

4

Keeping the peace in the 1920s

4.1 Was the League of Nations a good idea?



Your priority on this spread is to explain two aims of the League of Nations.

Key words

collective security; co-operate; covenant; disarmament; international

Questions and answers about the League of Nations

SOURCE 1

THE PARTIES [those taking part], in order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security, agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations

- *by promising not to go to war*
- *by agreeing to open, just and honourable relations between nations*
- *by agreeing that governments should act according to international law*
- *by maintaining justice and respect for all treaty obligations.*

The first words of the Covenant of the League of Nations. All members of the League signed this covenant.

Q1: What was the League of Nations?

A: The League was an INTERNATIONAL organisation. It was set up as part of the Treaty of Versailles. It was the idea of US President Woodrow Wilson – he thought the League would help to stop future wars. There were 42 countries in the League when it began in 1919.

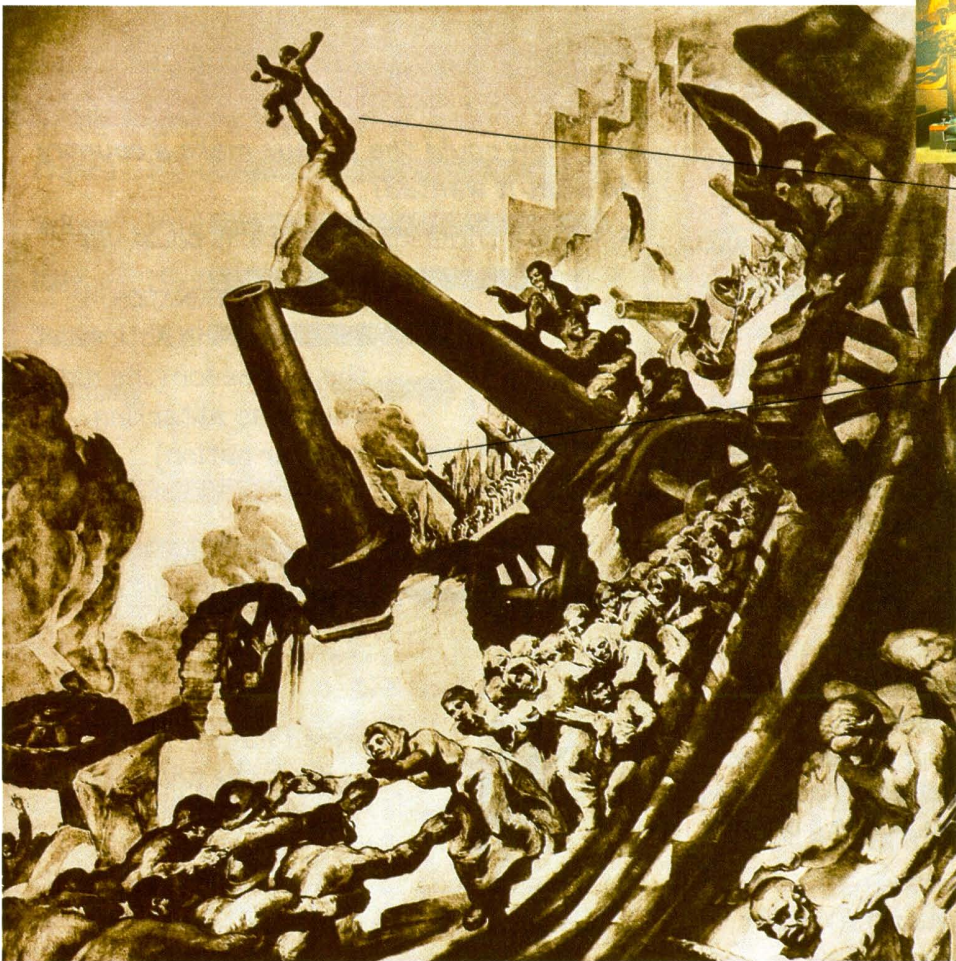
Q2: What were the aims of the League of Nations?

A: The aims were set out in the COVENANT of the League of Nations. This document was like a 'rule book' for the League (see Source 1). The aims were:

- to be united and strong enough to discourage any nation from using force as a way to solve disputes
- to provide a place to discuss international disputes and work them out peacefully
- to encourage countries to CO-OPERATE, especially in business and trade
- to encourage DISARMAMENT by nations
- to improve living and working conditions for people around the world.

By sticking together, the nations of the world would have protection and help from each other – this was called COLLECTIVE SECURITY.

SOURCE 2



The survivors
Women welcome their men back from war. One woman stands astride two silent guns holding her baby – a symbol of hope for the future.

Some of the guns are still firing but, one by one, men and women are pushing them off a precipice where they will break up and be unusable. The League tried to persuade countries to disarm.

Hand in hand
The five giants represent the five continents of the Earth. The giants are standing firm together.

At the giants' feet, leaders of all the nations are working, reading and talking together. The League's members come from all five continents. The League believed that strength came from unity.



