

# *Why was there no major war in the 1920s?*

## *League of Nations*

- ☀ *Aims*
- ☀ *Structure*
- ☀ *Membership Weaknesses*
- ☀ *Success and Failures*
- ☀ *International Agreements*



## *Aims*

The League of Nations was set up by the Treaty of Versailles. The aims of the League of Nations were set out in the Covenant.

The League was supposed to:

- Stop countries fighting;
- Encourage countries to work with each other in business and trade;
- Encourage countries to disarm;
- And improve the living and working conditions of ordinary people.

## *Structure*

The League had various different sections to make it work effectively.

### **Assembly**

This was the parliament of the League. Every country had a representative. It could recommend action to the council and could vote on membership, budget. It met **once a year** and decisions had to be **unanimous** – everyone had to agree to them.



## Council

A smaller group which met five times a year, and whenever there was an emergency. It was made up of permanent and temporary members. In 1920 the permanent members were Britain, France, Italy and Japan.



Each permanent member had a **veto**.

This allowed a single permanent country to stop the council taking a decision, even if all the other members agreed.

The council had three main powers:

- **Moral condemnation** – ‘telling off’, telling them to stop it;
- **Economic sanctions** – refusing to trade with a country;
- **Military force** – although the League had **no army** of its own, it could use the militaries of member countries.

## Secretariat

This was like a big office; it was full of secretaries – tee hee! It kept records of the meetings, prepared reports and generally made the League work.

## The Permanent Court of International Justice

A permanent (!) Court designed to sort out arguments between countries without fighting. It could decide who was in the right over border disputes. However, the Court had no power to make sure people did what it said.



JUDGES OF THE COURT IN THEIR ROBES.  
From left to right: Judge NEGULESCO (Roumania), Judge A. SANCHEZ de BASTAMANTE (Cuba), Judge ANZILOTTI (Italy), M. HAMMARSKJÖLD (Sweden), Registrar of the Court; Judge ODA (Japan), Judge ALTAMIRA (Spain), Judge LODER (Netherlands), Judge C. A. WEISS (France), Lord FINLAY (Great Britain), Judge NYHOLM (Denmark), Judge John BASSETT MOORE (United States), Judge N. BEICHMANN (Norway).

## International Labour Organisation (ILO)

Tried to improve the working conditions of ordinary people in the world. It held meetings between workers, employers and government. However, it had no way of making things improve. In this way, it passed a resolution for a 48-hour maximum working week. However only a few countries actually did this.

## The League of Nations Commissions

A series of committees set up to 'make the world a better place':

### The Slavery Commission

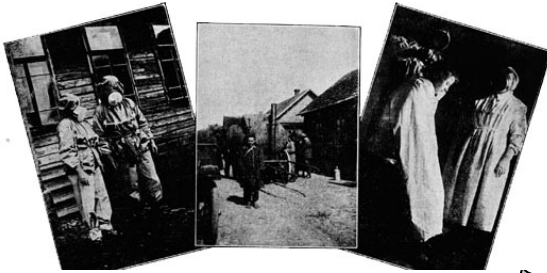
Tried to abolish slavery.  
Successfully freed 200,000 slaves in Sierra Leone.

### The Refugees Committee

Returned refugees. 400,000 prisoners returned after the First World War. It also looked after thousands of refugees in Turkey in 1922.

### The Health Committee

Attempted to eradicate dangerous diseases, for example malaria, small pox, and even plague in Siberia.



### The Mandates Commission

Supervised the former colonies of Germany that were being run by Britain and France after the First World War

## *Membership Weaknesses*

The League had been designed by Woodrow Wilson, the President of the USA. However the **USA** did not join; this was known as isolationism.

There were a number of different reasons for the policy of isolationism:

- Many Americans, especially German immigrants, were against the Treaty of Versailles. As a result, they were against the League as it had been set up by Versailles, and was supposed to oversee reparations payments;
- There were fears over the cost of being a member, especially if they had to apply economic sanctions on another country;
- They did not want to support the British and French empires;
- They did not want to become involved in any more wars.

