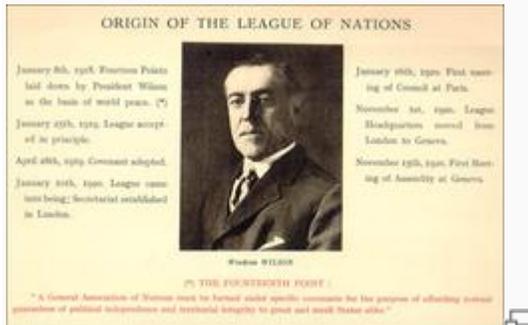


League of Nations

The **League of Nations** was an international organization founded after the Paris Peace Conference, 1919. The League's goals included disarmament, preventing [war](#) through collective security, settling disputes between [countries](#) through negotiation diplomacy and improving global welfare. The diplomatic philosophy behind the League represented a fundamental shift in thought from the preceding hundred years. The League lacked an armed force of its own and so depended on the Great Powers to enforce its resolutions, keep to economic sanctions which the League ordered, or provide an Army, when needed, for the League to use. However, it was often very reluctant to do so.

After a number of notable [successes](#) and some early [failures](#) in the 1920s, the League ultimately proved incapable of preventing aggression by the Axis Powers in the 1930s. The onset of the [Second World War](#) made it clear that the League had failed in its primary purpose—to avoid any future world war. The United Nations Organization replaced it after [World War II](#) and inherited a number of agencies and organizations founded by the League.

Origins



A commemorative card depicting American President Wilson and the "Origin of the League of Nations"

The concept of a peaceful community of nations had previously been described in [Immanuel Kant's Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch](#) (1795). The idea of the actual League of Nations appears to have originated with British Foreign Secretary Edward Grey, and it was enthusiastically adopted by the Democratic [U.S. President Woodrow Wilson](#) and his advisor Colonel Edward M. House as a means of avoiding bloodshed like that of World War I. The creation of the League was a centerpiece of Wilson's Fourteen Points for Peace, specifically the final point: "A general association of nations must be formed under specific covenants for the purpose of affording mutual guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike."

The Paris Peace Conference accepted the proposal to create the League of Nations ([French](#): *Société des Nations*, [German](#): *Völkerbund*) on January 25, 1919. The Covenant of the League of Nations was drafted by a special commission, and the League was established by Part I of the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed on June 28, 1919. Initially, the Charter was signed by 44 states, including 31 states which had taken part in the war on the side of the Triple Entente or joined it during the conflict. Despite Wilson's efforts to establish and promote the League, for which he was awarded the [Nobel Peace Prize](#) in 1919, the [United States](#) neither ratified the Charter nor joined the League due to opposition from isolationists in the [U.S. Senate](#), especially influential Republicans Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts and William E. Borah of Idaho, together with Wilson's refusal to compromise.

The League held its first meeting in [London](#) on 10 January 1920. Its first action was to ratify the [Treaty of Versailles](#), officially ending World War I. The headquarters of the League moved to [Geneva](#) on November 1, 1920, where the first general assembly of the League was held on November 15, 1920 with representatives from 41 nations in attendance.

Symbols

The League of Nations had neither an official flag nor logo. Proposals for adopting an official symbol were made during the League's beginning in 1920, but the member states never reached agreement. However, League of Nations organizations used varying logos and flags (or none at all) in their own operations. An international contest was held in 1929 to find a design, which again failed to produce a symbol. One of the reasons for this failure may have been the fear by the member states that the power of the supranational organization might supercede them. Finally, in 1939, a semi-official emblem emerged: two five-pointed stars within a blue pentagon. The pentagon and the five-pointed stars were supposed to symbolise the five [continents](#) and the five races of mankind. In a bow on top and at the bottom, the flag had the names in [English](#) (*League of Nations*) and [French](#) (*Société des Nations*). This flag was used on the building of the New York World's Fair in 1939 and 1940.