Wall paintings by the famous Spanish artist, José Maria Sert that decorate the Assembly Chamber in the League's Headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland. They were designed to show the aims and values of the League.

Activity

Prepare a headphone commentary about the paintings in Source 2 to be used by a visitor. Make sure you point the viewer to the important details which show the aims of the League.



Your main aim on this page is to explain the difference between the League's Council and its Assembly.

Key words isolationism; moral condemnation; sanctions

Q3: How was the League organised?

A: Britain and France wanted the League to be a sort of informal club. In a crisis, the big nations would get together. There was something like this already. It was called the Council of Ambassadors. However, President Wilson did not agree. He insisted that the League should work like a kind of international government. He got his way (see Source 3).

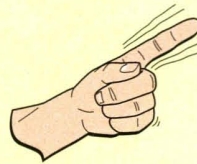
Activity

A young secretary is arriving for his first day at the League of Nations Secretariat in the 1920s.

Prepare a bullet point briefing for him about the League. Explain the difference between the Council and the Assembly. You could also include a diagram in your briefing.

Q4: How could the League make a country do what it wanted?

A: It had three main powers. It could use:



- **MORAL CONDEMNATION** – criticising the actions of the aggressor (the nation which was attacking another nation)



- **economic SANCTIONS** – cutting off important supplies like oil



- **armed force** – using force against the aggressor.

SOURCE 3



The Council met five times a year or when there was an emergency. It had some temporary members elected by the Assembly and four permanent members – Britain, France, Italy and Japan. The real power in the League lay with these four. Each permanent member could veto (stop) any action by the League. In any crisis, the Council took all the important decisions.



The **Assembly** was the League's parliament. It met once a year. It voted on issues such as the budget (spending) of the League, or letting in new members. Decisions had to be unanimous (every member had to agree).

The League was run by a permanent **Secretariat** (staff of office workers).

The League had a number of **commissions**, or committees, to tackle international problems such as helping refugees or improving health.

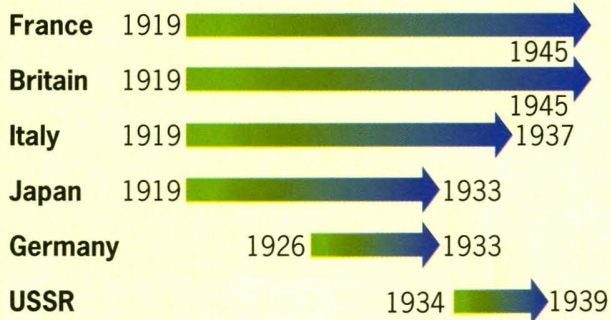


The **Court of International Justice** helped to settle disputes between countries. The court would listen to both sides and then make a decision, just like an ordinary court of law.



Q5: Who belonged to the League?

A: The League began with 42 nations. By 1939, there were over 50 members. But some powerful nations left the League or never joined.

**Q6: What about the USA?**

A: The USA never joined! The League may have been President Wilson's big idea, but he could not get the rest of the USA to agree with him. The US Congress (Parliament) did not want the USA to get involved in sorting out problems in the rest of the world. This view became known as ISOLATIONISM.

This was a real setback for the League. Everybody knew that the League needed the USA's money and troops so that it could work effectively.



Your aims on this page are to:

- explain why it was such a blow that the USA did not join the League
- explain the attitudes of Britain and France to the League.

Q7: So was the League powerful?

A: This is a tricky question. Over the next few chapters, you will decide this for yourself!

Most people and most governments wanted the League to succeed. However, the League had some weaknesses right from the start.

- Its way of working – for example, the Assembly met only once a year and every vote had to be unanimous. This meant that reaching decisions could be a very slow process.
- Its membership – the USA did not join; Germany and the USSR only joined much later; Britain and France were both weakened by the First World War.
- Britain and France had their own priorities:
 - Britain wanted to protect its empire
 - France worried about another attack from Germany.

They often put these concerns ahead of the League's priorities.

Focus task**Was the League of Nations strong?**

When the League was set up in 1919, people could see both its good and bad points.

Use a table like the one below to sum up the information on pages 70–73.

Key issue	Positive view	Negative view
Membership of the League	Major powers, like Britain and France, were in the League.	
How decisions were made in the League		
Powers of the League's organisations		
Attitude of Britain and France towards the League		

4.2 Did the League work well in the 1920s?



Your core aims over these next four pages are to:

- describe one success of the League and explain why it was a success
- describe one failure of the League and explain why it was a failure.

Bonus: explain how one event was a partial success or failure.

Key words facilities; interpret; plebiscite



During the 1920s there were many disputes and problems in which the League played a role. The map above outlines some cases where the League helped or tried to help. On the next three pages you will look at four of them in a bit more detail and decide which were failures and which were successes.

Focus task

Many historians have studied the League in the 1920s. They have INTERPRETED events very differently. You will now look at four case studies of the League in action in the 1920s and come up with your own interpretation.

