

The League of Nations

The League of Nations was an international diplomatic group developed post the end of World War I. It was a precursor to the United Nations where disputes between nations would not be solved by open warfare but rather by mediation and diplomatic means.

The League of Nations had a mixed record of success before it stopped operations during World War II.

Origins of League of Nations

The Origins of the League of Nations was found in the Fourteen Points laid down by US President Woodrow Wilson which envisioned an organisation that would solve a dispute between members.

The League was approved and ratified by the Treaty of Versailles at the Versailles Conference on 28 April 1919. The first formal session of the League was held in Geneva in 1920. Though the League had no armed force of its own, economic sanctions and the imposition of a kind of quarantine of the offending state was considered a deterrent against aggression.

In practice, the League spoke with anything but a collective voice. Germany and the Soviet Union were both excluded and the United States refused to ratify the Versailles Treaty and never joined the League. The isolationist elements in the US Government felt that America would lose its autonomy should it become involved in international politics.

The League of Nations consisted of a council made up of four permanent powers - Britain, France, Italy and Japan - and four others chosen at intervals from the remaining member states. The first four were Belgium, Brazil, Spain and Greece, but Brazil became the first state to leave the League when it forced Italy to withdraw from its unilateral occupation of Corfu in 1923, was scored against one of the organization's own principal council members.

Issues faced by the League of Nations

The most serious test faced by the League came in the effort to impose a settlement of the Balkans and the Near East, the area whose instability was one of the causes of World War I.

Here there was an issue which was difficult to resolve. Italy had joined the war in 1915 after signing a secret convention in London promising her substantial territorial spoils in Dalmatia and Slovenia.

At the Paris Peace Conference, Woodrow Wilson rejected secret agreements and the London agreement was shelved. The Italian representative stormed out of the conference, but nothing could persuade the other Allies to concede all Italy wanted.

The second problem was Greece. A minor Allied power, Greece's ambitions were fired by the power vacuum which the defeat of Bulgaria and Turkey opened up in the Near East. The Greek premier, Venizelos, looked for compensation in mainland Turkey, where there were large Greek minorities, and in Thrace. Under the Treaty of Neuilly, which Bulgaria signed on 29 November 1919. Bulgaria lost its territorial gains in the Balkan Wars years before as a result

Serbia retained a large share of Macedonia, while Greece took western Thrace. The Greeks reached a secret agreement with Italy, granting them a free hand in western Turkey in return for Greek support for an Italian mandate over Albania. Here again, the League intervened. Albania's independence was guaranteed and the 1913 frontiers restored with minor adjustments in November 1921.

The Soviet Union which was not a member of the league attacked a port in Persia in 1920, Persia appealed to the League for help. But the League refused to help to believe that the Soviets Union would not accept any of its rulings since it was a non-member state and in need of damaging its authority.

Other issues included the hard time other European countries had when handing over autonomy during negotiation of disputes.

There scenarios in which the League had to intervene despite its reservations. For example, the League acted as a trustee of a tiny region between France and Germany called Saar from 1919 to 1935

The League became the 15-year custodian of the coal-rich area to allow it time to determine on its own which of the two countries it wished to join, with Germany being the eventual choice.

Disputes solved by the League of Nations

Poland would always face external aggressions against its independence. The first issue came during the occupation of Vilna by the Soviet Union in 1920 and its subsequent handover to Lithuania. Following a demand that Lithuania's independence be recognised, the League of Nations got involved.

Through careful mediation, Vilnia was returned to Poland. The League was also brought in as Poland grappled with Germany about Upper Silesia and with Czechoslovakia over the town of Teschen.

It's unclear precisely how the debacle in the border town of Petrich in Bulgaria started, but it resulted in the deaths of a Greek captain and retaliation from Greece in the form of invasion.

Bulgaria apologized and begged the League for help. The League decreed a settlement that was accepted by both countries.

Reasons why the League of Nations Failed

The League did not have a standing army of its own, instead relied on the armies of its member nations for military intervention and any member nation that lent its army for such a cause there was always an unmitigated risk of it having demanding compensation for its trouble.

As such the league was powerless when the Japanese Empire blitzed its way across the Chinese mainland in 1937 or when Nazi Germany took over the whole of Czechoslovakia under the pretext of protecting the German minority population living there.

The representation of the League itself was an issue. Not all nations were represented under its banner the most conspicuous being the United States. Had the United States been a member, it is speculated that the League of Nations would have had a better authority when it came to the support and disputes between member states.

When World War II finally broke out in September 1939, the League was virtually disbanded. In 1940 league members Denmark, Norway, Belgium, and France fell to the German onslaught. Switzerland, in a bid to maintain its neutrality at all costs, refused to host the League of Nations within its borders anymore. The reason being the League was perceived as an organisation of the allies. As a result, the League began to dismantle its offices.

Soon the Allies endorsed the idea of the United Nations, which held its first planning conference in San Francisco in 1944, effectively ending any need for the League of Nations to make a post-war return.

The League of Nations was officially dissolved on April 20, 1946.