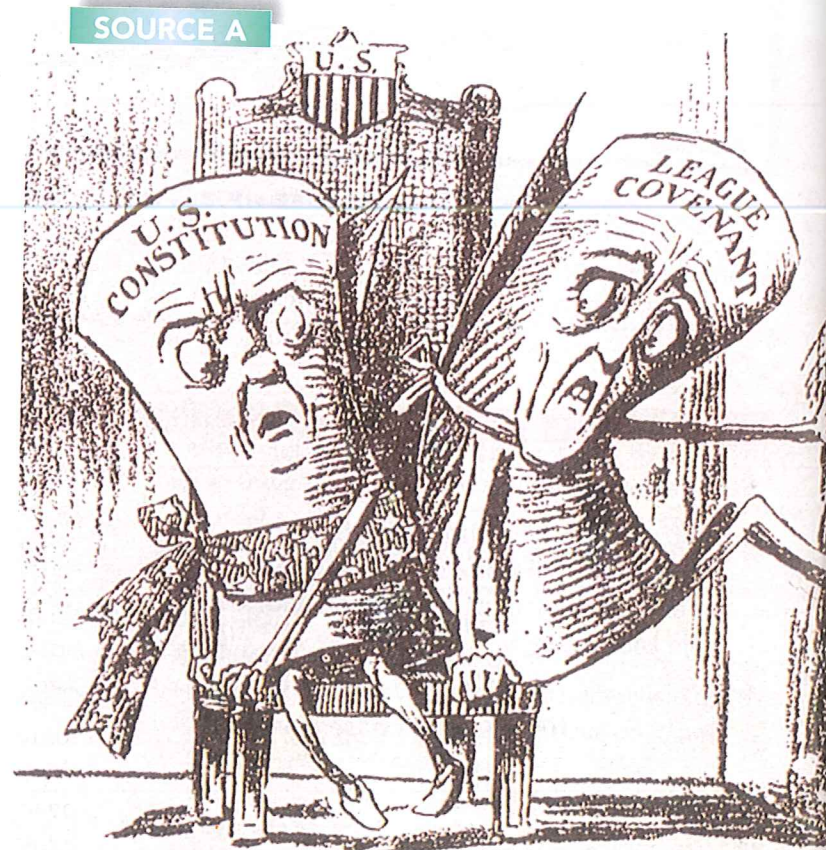


To what extent was the League of Nations a success?

The peacemakers at Versailles knew that they had not solved all the problems of the post-war world, but they looked to the League of Nations to complete their work. This international organisation, set up to preserve world peace, was dealt a serious blow by the USA's refusal to join, but still did much to encourage co-operation between nations. It had some successes, particularly in the 1920s, in persuading nations to resolve conflicts peacefully. However, the Great Depression, starting in 1929, created a more unstable international climate, in which aggressive nations, prepared to use war to achieve their aims, challenged the principles of international peace and co-operation on which the League was based. The League proved too weak to stand up to Japanese aggression in Manchuria, and could not prevent the Italian invasion of Abyssinia. By the mid-1930s it had lost its authority and had ceased to play an effective part in international affairs.

How far did weaknesses in the League's organisation make failure inevitable?

