League of Nations

Originating at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, the League of Nations was an international institution dedicated to maintaining world peace. The Paris Peace Conference drafted the Treaty of Versailles, the treaty that ended the war between the Allied Powers and Germany. The charter for the League was written directly into the Treaty of Versailles. The League, with its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland, consisted of a Secretariat, a Council, an Assembly, and a number of humanitarian organizations. The League held its first meeting on January 10, 1920. While the League enjoyed some success in settling minor disputes among European powers in the 1920s, it failed to prevent Japanese aggression in Manchuria in 1931 and Italian aggression in Ethiopia in 1935. By 1936 the League was effectively marginalized in European diplomacy and was disbanded in 1946, to be superseded by the United Nations.

Long before the twentieth century, writers and thinkers had floated plans for an international organization, but it took the carnage of World War I to build popular support for the concept. In 1915, the League of Nations Union was founded in Britain to promote the idea of a postwar international organization. Three years later, U.S. president Woodrow Wilson, in his Fourteen Points speech to the U.S. Congress, called for an international organization to uphold the peace, while at the same time the British government set up a commission to study the idea and make specific recommendations.

As set out in its charter, the League of Nations was composed of a number of different parts. The Secretariat, led by the secretary general, carried out most of the day-to-day bureaucratic functions of the League. The Assembly was made up of all the member states of the League, with each state having one vote. The Assembly met once a year, with its session starting in September. In addition, the League Council comprised five permanent members plus four elected nonpermanent members serving three-year terms. The Council met four times a year plus any extraordinary sessions as required. Finally, a number of humanitarian organizations, such as the Commission for Refugees, the International Labor Organization, the Health Organization, and the Permanent Court of International Justice, came under the League umbrella. League headquarters were established in the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1920.

Member states of the League of Nations pledged to respect national boundaries and refer disputes to the international body for peaceful resolution. Aggressors could be punished by economic sanctions, and the Council could also recommend military action. The League was also charged with the task of promoting international disarmament.
The spectacular political failures of the League of Nations have overshadowed the successes of the League's humanitarian organizations. The Health Organization undertook highly successful campaigns against malaria and typhus. This photograph shows an educational play put on by the League's Malaria Investigation Committee in India in 1929 or 1930. Youngsters in the play are extolling the use of quinine in curing malaria.

—Paul W. Doerr

The League of Nations ran into serious obstacles from the very start. Reflecting a new mood of isolationism, the U.S. Senate rejected the Treaty of Versailles in 1920. As a result, the United States never joined the League. The absence of such a major power was a serious blow to the strength of the League. Germany was not initially allowed to join, and neither was Russia, then in the throes of a civil war. Britain and France dominated the League from the start, leading critics to charge that the League was not an impartial body but rather a winner's club for enforcing the Treaty of Versailles. The League also had no means of enforcing its will other than relying on the good graces of the major powers to do so.

The League of Nations had some successes in the 1920s, settling minor disputes among European states, such as a border dispute between Greece and Bulgaria in 1925, and the dispute over the Aaland
Islands between Finland and Sweden in 1921. Germany joined the League in 1926 at a time when international tensions seemed to be lessening. However, the League was unable to prevent the Japanese conquest of the northeastern Chinese region of Manchuria in 1931. The attack on Manchuria was a clear act of aggression; however, none of the Great Powers had the will or capability to confront Japan. Condemned as aggressors, the Japanese simply walked out of the League in 1933 and remained in Manchuria.

Supporters of the League of Nations reasoned that Manchuria was a distant conflict, and the League still had relevance for Europe, then the center of world power. But Adolf Hitler, elected chancellor of Germany in 1933, scorned the League as a product of the Treaty of Versailles. Germany left the League in 1933. The USSR was finally allowed to join the League in 1934, but by that time the League’s credibility was in decline. The League failed to respond to the Italian attack on Ethiopia, a League member, in 1935. Once again, Great Powers such as Britain and France were reluctant to go to war in support of the League. The outbreak of World War II in 1939 marked the final failure of the League.

The League of Nations held its final session in 1946, when it voted to dissolve and transfer all its assets and humanitarian organizations over to the newly created United Nations. The League’s health organization, for example, became the World Health Organization. The Palais des Nations in Geneva today serves as the European headquarters for the United Nations.

Bibliography


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