. Mussolini, the Italian Fascist Prime Minister, who had come to power the preceding October, immediately seized the chance to issue a deliberately unacceptable ultimatum to Athens. When the Greeks rejected three of its demands, Italian troops occupied Corfu. The Greeks wanted to refer the incident to the League, while the Italians insisted that the Conference of Ambassadors should deal with it. The Conference, while initially accepting some assistance from the League, nevertheless ultimately settled the case itself and insisted that Greece should pay 50 million lire in compensation to Italy. Once this was agreed, Italian forces were withdrawn from Corfu. The Corfu incident, like the Ruhr crisis, underlined the continuing ability of the great powers to ignore the League and to take unilateral action when it pleased them.

In 1924 the League was confronted with another crisis involving a greater power and a lesser power. On this occasion it was able to mediate successfully. It provided a face-saving means of retreat for Turkey in its dispute with Britain over the future of Mosul, which according to the Treaty of Lausanne (see page 60) was to be decided by direct Anglo-Turkish negotiations. When these talks broke down and the British issued in October 1924 an ultimatum to Turkey to withdraw its forces within 48 hours, the League intervened and recommended a temporary demarcation line, behind which the Turkish forces withdrew. It then sent a commission of enquiry to consult the local Kurdish population, which, as total independence was not an option, preferred British to Turkish rule. The League's recommendation that Mosul should become a mandate of Iraq for 25 years was then accepted. As Iraq was a British mandate, this effectively put it under British control.

In October 1925, the League's handling of the Greece–Bulgarian conflict, like its solution to the Åland Island dispute, was to be a rare example of a complete success. When the Bulgarians appealed to the Council, its request for a ceasefire was heeded immediately by both sides. So too was the verdict of its commission of enquiry, which found in favour of Bulgaria. It was an impressive example of what the League could do, and in the autumn of 1925 this success, together with the new 'Locarno spirit', seemed to auger well for the future. Briand stressed at the meeting of the Council in October 1925:

I had been shown that the criticisms which had been brought against the League of Nations to the effect that its machinery was cumbersome and that it found it difficult to take action in circumstances which required an urgent solution were unjustified. It has been proved that a nation which appealed to the League when it felt that its existence was threatened, could be sure that the Council would be at its post ready to undertake its work of conciliation.

The League was not put to the test again until the Manchurian crisis of 1931. Unfortunately Briand's optimism was to be shown to be premature (see page 97–9).

6 The League, America and Disarmament

KEY ISSUES What role did the USA play in the disarmament question, 1921–33? Why was the League able to achieve so little on this issue?

One of the major tasks of the League was to work out an acceptable world disarmament programme. Disarmament, however, could not be divorced from the question of security, for if a state did not feel

secure, it would hardly disarm. Thus on the initiative of the French the Assembly adopted a resolution in September 1922 which specifically linked these two aims. In 1924 the League did attempt to draft an ambitious collective security agreement, the Geneva Protocol (see page 69), but it was rejected by Britain, who feared that it would commit it to policing the world. Britain preferred more precise regional agreements, or as Austen Chamberlain put it: 'special arrangements to meet special needs'.⁷

Chamberlain was primarily thinking of Locarno when he made this remark, but with America outside the League the twin problems of growing Anglo-American naval rivalry and deteriorating American-Japanese relations in the Pacific had also been tackled on a largely regional basis. In 1919 America had been alarmed by the rise of Japanese power in the Pacific. Japan, already possessing the third largest navy in the world, had begun a major naval construction programme. The Americans responded by forming a Pacific fleet and embarking on their own formidable building programme, which, when completed, would make the American navy the largest in the world. In turn this pushed Britain in early 1921 into announcing its own naval programme, but privately it was intimated to Washington that a negotiated settlement was desired as Britain could not afford a naval race. President Harding was anxious both to reduce armaments and to economise, but he would only negotiate with Britain if it agreed not to prolong the 20-year-old Anglo-Japanese alliance which, theoretically at least, could have involved Britain as Japan's ally in a war against America. As the treaty was due for renewal in July 1921 the British and Japanese agreed under pressure from Washington to replace it by a new four-power treaty, which committed Britain, France, Japan and the USA to respect each other's possessions in the Pacific and to refer any dispute arising out of this agreement to a conference of the four signatory Powers.

With the Anglo-Japanese Treaty out of the way, the first Washington Treaty was signed in February 1922 for a duration of 14 years. It halted the building of capital ships for 10 years, provided for the scrapping of certain battleships and battle cruisers, and, for those capital ships which were spared the breaker's yard, established a ratio of 3 for Japan and 1.67 each for Italy and France to every 5 for Britain and the USA. In 1929 Britain, Japan and the USA in the London Naval Treaty agreed to extend the main principle of this agreement to smaller fighting ships.

From 1922 onwards the USA's attitude towards the League began to alter. It saw the value of participating in some of the League's committees on social, economic and health matters, and President Harding even considered American membership of the Permanent Court of International Justice in 1923, but the Senate again vetoed it. When the League set up a Preparatory Commission in 1926 to prepare for a world disarmament conference, both the USA and Soviet

Russia participated. Peace movements, especially the American Committee for the Outlawry of War and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, exerted considerable pressure on the American Government to play a greater role. In March 1927, Professor Showell, a director of the Carnegie Endowment, on a visit to Paris persuaded Briand to sign a message and sent it over the head of the President to the American people, proposing a Franco-American pact that would outlaw war. Briand was, of course, delighted at any chance to involve America, even if indirectly, in the French postwar alliance system. To avoid just such a linkage Kellogg, the American Secretary of State, replied cautiously in December suggesting a general pact between as many states as possible, rejecting war 'as an instrument of national policy'. Briand had no alternative but to accept it, if he wished to ensure American cooperation. Thus on 27 August 1928 the Kellogg-Briand Peace Pact was signed by 15 states, and by 1933 a further 50 had joined it. It consisted of three articles only:

1. The high contracting parties solemnly declare in the names of their respective peoples that they condemn recourse to war for the solution of international controversies, and renounce it as an instrument of national policy in their relations with one another.
2. The high contracting parties agree that the settlement or solution of all disputes or conflicts of whatever nature or of whatever origin they may be, which may arise among them, shall never be sought except by pacific means.
3. This treaty... shall remain open... for adherence by all the other Powers of the world.