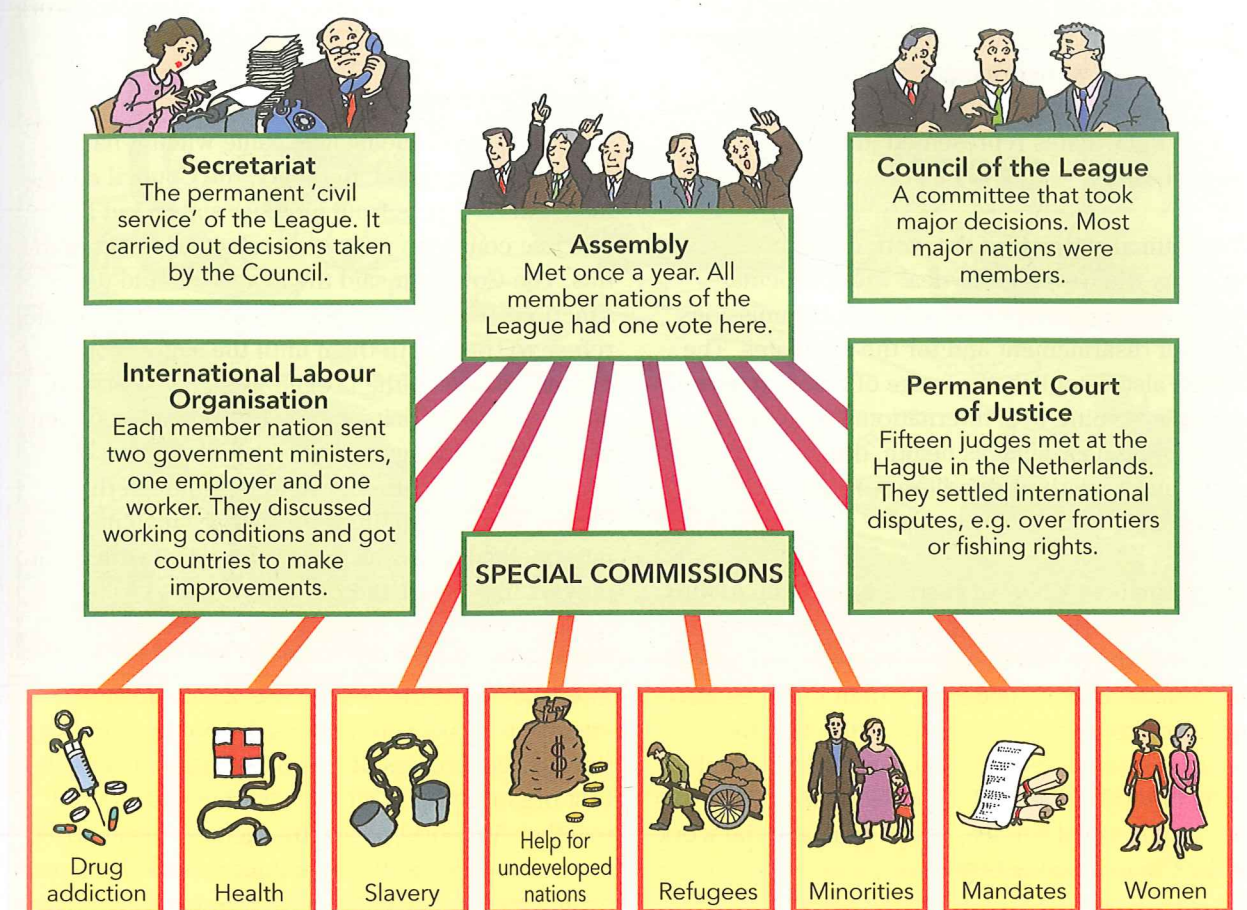
The Covenant of the League of Nations (setting out its aims) was written into each of the peace treaties. Wilson hoped this would ensure that the League was accepted by all nations. However, from the start, the League shared many of the weaknesses of the treaties themselves. The defeated powers were not consulted about the League and were not invited to join. The victorious powers did not really agree among themselves about the League. Wilson's idealism and belief in co-operation between nations were not shared by the cynical and worldly wise Europeans. Lloyd George went along with the idea to keep Wilson happy, and the French agreed on the basis that anything which might give them additional security against Germany was worth trying.



An American cartoon of 1919, showing America's reluctance to join the League.

QUESTIONS

- 1 What was the work of the following in the League of Nations: the Assembly, the Secretariat, the Council?
- 2 In what ways was the League weak from the start?



The structure of the League of Nations.

Most important of all, Wilson's failure to persuade the US Congress to accept the treaties meant that the USA never joined the League. The absence of the world's most powerful nation seriously undermined the League's authority to deal with international problems.

The structure and organisation of the League

To carry out its work, the League needed a structure that would enable nations to meet, discuss and resolve international problems. It was decided that the League would be based in Geneva, Switzerland. All member states could send representatives to the Assembly. This was the League's parliament. It met every year and had ultimate authority over the League's actions. In the Assembly, all nations were equal and had one vote. The Assembly was too large to react quickly to international crises, so a smaller group called the Council was set up, which met more frequently.

Extracts from the Covenant of the League of Nations.

To promote international co-operation 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 international law as the rule of conduct between governments;
- by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another.

The great powers attempted to control the Council. Britain, France, Italy and Japan were permanent members and were originally matched by representatives from four other states. The number of additional states represented increased to nine over the years.

The Council supervised the work of commissions set up by the Covenant to deal with particular issues. The most important of these commissions were for disarmament and for the mandates. The League also established a range of committees and agencies, dealing with international social and economic issues, such as health, drugs, prostitution, working conditions, refugees and women's rights.

The Permanent Court of Justice was set up in the Hague to rule on legal disputes between nations, but as countries had to agree in advance to accept the court's verdicts, many important disputes were never referred to it. Finally, to ensure that the League's operations functioned smoothly, it had its own administrative staff – the Secretariat. This was the League's civil service, which arranged the work of the Council and Assembly.