For each case study, decide:

- why you might criticise the League's actions
- why you might think the League's actions were justified or reasonable
- where you will put this event on a success scale of 0–5, where 0 is a total failure and 5 is a total success.

The two professors should help you. They have already done some of the work for case study 1!

I would put the League on 0 on the scale. It was useless here. It could not enforce its own rules. The French looked after their own interests. The British showed how weak they were.



Case study 1: Vilna 1920

Vilna was the capital of Lithuania, one of the new states created by peace treaties after the war. Vilna was on the border with Poland. Most of its population was Polish. In 1920, Polish troops simply moved in and took over Vilna. Lithuania asked the League of Nations for help. It was obvious that Poland had broken the League's Covenant – it was the aggressor. However, that did not make things simple.

- Most of the population of Vilna was Polish – didn't that mean the Poles had a case for moving in?
- France wanted to stay friendly with Poland. It saw Poland as a possible ally against Germany.
- Britain didn't see how it could send troops across Europe to force the Poles out of Vilna. Not many British people cared enough about Vilna to support that kind of action.

The League did nothing in the end. The Poles kept control of Vilna.

Where would **you** put this event on the scale?

Case study 2: Upper Silesia 1921

Upper Silesia was on the border between Poland and Germany. Poles and Germans lived there. The area also contained a valuable steel industry. Germany and Poland both wanted to control the area. The League organised a PLEBISCITE. British and French troops kept order during the voting. The vote was divided, so the League divided Upper Silesia between Germany and Poland. The League also made sure that the division did not disrupt railway lines, power supplies or other FACILITIES. Germany and Poland both accepted the League's decision.

How do you think Professor 1 would criticise the League?

Where would **you** put this event on the success scale from page 74?

How do you think Professor 2 would defend the League?

Now be fair. I would put the League on at least 3 on the scale. They were right to do nothing. Vilna was very Polish so the Poles had a point. Also, how could Britain and France march troops across Europe?



Key words boundary; Refugees Commission; trafficking



How do you think this professor would criticise the League?

Case study 3: Corfu 1923

This started off as another BOUNDARY dispute. In 1923, an Italian army unit was mapping the border between Greece and Albania. The soldiers were attacked, but it was not clear who attacked them. The Italian general, Tellini, was killed. Italy's leader, Benito Mussolini, blamed the Greeks. He demanded that the Greeks hand over the murderers. He also demanded compensation. In August 1923, he invaded the Greek island of Corfu.

The Greeks appealed to the League. Early in September, the League condemned Mussolini's actions. It was clear that he had broken the League's Covenant. However, Mussolini got to work behind the scenes. He put pressure on the members of the League's Council to support Italy instead of Greece. By the end of September, things had turned around. The Council began to put pressure on the Greeks. The Greeks had to apologise to Mussolini and pay compensation for the murder of Tellini.

Where would **you** put this event on the success scale?



How do you think this professor would defend the League?

Case study 4: Bulgaria 1925

In October 1925, Greek and Bulgarian forces clashed on the border between the two states. Bulgaria claimed that Greece was to blame. Greece appealed to the League. The League decided that the Greeks were at fault. They had to pull back their troops and pay compensation to Bulgaria. The Greeks obeyed the League's orders. However, they also complained that the League had not treated Italy in the same way as it had treated Greece (see case study 3). Did the power of the League only apply to small states like Greece?

How do you think this professor would criticise the League?

Where would **you** put this event on the success scale?

How do you think this professor would defend the League?

Other developments in the 1920s

The League's commissions did some tremendous work. For example, the REFUGEES COMMISSION helped 400,000 prisoners of war to return home after the Great War. The Health Committee helped to fight deadly diseases such as malaria and leprosy. The League also fought against drug TRAFFICKING and slavery. It freed 200,000 slaves in Sierra Leone.

The League also helped its members to agree some important treaties. In 1925, Germany signed the Locarno Treaty. This meant it accepted the borders of Germany set out in the Treaty of Versailles. In 1928, 65 states signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact. They promised not to use force to settle disputes.

There were still problems, of course. And one big failure was that the League failed to make any progress on disarmament. Nevertheless, by early 1929, the world was more peaceful and stable than it had been for many years.

Revision task

It is now time to prepare your class quiz, based on the yellow notes at the beginning of each section. Your teacher can give you a sheet to help you.

Focus task

End of decade report on the League of Nations

It is the end of the 1920s. You have to write a report on the League.

This will be a bit like a school report. You have to grade the League on the areas in the table below and add a comment on its progress, achievements and weaknesses. The section on disarmament has been filled in to give you an example of how to complete the report.

Area of performance	Overall grade for 1920s (A–E)	Comments (including examples of achievements or weaknesses)
To be united and strong enough to discourage any nation from using force as a way to solve disputes.		
To provide a place to discuss international disputes and work them out peacefully.		
To encourage countries to co-operate, especially in business and trade.		
To encourage nations to disarm.	E	I'm afraid the League has made little progress in disarmament in this decade. The League needs to work harder in the years to come.
To improve living and working conditions for people around the world.		