

## History of the League of Nations (1919-1946)

Born with the will of the victors of the First World War to avoid a repeat of a devastating war, the League of Nations objective was to maintain universal peace within the framework of the fundamental principles of the Pact accepted by its Members : “to develop cooperation among nations and to guarantee them peace and security”.

The first years of existence of the League of Nations were marked by great successes. In accordance with the provisions of the Pact, several international disagreements – between Sweden and Finland, and between Greece and Bulgaria – were resolved peacefully. The Locarno Agreements signed in October 1925, which marked the beginnings of a Franco-German reconciliation, were entrusted to the League. A direct consequence, Germany, beaten and excluded from the League by the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, became a Member in 1926. In 1929, the delegate from France, Aristide Briand, put forward to the Assembly the very first political project of a European Federal Union.

In spite of these early successes, the League of Nations did not manage to prevent neither the invasion of Manchuria by Japan, nor the annexation of Ethiopia by Italy in 1936, nor that of Austria by Hitler in 1938. The powerlessness of the League of Nations to prevent further world conflict, the alienation of part of its Member States and the generation of the war itself, added to its demise from 1940.

The failure, politically, of the mission of collective security of the League of Nations must nevertheless not make one overlook its success in, what was from the beginning to be a secondary aspect of its objectives: international technical cooperation. Under its auspices, in fact, considerable number of conferences, intergovernmental committees and meetings of experts were held in Geneva, in areas as diverse as health and social affairs, transport and communications, economic and financial affairs and intellectual cooperation. This fruitful work was validated by the ratification of more than one hundred conventions by the Member States. The unprecedented work on behalf of refugees carried out by the Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen from 1920 should also be stressed.

## Before the League of Nations

- **Forerunner to the League of Nations: the Inter-parliamentary Union**

The peace activists of the nineteenth century were very aware of the fact that in the long run, the results of their efforts would depend on the active involvement and cooperation of governments worldwide. They envisaged an “International Forum” where governments could get together and discuss international disputes rather than immediately resorting to the use of arms.

In 1889, the Inter-parliamentary Union (IPU) was co-founded by William Randall Cremer, the British pacifist and Member of the Parliament, and Frederic Passy, the founder of the French “Ligue de la Paix” and Member of Parliament. Thus, the first truly international political organization, whose aim was to promote international arbitration and world peace, was born. As a result, a new kind of pacifism, based on parliamentarian support, was established. By 1914, one third of all members of the 24 State Parliaments had joined IPU, and their ultimate goal was to compel their Governments to resolve disputes by means of peaceful settlement and arbitration. IPU acclaimed with satisfaction the initiative of Tsar Nicholas II who had called the Peace Conferences held at The Hague in 1899 and 1907.

IPU was directed by a Council headed by a President who was to have been both a Member and the President ex officio of the Executive Committee. All the annual IPU conferences served as forums by which States could “perfect” the process of international arbitration. The IPU Bureau transferred its operations from Bern to Brussels in 1911. It is now based in Geneva.

- **The International Peace Bureau**

Even though the International Peace Bureau (IPB) was not an officially recognized organization of member States, it can be considered a forerunner of the League of Nations because of its visions, its goals and its prominent activists. IPB was an international body created to provide a “base of operations” for peace societies all over the world so that they could consolidate their efforts and organize annual Universal Peace Congresses. Its members consisted of the various peace societies that had been founded during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1891, the Third Universal Peace Congress in Rome voted to formally install IPB at Kanonenweg 12 in Bern, Switzerland.

The first President was the Danish pacifist and Member of Parliament, Fredrik Bajer, followed by Henri La Fontaine in 1907. Bertha von Suttner, the well-known Austrian pacifist, became Vice-President until her death in 1914. The Swiss pacifist and publisher, Elie Ducommun, was the Secretary-General until his death in 1906, after which he was followed by Albert Gobat (1906-1914) and Henri Golay (1914-1951). In spite of their intense efforts, the First World War broke out, and during the war, most of the activities of the peace societies were severely restricted. Thus, the work of the International Peace Bureau was put on hold until 1918.

After the war, it became very active in the “No More War!” campaign of the International War Resisters movement. With the foundation of the League of Nations in January of 1920, IPB lost much of its relevance, though it had reached its goal of establishing an international organization for the peaceful settlement of conflicts. In 1924, IPB executive office moved to Geneva, where it is still active, at 41, rue de Zurich.

- **The First World War, the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom and President Woodrow Wilson’s “14 Points” speech**

At the turn of the century, Europe was not only caught in an unstable web of precarious alliances; it also faced a variety of nationalist and ethnic disputes. Triggered by the assassination of Archduke of Austria Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914, the ensuing war that resulted was thought to be a justifiable method of settling those disputes once and for all. The First World War broke out that year at the end of August. It eventually embroiled most of Europe, Russia, the Middle East and the United States of America, among other regions, and it lasted four years.