Languages

The official languages of the League of Nations were [French](#), [English](#) and [Spanish](#) (from 1920). In the early 1920s, there was a proposal for the League to accept [Esperanto](#) as their working language. Ten delegates accepted the proposal with only one voice against, the French delegate, Gabriel Hanotaux. Hanotaux did not like how the [French language](#) was losing its position as the international language of diplomacy and saw Esperanto as a threat. Two years later the League recommended that its member states include Esperanto in their educational curricula.

Structure

The League had three principal organs: a secretariat (headed by the General Secretary and based in [Geneva](#)), a Council, and an Assembly. The League also had numerous Agencies and Commissions. Authorization for any action required both a unanimous vote by the Council and a majority vote in the Assembly.

Secretariat

The staff of the League's secretariat was responsible for preparing the agenda for the Council and Assembly and publishing reports of the meetings and other routine matters, effectively acting as the civil service for the League.

Over the life of the League from 1920–1946, the three Secretaries General were:

- Sir James Eric Drummond, 7th Earl of Perth (UK) (1920-1933)
- Joseph Avenol (France) (1933-1940)
- Seán Lester (Ireland) (1940-1946)

The first president was Paul Hymans, a well-known [Belgian](#) politician. The General Secretary wrote annual reports on the work of the League.

Council

The League Council had the authority to deal with any matter affecting world peace. The Council began with four permanent members (the [United Kingdom](#), [France](#), [Italy](#), [Japan](#)) and four non-permanent members, which were elected by the Assembly for a three-year period. The first four non-permanent members were [Belgium](#), [Brazil](#), [Greece](#) and [Spain](#). The [United States](#) was meant to be the fifth permanent member, but the [United States Senate](#) was dominated by the Republican Party after the 1918 election and voted on March 19, 1920 against the ratification of the [Treaty of Versailles](#).

The initial composition of the Council was subsequently changed a number of times. The number of non-permanent members was first increased to six on September 22, 1922, and then to nine on September 8, 1926. [Germany](#) also joined the League and became a fifth permanent member of the Council on the latter date, taking the Council to a total of fifteen members. When Germany and Japan later both left the League, their places were taken by new, non-permanent, members.

The Council met on average five times a year, and in extraordinary sessions when required. In total, 107 public sessions were held between 1920 and 1939.

Assembly

Each member was represented and had one vote in the League Assembly. Individual member states did not always have representatives in [Geneva](#). The Assembly held its sessions once a year in September.

Éamon de Valera was the President of the Council of the League of Nations at its 68th and Special Sessions in September and October 1932, and President of the Assembly of the League of Nations in 1938. Carl Joachim Hambro was President in 1939 and 1946. Nicolae Titulescu served as president of the League of Nations for two terms, in 1930 and 1931.

Other bodies

The League oversaw the Permanent Court of International Justice and several other agencies and commissions created to deal with pressing international problems. These were the Disarmament Commission, the [Health Organization](#), the International Labour Organization, the [Mandates](#) Commission, the Permanent Central Opium Board, the Commission for Refugees, and the [Slavery](#) Commission. While the League itself is generally branded a failure, several of its Agencies and Commissions had successes within their respective mandates.

Disarmament Commission

The Commission obtained initial agreement by France, Italy, Japan, and Britain to limit the size of their navies. However, the [United Kingdom](#) refused to sign a 1923 disarmament treaty, and the Kellogg-Briand Pact, facilitated by the commission in 1928, failed in its objective of outlawing war. Ultimately, the Commission failed to halt the military buildup during the 1930s by Germany, Italy and Japan.

Health Committee

This body focused on ending leprosy, [malaria](#) and [yellow fever](#), the latter two by starting an international campaign to exterminate mosquitoes. The Health Organization also succeeded in preventing an epidemic of typhus from spreading throughout Europe due to its early intervention in the [Soviet Union](#).

Mandates Commission

The Commission supervised League of Nations [Mandates](#), and also organised plebiscites in disputed territories so that residents could decide which country they would join, most notably the plebiscite in Saarland in 1935.

International Labour Organization

This body was led by Albert Thomas. It successfully banned the addition of [lead](#) to paint, and convinced several countries to adopt an eight-hour work day and forty-eight-hour working week. It also worked to end child labour, increase the rights of women in the workplace, and make shipowners liable for accidents involving seamen.

