**League of Nations**

The League of Nations (1919-1946) was an intergovernmental organization formed after WWI to mediate disputes among its member nations through diplomacy and collective security. Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (who coined the term) and Lord James Bryce first proposed the League in Great Britain on the eve of WWI, and the idea attracted a group of like-minded pacifist thinkers. In America, President William Howard Taft promoted the League and, after the war, President Woodrow Wilson embraced the cause. Wilson saw it as a way to ameliorate and resolve future national conflicts without war. His “Fourteen Points” also argued for the creation of new (or newly reborn) nations after the collapse of the Austrian, Ottoman, and Russian Empires. Despite Wilson’s involvement, the United States Congress never ratified joining the organization, primarily because it was understood to allow a non-US entity to call American troops into battle. The Congress’s Republican-led rejection is often cited as a key factor in the League’s failure. By the outbreak of WWII, a general lack of confidence in the toothless organization had made it obsolete, and it was dissolved in 1946. Despite its failures, the organization was the most significant result of the movement toward political internationalism, which had begun well before 1914. The League’s post-war effort at internationalism, an ideal espoused earlier in the nineteenth-century by Auguste Comte and again later by Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss in France, as well as by J. A. Hobson in England, was undermined from the start by the vengeful terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The League was, however, a predecessor to the United Nations, established in the immediate wake of WWII.

A significant part of the League of Nations’ early appeal is described by John Maynard Keynes in his *The Economic Consequences of the Peace,* a treatise Keynes wrote in a few months immediately following the conclusion of the Conference of Versailles. Wilson arrived at Versailles, in part, as a heroic figure bringing with him the blueprints for a new world order that would prevent anything like the Great War from occurring again. Among Wilson’s basic proposals, several stood out: the need for transparent treaties between nations, so that the situation that led to WWI, by which one nation in a dispute did not always know in advance which other nations were pledged in support of the rival nation, could not occur again; freedom of navigation on the seas; the reduction of barriers to free trade; the reduction of armaments; and the adjudication of colonial clams so that the right to self-determination of colonized peoples would be respected. Most other proposals referred to specific national boundaries (for example, the security of Russia and Turkey, the restoration of Poland, the configuration of the remains of Austro-Hungary, and so on). Despite Wilson’s idealism—an idealism that for Keynes was based in part on Wilson’s ignorance of European history and the depth of its hatreds, and in part on Wilson’s naïve, country-preacher understanding of the world—the reforms that the League of Nations was to enforce were more or less ignored by other participants at Versailles from the start. Most of the big goals were incredibly vague. How would the openness of treaties ever be guaranteed? How free of tariffs should trade be? How small should armaments be? What constitutes justice for a former colony? And Wilson had little skill in figuring out how to fill in the details, details that interested Great Britain, France, and Russia even less.

Nevertheless, many provisions of the League of Nations (as embodied in its Covenant, drafted by Lord Robert Cecil and Jan Smuts) provided a loose template for subsequent international life. The League established a Secretariat at Geneva, a Court of International Justice at The Hague, a Health Organization (later the World Health Organization), the International Labor Organization (or ILO), a Committee on Intellectual Cooperation (with Henri Bergson as its first chair), a Slavery Commission, and finally, in 1937, a Committee for the Study of the Legal Status of Women (later the Commission on the Status of Women in the United Nations). The League of Nations was in no sense a success, if we measure it by its primary duty to prevent another world war. On that score, it failed miserably. But if we consider it instead as the first concrete attempt to build a world wide political order—as learning to crawl, in geo-political terms—than it may have achieved more than we tend to think.

**Bibliography:** *The League of Nations Online Bibliography*.Indiana University. (http://www.indiana.edu/~league/bibliography.php).

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