Linda Gustava Heyman and Anita Augspurg, despite being accused of treason, met with like-minded women from Belgium and the United Kingdom at the house of Dr. Aletta Jacobs in the Netherlands to organize an International Women’s Congress to be held in The Hague in the spring of 1915. Jane Addams, a member of the Women’s International League of Peace and Freedom (WILPF), chaired the meeting of nearly 1,200 delegates from 12 countries and more than 700 guests.

The meeting furthered two causes: suffrage, and the use of arbitration as a means of solving international disputes. Several resolutions against the war were registered, and a list of “18 Final Recommendations to End the War and Foster Peace” were submitted to the President of the United States of America as well as to other Heads of State who were involved in the war. Among other things, these resolutions demanded the self-determination of all peoples, the use of arbitration for the settlement of all international disputes, the democratic control of foreign affairs, disarmament, equal civil and political rights for women, and freedom of trade on land and sea. The similarities of several of these recommendations with the “14 Points” of President Wilson’s 1918 proposal for world peace are obvious.

## Organization and establishment

- **The founding of the League of Nations**

In 1918, a little more than a hundred years after the foundation of the first peace societies in the United States and England (and with the support of both countries' Leagues to Enforce Peace), the idea of a "League of Nations" took form with the pledge to prevent future wars. President Woodrow Wilson of the United States of America was one of its most powerful advocates, and in December of 1918, he chaired the Peace Conference in Paris.

President Wilson was made Chairman of the Committee established to formulate a list of "rules and regulations" for an international organization whose purpose was to preserve world peace through open diplomacy and global consensus. The resulting document was the draft of an agreement or "Covenant" between nations. Less than four months later, on 29 April 1919, the final version of the Covenant of the League of Nations was adopted, and it became Part I of the Treaty of Versailles.

In accordance with President Wilson's ideals, the Covenant outlined the League of Nations' three basic objectives: to ensure collective security, to assure functional cooperation, and to execute the mandates of peace treaties. However, the League of Nations could only begin to function, formally and officially, after the Peace Treaty of Versailles came into effect. Thus, the League of Nations was officially inaugurated on 10 January 1920.

The 32 original Members of the League of Nations were also Signatories of the Versailles Treaty. In addition, 13 additional States were invited to accede to the Covenant. The League of Nations was open to all other States, providing they fulfilled certain requirements. Those which had obtained a two-thirds majority of "yes" votes cast in the Assembly were admitted.

- **The Covenant of the League of Nations**

The Covenant of the League of Nations consists of a short foreword or "Preamble" which introduces its three primary objectives; the 26 Articles which follow outline the means of carrying them out.

In general, Article 1 describes the conditions of membership, admission and withdrawal. Articles 2 to 5 specify the nature and power of the Assembly and the Council, the two main bodies of the Organization. Articles 6 to 7 discuss the appointment of a Secretary-General, the establishment of the League of Nations' Secretariat at Geneva, and its budget. Articles 8 to 9 deal with the subject of disarmament and the League of Nations' objective of reducing the number of arms to the lowest possible level through open discussion between Members. Articles 10 to 21 clarify the political and social mandates the newly formed international organization was expected to carry out, spelling out the obligations and rights of the Member States in order to promote international cooperation, and thus achieve international peace and collective security. Articles 22 to 23 detail the League of Nations' intention of extending international relations in the fields of finance, trade, transport by land, sea and air as well as the promotion of health and the struggle against drugs, prostitution and slavery. Articles 24 to 25 deal with the transfer of already established agencies and the commitment to encourage and support the aims of the Red Cross. Finally, Article 26 explains how Members should proceed when amendments to the Covenant are deemed necessary.

- **The main bodies of the League of Nations**

The League of Nations consisted of the Assembly and the Council (both assisted by the Permanent Secretariat), and the Permanent Court of International Justice. In September of each year, an Assembly of all the Member States met in Geneva. Each Member State had one vote and was permitted up to three delegates. Amongst other things, the Assembly dealt with such matters as the

budget, the admission of new members, all matters affecting world peace, making amendments to the Covenant, and electing non-permanent members to the Council. Paul Hymans of Belgium acted as President of the First Assembly, and after the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald attended the Assembly in 1924, other prime and foreign ministers followed suit. The Council was a coalition of the four permanent members: France, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom. Germany joined in 1926, but left in 1935. In September 1934, the Soviet Union entered the League of Nations. Up to 10 non-permanent Council members were elected by the Assembly for a three-year period. The most important task of the Council was to settle international disputes. It met three times a year and reported to the Assembly on its activities. Its first President was Lord Balfour, the Council's British representative.

The Permanent Secretariat, appointed by the Secretary-General, was given the task of working out the methodology of international cooperation. The Secretariat was also responsible for the general administrative tasks of the League of Nations, in addition to the registration and publication of the Treaties ratified between Member States. The Permanent Court of International Justice, consisting of 11 judges and four deputy judges, was established in The Hague to "hear and determine any dispute of an international character which the parties thereto submit to it".