Membership

The League had 42 members when it was set up, and this number increased over the years. However, it was not just the USA that was not a member. At first, all the defeated nations were excluded. They were later allowed in – Germany joined in 1926, although it left again when Hitler came to power in 1933. Russia was also excluded because other nations refused to recognise its communist government. It was finally admitted to the League only in 1934. Other founder members of the League, such as Japan and Italy, subsequently left it. So the League was never an organisation of all states, or even of all the most important states.

The League was dominated by Britain and France, which disagreed significantly over the role that it should play. Britain regarded the League as a harmless talking-shop, but did not want to give it real authority or power. France, on the other hand, wanted the League to enforce the terms of the peace treaties. This difference in attitude between

the two powers most involved in the League's work inevitably weakened it.

Security issues

The real test for the League came when it had to deal with aggression. In theory, the Council could raise armed forces from member states, but in practice countries were very reluctant to agree to this. The Covenant said the League should use sanctions to deter aggressors – all members would refuse to trade with them until the aggression ceased. However, the League was only as strong and determined as its members, and nations often looked to the League to solve problems that they would not deal with themselves. Although the League could sometimes pressurise small nations into obedience, it was too weak to deal with great powers like Japan and Italy.

Idealism

The creation of the League was an idealistic attempt to make sure nations did not have to live through the horrors of world war again. It was the first organisation in which governments worked together for world peace. Its agencies also carried out much successful humanitarian work. Its campaigns for better health and working conditions, to help refugees return to their homes and to free slaves did much to improve people's lives across the world. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) encouraged governments to recognise trade unions, and to improve workers' pay and pensions. Even when governments did not accept everything proposed by the League's agencies, public awareness of a whole range of social issues was increased.

However, the idealism of the League was also a weakness. All member states, large and small, had equal voting rights, and all decisions (in both the Assembly and the Council) had to be unanimous. This was fine when members agreed with each other, but not when they disagreed.

The work of the commissions illustrates how the League was powerless to make progress against the wishes of individual states. The Covenant committed all members to reducing armaments, yet the Disarmament Commission found this impossible to achieve. The French regarded



A British cartoon commenting on the ability of the League of Nations to deal with the threat of war.

disarmament as giving away their security, while the Germans, who had been disarmed in the Treaty of Versailles, thought they had a right to rearm, at least to the level of other powers. Not until 1932 was the commission finally able to set up a Disarmament Conference. By then, much of the spirit of co-operation and trust that the League originally enjoyed had disappeared. The Conference could agree nothing, and France's refusal to disarm was the perfect excuse for Hitler to walk out of the Conference (and the League) in 1933.

The Mandates Commission was only slightly more successful. The mandated powers were supposed to administer the mandates on behalf of the League and to prepare them for eventual independence. In practice, they treated them more or less as colonies. Iraq's independence in 1932 was the only example of a mandate being freed in the inter-war period.

Conclusion

The circumstances in which the League was set up, and in particular the refusal of the USA to join, left the League with serious weaknesses. The League

was not well equipped to deal with cases of aggression, and had no armed forces of its own. The League worked well when members wished to co-operate, and through its agencies had many worthwhile achievements. However, the creators of the League were too optimistic and idealistic in expecting all nations to accept the League's authority.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Look at Source A. What can you tell from this cartoon about American attitudes towards the League of Nations? Explain your answer using details from the cartoon.
- 2 Look at Source B. Do you think the cartoonist believed that the League would be successful in preventing war? Use details of the cartoon to explain your answer.

How successful was the League in the 1920s?

Successes and failures in peacekeeping

The peace treaties of 1919–20 did not resolve all the territorial disputes caused by the war. As we have seen (refer back to page 60), the Turks were so outraged by the peace settlement that they refused to accept it. They went on fighting, mainly against the Greeks, until the Allies were ready to agree to the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923. The Italians were dissatisfied with their gains, and managed to hold on to Fiume after D'Annunzio's occupation of 1919–20. The Poles were especially active, grabbing much of the area of Teschen from Czechoslovakia in early 1919 (the League finally fixed this border between the two countries in 1920). More importantly, the Poles were at war with Russia until 1921, gaining much of the Ukraine and Belorussia.

In the face of continuing violence and uncertainty, the League only gradually established a role for itself in dealing with international crises. Even when it did become involved, its record in resolving crises was mixed.

