The League of Nations

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Index

Introduction - 3
Background - 3
The Covenant: Basis of the League - 4
The Organization of the League of Nations - 4
Successes and Failures - 6
Conclusion - 7
References - 7
The League of Nations

Introduction.

The League of Nations was founded immediately after the First World War. It consists of 42 countries, 26 of which are non-European. At its largest, 57 countries are members of the League. The League was created because a number of people in France, South Africa, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US) believed that a world organization of nations could keep the peace and prevent a repetition of the horrors of the First World War. An effective world body now seemed possible because communications had improved and there was an increase of cooperation within international organizations. Coordination and cooperation for economic and social progress were also becoming very important.

The League has two basic aims. Firstly, it seeks to preserve the peace through collective action. Disputes will be referred to the League's Council for arbitration and conciliation. If necessary, economic and then military sanctions can be used. In other words, members undertake action to defend other members from aggression. Secondly, the League aims to promote international cooperation in economic and social affairs.

Background

The League of Nations came into existance after the end of the First World War. The League of Nation's task was simple - to ensure that war never breaks out again. After the turmoil caused by the Versailles Treaty, many have hoped that the League would bring stability to the world.

The United States entered World War I in 1917. The country as a whole and the president, Woodrow Wilson in particular, was horrified by the slaughter that had taken place in what was meant to be a civilized part of the world. The only way to
avoid a repetition of such a disaster was to create an international body whose sole purpose was to maintain world peace and which would sort out international disputes as and when they occurred. This is the task of the League of Nations, which was received with open arms in most of the globe.

The Covenant: Basis of the League

At the close of World War I, a society of nations was advocated. The basis of the League was the Covenant, which was included in the Treaty of Versailles and other peace treaties.

The Covenant consisted of 26 articles. Articles 1 through 7 concerned organization, providing for an assembly, composed of all member nations; a council, composed of the great powers (originally Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan, later also Germany and the USSR) and of four other, nonpermanent members; and a secretariat. Both the assembly and the council were empowered to discuss any matter within the sphere of action of the League or affecting the peace of the world. In both the assembly and the council unanimous decisions were required.

Articles 8 and 9 recognized the need for disarmament and set up military commissions. Article 10 was an attempt to guarantee the territorial integrity and political independence of member states against aggression. Articles 11 through 17 provided for the establishment of the Permanent Court of International Justice for arbitration and conciliation, and for sanctions against aggressors. The rest of the articles dealt with treaties, colonial mandates, and international cooperation in humanitarian enterprises, and amendments to the Covenant.

The Organization of the League of Nations

The League of Nations is based in Geneva, Switzerland. This choice is natural as Switzerland was a neutral country and had not fought in World War I. No one can dispute this choice especially because an international organization like the Red
Cross is already based in Switzerland.

If a dispute did occur, the League, under its Covenant, could do three mandates, better known as sanctions:

1) At first it requests that the states in dispute discuss the problem in an orderly and peaceful manner. This would be done in the League’s Assembly - which was essentially the League’s parliament, which would listen to disputes and come to a decision on how to proceed. If one nation was seen to be the offender, the League could introduce verbal sanctions, such as warning an aggressor nation that it would need to leave another nation's territory or face the consequences.

2) If the states in dispute failed to comply with the Assembly’s decision, the League could introduce economic sanctions arranged by the League’s Council. The purpose of this sanction was to hurt financially and economically the aggressor nation so that it would have to do as the League required.

3) If this failed, the League could introduce physical sanctions, specifically that military force would be used to enforce the League’s decision. However, the League did not have a military force at its disposal and no member of the League had to provide one. Therefore, it could not carry out any threats and any country defying its authority would have been very aware of this weakness.

Germany was not allowed to join the League in 1919. As Germany had started the war, according to the Treaty of Versailles, one of its punishments was that it was not considered to be a member of the international community and, therefore, not invited to join. This was a great strike for Germany but it also meant that the League could not use whatever strength Germany had to support its campaign against aggressor nations.

Russia was also not allowed to join, because in 1917, it had a communist government that generated fear in Western Europe. Also in 1918 the Russian royal family, the Romanovs, were murdered.

Ergo, two of the world’s most powerful nations played no part in supporting the
League. The two most powerful members were Britain and France, and both had suffered financially and militarily during the war. Furthermore, neither was enthusiastic to get involved in disputes that didn’t affect Western Europe.

Therefore, the League had a final goal: to end war for good. However, if an aggressor nation was determined enough to ignore the League’s verbal warnings, all the League could do was enforce economic sanctions and hope that these worked as it had no chance for enforcing its decisions by using military strength.

Successes and Failures

The League quickly proved its value by settling the Swedish-Finnish dispute over the Åland Islands (1920–21), guaranteeing the security of Albania (1921), rescuing Austria from economic disaster, settling the division of Upper Silesia (1922), and preventing the outbreak of war in the Balkans between Greece and Bulgaria (1925). In addition the League extended considerable aid to refugees, helped to suppress white slave and opium traffic, pioneering work in surveys of health, extended financial aid to needy states, it furthered international cooperation in labor relations and many other fields.

The problem of bringing its political influence to bear, especially on the great powers, soon made itself felt. Poland refused to abide by the League decision in the Vilnius dispute, and the League was forced to stand by powerlessly in the face of the French occupation of the Ruhr (1923) and Italy’s occupation of Kérkira (1923). Failure to take action over the Japanese invasion of Manchuria (1931) was a blow to the League's prestige, especially when followed by Japan's withdrawal from the League (1933). Another serious failure was the inability of the League to stop the Chaco War (1932–35; see under Gran Chaco) between Bolivia and Paraguay.

Also it didn’t work in the Disarmament Conference, with Germany’s withdrawal from the League (1933), and Italy's successful attack on Ethiopia in defiance of the
League's economic sanctions (1935). In 1936, Adolf Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland and denounced the Treaty of Versailles; in 1938 he seized Austria. Faced by threats to international peace from all sides—the Spanish civil war, Japan's resumption of war against China (1937), and finally the appeasement of Hitler at Munich (1938)—the League collapsed. The last important act of the League came in December 1939, when it expelled the USSR for its attack on Finland.

In 1946 the League dissolved itself, and its services and real estate (notably the Palais des Nations in Geneva) were transferred to the United Nations. Its failures were due as much to the indifferences of the great powers, which preferred to reserve important matters for their own decisions, as to weaknesses of organization.

Conclusion

The League of Nations was created as an emergency solution to prevent the world from repeating the horrors of World War I. It was created in such a rash way that it wasn't objective enough; therefore it had too many flaws, which ended sinking the project. The League of Nations can be seen as a rough draft of what nowadays we know as the United Nations, an organization that devotes itself to make sure that peace reigns in between countries.

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