- **Geneva, headquarters of the League of Nations**

Brussels and Geneva were the two cities competing to become the seat of the new organization. The final decision in Geneva's favour was influenced by President Wilson, who favoured it primarily because of Switzerland's neutrality. He felt that if Germany ever did join the League of Nations, it would be a far more acceptable place because the painful memories associated with Belgium could be avoided.

In 1920, the preliminary office of the League of Nations moved from London to the Palais Wilson (formerly the Hôtel National) in Geneva. During the 1920s, the League of Nations also held its Council meetings and conferences in the Palais Wilson. The assemblies, however, were held in the Salle de la Réformation, and after 1930, in the Bâtiment Electoral in Geneva.

In March 1926, the Extraordinary Assembly decided to hold an international architectural competition for the design of the new buildings for the organization. Some 377 plans were submitted, and an international jury awarded nine first prizes of 12,000 Swiss francs each. Five architects, Nénot and Lefèvre (Paris), Flegenhaimer (Geneva), Broggi (Rome) and Vágó (Budapest) were chosen to design the final plans.

On 7 September 1929, the foundation stone was laid in Ariana Park, which was given to the City of Geneva by Gustave Revilliod upon his death in 1890. When the League of Nations finally moved into its new home in 1936, the costs for the Palais des Nations had exceeded 29 million Swiss francs. John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s gift of US\$ 2 million made the addition of a unique Library possible.

## **Political activities**

- **International conflicts**
- **The settlement of disputes**

The League of Nations' primary objective was to settle disputes by any means other than outright war. However, reaching this objective depended on the willingness of the sovereign States in question to cooperate with the League of Nations and to respect the maxims of the Covenant. By the time it folded, more than 60 international disputes had been brought before the League of Nations. During the first 10 years of its existence, only eight of the 30 disputants resorted to hostilities or war. Some of the peaceful settlements included:

**1920: the Aaland Islands.** After the Russian Revolution, Finland declared its independence and sovereignty over these Islands. However, its Swedish-speaking population claimed it had the right to vote for Swedish governance. Before it could develop into an armed conflict, both parties accepted the solution offered by the League of Nations. Though autonomy under Finnish rule was continued, important guarantees were granted to the Aaland Islands, and demilitarization under League of Nations observance was carried out.

**1922: Vilna.** Both Lithuania and Poland were claiming sovereignty over Vilna, and in 1922, the League of Nations was called in. Despite the Council's recommendation that the city be placed under Lithuanian rule however, the disputing States were unable to reach an agreement acceptable to all. Consequently, when the Conference of Ambassadors redefined the Polish border in 1923, Vilna became part of Poland.

**1923: Memel.** After the First World War, this previously Baltic port on the Eastern frontiers of Germany was taken over by the Allies under a provisional administration responsible to the League of Nations' Conference of Ambassadors. After a coup d'état, the port was under Lithuanian sovereignty. Special privileges were granted to the mostly German population as well as to Poland, which received the right to use the port for transit and trade.

- **The Greco-Bulgarian conflict (1925) and Leticia (1932)**

There existed in the Covenant a provision that empowered the League of Nations to take action and even impose sanctions (within specific guidelines) in order to settle international disputes brought before the Council by any one of its Member States.

One such case arose when, in 1925, a border conflict broke out between Greece and Bulgaria that threatened to escalate into an all-out war in the Balkans. The Bulgarian Government appealed at once to the League of Nations (under Article 10 of the Covenant) and an Extraordinary Session of the Council was called, and subsequently held in Paris. Aristide Briand, the representative of France, acted as Chairman. Under the observation of the British, French and Italian military attachés, the hostilities ceased and the evacuation of the territory occupied by Greek forces was carried out without incident. This conflict is but one of the few in which the system as outlined in the Covenant was successful; a conflict was identified, the Council met without delay, a fair hearing was given, and a general agreement arrived at for maintaining the peace and providing justice for all concerned.

A more complicated example of an international dispute requiring the League of Nations' assistance was that which took place between Colombia and Peru over Leticia, a remote border district in the Upper Amazon valley. After several attempts to solve the problem on a regional level, the Peruvian and Colombian delegates finally turned to the League of Nations for assistance in 1933. However, it was only after Luis Sanchez Cerro, the Peruvian president, was assassinated that an agreement could be reached. After the ownership of the Letician territory was transferred to an International Commission for one year, it was returned to Colombia.

- **China: the Manchurian crisis of 1932**

On 19 September 1931, the League of Nations was made aware of an incident provoked by anti-Japanese activists at the Japanese-owned South Manchurian railway line in China. Consequently, the Japanese army invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria. China immediately appealed to the world's powers for their intervention. Under the chairmanship of Aristide Briand, and with the active participation of the United States of America (which had thus far refrained from recognizing the League of Nations as a global mediator), the Council attempted to negotiate a peaceful solution. However, neither the Council nor the Assembly were able to agree on the imposition of sanctions of any kind, which in accordance with the Covenant, could have been used against any Member State that had violated the principles of the League of Nations.

