

2 To what extent was the League of Nations a success?

Main aims

- To uphold the Treaty of Versailles.
- To maintain peace/avoid war/settle disputes peacefully.
- To discourage aggression from any nation.
- To encourage countries to co-operate, especially in trade.
- To encourage nations to disarm.
- To improve living and working conditions in all parts of the world.
- To encourage international co-operation.
- To encourage collective security.

Work of the agencies of the League

The Mandates Commission made sure that Britain and France acted in the interests of the people of that territory, not their own interests. The Refugees Committee helped to return refugees to their original homes after the end of the war. The Slavery Commission worked to abolish slavery around the world. The Health Committee attempted to deal with the problem of dangerous diseases and to educate people about health and sanitation. The ILO met once a year. Its aim was to improve working conditions throughout the world trying to get member countries to adopt its suggestions.

Collective security

If one state attacked another, the member states of the League would act together collectively. This was a way of keeping peace as they would hope to restrain the aggressor by economic or military sanctions. It was Article 10 of the Covenant of the League.

Early problems with the league

- Not all nations were members of the League. The USA never joined and this deprived the League of the support of the most powerful nation in the world.
- The defeated nations, like Germany, were not members at first. Other nations, such as Japan, left when they got into disputes with the League.
- The League had no armed forces of its own. It relied on collective security. Too often this meant nations looking to the League to take action when they weren't willing to act themselves.
- The League was dominated by Britain and France but they never agreed on how powerful it should be or how it should operate.
- The League was too slow to take action. All decisions, in the Assembly and Council, had to be taken unanimously.
- The League was too idealistic. It was unrealistic to expect nations to obey the League without giving it the power to enforce its will.
- All member states had equal voting rights. All decisions in Assembly and Council had to be unanimous. This was fine when members agreed with each other, but not when they disagreed.

Dominated by Britain and France

Britain and France had agreed with Wilson's 14th Point to establish the League. They were founder members. They had just won the First World War and, therefore, had powerful armies. Both countries wanted to uphold the Peace Settlement as they had a lot to gain. To do this, they supported the League. Although Wilson had suggested the League, the USA senate refused to ratify the Treaty and, therefore, the setting up of the League. The USA never joined the League, leaving Britain and France as the most powerful and dominant members. At the start, defeated countries, like Germany, were not allowed to join or they held unacceptable views, like the USSR. Members in the Far East, like Japan, considered the League as a European club. Its headquarters

were in Geneva. These factors helped Britain and France's domination. In the '30s, Japan, Italy and Germany all left the League, leaving Britain and France even more dominant within the League.

Why was the League able to achieve some successes in the 1920s in dealing with international disputes?

- Early successes of the League gave nations confidence and they wanted it to work as war had just ended and countries did not want more hostility. Hence its decisions were accepted as they did not want another war.
- Most of the disputes in this period involved smaller nations and countries such as Germany and Japan were not powerful and therefore not a problem.
- Countries were willing to accept the League's decision. This happened in the Finland and Sweden dispute over the Aaland Islands (1920) and In the Greek-Bulgarian border dispute.

How did the League of Nations hope to prevent future wars between nations?

- The League was responsible for the operation of the Treaty.
- Through the International Court of Justice.
- By encouraging co-operation through business and trade.
- By encouraging nations to disarm.
- Improving living and working conditions throughout the world.
- The League could put pressure on the guilty country, bringing world opinion against it.
- Members could refuse to trade with the guilty country (economic sanctions).
- The armed forces of member countries could be joined together and used against the aggressor (military force).
- Collective security.

Corfu crisis 1923

In August five Italian surveyors who were working for the League of Nations in mapping the border between Greece and Albania were killed on the Greek side of the border. Mussolini demanded compensation from the Greek government. Mussolini bombarded and occupied Corfu because the Greeks refused to pay compensation.

Why was the League unable to stop Italian aggression in the Corfu crisis of 1923?

The council of the League wanted to condemn Italy's actions but France and Britain did not want to upset Mussolini and would not permit it putting pressure on the Greeks to accept Mussolini's demands.

Behind the scenes, Mussolini worked on the Conference of Ambassadors and persuaded it to change the League's ruling.

Italy was a great power willing to use force and as the League did not have an army it backed down.

Members of the League, especially Britain and France feared another war and therefore did not want to use force. They allowed the dispute to be settled outside the League.

A powerful Mussolini was willing to go against the League. The weak League could do nothing about this.

(Vilna 1920)

The League failed over Vilna. It was quite clear that Poland was the aggressor because they took control of Vilna, the capital of the new state of Lithuania. The French did not want to upset Poland because they were a potential ally against Germany and Britain was not prepared to act alone. The Poles kept Vilna because the League did nothing.

'It was Manchuria and not Abyssinia which destroyed the League as an effective peacekeeper.' How far do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer.