Permanent Central Opium Board

The Board was established to supervise the statistical control system introduced by the second International Opium Convention that mediated the production, manufacture, trade and retail of opium and its by-products. The Board also established a system of import certificates and export authorizations for the legal international trade in narcotics.

Commission for Refugees

Led by Fridtjof Nansen, the Commission oversaw the repatriation and, when necessary the resettlement, of 400,000 refugees and ex- prisoners of war, most of whom were stranded in [Russia](#) at the end of World War I. It established camps in [Turkey](#) in 1922 to deal with a refugee crisis in that country and to help prevent disease and hunger. It also established the Nansen passport as a means of identification for stateless peoples.

Slavery Commission

The Commission sought to eradicate [slavery](#) and slave trading across the world, and fought forced prostitution and drug trafficking, particularly in opium. It succeeded in gaining the emancipation of 200,000 slaves in [Sierra Leone](#) and organized raids against slave traders in its efforts to stop the practice of forced labour in [Africa](#). It also succeeded in reducing the death rate of workers constructing the Tanganyika railway from 55% to 4%. In other parts of the world, the Commission kept records on slavery, prostitution and drug trafficking in an attempt to monitor those issues.

Several of these institutions were transferred to the United Nations after the Second World War. In addition to the International Labour Organisation, the Permanent Court of International Justice became a UN institution as the [International Court of Justice](#), and the Health Organization was restructured as the [World Health Organization](#).

Members



An anachronous map of the world in the years 1920-1945, which shows the League of Nations and the world.

The League of Nations had 42 founding members with the notable exception of the [United States of America](#), 16 of them left or withdrew from the international organization. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was the only (founding) member to leave the league and return to it later and remained so a member until the end. France was a member for the duration of league, although Vichy France withdrew from the league. In the founding year six other nations joined, only two of them would have a membership that lasted until the end. In later years 15 more countries joined, three memberships would not last until the end. [Egypt](#) was the last nation to join in 1937. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was expelled from the league five years after it joined. [Iraq](#) was the only member of the league that at one time was a League of Nations Mandate. Iraq became a member in 1932.

Mandates

League of Nations Mandates were established under Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. These territories were former colonies of the German Empire and the [Ottoman Empire](#) that were placed under the supervision of the League following [World War I](#). There were three Mandate classifications:

"A" Mandate

This was a territory which "had reached a stage of development where their existence as independent nations can be provisionally recognised, subject to the rendering of administrative advice and assistance by a "Mandatory" until such time as they are able to stand alone. The wishes of these communities must be a principal consideration in the selection of the Mandatory." These were mainly parts of the old Ottoman Empire.

"B" Mandate

This was a territory which "was at such a stage that the Mandatory must be responsible for the administration of the territory under conditions which will guarantee:

- *Freedom of conscience and [religion](#)*
- *The maintenance of public order and morals*
- *Prohibition of abuses such as the slave trade, the arms traffic and the [liquor](#) traffic*

- *The prevention of the establishment of fortifications or military and naval bases and of military training of the natives for other than political purposes and the defence of territory*
- *Equal opportunities for the trade and commerce of other Members of the League.*"

"C" Mandate

This was a territory "*which, owing to the sparseness of their population, or their small size, or their remoteness from the centres of civilisation, or their geographical contiguity to the territory of the Mandatory, and other circumstances, can be best administered under the laws of the Mandatory.*"

(Quotations taken from *The Essential Facts About the League of Nations*, a handbook published in [Geneva](#) in 1939).

The territories were governed by "Mandatory Powers", such as the [United Kingdom](#) in the case of the Mandate of Palestine and the Union of South Africa in the case of South-West Africa, until the territories were deemed capable of self-government. There were fourteen mandate territories divided up among the six Mandatory Powers of the [United Kingdom](#), [France](#), [Belgium](#), [New Zealand](#), [Australia](#) and [Japan](#). In practice, the Mandatory Territories were treated as colonies and were regarded by critics as spoils of war. With the exception of [Iraq](#), which joined the League on October 3, 1932, these territories did not begin to gain their independence until after the Second World War, a process that did not end until 1990. Following the demise of the League, most of the remaining mandates became United Nations Trust Territories.