Four months after the initial outbreak of hostilities, the Council dispatched an Inquiry Commission to China under the leadership of the British diplomat, the Earl of Lytton. By the time the so-called Lytton Commission finally arrived in China in April of 1932, the Japanese Army had already installed the Manchurian State of Manchukuo. In order to determine the source of the conflict and to come up with possible measures to restore the peace between China and Japan, the Commission began its investigations with the assistance of George Moss, a member of the British Consular Service who was also fluent in Chinese.

On the advice of the Lytton Report (September 1932), the League of Nations refused to recognize Manchukuo as a genuine State and proposed a series of measures to re-establish the status quo. While China accepted the League of Nations' recommendations for restoring peace in the area, Japan did not and, as a result, withdrew from the League of Nations in 1935.

- **Ethiopia (Abyssinia)**

In 1933, the Fascist Government of Benito Mussolini planned its attack on Ethiopia with the intention to expand the colonial territory of Italy, despite the fact that in 1928 it had signed the Italo-Ethiopian Treaty of Friendship, Conciliation and Arbitration. In December of 1934, a clash occurred between the armed forces of the two States at Walwal on the Ethiopian side of the frontier with Italian Somaliland. Mussolini declared the incident "an act of self-defence" and, therefore, not subject to arbitration. Compensation was demanded in addition to formal recognition of the area as Italian.

When this was refused by Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie, the case was taken as a *casus belli* by Italy. As a Member of the League of Nations, Ethiopia brought the case before the Council, but in order to continue his pursuit of expansion, Mussolini ignored all League of Nations proposals in order to continue to mobilize his military forces in the northern Ethiopian state of Eritrea.

Rounds of talks in Geneva proved futile, a clear indication that the Council was unable to protect a small Member State from the interests of a larger and more influential one and, as a result, oil sanctions that would have halted Mussolini's military endeavours were not imposed. Thus, armed with a deadly combination of superior weaponry and poison gas, Italy was able to launch an attack on Ethiopia in December of 1935.

Once Addis Ababa fell in May of 1936, Emperor Haile Selassie, who was in Geneva at the time, went to the Assembly and again asked the League of Nations for help, but to no avail, as Italy's conquest had been formally recognized by most countries. However, Mussolini's declaration of war on France and the United Kingdom provoked the latter into facilitating the Emperor's recapture of his country, and by 1941, the Ethiopian Government was back in power and Ethiopia became an independent State.

- **International reconciliation and disarmament**

- **The 1925 Locarno Pact**

In 1924, with Gustav Stresemann becoming head of Germany's Foreign Office, a more liberal foreign policy was ready to consider cooperating with the League of Nations rather than viewing the new organization as an instrument set up to suppress Germany. Thus, in December of 1924, Stresemann dispatched an application for Germany's admission to the Council in which he requested (among other things) a seat on the Council and special treatment concerning hostile actions to be taken against any Covenant-breaking State. Because of the latter request, admission was denied.

In early 1925, Stresemann made a second attempt. Even though the Geneva Protocol was not yet in force, its principles of "security" made the follow-up application possible. Stresemann proposed to

the British and French Foreign Offices his guarantee of Germany's intent to respect the Treaty of Versailles. After the exchange of Stresemann's proposals between London, Paris and Berlin, Sir Austen Chamberlain and Aristide Briand invited Member States to a common meeting in Locarno, Switzerland.

Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Italy, and Poland were also invited to join the meeting. The negotiations held in October of 1925 resulted in the Locarno Pact, signed by Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom. In addition, four arbitration conventions were signed between Germany and the following States: Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France and Poland. Thus, Locarno prepared the ground for reconciliation between Germany and her neighbours Belgium and France, and for Germany's eventual entry into the League of Nations in 1926. However, in 1933, shortly after Nazism took control of the country, Germany withdrew her membership from the League of Nations.

- **Briand's plan for a European Union**

The original idea of a "United States of Europe" can be traced back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; however, it was Aristide Briand who revitalized the concept at the end of the 1920s.

Briand and those in favour of a "European Union" believed that its realization depended on the establishment of new institutions which would cooperate with those of the League of Nations, yet would be independent of them in all essential aspects. Upon further discussion, it was decided that the creation of such a union should occur entirely within the framework of the League of Nations. During the 1929 Assembly, Briand promised the 27 invited European Member States that he would submit a more detailed plan that they could then discuss.

While other Members waited without further commitment for Briand's plan to evolve, Stresemann supported Briand's plan and spoke out on the need for European stamps, a European Customs Union, and a European coinage in order to remain economically competitive with forces outside Europe.

By the time Briand's proposal was ready for discussion in May of 1930, Stresemann had died and Europe was in the process of undergoing some drastic changes in the form of growing levels of unemployment and nationalism. However, Briand's proposal was brought before the 1931 Assembly and it was agreed to go ahead with plans to establish a Commission of Inquiry for European Union. Briand was elected as Chairman and Sir Eric Drummond as Secretary.