Other issues:

- **Germany** was only **allowed** to join in 1926, it left in 1933.
- **Japan** left in 1933
- **USSR** was only **allowed** to join in 1934, it left in 1939.
- **Italy** left in 1937.

It was *a league of some nations* and rested heavily on the involvement Britain and France.

## *Success and Failures*

You need to know about the border disputes:

### **Vilna 1920**

Vilna was the capital of the new country of Lithuania. Most of the people living there were Polish. In 1920 a private Polish army took control of Vilna. Lithuania asked the League for help. However, France were unwilling to upset Poland as they thought they could be a useful ally against Germany. Britain was unwilling to act alone, and the League did nothing.

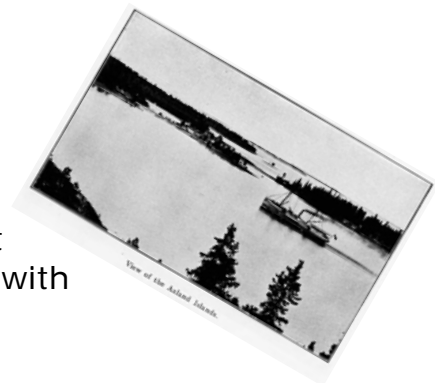


### **Upper Silesia 1921**

This rich industrial area with a large iron and steel industry had both German and Polish people. In 1920 a plebiscite (public vote) was organized. The area was split so that the largely German towns went to Germany and the largely Polish countryside went to Silesia.

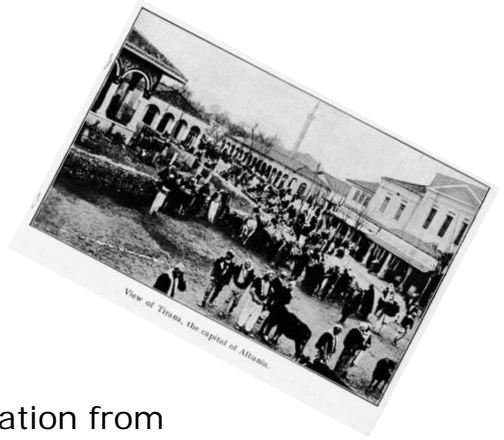
### **Aaland Islands 1921**

The Aaland Islands are a small group of islands situated between Sweden and Finland. The two countries asked the League to decide who should have the islands. The League decided that they should go to Finland. Sweden did not argue with the League's decision.



### **Corfu 1923**

Greece and Albania were in disagreement about where their border should be. An Italian general, called Tellini, was in charge of deciding on this argument. In August 1923 he and his team were killed in Greece.



The leader of Italy, Mussolini, demanded compensation from Greece and said that they should execute the murderers. The Greeks said that they had no idea who they were. Mussolini bombed and invaded the Greek island of Corfu.

The Council decided that Mussolini was in the wrong. It said that the Greece should pay it the compensation and the money would be paid to Italy if the killers of Tellini were found.

Mussolini said that he accepted the League's decision. However he persuaded other countries to support him in demanding, and succeeding in making Greece apologise and pay their compensation directly to Italy. In late September, Mussolini removed his army from Corfu claiming it had been a great victory.

### **The Geneva Protocol**

Written in 1924, the Protocol said that if two League members were in dispute they would ask the League to decide. Moreover they would agree to follow the Council's decision. However, worried about being forced into something that was against their interests, Britain refused to sign.

### **Bulgaria 1925**

In late 1925, Greece invaded Bulgaria after some of its troops had been killed on the border. The League order Greece to pull out and pay compensation. Greece obeyed the League. In some ways this was a success, however it did seem that small Greece was being treated very differently to powerful Italy.

