The League of Nations

During the First World War several world leaders such as Woodrow Wilson and Jan Smuts, began advocating the need for an international organization to preserve peace and settle disputes by arbitration. In September, 1916, Robert Cecil, a member of the British government, wrote a memorandum where he argued that civilization could survive only if it could develop an international system that would insure peace.

When peace negotiations began in October, 1918, Woodrow Wilson insisted that his Fourteen Points should serve as a basis for the signing of the Armistice. This included the formation of the League of Nations.

The constitution of the League of Nations was adopted by the Paris Peace Conference in April, 1919. The League's headquarters were in Geneva and its first secretary-general was Sir Eric Drummond. The Covenant (Constitution) of the League of Nations called for collective security and the peaceful settlement of disputes by arbitration. It was decided that any country that resorted to war would be subjected to economic sanctions.

The main organs of the League of Nations were the General Assembly, the Council and the Secretariat. The General Assembly, which met once a year, consisted of representatives of all the member states and decided on the organization's policy. The Council included four permanent members (Britain, France, Italy and Japan) and four (later nine) others elected by the General Assembly every three years. The Secretariat prepared the agenda and published reports of meetings.

As a result of the decision by the US Congress not to ratify the Versailles Treaty, the United States never joined the League of Nations. Others joined but later left the organization: Brazil (1926), Japan (1933), Italy (1937). Germany was only a member from 1926 to 1933, and the Soviet Union from 1934 to 1940.

The League of Nations had no armed forces and had to rely on boycotts (sanctions) to control the behavior of member states. In January 1923 France occupied the Ruhr. Six months later Italy bombed the Greek island of Corfu. When the League of Nations discussed these events, the governments of France and Italy threatened to withdraw from the organization. As a result, the League of Nations decided not to take any action. Konni Zilliacus, a member of the Information Section of the League Secretariat, wrote to his friend Norman Angell: "I feel depressed and fed up. Who could have imagined things would turn out as badly as this?"

In 1924 the League of Nations was given a boost when James Ramsay MacDonald, Arthur Henderson and Edouard Herriot, leading politicians in Britain and France, visited Geneva in 1924. Hugh Dalton, wrote enthusiastically, "The League seemed to have come to life again, and to have gained a new significance."

The League of Nations also had success in adverting wars in the border disputes between Bulgaria-Greece (1925), Iraq-Turkey (1925-26) and Poland-Lithuania (1927). The League of Nations also had noticeable success in the areas of drugs control, refugee work and famine relief.

In 1929 foreign ministers of all the main European nations attended meetings of the League of Nations. Mary Hamilton, a Labour Party delegate to the League of Nations wrote: "Geneva in 1929 and 1930 was a genuine International clearing-house of ideas... There was hard work, and there was goodwill."
The League of Nations faced a fresh crisis in September 1931 when the Japanese Army occupied large areas of Manchuria, a province of China. The Chinese government appealed to the League of Nations under Article 11 of the Covenant. China also appealed to the United States as a signatory of the Kellogg Pact.

Robert Cecil, Britain's official delegate to the League of Nations, proposed an inquiry to deal with the dispute. Henry L. Stimson, the US Secretary of State, advised against this as he believed it would upset the Japanese government. However, eventually it was agreed that the League of Nations would establish a commission of inquiry under the chairmanship of Lord Lytton.

In March 1932 Japan renamed Manchuria as Manchukuo ("land of the Manchus"). Only Germany and Italy recognized the new state. The Lytton Report was published six months later. The report acknowledged that Japan had legitimate grievances against the Chinese Government. However, the report condemned the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and refused to recognize Manchukuo as an independent state. When the League adopted the report Japan resigned from the organization.

Konni Zilliacus, an official of the League of Nations, believed that Germany and Italy posed the greatest threat to world peace. He argued for the creation of an "inner ring" of states within the League of Nations, led by Britain, France and the Soviet Union. He also proposed the election by proportional representation of a new international debating chamber of the League of Nations. His views influenced some leading British politicians such as Arthur Henderson, Clement Attlee, Herbert Morrison and Hugh Dalton, but the idea was rejected by the government led by Stanley Baldwin.

In October 1935 Benito Mussolini sent in General Pietro Badoglio and the Italian Army into Ethiopia. The League of Nations condemned Italy's aggression and in November imposed sanctions. This included an attempt to ban countries from selling arms, rubber and some metals to Italy. Some political leaders in France and Britain opposed sanctions arguing that it might persuade Mussolini to form an alliance with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.

Over 400,000 Italian troops fought in Ethiopia. The poorly armed Ethiopians were no match for Italy's modern tanks and aeroplanes. The Italians even used mustard gas on the home forces and were able to capture Addis Ababa, the capital of the country, in May 1936, forcing Emperor Haile Selassie to flee to England.

In September 1938, Neville Chamberlain, the British prime minister, met Adolf Hitler at his home in Berchtesgaden. Hitler threatened to invade Czechoslovakia unless Britain supported Germany's plans to takeover the Sudetenland. After discussing the issue with the Edouard Daladier (France) and Eduard Benes (Czechoslovakia), Chamberlain informed Hitler that his proposals were unacceptable.

Benito Mussolini suggested to Adolf Hitler that one way of solving this issue was to hold a four-power conference of Germany, Britain, France and Italy. This would exclude both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, and therefore increasing the possibility of reaching an agreement and undermine the solidarity that was developing against Germany.

The meeting took place in Munich on 29th September, 1938. Desperate to avoid war, and anxious to avoid an alliance with Joseph Stalin and the Soviet Union, Neville Chamberlain and Edouard Daladier agreed that Germany could have the Sudetenland. In return, Hitler promised not to make any further territorial demands in Europe. Adolf Hitler, Neville Chamberlain, Edouard Daladier and Benito Mussolini
now signed the Munich Agreement which transferred the Sudetenland to Germany. The League of Nations remained silent on the invasion.

Joseph Stalin now became concerned about the Soviet Union being invaded from the West. Stalin argued that Leningrad was only thirty-two kilometers from the Finnish border and its 3.5 million populations, were vulnerable to artillery fire from Nazi Germany. After attempts to negotiate the stationing of Soviet troops in Finland failed, Stalin ordered the Red Army to invade on 30th November 1939. This time the League of Nations decided to take action and expelled the Soviet Union.

The League of Nations did not meet during the Second World War. In 1946 the responsibilities of the League of Nations was handed over to the United Nations.