In addition to the Mandates, the League itself governed the Saarland for 15 years, before it was returned to [Germany](#) following a plebiscite, and the free city of Danzig (now Gdańsk, [Poland](#)) from 15 November 1920 to 1 September 1939.

Successes

The League is generally considered to have failed in its mission to achieve disarmament, prevent war, settle disputes through diplomacy, and improve global welfare. However, it achieved significant successes in a number of areas.

Åland Islands

[Åland](#) is a collection of around 6,500 islands mid-way between [Sweden](#) and [Finland](#). The islands are exclusively Swedish-speaking, but Finland had sovereignty in the early 1900s. During the period from 1917 onwards, most residents wished the islands to become part of Sweden; Finland, however, did not wish to cede the islands. The Swedish government raised the issue with the League in 1921. After close consideration, the League determined that the islands should remain a part of Finland, but be governed autonomously, averting a potential war between the two countries.

Upper Silesia

The Treaty of Versailles had ordered a plebiscite in Upper Silesia to determine whether the territory should be part of [Germany](#) or Poland. In the background, strong-arm tactics and discrimination against Poles led to rioting and eventually to the first two Silesian Uprisings (1919 and 1920). In the plebiscite, roughly 59.6% (around 500,000) of the votes were cast for joining Germany, and this result led to the Third Silesian Uprising in 1921. The League was asked to settle the matter. In 1922, a six-week

investigation found that the land should be split; the decision was accepted by both countries and by the majority of Upper Silesians.

Memel

The port city of Memel (now Klaipėda) and the surrounding area was placed under League control after the end of the World War I and was governed by a French general for three years. However, the population was mostly [Lithuanian](#), and the Lithuanian government placed a claim to the territory, with Lithuanian forces invading in 1923. The League chose to cede the land around Memel to Lithuania, but declared the port should remain an international zone; Lithuania agreed. While the decision could be seen as a failure (in that the League reacted passively to the use of force), the settlement of the issue without significant bloodshed was a point in the League's favour.

Greece and Bulgaria

After an incident between sentries on the border between [Greece](#) and [Bulgaria](#) in 1925, Greek troops invaded their neighbour. Bulgaria ordered its troops to provide only token resistance, trusting the League to settle the dispute. The League did indeed condemn the Greek invasion, and called for both Greek withdrawal and compensation to Bulgaria. Greece complied, but complained about the disparity between their treatment and that of [Italy](#) (see [Corfu](#), below).

Saar

Saar was a province formed from parts of Prussia and the Rhenish Palatinate that was established and placed under League control after the [Treaty of Versailles](#). A plebiscite was to be held after fifteen years of League rule, to determine whether the region should belong to Germany or France. 90.3% of votes cast were in favour of becoming part of Germany in that 1935 referendum, and it became part of Germany again.

Mosul

The League resolved a dispute between [Iraq](#) and [Turkey](#) over the control of the former Ottoman province of Mosul in 1926. According to the UK, which was awarded a League of Nations A-mandate over Iraq in 1920 and therefore represented Iraq in its foreign affairs, Mosul belonged to Iraq; on the other hand, the new Turkish republic claimed the province as part of its historic heartland. A three person League of Nations committee was sent to the region in 1924 to study the case and in 1925 recommended the region to be connected to Iraq, under the condition that the UK would hold the mandate over Iraq for another 25 years, to assure the autonomous rights of the Kurdish population. The League Council adopted the recommendation and it decided on 16 December 1925 to award Mosul to Iraq. Although Turkey had accepted the League of Nations arbitration in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, it rejected the League's decision. Nonetheless, Britain, Iraq and Turkey made a treaty on 5 June 1926, that mostly followed the decision of the League Council and also assigned Mosul to Iraq.

