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THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

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Exercise Solo Flight

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THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Efforts to end the Great War would soon be realized in Paris at a peace conference. European state borders had been blurred from four years of fighting and those involved were anxious for peace. A peace that would endure longer than what had been seen through the efforts of organizations like the Inter-parliamentary Union, the International Peace Bureau, and the League to Enforce Peace.¹

President Woodrow Wilson would present his fourteen points to Congress in 1918, calling for a concept of collective security through international cooperation.² His timely articulation would spark a desire within war-weary European states for such a union. It would lead to the birth of a ‘League of Nations’ predicated on “open, just and honourable relations”, ready to accept and embrace international law.³

Through an examination of the League’s foundation, some failures and successes, this essay will demonstrate that even though it was terminated only 26 years after it started, the efforts with the League were not in vain. This will not be an exhaustive review but will focus on key aspects. The League’s biggest downfall is noticeably marked by the fact that it did not avoid a second world war (WW2). It did enjoy some success though and while enduring the harsh results from its inadequacies, it led the international community closer to the possibility of peace and closer to a future, more resilient organization.

¹ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations*. (Accessed May 25, 2018) [https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/\(httpAssets\)/36BC4F83BD9E4443C1257AF3004FC0AE/\\$file/Historica1_overview_of_the_League_of_Nations.pdf](https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/(httpAssets)/36BC4F83BD9E4443C1257AF3004FC0AE/$file/Historica1_overview_of_the_League_of_Nations.pdf), 1 and, Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity of the League of Nations*. (Geneva: League of Nations, 1938), 19.

² Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 20.

³ Raymond L. Buell. *The League of Nations a Summary of its organization and accomplishments during ten years*. (New York: Foreign Policy Association, 1930), 3.

To understand the League, one must consider its origination. The League is a product of the Treaty of Versailles. The terms of which provided the guidance and direction for the committee, led by President Wilson, to create a charter for the League, to be known as the Covenant.

The 'Big 3' monopolized the creation of the Treaty bringing aspects of revenge, financial compensation expectations and a strong desire for peace in Europe.⁴ The terms of the Treaty were given to Germany and were not open to negotiation. German territorial gains from the war were reversed, its military was limited to specific levels to provide only for its own defence and safety, immense financial reparations were imposed and to round off the main terms of the treaty, Germany was to admit to full responsibility for starting the war.⁵ Germany had no room to disagree with the terms and had to sign the treaty.

Upon examination, these terms appear to lay the foundation for Germany's angst and rise a decade later. The citizens of Germany were not at all satisfied with the punishment brought on by their government's actions some five years ago. They were isolated, paying for war repairs either in kind or cash, and bearing the burden of fault for all that the war caused. This bitter unrest continued to percolate into the 1930s, giving the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) political party the fuel it needed to unite its people and rise against the world order that was oppressing them.

⁴ Verdiana Grossi. "Building a New World on Old Concepts: The International Peace Bureau and the League of Nations in the Early 1920s" In *The League of Nations 1920-1946 Organization and Accomplishments A Retrospective of the First Organization for the Establishment of World Peace*. (Geneva: United Nations, 1996), 4.

⁵ *The Treaty of Versailles*. (Accessed May 27, 2018) <https://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/modern-world-history-1918-to-1980/the-treaty-of-versailles>

It was the League that enforced the Treaty terms and was guided by the 26 Articles of the Covenant.⁶ With all the members belonging to the Assembly that met annually, the strong powers on a permanent council, with others selected for non-permanent council and various committees meeting when necessary, all being led by the Secretariat supported by the hundreds of staff deemed necessary to manage operations.⁷

The main aims of the League, detailed in the Covenant, were “to ensure collective security, to assure functional cooperation, and to execute the mandates of peace treaties”.⁸ This pacifist approach would focus on disarmament, helping states, and helping individuals in order to avoid war. The League embarked on incredibly complex tasks, led by competent and well-intentioned individuals. Unfortunately it was not enough to ensure success.

The failure to stop WW2 was not about failing at a single event. WW2 was the end result of a series of events that can be seen in the League’s foundation and activities.

League membership was intended to be inclusive for allies, neutrals and ex-enemies after a probation period.⁹ There were set conditions to join,¹⁰ and at its commencement it had 32 originals with 13 more invited.¹¹ Unfortunately the world’s strongest country was not a member. The absence of the United States (US) wasn’t the fault of the League directly but it was the League that suffered from US absence. US Congress was not convinced by the Covenant’s architect that the League was a worthwhile venture when compared against the risk of further

⁶ F.S. Northedge. *The League of Nations its life and times 1920-1946*. (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1986), 317.