The League was slow acting. This is highlighted by the length of time the Lytton Commission took to report. By the time the report was published Japan had completed the invasion. The League was very Eurocentric in its attitudes. Asia seemed very distant to many League members. It did not consider an Asian crisis as being vital to the countries in Europe.

Britain and France did not want to upset Mussolini as this might drive him to ally with Hitler and Germany. So the economic sanctions the League imposed did not include oil, coal and iron. Non-League members, such as the USA and Germany, continued to trade with Italy. Although much damage had been done to the League's reputation over Manchuria, it was still possible to show that the League had teeth if Britain and France had been willing to impose severe economic sanctions and been willing to use military force against a power weaker than British and French forces.

Explain how the Japanese invasion of Manchuria showed the weaknesses of the League

- Japan ignored the League's instruction to withdraw. In truth there was little the League could do as it had no way of making Japan withdraw. Japan was determined to ignore the League.
- The league was very Eurocentric in its attitudes. Asia seemed very distant to many League members it did not consider an Asian crisis as being vital to the countries in Europe.
- The League was weakened by the USA not joining. If economic sanctions had been imposed it is likely that they would have been ineffective as the Japan would continue to trade with the USA.
- The League, particularly Britain, feared reprisals on Far East Colonies if military action took place.
- The League was slow acting. This is highlighted by the length of time the Lytton Commission took to report. By the time the report was published Japan had completed the invasion.

The league was a failure. HFDYA?

Yes it was a failure..

- The Manchurian and Abyssinian crises destroyed the idea of collective security by demonstrating that League members would not act together firmly in the face of determined aggression. This also destroyed the credibility of the League as a peacekeeping organisation.
- From 1936 onwards countries had to find an alternative to the League to deal with dictators. They had to accept that the League was following appeasement. War became inevitable.' 'Even in the 1920s the League was not always successful. It showed over Corfu that it was not willing to confront a major power and was weak and useless over Vilna as it saw Poland as helpful against Germany and Russia.

No it was a success..

- The League was at its best when dealing with small nations in the early 1920s as they were willing to accept the League's authority. War was averted over the Aaland Islands and peace brought in relation to the Greek-Bulgarian Dispute.
- With the help of the League arranging international loans and supervising their economies, Austria and Hungary were able to begin economic recovery.
- The League was successful in dealing with refugees and former prisoners of war. It returned around 400,000 to their homelands. In Turkey it moved swiftly to stamp out cholera, smallpox and dysentery in the camps.
- The International Labour Organisation was successful in banning white lead from paint and limiting the hours of work for small children.
- Socially the league worked hard against the drug trade and freed 200,000 slaves in Sierra Leone and improved conditions on the Tanganyika railway.

Did the league fail because of Britain and France?

- Britain and France were reluctant to send troops to deal with far away problems, such as in Manchuria.
- Britain and France tried desperately to find a solution to the Abyssinian Crisis. This involved the Hoare-Laval Pact, which was leaked to the press, and showed that they were not willing to take tough action.
- The League was dominated by France and Britain and, therefore, they must take responsibility for the League's inability to solve the problems.

However

- Not all nations were members, including the USA. If armed force or meaningful sanctions were to be imposed, the USA was needed.
- The Depression brought increased unemployment and many turned to extreme political parties.
- They did not believe in democracy and cared only for themselves. They ignored the authority of the League.
- The League was slow to take action. All decisions in the Assembly and the Council had to be unanimous.

Depression

- Britain suffered high unemployment in the Depression. It was not willing to get involved sorting out international disputes while its own economy was suffering.
- The US was unwilling to support economic sanctions imposed by the League when its own trade was in such a mess.
- In Germany, unemployment and poverty led people to elect the Nazis, who promised to solve economic and social problems. Hitler and the Nazis made no secret of their plan to overturn the Treaty of Versailles, which the League was supposed to uphold, and regain lost German territory.
- Worried about the growth of the power of the Nazis, France started building a series of frontier defences on its border with Germany.
- In Italy economic problems encouraged Mussolini to try to build an overseas empire to distract people's attention away from the difficulties the government faced.
- In Japan the Depression threatened a complete collapse of the country's industry. This led to Japan taking over Manchuria.

Which was the more important cause of the failure of the League of Nations – the World Depression of the 1930s or the invasion of Abyssinia? Explain your answer.

The Depression had hit Japan badly and its economy was in crisis. The League judgement was that Japan had acted unlawfully and should withdraw. Japan refused and left the League showing the League to be powerless.

Members of the League were unwilling to impose economic sanctions on Japan over Manchuria because the Depression had already damaged world trade and this would damage it further.

The world economic crisis caused by the Great Depression had political consequences as in desperation millions of people turned to extreme political parties, like the Nazis, who did not believe in democracy and international co-operation. They ignored the authority of the League.