Optimists saw the Pact as supplementing the Covenant. It outlawed war, while the League had the necessary machinery for setting up commissions of inquiry and implementing cooling off periods in the event of a dispute. Pessimists, however, pointed to the fact that it was just a general declaration of intention, which did not commit its members. Perhaps, in reality, all that could be said for it was that it would give the American Government a moral basis on which it could intervene in world affairs, should it desire to do so. In 1946 the pact provided the legal basis for charging the Nazi leaders with the crime of waging aggressive war at the Nuremberg trials.

In 1930 the Preparatory Commission, after protracted discussions on different models of disarmament, produced its final draft for an international convention. The League Council called the long-awaited World Disarmament Conference in February 1932 at Geneva. It could not have been convened at a more unfortunate time: the Manchurian crisis was escalating into full-scale war between China and Japan (see pages 97-9), the rise of nationalism in Germany was making France and Poland less likely to compromise over German demands for equality in armaments, while the impact of the Depression on the USA was reviving the isolationist tendencies of the

early 1920s. Long before the Germans withdrew in November 1933 (page 101) it was clear that the Conference would fail.

7 Assessment

KEY ISSUE To what extent did the Locarno Agreements mark the beginning of a new era of conciliation?

The acceptance of the Dawes Plan and the signature of the Locarno Agreements together marked a fresh start after the bitterness of the immediate postwar years. For the next 4 years the pace of international cooperation quickened and the League of Nations, despite a hesitant start, grew in authority and influence. After Germany joined the League in 1926 a new framework for great power cooperation evolved. The foreign ministers of Britain, France and Germany (Austen Chamberlain, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann) regularly attended the meetings of the League Council and Assembly and played a key part in drawing up their agendas and influencing their decisions. The partnership of these three statesmen came to symbolise the new era of peace and apparent stabilisation. As long as the three European great powers cooperated, the League, too, had a chance of working.

Were these men really the great peace-makers they seemed or were they pursuing the same aims as their predecessors, although somewhat more subtly? Stresemann, particularly, is a controversial figure. Initially in the 1950s a debate raged over whether he was a great European statesman or in fact a German nationalist who just went along with Locarno as it suited Germany's interests at that point. Certainly up to 1920 Stresemann had been an uncompromising German nationalist, but in 1923 the gravity of the Ruhr crisis did convince him that only through compromise could Germany achieve the revision of Versailles and the re-establishment of its power in Europe. In a sense, as his most recent biographer, Jonathan Wright,⁸ has shown, the logic of Germany's position began to push Stresemann down the road of European integration. Neither had Briand, who had threatened Germany with the occupation of the Ruhr in April 1921 (see page 55), really changed his fundamental aims. He still sought security against German aggression, but after the failure of Poincaré's Ruhr policy, he was determined to achieve it by cooperation with Britain and Germany itself. In many ways Briand was the right man for the moment. He had a genius for compromise or, as Néré has observed, 'for creating the half-flight conducive to harmony'.⁹ Chamberlain, too, pursued the same policies as his predecessors, but he had a much stronger hand to play. As a consequence of France's failure in the Ruhr, America's refusal to play a political role in Europe

and Soviet Russia's isolation, the Dawes Plan and the Locarno Treaties made Britain the virtual arbiter between France and Germany. In that enviable but temporary position Chamberlain could simultaneously advise the Germans to be patient and the French to compromise, whilst retaining the maximum freedom for Britain to attend to the pressing problems of its empire.

After the traumas of the Depression, the collapse of the League of Nations and the Second World War the Locarno era appears in retrospect to be a brief but doomed era of hope and international progress. Most studies of this period stress the fragility and inadequacy of the stabilisation policies pursued by America and the great European powers and argue that their failure was inevitable. However, an important exception to this view is C.S. Maier's thesis that the European politicians of the late 1920s did in fact produce a viable model of stability. He argues that in retrospect 'the Depression, National Socialism and the Second World War were interruptions, albeit catastrophic ones, between a provisional political and social settlement [after Locarno] and a more permanent one [after 1945]'.¹⁰

References

- 1 Quoted in David G. Williamson, *The British in Germany, 1918–30* (Oxford, Berg, 1991), p. 268.
- 2 The head of the British section of the Inter-Allied Military Control Commission to the War Office, 30 Nov. 1924, in *ibid.*, p. 283.
- 3 F.S. Northedge, *The Troubled Giant*, London, Bell and Sons, 1966, p. 267
- 4 J. Jacobson, *Locarno Diplomacy: Germany and the West, 1925–29* (Princeton, Princeton University Press), 1972, p. 306.
- 5 Quoted in F.S. Northedge, *The League of Nations: Its Life and Times* (Leicester University Press, 1988), p. 196.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 220.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
- 8 J. Wright, *G. Stresemann* (Oxford, OUP, 2002), p. 417.
- 9 J. Néré, *The Foreign Policy of France from 1914 to 1945* (London, Routledge, 1975), p. 71.
- 10 C.S. Maier, *Resisting Bourgeois Europe* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988 edition), p. xiii.