⁷ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations...*, 3 and Wilson H. Harris. *The League of Nations*. (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1929), 13.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹ Wilson H. Harris. *The League of Nations...*, 7.

¹⁰ Horace M. Kallen. *The League of Nations Today and Tomorrow*. (Norwood: The Plimpton Press, 1918), 30.

¹¹ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations...*, 3.

entanglement in European affairs. It was hotly debated with an unclear stance on Article 10¹². The fear of national militarism turning into international militarism and likely further European entanglement was enough to dissuade Senate support.¹³

During the League's tenure, the US was unofficially involved¹⁴ and contributed to some progress in health and social efforts but was overall it was still insufficient to strengthen the League's backbone when challenged by issues caused by key member states. US absence, left the influence with Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan. Germany was excluded as a result of its responsibility for the war. After years of pleading, it was allowed to become a member in 1926 only to leave a few years later in 1933 when Germany came under Nazi power.

It was in the 1930s that the most significant defiance and failure of the League occurred. In 1935, Hitler denounced the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.¹⁵ He announced plans for Germany resurgence and put the League in a position that exposed its weakness and inability to enforce the Versailles treaty or any other international agreement for that matter. His announcement to build up the Army and stop paying reparations was met with action that could not cause result. He re-occupied the demilitarized zone and combined resources with those of Austria. The League had exhausted French and Great Britain troops as its main hard power mechanism over the years and at this time combined with political and international financial depression conditions, the League was powerless against Germany's resistance and subsequent rise.¹⁶

¹² Gary B. Ostrower. "The United States and the League of Nations, 1919-1939" In *The League of Nations in retrospect Proceedings of the Symposium*. (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1983), 129.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁵ Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 82.

¹⁶ F.S. Northedge. *The League of Nations...*, 279.

In the League's life, there were over 60 disputes brought to it for consideration. Two territorial disputes of note that weakened the League's perceived strength were between Japan and China, and between Italy and Ethiopia (Abyssinia).

Japan's aggressions into China were met with League indecisiveness and an inability to take real action against a League member.¹⁷ Under the guise of self-defence but with a deeper agenda of concern towards potential Soviet advances, Japan invaded Manchuria and eventually renamed it to be Japanese territory.¹⁸ China appealed to the League. The League investigated and with few real options for action, announced that it did not officially recognize the new state and expressed disapproval for Japan's actions. In response, Japan left the League, but not the territory it had invaded.¹⁹

In another situation with Italy, Mussolini's actions to spread into Ethiopia prompted a slow response from the League.²⁰ The actions taken were temporarily hurtful to Italy but due to a threat of war against its own League members, the sanctions chosen to be imposed were weak and insufficient to affect the gains made by Italy within Ethiopia.²¹ Eventually Italy left the League. The League could not hold its own membership accountable. These failures exposed a significant weakness with the League in its ability to enforce the principles that it espoused.

Another failed approach to avoid war, determined by the League, was through disarmament. It was a well-received idea in theory, but in practice proved to be complicated and not possible.

¹⁷ Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 94.

¹⁸ The League of Nations Archive. "Exhibition Showcase" In *The League of Nations 1920-1946 Organization and Accomplishments A Retrospective of the First Organization for the Establishment of World Peace*. (Geneva: United Nations, 1996), 144.

¹⁹ F.S. Northedge. *The League of Nations...*, 221.

²⁰ The League of Nations Archive. "Exhibition Showcase"... , 145.

²¹ Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 97.

There was no shortage of discussion in the League about the importance of disarmament.²² Unfortunately the lack of trust and emphasis on self-preservation among League members side-railed any efforts towards real disarmament. The terms of the Treaty imposing reductions on ‘loser’ countries were acceptable to the League. But how would the members take action for their own disarmament? In the end they would not take any real action at all.

During a four year period prior to the Disarmament Conference that was held in 1932, the Preparatory Commission prepared a special proposal for disarmament. When it was presented at the start of the conference, it was essentially rejected.²³ Two more years were spent in the conference but no progress was made. Although disarmament was supported in principle, each state defended its own military needs over those of the program. The result of the conference was failure. The effects of the Great War had not yet dissipated, states were still far from war recovery and were now reeling in an international financial disaster. A clear formula could not be determined.²⁴ Every state’s situation was different²⁵ and with no easy solution or authority, the League effort failed. The failure was another example of the League’s inability to enforce its own principles.²⁶

By the late 1930s WW2 had erupted, bringing to a boil Germany’s unrest toward the ‘oppression’ from the Treaty, as well as the inability of the League to enforce action against states and members when the articulation of, and appeal to, moral perspective was not sufficient. At this point, the future of the League’s future was certainly in jeopardy.

