

The Parliament of Man

Before examining the diplomatic maneuvering of the great powers in the decade after the Great War, we must pause to take note of the birth of the League of Nations, an

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institution that promised to revolutionize the conduct of foreign relations by establishing procedures for international cooperation that had not existed before. There had been a few earlier efforts to establish rules of international cooperation on specific issues, such as the formation of the International Telegraphic Union (1865) and the Universal Postal Union (1874), as well as two Hague Peace Conferences (1899 and 1907) that attempted to place limits on the arms race in Europe and to devise laws of war that would be respected by all combatants. The Covenant of the League of Nations, which entered into force on January 10, 1920, went much further than these earlier efforts by charging the new organization with a set of heavy responsibilities in almost every sphere of international affairs: the promotion of world disarmament, guarantees of the territorial integrity of member states and the imposition of sanctions against aggressors, the establishment of the Permanent Court of International Justice to adjudicate disputes among states, the supervision of colonial mandates in the former overseas possessions of Germany and the Ottoman Empire, and many others. The headquarters of the new organization was established the following November in Geneva, Switzerland. It housed a secretariat to manage the day-to-day business of the League as well as two deliberative bodies to make policy: The League Assembly consisted of all member nations, which originally included the victors in the war (with the exception of the United States, whose Senate refused to consent to U.S. membership in the organization) and most of the neutral countries. With the withdrawal of the United States, the League Council consisted of four permanent members—those great powers whose armies had played the most important role in defeating Germany and its allies (Great Britain, France, Italy, and Japan)—as well as four nonpermanent members.

The League was successful to resolving a number of minor territorial disputes that did not engage the interests of the great powers, such as one between Sweden and Finland over the Aland Islands (1920–21) and one between Greece and Bulgaria in 1925. Moreover, its specialized agencies launched a number of initiatives to improve the lives of people that set important precedents for international cooperation in the future. The new World Health Organization established by the League coordinated an international response to the spread of typhus, influenza, and other infectious diseases after the war. It later pioneered new approaches in international health cooperation by sponsoring research on the effects of such socioeconomic factors as nutrition and housing on particular diseases. The International Labor Organization of the League campaigned for the improvement of working conditions, the regulation of child labor and hours of work, the provision of adequate wages, and the protection of workers against occupational disease and injury and of women and children against maltreatment. An agency of the League received and assessed complaints from representatives of ethnic and religious minorities in several European states about repression by their government.

In addition to this humanitarian work, the League of Nations will be remembered for having established the principle that the world cannot and must not depend on the anarchic rivalry among sovereign states to preserve the peace and security of the world. The horrible carnage of the recent war had inspired a new spirit of internationalism that sought to replace the alliances, ententes, and arms races of the past with institutions of international cooperation. Proponents of the new organization hoped that rules of international behavior recognized by all nations would replace the law of the jungle in world affairs. The principle of collective security would replace regional

security arrangements as the guarantor of a nation's freedom from attack by its neighbors. The alliance of all members of the League against an aggressor would render unnecessary the discredited practice of accumulating allies to deter and, if need be, defeat potential enemies.

The credibility and effectiveness of this new form of international security were undermined by a number of weaknesses in the League of Nations that were apparent from the very beginning. First, the absence of the United States dealt a crushing blow to the prestige of the new organization, which had been established largely at the insistence of President Woodrow Wilson and whose members had expected to rely heavily on American diplomatic and economic support to make the bold experiment in international cooperation work.* Second, the requirement of unanimity in the voting rules of both the Assembly and the Council empowered a tiny minority of states, or even one by itself, to block effective action against an aggressor. Third, even if unanimity could be achieved in response to aggression, the organization lacked both a military force of its own and the power to raise one from its member states in order to back up its word.†

The major weakness of the organization in Geneva was the unwillingness of the governing elites of the great powers of Europe to entrust to the League decisions affecting the security and economic well-being of their own people. They all continued to pursue their own vital interests as they saw them and promptly reverted to the prewar methods of state-to-state diplomacy that had supposedly been abandoned amid the new spirit of internationalism. Most of the important policies concerning the political and economic future of Europe during the 1920s were developed and executed outside the auspices of the League.

The international history of this crucial decade in Europe may be reduced to a few essential themes: the German Republic's effort to dismantle the peace treaty that restricted its economic, diplomatic, and military power; the attempt by France and its continental allies to enforce those treaty limitations; and the effort by Great Britain, with the tacit encouragement of the United States, to remove the objectionable features of the peace treaty that were thought to be responsible for Germany's refusal to accept the new European order created at Versailles.

* Germany and the Soviet Union were originally excluded from the League, which further tarnished its reputation as the organization of the peoples of the world, but they would later join in 1926 and 1934, respectively.

† The French delegation had proposed the establishment of a general staff and permanent military force for the League at the peace conference, but that idea was rejected by the American president.