The practical activities of the Commission of Inquiry merged with the general work of the League of Nations for the purpose of economic cooperation. In addition, the Commission was a catalyst in bringing the Soviet Union and Turkey into closer cooperation with the League of Nations after inviting the two States to join the Commission.

- **The Geneva Protocol and the Disarmament Conference of 1932**

Disarmament was one of the most important questions to be considered by the League of Nations. The condition, however, was that Germany would agree to the Treaty of Versailles and would be the first country to reduce its arms in accordance with the Treaty.

The Advisory Commission and the Temporary Mixed Commission (later replaced by a so-called "Coordination Commission") were bodies entrusted with the creation of a plan for disarmament. The issue was discussed in each Assembly and in many sessions of the Council and other special meetings, but all these efforts failed in the end.

One of the main obstacles faced was the belief of the main Powers that their security depended on maintaining a level of armaments equal or even superior to those of their neighbours. They also preferred to determine their own needs in armaments. Another problem was that the Soviet Union

and the United States of America, not being members of the League of Nations, did not take part in the process until 1932.

Thus, the 1922 Draft Treaty of Mutual Guarantees and the 1923 Treaty of Mutual Assistance, piloted by Lord Cecil with the close cooperation of Edouard Benes and the French delegation, were not accepted in the Assemblies.

The new more liberal Governments in France under Edouard Herriot and in the United Kingdom under Ramsay MacDonald brought a new spirit to the disarmament negotiations and as a result the fifth Assembly adopted the Geneva Protocol on the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes, in October 1924, proposing the general disarmament of all nations linked with compulsory arbitration and security guarantees. It also pledged that a general Disarmament Conference would be convened shortly. This Conference eventually convened in 1932 and lasted, with a short interruption, for two and a half years.

Despite numerous petitions and public demand for disarmament, the countries were not ready to sacrifice their security. Thus, the Conference was a failure.

- **The protection of minorities**

After the war, the new Eastern European States of Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Romania, and Yugoslavia were forced to sign agreements granting religious, social and political equality to their minorities, whether or not they had been defeated. In order to supervise these agreements, the League of Nations set up the Minority Section, whose influential programmes were rather unique at that time. Its responsibilities included screening the incoming petitions, requesting responses from the accused States, forwarding cases to the ad hoc "Committee of Three", and/or investigating matters on its own. If the case appeared before the Committee, a decision had to be made as to whether or not the Council's involvement was warranted.

In the beginning, the reports were unofficial; however, after 1929, the Council decided that the reports were to be published in the League of Nations' *Official Journal*.

Between 1920 and 1939, 883 petitions were submitted to the Minorities Section. Only 16 of the 395 petitions deemed "receivable" ever reached the attention of the Council, and of these 16, the Council very reluctantly condemned the accused State of improper treatment in only four cases.

Due to the efforts of Erik Colban, the first director of the Minority Section, a more personal approach was developed. The Section officials would investigate matters locally and pursue their findings. This close cooperation between the Section and the accused States made it possible in many cases to avoid further aggravation and alleviate future problems.

- **The Mandate system**

As a result of the war, the Allied and associated Powers acquired the territories that were previously under the sovereignty of Germany and the Ottoman Empire. As their inhabitants were at this time considered incapable of ruling themselves, the Peace Conference of 1919 decided that they should be ruled by mandate, whereby powers were conferred upon a State chosen by the League of Nations to govern a region elsewhere in order "to secure the well-being and development of the peoples who inhabited the territories in question". Belgium, the British Empire, and France were entrusted with the governance of the mandated territories.

In accordance with the Covenant, annual reports concerning these regions were to be submitted to the League of Nations' Permanent Mandate Commission, established in February of 1921. It was on the basis of these reports that the Commission advised the Council as to whether or not the conditions of each mandate were being strictly observed.

The members of the Commission were nominated by the Council, and because of the need for impartiality, it was preferred that they come from non-mandated Powers. As a result, the Commission was trusted and often consulted by both mandated and non-mandated Powers during its last years. Three categories of mandates, "A", "B" and "C", were applied "according to the stage of the development of the people, the geographical situation of the territory, its economic conditions and other similar circumstances" (Article 22, paragraph 3).

Under the United Nations, the work of the Mandates Commission continued through the Trusteeship Council, though it was no longer composed of non-governmental representatives. However, as the previously mandated countries have become officially recognized as sovereign and independent States, its responsibilities have steadily diminished.

- **The Saar and the Free City of Danzig**

One of the unique responsibilities assigned to the League of Nations by the Treaty of Versailles was the supervision of the former German border territories of the Saar basin and the Free City of Danzig. As stated in the 1920 Treaty, the Territory of the Saar basin was to be placed under the administration of the League of Nations for 15 years. During that time, the Saar was to be isolated from the rest of Germany, and as compensation for the war, France was given control of its coal mines.