Liberia

Following rumours of forced labor in the independent African country of [Liberia](#), the League launched an investigation into the matter, particularly the alleged use of forced labor on the massive *Firestone* rubber plantation in that country. In 1930, a report by the League implicated many government officials in the selling of contract labor, leading to the resignation of President Charles D.B. King, his vice-president and numerous other government officials. The League followed with a threat to

establish a trusteeship over Liberia unless reforms were carried out, which became the central focus of President Edwin Barclay.

Other successes

The League also worked to combat the international trade in opium and sexual slavery and helped alleviate the plight of refugees, particularly in Turkey in the period to 1926. One of its innovations in this area was its 1922 introduction of the Nansen passport, which was the first internationally recognised identity card for stateless refugees. Many of the League's successes were accomplished by its various Agencies and Commissions.



Moral Suasion.

The Rabbit. "My offensive equipment being practically nil, it remains for me to fascinate him with the power of my eye."

Cartoon from Punch magazine, July 28th 1920, satirising the perceived weakness of the League.

General weaknesses

The League did not, in the long term, succeed. The outbreak of World War II was the immediate cause of the League's demise, but there was also a variety of other, more fundamental, flaws.

The League, like the modern United Nations, lacked an armed force of its own and depended on the Great Powers to enforce its resolutions, which they were very reluctant to do. Economic sanctions, which were the most severe measure the League could implement short of military action, were difficult to enforce and had no great impact on the target country, because they could simply trade with those outside the League. The problem is exemplified in the following passage, taken from *The Essential Facts About the League of Nations*, a handbook published in [Geneva](#) in 1939:

*"As regards the military sanctions provided for in paragraph 2 of Article 16, there is **no legal obligation** to apply them... there may be a political and moral duty incumbent on states... but, once again, there is no obligation on them."*

The League's two most important members, Britain and France, were reluctant to use sanctions and even more reluctant to resort to military action on behalf of the League. So soon after World War I, the populations and governments of the two countries were pacifist. The British Conservatives were especially tepid on the League and preferred, when in government, to negotiate treaties without the

involvement of the organization. Ultimately, Britain and France both abandoned the concept of collective security in favour of appeasement in the face of growing German militarism under [Adolf Hitler](#).

Representation at the League was often a problem. Though it was intended to encompass all nations, many never joined, or their time as part of the League was short. One key weakness of the League was that the United States never joined, which took away much of the League's potential power. Even though US President [Woodrow Wilson](#) had been a driving force behind the League's formation, the [United States Senate](#) voted on November 19, 1919 not to join the League.

The League also further weakened when some of the main powers left in the 1930s. [Japan](#) began as a permanent member of the Council, but withdrew in 1933 after the League voiced opposition to its invasion of the Chinese territory of Manchuria. Italy also began as a permanent member of the Council but withdrew in 1937. The League had accepted Germany as a member in 1926, deeming it a "peace-loving country", but [Adolf Hitler](#) pulled Germany out when he came to power in 1933. Another major power, the Bolshevik [Soviet Union](#), was only a member from 1934, when it joined to antagonise Germany (which had left the year before), to December 14, 1939, when it was expelled for aggression against Finland.

The League's neutrality tended to manifest itself as indecision. The League required a unanimous vote of its nine (later fifteen) member Council to enact a resolution, so conclusive and effective action was difficult, if not impossible. It was also slow in coming to its decisions. Some decisions also required unanimous consent of the Assembly; that is, agreement by every member of the League.

Another important weakness of the League was that it tried to represent all nations, but most members protected their own national interests and were not committed to the League or its goals. The reluctance of all League members to use the option of military action showed this to the full. If the League had shown more resolve initially, countries, governments and dictators may have been more wary of risking its wrath in later years. These failings were, in part, among the reasons for the outbreak of World War II.

Moreover, the League's advocacy of disarmament for Britain and France (and other members) whilst at the same time advocating collective security meant that the League was unwittingly depriving itself of the only forceful means by which its authority would be upheld. This was because if the League was to force countries to abide by international law it would primarily be the [Royal Navy](#) and the French Army which would do the fighting. Furthermore, Britain and France were not powerful enough to enforce international law across the globe, even if they wished to do so. For its members League obligations meant there was a danger that states would get drawn into international disputes which did not directly affect their respective national interests.