Economic collapse in Austria and Hungary (1922–3). In 1922–3 Austria and Hungary faced bankruptcy. Their economies had not recovered after the war, and now, burdened with reparations payments, it seemed that they would simply collapse. The League arranged international loans for the two countries, sending commissioners to supervise how the money was spent. In effect, the League temporarily took over the economic management of the two countries. With this help, both Austria and Hungary were able to begin economic recovery.

Verdict on the League: The League's action was prompt and effective.

Corfu (1923). In August 1923 five Italian surveyors, who were working for the League of Nations in mapping the Greek-Albanian frontier, were shot and killed on the Greek side of the border. Mussolini, the new Italian dictator, took advantage of the situation, demanding compensation from the Greek government. When this was not forthcoming, he bombarded and occupied Corfu, an island off the Greek coast. This action was in complete defiance of the

Successes and failures for the League of Nations in the 1920s.

The Aaland Islands (1921). These islands are in the Baltic Sea about half way between Sweden and Finland. Both nations claimed the islands and seemed ready to fight over them, but they invited the League to reach a judgement on the dispute. It decided the islands should be awarded to Finland, and Sweden accepted this.

Verdict on the League: A satisfactory outcome, but only because the nations in the dispute were willing to accept the League's authority.

principles of the League, of which Italy was a prominent member. The Council wanted to condemn Italy, but the great powers would not permit it. Instead they put pressure on the Greeks to accept Mussolini's demands. Only when the Greeks had apologised and paid up did Mussolini withdraw his forces from Corfu. *Verdict on the League:* A disaster – confronted by a great power willing to use force, the League had backed down.



Vilna (1920). This area was claimed by both Lithuania and Poland. It was included in the new state of Lithuania set up at the end of the war, but it had a majority Polish population. In 1920, during the Russo-Polish War, Vilna was occupied by Polish forces, which later refused to leave. This seemed a clear case of one League member (Poland) showing aggression against another (Lithuania), but the League was very reluctant to become involved.

Taking action against Poland would have required armed forces, but League members were not willing to supply them. In addition, Britain and France saw Poland as a strong barrier against Germany and communist Russia, and did not wish to upset it. The League tried to negotiate a deal, but in 1923 it confirmed Poland's occupation of Vilna. Sporadic fighting between the two sides continued until 1927.

Verdict on the League: Weak and useless.

The Greek-Bulgarian Dispute (1925). After the Treaty of Neuilly, the border between Greece and Bulgaria remained a source of tension between the two nations. After a number of violent incidents, the Greeks invaded Bulgaria in October 1925. On this occasion the League intervened effectively. It condemned the Greek action and pressurised them to withdraw, which they did. *Verdict on the League:* Successful action brought a return to peace – exactly what the League was for. But cynics suggested that the League was only willing to take firm action when no great powers were involved.

Upper Silesia (1921). Upper Silesia was one of several plebiscite areas defined in the Treaty of Versailles. The people who lived in these areas could vote on which country should have the territory. Upper Silesia contained large numbers of Poles and Germans, and since the area was particularly important for its industry, both Poland and Germany were determined to acquire the territory. In the plebiscite held by the League in March 1921, the people voted in favour of Germany by 700,000 votes to 480,000. The League decided to partition (share) the area. Germany received over half the land and population, while the Poles had most of the industry. This caused great bitterness in Germany, but both countries accepted the decision. *Verdict on the League:* A messy compromise, but whatever the League decided would have displeased someone. In difficult circumstances, it did as well as it could.

