



The League of Nations in the 1920s

This is a transcript of the [League of Nations in the 1920s](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

Quite often when we talk about the League of Nations we give them a bit of a hard time, mainly because in 1939 the Second World War began, thus scuppering the League of Nations' aims of trying to maintain peace and avoid disputes in the future. This podcast is looking at the 1920s though, during which the League did have some success – although it must be admitted some failures as well.

Quite often the exam paper will ask you to consider the success of the League during a certain period. If indeed you are asked about the 1920s then this is the podcast for you. When you're talking about how successful things were, the question how is about distance. 'How far?' You could be standing very close to someone; you could be standing reasonably close; you could be standing quite close. Those kinds of words – 'very', 'reasonably', 'extremely', 'quite' – are the kind of words you should be using when you're talking about how successful something is. 'Reasonably successful', 'quite successful'.

I often find it useful when thinking about lines of success to think about a scale going from zero at one end (not at all successful) to 10 at the other end (completely successful). We can consider that the scale is like a seesaw where we can lump a lot of stuff onto one end and lump a lot of stuff onto the other end and see how it balances out: that could be your answer, and that's what we're going to try and do now. We're going to start off by looking at the successes of the League of Nations and then take a look at the failures. If you can mentally assign them some kind of score on that scale of one to ten, imagine how a seesaw with things placed in those positions would balance out. Would it verge towards success? Would it get towards failure? And whichever way it goes, how far would it go would it go? Very far? Reasonably far? Quite far? Would it be almost balanced? As I run through the different successes and failures of the League of Nations try to imagine where you'd put them on to this scale.

We're going to start with the successes. How far up are you going to place them, and why?

The first real success for the League of Nations was in 1921 in Upper Silesia, an industrial region on the border between Germany and Poland. Both German and Polish people lived there, but both countries wanted control of the area because of the rich iron and steel industry. Because of tension between the two, the League decided to organize a plebiscite – a vote where the people were asked whether they should become part of Poland or part of Germany. Based on the result of the vote, the League decided to divide the area: one-third went to Poland and two-thirds went to Germany in a completely peaceful settlement. The



industrial areas voted mainly for Germany while the rural areas mainly voted for Poland, so the country was divided in exactly that way although many safeguards were built in to prevent future disputes. Both countries accepted the decision and war was avoided: a success for the League of Nations in Upper Silesia in 1921.

The Upper Silesia dispute came at around the same time the League intervened successfully in a dispute between Finland and Sweden over an area called the Aaland Islands. Both countries wanted control of them as they were midway between the two countries. Both countries threatened each other to fight for them, but did exactly what the League's covenant said they do by calling on the League to settle the dispute. In the end the League decided that the islands should remain under Finnish control, although the rights of the Swedish minority in the islands were to be protected in the end. Sweden agreed: another success for the League of Nations over the Aaland Islands in 1921.

The last really successful dispute that the League of Nations managed to settle was in 1925 in Bulgaria. In October that year Greece invaded Bulgaria after some of their troops were killed over border clashes. Bulgaria appealed to the League after the Greek invasion. At first the League appealed to both countries to stop their fighting, which both of them did, and sent a commission to investigate. The commission found in favour of the Bulgarians, and the Greeks were thus forced out of Bulgaria and told to pay compensation. They obeyed, although they did complain that it seemed larger countries such as Italy were being favoured at the expense of smaller ones. We'll find out what Italy had done in Corfu in the second part of this podcast. Yet again though, in Bulgaria in 1925 the League had successfully avoided another war.

These successes have often been forgotten. They all involve small nations rather than the great powers. Even so, the League showed that it was capable of successfully preventing disputes and in some cases it was even able to stop fighting once it had already broken out. But the League of Nations was also successful in other areas of work. For example the League helped to repatriate (return to their own countries) approximately 400,000 First World War prisoners. Commissions were also successful in fighting against drug trafficking and slavery. The league even managed to free two hundred thousand slaves in Sierra Leone. It's also unlikely that Germany would have signed the Locarno Treaty in 1925 without the League of Nations' help. This was the treaty where Germany accepted the western borders of Germany set out in the Treaty of Versailles and guaranteed that it would stay within them. The Kellogg-Briand pact in 1928 was another big success where 65 countries agreed not to use force to settle disputes, although this agreement was actually signed outside the League.

The successes were arguably outweighed by some of the failures of the League during the 1920s, which we're going to take a look at now. Although we've acknowledged that the League did quite well in the early 1920s with Upper Silesia and the Aaland Islands, its very first major test was a big blow to its reputation. In 1920 Poland and Lithuania came to blows



over the city of Vilna, the former capital of Lithuania. It was on the border with Poland and most of the population was Polish. In 1920 the Polish army simply moved in, and so the new government of Lithuania appealed to the League of Nations. It was quite clear to the League that the Poles had broken the Covenant: they were clearly the aggressors, but that didn't necessarily make things simple. The League protested against the Polish action but Vilna remained under Polish occupation. In fact France, a key member of the League, supported Poland's claim to Vilna in return for Polish support in the event of a future attack by Germany. Neither was Britain prepared to step in. Not many British people cared enough about the distant city of Vilna to send in their own troops. In the end the League of Nations couldn't do anything without its own army, and so the Poles kept control of Vilna: a big failure of the League of Nations in 1920.

In Bulgaria the League told Greece that they needed to get out, and Greece wasn't happy. They probably weren't very happy because just a couple years earlier, in 1923, Italy invaded Corfu with very different outcomes. A group of Italian soldiers were actually working for the League of Nations at this point, mapping out the boundary between Greece and Albania. The soldiers were attacked (no one really knows who by) and their general, called Tellini, was killed. Benito Mussolini, the leader of Italy, demanded 50 million Lira in compensation from the Greeks whom he blamed for the attack. He also called for the murderers to be handed over to Italy, but Greece didn't know who they were. As a result the Italians invaded the Greek island of Corfu, clearly breaking the League's Covenant. The League suggested to Greece that they paid them the compensation, and once the murders had been found they would return the money. Mussolini though was working behind the scenes. He put pressure on members of the League's Council to support Italy instead of Greece and by the end of September things had turned around. Instead of continuing to condemn the Italian invasion the League told Greece that it needed to pay Italy what it was owed. On 27 September Mussolini removed his troops. The League of Nations had failed. It had given into greater powers during the Corfu incident of 1923. No wonder Greece was so upset with the League's ruling over the Bulgaria incident two years later. There was simply no consistency.

Territorial disputes were part and parcel of the League's job, but so was doing other talks to make sure that war couldn't happen again. Disarmament was a major issue, and at the Washington conference in 1921 the USA, Japan, Britain and France agreed to limit the size of their navies. But that was as far as disarmament ever really got. It wasn't really until 1926 that plans were finally made for a disarmament conference, but it took five years even to agree a draft convention for it to focus on. In 1933 even that was rejected by Germany.

With only the paper treaties of Locarno and the Kellogg-Briand pact, it was clear that disarmament had to happen if the league was to avoid another war in the future. Unfortunately disarmament was a long way off.