Successful action of the League against Italy was dependent on Britain and France. They were unwilling to take strong measures because they were frightened that if they imposed full sanctions it would lead to war with Italy and they were not ready for war.

Britain and France did not want to upset Mussolini as this might drive him to ally with Hitler and Germany. So the economic sanctions the League imposed did not include oil, coal and iron. Non-League members, the USA and Germany, continued to trade with Italy.

Behind the scenes the foreign secretaries of Britain and France drew up an agreement. This was leaked to the press and served to undermine the credibility of the League.

Why did the absence of several leading nations from the League make the work of the League more difficult?

The USA had suggested the League but never joined. This deprived the League of the most influential and powerful nation in the world. Without the USA, economic sanctions would be ineffective because the USA could continue trading with the offending country.

The USA could bring huge resources to the League. It was one of the few countries which had gained economically from the First World War.

Britain and France were left as the dominant powers in the League. The War and later Depression meant that these countries were tired and lacked the resolve to see through some of the large crises.

Without Germany and Russia in the League at the start meant that huge areas of Europe and Asia were not covered by the authority of the League.

For collective security to work effectively all major countries were needed in the League all of the time. It was an organisation of some nations not all nations.

Disputes of the League in detail

FIUME / ITALY + YUGOSLAVIA / 1919

- Italy had been promised land for AustriaHungary in the Secret Treaty of London (March 1915)
- In 1919, much of this land was given to the new country of Yugoslavia
- One leading Italian, Gabriele D'Annunzio, took matters into his own hands and marched into Fiume
- The league and the governments of Italy and Yugoslavia could not force D'Annunzio out; it was an embarrassing failure

VILNA / LITHUANIA + POLAND / 1920

- Lithuania had vanished from the map of Europe in 1569, dominated by Poland and Russia
- Lithuania was re-established as an independent state in 1919 - obviously the Lithuanians wanted the historic city of Vilnius (Vilna) as their capital
- By 1919, almost 80% of the population of Vilna was Polish. In 1920 the Polish army marched into Vilna and refused to leave
- Lithuanians appealed to the league but nothing was done

UPPER SILESIA / POLAND + GERMANY / 1921

- Upper Silesia had been given to Poland as a result of the Paris Peace treaties. This led to rioting and fighting in 1920.
- The league proposed to divide Upper Silesia between Poland and Germany
- They arranged a plebiscite; this popular vote was accepted by both countries

THE ÅLAND ISLANDS / SWEDEN + FINLAND / 1921

- Both countries claimed these islands belonged to them
- The dispute was referred to the league
- A compromise was suggested; the islands should belong to Finland but no weapons were to be kept on them
- Both countries agreed

POLISH-SOVIET WAR / POLAND + RUSSIA / 1919 - 1921

- The border between Poland and Russia was difficult to define. Lord Curzon drew his famous line on the map and this led to full scale war
- Poland invaded Russia and captured Kiev
- The Russians then drove back the Poles and nearly captured Warsaw
- The French helped Poland and eventually the Treaty of Riga (March 1921) ended the war
- Poland got all of what she wanted. The league had been completely ignored thus making it a failure for the league

GREEK-BULGARIAN DISPUTE / 1925

- Bulgarian officials were mapping the border between Greece and Bulgaria
- There was a shooting on the frontier and a Greek sentry was killed. The Greeks immediately invaded Bulgaria
- Dispute referred to the league. They imposed a fine on Bulgaria and ordered the Greeks to call off their attack. Both countries agreed with the decision

MANCHURIAN CRISIS / JAPAN + CHINA / 1931-1933

In 1931, Japan claimed that Chinese soldiers had sabotaged the Manchurian railway in Korea, which Japan controlled. Japan attacked and by February 1932, had brutally conquered Manchuria. Meanwhile in January-March 1932, Japan attacked and captured the city of Shanghai in China itself. In March 1932, China appealed to the League of Nations. In April, a league delegation arrived in Manchuria to see what was happening and in October it declared that Japan should leave. In February 1933, a special assembly of the league voted against Japan, so the Japanese left the league. The League, however, could not agree on sanctions, and Britain and France were not prepared to send an army. Not only did the Japanese stay in Manchuria, but in July 1937 they also invaded China.

ABYSSINIAN CRISIS / ITALY + ABYSSINIA / 1935

In December 1934 a dispute about the border between Abyssinia and the Italian Somaliland flared into fighting. In January 1935 the Abyssinian emperor asked the League for help and in July the League banned armed sales to both sides. However, this ended up causing more harm to Abyssinia than to Italy. In October, the League's committee suggested that Italy should have some land in Abyssinia. Instead, Italy's army invaded Abyssinia. Britain and France refused to intervene; they agreed on a secret plan called the Hoare-Laval pact. This was a plan made by the foreign secretary of Britain and the prime minister of France to give Abyssinia to Italy. In the end the League did almost nothing and by May 1936 Italy had conquered Abyssinia.