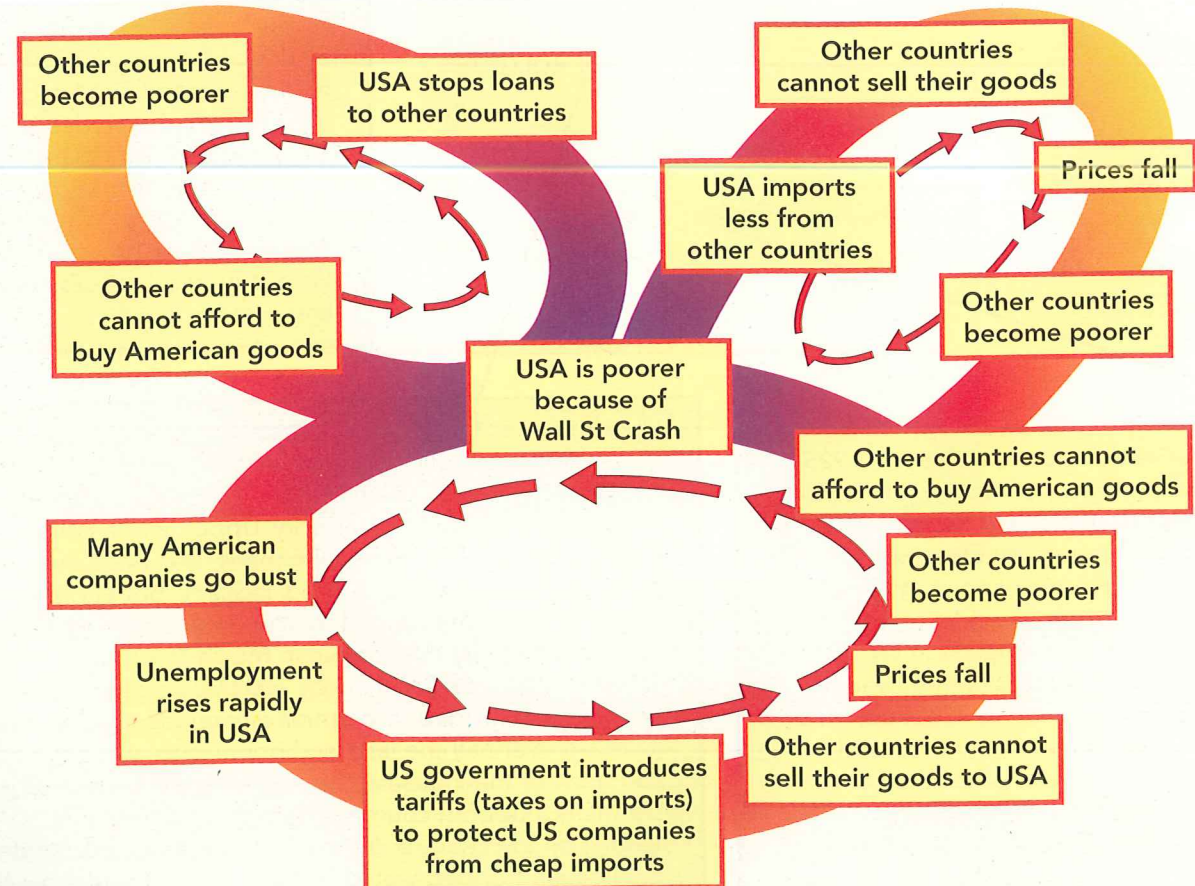
Conclusion

The League had its successes and failures in dealing with international crises in the 1920s. It was at its best when dealing with small nations that were prepared to accept its authority. However, when the great powers had vital interests at stake, they ignored the League. Thus the League could do nothing about the French invasion of the Ruhr in 1923. Moreover, there were already signs that it would prove incapable of dealing effectively with determined aggressors.

A number of important international agreements were signed by the great powers in the 1920s without reference to the League. It was as if the great powers felt that some matters were too important for the League to handle. There were many such agreements, but two examples will illustrate the point. The League was notably unsuccessful in achieving disarmament. However, by the Washington Naval Agreement of 1922 the

USA, Britain, Japan, France and Italy agreed to limit their fleets. No major ships would be built for ten years, and the size of the American, British and Japanese fleets would be in the ratio 5:5:3, with France and Italy having about half as many ships as Japan. The League played no part in reaching this agreement.

Even when the great powers met to discuss relations with Germany and the future of the Versailles settlement, the League was not invited. In the Locarno Treaties of 1925, signed between Germany and the wartime Allies, Germany formally accepted its frontiers with France and Belgium. It also agreed to the permanent demilitarisation of the Rhineland, and to accept international arbitration in any future disputes with France. Locarno did much to create a more friendly relationship between Germany and the other great powers, and led directly to Germany being admitted to the League in 1926.



The collapse of world trade following the Wall Street Crash, 1929.

How far did the Depression make the work of the League more difficult?

The Great Depression was sparked off by the Wall Street Crash – the collapse of the US stock market – in October 1929. The slump in US share prices was a disaster not just for America, but for the world economy. The wave of bankruptcies that followed the crash sent the US economy into a downward spiral that had a deep impact on world trade. Hardly a country in the world remained unaffected. The only exception was the Soviet Union, whose economy was not dependent on trade with other nations. The slump in world trade made all other nations poorer, and unemployment soared as industries ground to a halt.

Although this was an economic crisis, it soon had harmful political effects, which impacted on the work of the League of Nations. The Great Depression did much to destroy the goodwill on which the League had depended in the 1920s. The 1930s brought increasing tension and conflict, as nations struggled to cope with the effects of the crash. Their failure to find peaceful ways of doing this culminated in the Second World War.

Unemployed shipbuilding workers in England on a protest march from Jarrow to London in 1936.

SOURCE C