### **Criticisms:**

- The League was slow to act
- Members acted in their own interests, not the League's
- It lacked strength without the USA

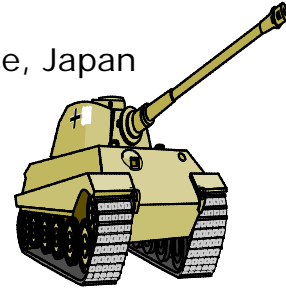
## *International Agreements*

### **Disarmament**

At the Washington Conference in 1921, Britain, France, Japan and the USA agreed to limit the size of their navies.

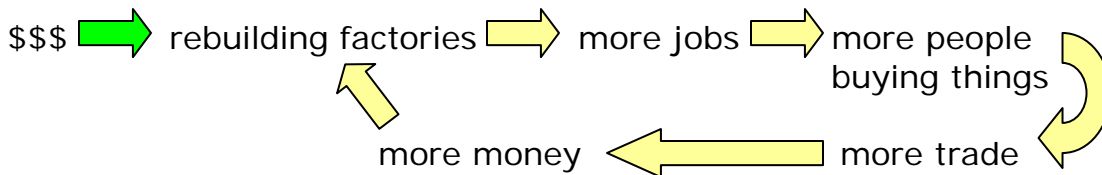
In 1923 a disarmament treaty was accepted by France but rejected by Britain.

In 1926 plans started to be made to set up a disarmament conference. However, there was very little progress as, ultimately, no country wanted to give up their armies.



### **Dawes Plan 1924**

America agreed to lend Germany money to sort out its economy. This also helped other European countries:



By trading together the countries of Europe were getting richer and were also less likely to become involved in another war.

### **Locarno, 1925**

The Locarno treaties were signed at in October 1925 by Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia. They agreed that:

- Germany would not try to change its borders with France and Belgium. Britain and France agreed to protect these borders if they were attacked.
- Germany accepted that it was not allowed to keep troops in the Rhineland, that it would stay de-militarised.
- France and Germany agreed to use the League of Nations in any future disputes.

The apparent friendship between the major powers was greeted with great joy. However the Locarno treaties were agreed without the League of Nations.

## **Kellogg-Briand Pact 1928**

The Pact was celebrated as a success. The countries that signed it agreed not to use force to settle disputes. They also agreed to keep their armies as long as they were only used for 'self defence. However, it was not clear what would happen if a country broke the Pact. Moreover, it was another example of a treaty being signed without the League of Nations being involved.



## *And don't forget*

If we are looking at why there was no war in the 1920s it is very easy to get lost in the detail of the League of Nations. However, the key to understanding this decade is to remember the events of the years that had preceded it.

The shadow of the First World War loomed large over the 1920s:

- There had been huge numbers of young men killed. The battlefields of 1914-1918 had been particularly bloody, for example 20,000 British soldiers had died on the first day of the Somme. There was not a community that had been untouched.
- The war had seen the end of three empires – the Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian.
- The war had also been hugely expensive, and trade had been severely disrupted.

The emotional, political and economic cost of the First World War underpinned the peace of the 1920s.

## *Possible Revision Activities*

For each of the border disputes from the 1920s, write a bullet point what happened:

**Vilna**

**Upper Silesia**

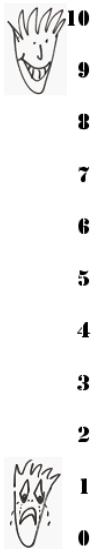
**Aaland Islands**

**Corfu**

**(The Geneva Protocol)**

**Bulgaria**

Now give each event a score out of ten for how well the League dealt with it. You can plot the scores on the graph below.





Make an A3 mind-map about the League of Nations. Include sections on aims, structure, membership, border disputes, and international agreements. Once you have made this, use two highlighter pens to find evidence of the League being a success and evidence of the League being a failure. Then, try to summarise these points into three big successes and the three big failures. Text your mates your top 3 points... ...or maybe not!

The black and white photographs in this free resource are taken from 'The Illustrated Album of the League of Nations' (1926) found at <http://www.indiana.edu/~league/leaguebook.htm>