On 23 June 1936, in the wake of the collapse of League efforts to restrain Italy's war of conquest against Abyssinia, British Prime Minister [Stanley Baldwin](#) told the [House of Commons](#) that collective security "failed ultimately because of the reluctance of nearly all the nations in Europe to proceed to what I might call military sanctions.... [T]he real reason, or the main reason, was that we discovered in the process of weeks that there was no country except the aggressor country which was ready for war.... [I]f collective action is to be a reality and not merely a thing to be talked about, it means not only that every country is to be ready for war; but must be ready to go to war at once. That is a terrible thing, but it is an essential part of collective security." It was an accurate assessment and a lesson which clearly was applied in the formation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, which stood as the League's successor insofar as its role as guarantor of the security of Western Europe was concerned.

Specific failures

The general weaknesses of the League are illustrated by its specific failures.



In 1935, Emperor Haile Selassie of [Ethiopia](#) condemns the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in his address to the League.

Cieszyn

Cieszyn ([German](#) Teschen, Czech Těšín) is a region between [Poland](#) and today's [Czech Republic](#), important for its coal mines. Czechoslovakian troops moved to Cieszyn in 1919 to take over control of the region while Poland was defending itself from invasion of Bolshevik Russia. The League intervened, deciding that Poland should take control of most of the town, but that Czechoslovakia should take one of the town's suburbs, which contained the most valuable coal mines and the only railroad connecting Czech lands and Slovakia. The city was divided into Polish Cieszyn and Czech Český Těšín. Poland refused to accept this decision; although there was no further violence, the diplomatic dispute continued for another 20 years.

Vilna

After World War I, Poland and [Lithuania](#) both regained the independence that they had lost during the partitions of Poland in 1795. Though both countries shared centuries of common history in the Polish-Lithuanian Union and [Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth](#), rising Lithuanian [nationalism](#) prevented the recreation of the former federated state. The city of Vilna (Lithuanian Vilnius, Polish Wilno) was made the capital of Lithuania, despite being mainly Polish in ethnicity.

During the [Polish-Soviet War](#) in 1920, a Polish army took control of the city. Despite the Poles' claim to the city, the League chose to ask Poland to withdraw: the Poles did not. The city and its surroundings were proclaimed a separate state of Central Lithuania and on 20 February 1922 the local parliament passed the Unification Act and the city was incorporated into Poland as the capital of the Wilno Voivodship. Theoretically, British and French troops could have been asked to enforce the League's decision; however, France did not wish to antagonise Poland, which was seen as a possible ally in a future war against Germany or the Soviet Union, while Britain was not prepared to act alone. Both Britain and France also wished to have Poland as a 'buffer zone' between Europe and the possible threat from Communist Russia. Eventually, the League accepted Wilno as a Polish town on March 15, 1923. Thus the Poles were able to keep it until [Soviet](#) invasion in 1939.

Lithuanian authorities declined to accept the Polish authority over Vilna and treated it as a constitutional capital. It was not until the 1938 ultimatum, when Lithuania resolved diplomatic relations with Poland and thus de facto accepted the borders of its neighbour.

Ruhr

Under the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had to pay reparations. They could pay in money or in goods at a set value; however, in 1922 Germany was not able to make its payment. The next year, France and [Belgium](#) chose to act upon this, and invaded the industrial heartland of Germany, the Ruhr, despite this being in direct contravention of the League's rules. With France being a major League member, and Britain hesitant to oppose its close ally, nothing was done in the League. This set a significant precedent – the League rarely acted against major powers, and occasionally broke its own rules.

Corfu

One major boundary settlement that remained to be made after World War I was that between [Greece](#) and [Albania](#). The Conference of Ambassadors, a *de facto* body of the League, was asked to settle the issue. The Council appointed [Italian](#) general Enrico Tellini to oversee this. On 27 August 1923, while examining the Greek side of the border, Tellini and his staff were murdered. Italian leader [Benito Mussolini](#) was incensed, and demanded the Greeks pay reparations and execute the murderers. The Greeks, however, did not actually know who the murderers were.