The administration of the Saar was entrusted to a Governing Commission consisting of five members chosen by the Council of the League of Nations: one representative of France, one native German inhabitant of the Saar, and three representatives of countries other than France and Germany. On 13 January 1935, the inhabitants of the Saar determined their sovereignty by plebiscite. On that day, order was guaranteed by an International Police Force composed of British, Dutch Italian, and Swedish soldiers. Over 90 per cent of the votes cast called for the immediate reintegration of the Saar into Germany. This decision took effect on 1 March 1935.

The inhabitants of the Free City of Danzig and the territory surrounding it were primarily of German nationality. However, Poland needed to have access to the sea. In accordance with the Treaty of Versailles, the League of Nations established a High Commission to oversee this district. Danzig was to be self-governing, though under the League of Nations' protection. Poland, however, was to govern the City's foreign affairs and maintain certain transit, postal and harbour rights. The High Commissioner appointed by the Council was to reside in Danzig and make the final decision in cases when mutual agreement between disputants could not be reached.

## Technical activities

- **The financial reconstruction of Austria and Hungary**

The Economic and Financial Section consisted primarily of an Economic Committee. It was founded at the Brussels Financial Conference of 1920 which was attended by 39 States concerned with the enormous task of analysing Europe's post-war financial disorder, and of finding ways to overcome it. The members of the Committee were appointed not by their Governments but by the Council of the League of Nations, and most of the ensuing decisions and actions resulting in Europe's financial reconstruction were based on its findings.

The Republic of Austria, with its seven million inhabitants, soon ran into serious economic and financial difficulty after its foundation in 1919. During the first three years of its existence, huge sums of public money intended for charitable purposes and other causes had accomplished nothing in the way of reconstructing the economy. In 1922, when Chancellor Seipel addressed the League of Nations to request assistance, a detailed programme was put in place to balance the Austrian budget within approximately two years, and the country was given a loan of £ stg. 26 million. In

1924, under the control of the League of Nations, the internal economy and the public financial system were reformed, and the budget was balanced without drawing upon the loan, which was subsequently used for reconstruction work. In 1926, League of Nations' control was withdrawn.

When the case of the financial reconstruction of Hungary came up in 1923, it was dealt with in a similar fashion, with £ stg. 10 million being loaned to the country by the League of Nations. Jeremiah Smith, from the United States of America, was appointed Commissioner-General in Budapest, and within one year, months ahead of schedule, the Hungarian budget showed a credit balance. A sizeable loan was also given to Greece, a country with only four million inhabitants at that time, to cope with the influx of more than one million Greek refugees from Asia Minor. Similar help was granted under League of Nations auspices to Bulgaria, and to the City of Danzig.

- **The International Economic Conferences of 1927 and 1933**

The Assembly's First International Economic Conference was held in Geneva in May of 1927. It was attended by representatives of 50 countries, including the Soviet Union and the United States of America. The two main objectives of the Conference were: to reinforce international trade laws, and to halt the widespread practice of tariff increases. The final Convention was signed by 29 States, each of whom agreed to act collectively to carry out its recommendations.

Despite this Convention, however, States began reducing their imports and increasing their exports in their own interests due to the rise of economic nationalism all over the world. This caused a global economic crisis that increasingly threatened the stability of international relations and fostered the renewal of Franco-German and Franco-Italian tensions.

As a result of requests put forth by Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom, the League of Nations' Economic and Financial Commission arranged for a Second Conference to be held in London in June 1933. Delegates from 64 countries assembled with two goals in mind, to stabilize international monetary standards, and to have prices rise at a steady and reasonable rate.

This Conference was a complete failure, as no State was prepared to voluntarily give up any of its own financial and economic strengths. The result was worldwide unemployment and collective insecurity. Thereafter, the Economic and Financial Section of the League of Nations decided to focus more on the cooperation of individuals rather than of States, and thus began to work more closely with the Health Organization, the International Labour Office, and the International Institute of Agriculture in Rome.

- **Transit, transport and communications**

Even before the onset of the First World War, the necessity of instituting a unified communications and transit organization had already been established. Thus, the need for such an organization was reinforced in the Covenant, though with the provision that all the major organizations involved would maintain their own constitutions and thus a certain degree of autonomy. However, this was only fully implemented in the case of the Communications and Transit Organization, which consisted of the following: a General Conference, made up of representatives of all League of Nations Members; a Committee of 18 States, 14 of whom were elected by the Conference (though not necessarily from Members of the League of Nations) and four of whom were Permanent Members of the Council; and a Transit Section in the Secretariat, directed by Robert Haas of France. A number of subcommittees were set up to deal with such matters as rail transport, inland navigation, ports and maritime navigation, road traffic and power transmission.

The Communications and Transit Organization held major Conferences in Barcelona, Spain (1921) and Geneva (1923) in order to conclude the Conventions on the International Regime of Maritime Ports and Railways. The purpose of the 1930 Lisbon Conference was to reach agreements on the unification of maritime signals; in 1931, a Convention on the Unification of Road Signals was drawn

up.