²² F.S. Northedge. *The League of Nations...*, 113.

²³ Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 82.

²⁴ F.S. Northedge. *The League of Nations...*, 116.

²⁵ Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 79.

²⁶ F.S. Northedge. *The League of Nations...*, 116.

Coupled with its failures, the League did realize numerous successes during its tenure. Successes that demonstrate that the League's creation was not in vain.

In the field of territorial disputes, the League was approached over 60 times. Its involvement contributed to a border dispute settlement between Greece and Bulgaria avoiding a large scale fight in the Balkans in 1925.²⁷ In another situation, it provided the point of calm escalation between Finland and Sweden over the Aaland Islands in 1920. The League's proposal was accepted in this case and, while the islands remained under Finnish rule, it was the avoidance of military action and further demilitarization under League supervision that marks it up as a success.

Under a category of financial assistance, the League implemented a successful program for Austria. Following the Great War, Austria was shunned by its neighbours. It did not have sufficient resources of its own and was not having success brokering trade deals. Combined with the terms of the Treaty being imposed, along with too many military and government officials on the state payroll, Austria was in a financial ruins that brought famine upon many citizens from 1919-1922. The four great Allied Powers had been attempting to assist but they were not able to do so effectively, so the matter was brought to the League.²⁸

After a thorough examination of Austria's situation, the League developed a program designed to bring stability to their economy. This included the provision of a loan for its immediate survival and as a future building block toward its recovery. Stopping the issuance of Austrian currency, that it could not back with gold reserves, was a critical step to balancing their books, as was the clearing out of excess government staff who were providing little to no value

²⁷ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations...*, 5.

²⁸ P.J. Noel Baker. *The League of Nations at work*. (Edinburgh: Dunedin Press Limited, 1927), 98-100.

to the state. As a result of the League's calculated and comprehensive approach, the Austrian economy stabilized, confidence returned and so did capital investment.²⁹ This model was deemed to be quite effective and, as such, was later applied to Hungary, Greece, Bulgaria and Estonia.³⁰

The League's view towards social causes was predicated on the belief that if citizens were happy with themselves and with each other, then the societal calm would aid to stabilize the governing authority and thereby mitigate tensions with other states.³¹ Article 23 of the covenant would focus attention on the "conditions of labour, people-trafficking, the drug trade and disease. While these four aspects saw strong positive results, this essay we will look at the illegal drug trade and infectious diseases as good examples for success.

On these issues the League took a committee approach, putting scholarly and world-experienced leaders together to tackle the problems.³² Based on worldwide drug addiction statistics, opium and its derivatives would rightly become the League's focus.³³ Through trial and error, it was determined that the best strategy was to bring the fight to the source. The expectation was that by blacklisting an offender state it would be forced take action to control the drug within its borders. Offenders were deemed those not restricting the "production, manufacture and distribution of narcotic drugs to the amounts required for scientific and medical purposes".³⁴ An embargo on pharmaceutical trading would be recommended by the committee against the offender state. It was an effective approach particularly as the League did not possess any real enforcement tools. Over a three year period ending in 1932, a 50% reduction in official

²⁹ Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 123.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 124.

³¹ Martyn Housden. *The League of Nations and the Organisation of Peace*. (Harlow: Pearson Education Limited, 2012), 75.

³² *Ibid.*, 75.

³³ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁴ Martyn Housden. *The League of Nations...*, 80.

morphine production was seen³⁵ which had a further direct result with the reduction of addicts worldwide. The success of this committee became a legacy of the League and is a part of the UN with continued advisory efforts coming from the Commission on Narcotic Drugs.³⁶

The second concern directly related to the welfare of people was that of infectious disease. Health systems in Europe were overextended as a result of the war. Infectious disease had crossed back and forth over borders with armies and with refugees. Malnutrition was rampant and it only helped to further spread diseases like Typhus that would take advantage of the weak. Although there was an International Office of Public Health formed in Paris in 1909 which was concerned with the collection of data regarding health issues, due to disagreements with the US, who was not even a member, the League went a different direction in 1922 and decided to create a new Health Committee and Health Section.³⁷

The new committee and section was based on the group that was formed in 1920 to fight Typhus. Within three years, and only one after the official group was established, the committee had global measures in place containing Typhus and had instilled improved control against the disease into participating state health systems. This was another big win for the League. The same approach was taken to contain the spread of other diseases like malaria.³⁸ Although shadowed perhaps by the territorial disputes it was managing at the time, along with the higher profile issues of disarmament, it was a solid success for the League and more importantly for

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

³⁶ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations...*, 12.