On 31 August, Italian forces occupied the island of Corfu, part of Greece, with fifteen people being killed. Initially, the League condemned Mussolini's invasion, but also recommended Greece pay compensation, to be held by the League until Tellini's killers were found. Mussolini, though he initially agreed to the League's terms, set about trying to change them. By working on the Conference of Ambassadors, he managed to make the League change its decision. Greece was forced to apologize and compensation was to be paid directly and immediately. Mussolini was able to leave Corfu in triumph. By bowing to the pressure of a large country, the League again set a dangerous and damaging example. This was one of the League's major failures.

Mukden Incident

The Mukden Incident was one of the League's major setbacks and acted as the catalyst for [Japan's](#) withdrawal from the organisation. In the Mukden Incident, also known as the "Manchurian Incident", the Japanese held control of the South Manchurian Railway in the [Chinese](#) region of Manchuria. They claimed that Chinese soldiers had sabotaged the railway, which was a major trade route between the two countries, on September 18, 1931. In fact, it is thought that the sabotage had been contrived by officers of the Japanese Kwantung Army without the knowledge of government in Japan, in order to catalyse a full invasion of Manchuria. In retaliation, the Japanese army, acting contrary to the civilian government's orders, occupied the entire region of Manchuria, which they renamed Manchukuo. This new country was only recognised internationally by Italy and Germany - the rest of the world still saw Manchuria as legally a region of China. In 1932, Japanese air and sea forces bombarded the Chinese city of [Shanghai](#) and the short war of January 28 Incident broke out.

The Chinese government asked the League of Nations for help, but the long voyage around the world by sailing ship for League officials to investigate the matter themselves delayed matters. When they arrived, the officials were confronted with Chinese assertions that the Japanese had invaded unlawfully, while the Japanese claimed they were acting to keep peace in the area. Despite Japan's high standing in the League, the Lytton Report declared Japan to be in the wrong and demanded Manchuria be returned to the Chinese. However, before the report was voted upon by the Assembly, Japan announced intentions to

invade more of China. When the report passed 42-1 in the Assembly in 1933 (only Japan voted against), Japan withdrew from the League.

According to the *Covenant* of the League of Nations, the League should have now placed economic sanctions against Japan, or gathered an army together and declared war against it. However, neither happened. Economic sanctions had been rendered almost useless due to the United States Congress voting against being part of the League, despite [Woodrow Wilson](#)'s keen involvement in the drawing up of the [Treaty of Versailles](#), and his wish for America to join the League. Any economic sanctions the League now placed on its member states would be fairly pointless, as the state barred from trading with other member states could simply turn and trade with America. An army was not assembled by the League due to the self-interest of many of its member states. This meant that countries like Britain and France did not want to gather together an army for the League to use, as they were too interested and busy with their own affairs - such as keeping control of their extensive colonial lands, especially after the turmoil of [World War I](#). Japan was therefore left to keep control of Manchuria, until the Red Army of the [Soviet Union](#) took over the area and returned it to China at the end of [World War II](#) in 1945.

Chaco War

The League failed to prevent the Chaco War between [Bolivia](#) and [Paraguay](#) in 1932 over the arid Chaco Boreal region of [South America](#). Although the region was sparsely populated, it gave control of the Paraguay River which would have given one of the two landlocked countries access to the [Atlantic Ocean](#), and there was also speculation, later proved incorrect, that the Chaco would be a rich source of [petroleum](#). Border skirmishes throughout the late 1920s culminated in an all-out war in 1932, when the Bolivian army, following the orders of President Daniel Salamanca Urey, attacked a Paraguayan garrison at Vanguardia. Paraguay appealed to the League of Nations, but the League did not take action when the Pan-American conference offered to mediate instead.

The war was a disaster for both sides, causing 100,000 casualties and bringing both countries to the brink of economic disaster. By the time a ceasefire was negotiated on 12 June 1935, Paraguay had seized control over most of the region. This was recognized in a 1938 truce by which Paraguay was awarded three-quarters of the Chaco Boreal.