Other agreements concerned the simplification of passport and visa procedures, the regulation of the passage of commercial and touring motorcars, international road traffic and the transmission of electric power across national frontiers. In addition, the organization provided practical expert advice to individual States such as China, and worked on reforming the calendar.

The work of the Communications and Transit Organization has been continued by the Transport and Communications Commission of the United Nations under the authority of the Economic and Social Council.

- **Social questions: the traffic in women and the protection of children**

In 1904 and 1910, several agreements intended to protect the rights of women and children were put in place by a number of States. As a result, Article 23 of the Covenant entrusted the League of Nations with supervising the execution of these agreements, and in 1921, an International Conference held in Geneva drew up a Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Women and Children that was ratified by 48 States. The Assembly launched two extensive enquiries in order to assemble data for the campaign against such traffic in both the East and the West.

In February of 1937, a Conference of Central Authorities of Eastern Countries was held at Bandung, Java. Several committees succeeded in discussing and improving some conditions. For example, in a number of countries, the age of marriage and consent was legally raised and licensed brothels were abolished. The rights of illegitimate children were also discussed. In addition, 50 countries accepted the Geneva Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1924), which dealt with issues such as the placement of children in families, the support of blind children, and the effects of economic depression and unemployment on children and young people.

In 1934, the Assembly established an Information Centre for questions regarding child welfare. The Centre collected and classified as much information as possible on this subject. All printed material was collected and housed in the League of Nations' Library. After 1940, the committees dealt with post-war societal problems.

- **The Health Organisation**

Established in Paris in 1908, the International Health Office collected and distributed information from various health departments around the world, though it had no authority to act on its own. In 1922, and in accordance with Article 23 of the Covenant (concerning the prevention and control of disease), the League of Nations' Health Committee and Health Section were established. However, these bodies were not associated with the Paris International Health Office because of disagreements that existed primarily between the United States of America and some Member States.

Under the leadership of Dr. Ludwig Rajchman, Secretary of the newly established Health Committee and Director of the Health Section, a health programme was initiated with the participation of non-member States such as Germany, the Soviet Union, and the United States of America.

In addition to its information service, the Health Section acted as a link between national health administrations in many ways. For example, it extended its support to governments through the promotion of technical assistance, and it advised the Assembly and the Health Council on all international public health questions. For these reasons it is considered one of the most successful auxiliary organizations of the League of Nations. As a result of the 1922 Warsaw Health Conference, plans were set up to control the spread of epidemic diseases in Africa, the Eastern Mediterranean countries, the Far East, and the Soviet Union. Soon after, an Eastern Bureau of Epidemiological Information was established in Singapore, a State Serum Institute was set up in Copenhagen, and a National Institute for Medical Research was installed in London. Through these institutions, several

vaccines (for diphtheria, tetanus and tuberculosis for example) were standardized worldwide.

After the demise of the League of Nations, the Health Organisation became the World Health Organization (WHO), based in Geneva.

- **Opium and dangerous drugs**

The first global attempt to control the traffic in opium and other deadly habit-forming drugs (such as morphine, heroin and cocaine) occurred via The Hague Convention, signed by 42 nations in 1912. The signatory States agreed to allow only such drugs coming into their countries which were considered necessary for medicinal and scientific purposes. However, before this Convention could be implemented, the First World War broke out.

After the war, the League of Nations was entrusted with reactivating The Hague Convention of 1912, and an Opium Advisory Committee was appointed by the Council with the task of convincing States to re-adhere to its edicts. However, it became evident that in order to prevent the illicit smuggling of drugs, drug manufacture and production had to be controlled at the source. Thus, in 1924 and 1925, the League of Nations organized two Opium Conferences to deal with this issue. The Convention of the First Conference strengthened the original Convention of 1912; the second Conference added practical control measures to be implemented regarding the production and manufacture of narcotic substances.

The 1931 Convention proposed a strict regulation of narcotic drugs to be used by the world's medical and scientific communities, though it did not indicate the need to limit and control the cultivation of the opium-producing poppy flowers; this was still under discussion when the Second World War broke out in 1939. Despite this setback (and its eventual demise), the League of Nations' "war against drugs" did not fail. Responsibility was transferred to the United Nations, whose Advisory Committee continues to deal with this issue through its Commission on Narcotic Drugs.

- **Intellectual cooperation**

The League of Nations was concerned not only with the exchange of political ideals and material goods, but also with the study of strategies that could reinforce intellectual relations between States. Therefore, in 1922, the Council set up one of its last permanent organizations, the Intellectual Cooperation Committee (ICC). Its purpose was to improve the working conditions of the educated workforce and to build up international relations between teachers, artists, scientists and members of other intellectual professions; national committees were to support their efforts.