³⁷ *Archives of the League of Nations, Health Section Files*. (Accessed May 27, 2018)
http://www.who.int/archives/fonds_collections/bytitle/fonds_3/en/

³⁸ Martyn Housden. *The League of Nations...*, 78.

humanity. It is a success that still endures today, for two years after the League ended official operations, its Health Organization transformed into the World Health Organization.³⁹

As a final example of League success, the focus moves on to the great work achieved for refugees. Interestingly though, the original plan was only to have Fridtjof Nansen ‘advising’ the League on a plan to have approximately 500,000 refugees returned home from Russia. Instead of advising and waiting for direction, Nansen took action. He embodied the founding spirit and intent of the League, to help others, and in less than two years he and his team successfully sent home over “427,00 prisoners of war from 26 countries at an average cost of only one pound sterling each”.⁴⁰ An unimaginable accomplishment by Nansen and his team on behalf of the League, which further demonstrated the ability of the organization to function on a large scale. It was so successful in fact that Nansen and his team were formalized, with him appointed as High Commissioner for Refugees. Additionally, an ingenious idea produced the Nansen passport which for many refugees was their only piece of identification and nationality which became recognized by more than 50 states.⁴¹ This League success was eventually transformed into the UN in 1951 as the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Through an examination of the foundation, failures and successes of the League of Nations, this essay has demonstrated that although the League ultimately failed to stop another world war, its efforts over 26 years were not in vain. It paved the way for international cooperation by shining a spotlight on how it can work and how it does not work. Failures of the League are still realized today as the scars of WW2 are still felt and seen. On the other hand,

³⁹ *Archives of the League of Nations, Health Section Files...*

⁴⁰ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations...*, 13.

⁴¹ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations...*, 13.

there are successes from the League that are still active today. Legacies seen in the UN's work toward world health, refugee assistance and its work against illicit drugs and human trafficking.

There are numerous other aspects of the League that this essay did not examine. This includes some detail and complexity of the League's structure along with the development of international law and a Permanent Court of International Justice.⁴² Additionally, some details regarding the fulfillment of the Treaty of Versailles terms were not deeply explored, like the Mandate program.⁴³ The League also conferred to develop many other special committees creating results which this essay acknowledges here but could not address. For example, the League's focus with intellectual cooperation, and focus against slavery and against trafficking of women and children.

The failures and successes examined in this essay are selected from a multitude experienced by the organization during its 26 years. The examples chosen, demonstrate the limitations of the League. It was limited in its ability to appeal to those with whom it had to confront. Some military force was used but as they contributed under the flag of their own country, there were complications from the perspective of the state providing forces, like in the example of Italy's threat of war against sanction-imposers. Additionally, the world situation greatly affected the outcome of the League. Income from membership and donations supported the financial needs of the endeavours, both of which were affected by the timeliness of payment and the ability of a state's economy to afford payment.⁴⁴ There were many personnel changes around the world, both politically and by appointment, that brought different energy, focus and politics to the operation of the League. It started from deep emotion and desire for peace but it

⁴² F.S. Northedge. *The League of Nations...*, 321.

⁴³ Secretariat of The League of Nations. *The Aims, Methods and Activity...*, 104.

⁴⁴ Raymond L. Buell. *The League of Nations a Summary...*, 4.

was also created from deeper emotions of revenge and punishment with no realistic timeframe for when the underlying revenge and punishment aspects would really be satisfied, if ever.

With all of this in mind, it is possible to consider that the United Nations may never have come to be if it weren't for the pursuit of the League. The legacies in League successes and failures can be seen throughout the UN's history. Contemporary society owes those who toiled in the complexities of international cooperation and did so without the luxuries of internet and social media. Just as this generation is concerned with the future of humanity, so were those who pushed relentlessly for international cooperation, disarmament and the hope for no more war.

As the League officially closed operations in April 1946, Lord Cecil articulated the closure of a chapter that left hope for securing peace through a new organization, "the League is dead, long live the United Nations!"⁴⁵

⁴⁵ *Historical Overview of the League of Nations...*, 14 and, Ruth Henig. *The League of Nations*. (London: Haus Publishing, 2010), 185.

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