Spanish Civil War

On 17 July 1936, armed conflict broke out between Spanish *Republicans* (the left-wing government of Spain) and *Nationalists* (the right-wing rebels, including most officers of the Spanish Army). Alvarez del Vayo, the Spanish minister of foreign affairs, appealed to the League in September 1936 for arms to defend its territorial integrity and political independence. However, the League could not itself intervene in the Spanish Civil War nor prevent foreign intervention in the conflict. Hitler and Mussolini continued to aid General Franco's Nationalist insurrectionists, and the Soviet Union aided the Spanish loyalists. The League did attempt to ban the intervention of foreign national volunteers.

Italian invasion of Abyssinia

Perhaps most famously, in October 1935, Benito Mussolini sent General Pietro Badoglio and 400,000 troops to invade [Abyssinia](#) (Ethiopia). The modern Italian Army easily defeated the poorly armed Abyssinians, and captured [Addis Ababa](#) in May 1936, forcing Emperor Haile Selassie to flee. The Italians used chemical weapons (mustard gas) and flame throwers against the Abyssinians.

The League of Nations condemned Italy's aggression and imposed economic sanctions in November 1935, but the sanctions were largely ineffective. As Stanley Baldwin, the British Prime Minister, later

observed, this was ultimately because no one had the military forces on hand to withstand an Italian attack. On 9 October 1935, the United States (a non-League member) refused to cooperate with any League action. It had embargoed exports of arms and war material to either combatant (in accordance with its new Neutrality Act) on 5 October and later (29 February 1936) endeavored (with uncertain success) to limit exports of oil and other materials to normal peacetime levels. The League sanctions were lifted on 4 July 1936, but by that point they were a dead letter in any event.

As was the case with Manchuria, the vigor of the major powers in responding to the crisis in Abyssinia was tempered by their perception that the fate of this poor and far-off country, inhabited by non-Europeans, was not a central interest of theirs.

Axis re-armament

The League was powerless and mostly silent in the face of major events leading to World War II such as Hitler's remilitarisation of the Rhineland, occupation of the Sudetenland and *Anschluss* with *Austria*, which had been forbidden by the Treaty of Versailles. As with Japan, both Germany in 1933 – using the failure of the World Disarmament Conference to agree to arms parity between France and Germany as a pretext – and Italy in 1937 simply withdrew from the League rather than submit to its judgment. The League commissioner in Danzig was unable to deal with German claims on the city, a significant contributing factor in the outbreak of World War II in 1939. The final significant act of the League was to expel the *Soviet Union* in December 1939 after it invaded Finland.

Demise and legacy

With the onset of *World War II*, it was clear that the League had failed in its purpose – to avoid any future world war. During the war, neither the League's Assembly nor Council was able or willing to meet, and its secretariat in *Geneva* was reduced to a skeleton staff, with many offices moving to North America.

After its failure to prevent one war, it was decided in 1945 at the Yalta Conference, to create a new body to supplant the League's role. This body was to be the *United Nations*. Many League bodies, for instance the International Labour Organization, continued to function and eventually became affiliated with the UN. At a meeting of the Assembly in 1946, the League dissolved itself and its services, mandates, and property were transferred to the UN.

The structure of the United Nations was intended to make it more effective than the League. The principal Allies in World War II (*UK*, *USSR*, *France*, U.S., and *China*) became permanent members of the UN Security Council, giving the new "Great Powers" significant international influence, mirroring the League Council. Decisions of the UN Security Council are binding on all members of the UN; however, unanimous decisions are not required, unlike the League Council. Permanent members of the UN Security Council were given a shield to protect their vital interests, which has prevented the UN acting decisively in many cases. Similarly, the UN does not have its own standing armed forces, but the UN has been more successful than the League in calling for its members to contribute to armed interventions, such as the Korean War, and peacekeeping in the former Yugoslavia. However, the UN has in some cases been forced to rely on economic sanctions. The UN has also been more successful than the League in attracting members from the nations of the world, making it more representative.

Trivia

- The *Swedish Communist* leader Fredrik Ström used to refer to the *League of Nations* as the *Imperialist International*.

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