The Committee had 12 original members, but eventually this grew to 15, and was made up of some of the foremost intellectual personalities of the time, including Marie Curie, Albert Einstein, Béla Bartók and Thomas Mann. The ICC submitted a modest proposal of its plans in the early 1920s, but the Assembly refused to supply it with a budget that would allow it to remain in Geneva. Thanks to an offer from France, the Committee was able to re-establish itself in Paris in 1926 as the International Institute of Intellectual Cooperation (IIIC). Its first director, M. Bergson, was followed by Henri Bonnet in 1930. By 1939, more than 40 such organizations acted as links between the IIIC and the various scientific and cultural institutions around the world; their proposals and opinions were exchanged in a number of conferences.

In Rome, the International Educational Cinematographic Institute (IECI) was created by the Italian Government. It worked closely with the IIIC in Paris, and seven out of 14 of its governing body members belonged to the IIIC as well.

- **The repatriation of prisoners of war and the problem of refugees**

In April of 1920, there were approximately 500,000 prisoners of war (primarily in Russia) awaiting repatriation under miserable conditions. The Council of the League of Nations appointed Fridtjof Nansen, the famous Norwegian explorer and statesman, to investigate the situation and report back with his findings. Nansen, however, took initiative and organized the repatriation of the prisoners on his own. In less than two years, and despite a very limited budget, he and his assistants succeeded in sending home more than 427,000 prisoners of war from 26 countries at an average cost of only one pound sterling each.

At the same time, a similarly grave situation was arising. As a result of the 1917 Revolution, there were more than 1.5 million Russian refugees scattered all over Europe. These refugees had neither the right to claim any nationality nor the financial means to improve their situation. In 1921, the League of Nations set up a Refugee Organization in order to deal with this problem, and Nansen was offered the post of High Commissioner, which he accepted.

After the situation of the Russian refugees had been settled, Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek refugees from Turkey were requesting help from the League of Nations. It soon became evident that the "temporary" Refugee Organization was becoming something more permanent. In order to reach a common policy and to stimulate the process of repatriation, Nansen convened a number of conferences. However, with the exception of the recognition of the Nansen Passport, which gave the refugees legal protection and was recognized by more than 50 States, the outcomes were small.

- **The Nansen Office**

After Fridtjof Nansen's death in 1930, the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees evolved into the Nansen International Office for Refugees, a separate organization which shortly thereafter found itself overwhelmed with refugees from Austria, Czechoslovakia, Nazi Germany, the Saar.

For them, the Nansen Passport became their only permanent identity and "nationality". The Office remained active throughout the war years, after which it became the International Refugee Organization, set up by the United Nations in 1947.

In 1951, this Organization was replaced with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with its headquarters in Geneva and more than 50 field offices throughout the world.

The Nansen International Office was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1938; UNHCR was similarly honoured in 1951.

## **The end of the League of Nations**

- **The last Assembly**

At the end of the war, 43 States were still Members of the League of Nations, though for all intents and purposes it had ceased to exist. However, the formal termination of the organization was necessary. A final and official disposition had to be taken concerning the transfer of the League of Nations' properties to the United Nations: its concrete assets in the form of its buildings and grounds, its Library, and last but certainly not least, its archives and historical collections.

In 1945, the San Francisco Conference set up a Preparatory Commission that met in London with the Supervisory Commission of the League of Nations in order to do this. At the initiative of the British Foreign Office, the last Assembly (the twenty-first) was held in Geneva on 8 April 1946. In his final speech, Lord Robert Cecil, one of the League of Nations' founders, proclaimed that the

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efforts of those who had established the League of Nations were not lost, because without them the new international organization, the United Nations, could not exist. Lord Cecil closed the Assembly with the words: "The League is dead, long live the United Nations!"

The final act of transfer was signed in Geneva on 18 April 1946 by Sean Lester, the last Secretary-General of the League of Nations, and Włodzimierz Moderow, the representative of the United Nations.

Thus, having handed over all of its assets to the United Nations, and having granted the new Secretariat full control of its Library and archives, the 43 Members attending this last Assembly declared by unanimous vote that as of 20 April 1946, the League of Nations would cease to exist.

- **The creation of the United Nations**

Although the League of Nations did enjoy some remarkable political success in the 1920s, the increasing economic strife and militant nationalism which characterized the 1930s led not only to the breakup of cooperation between States but also to several conflicts which could not be easily resolved.

Powerful States such as Germany, Italy, and Japan left the organization, and by the time the Second World War broke out in 1939, many had abandoned the League of Nations and its unfulfilled promise of collective security, and had instead returned to the traditional system of defensive alliances and power blocs.

However, the efforts of the League of Nations were not completely in vain; during the intervening war years, the Allies established plans to create a new organization, the United Nations. Signed on 26 June 1945 in San Francisco, the Charter of the United Nations came into force on 24 October 1945.

Similar in many ways to the League of Nations, the United Nations sought to continue many of the operations already in place. For example, economic activities were transferred to the new Economic and Social Council; the Health Organization evolved into the World Health Organization (WHO); the Nutrition Committee became the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO); the Committee of Intellectual Cooperation became the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO); the Permanent Mandates Commission was replaced by the Trusteeship Council; and the work of the Nansen Office was continued by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).