

The Pioneer International Organization: The League of Nations

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Abstract

Since the beginning of human civilization, the political powers have pursued the expansionist policy leading to different wars. In 17th century The Thirty Years War (1618-48) ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. This was the beginning of international law to contain any future war. After the Industrial Revolution (1750) the world witnessed the expansion of Colonial and Imperialist powers. The struggle between different Imperialist powers of Europe led to the beginning of First World War (1914-18). This war ended with the Treaty of Versailles. The need for an International Organization was realized which created the League of Nations as a world organization. The U.S.A which was behind the idea of this organization could not become its member. By 1939 the weakness of the organization came to the forefront when the Second World War started. Despite its failure to maintain peace and security, League of Nations became the benchmark for the future powerful world organization- UNO.

Key Words: Expansionist Power, Treaty of Westphalia, International Organization, Colonial Power, Imperialist Power, League of Nations, U.N.O (United Nations Organization).

Introduction

The history of Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries is marked by a series of wars. Some of these wars came to have specific names and some did not. Some of the wars involved long-standing conflicts over trade and territory that flared into actual warfare from time to time but simmered continuously. There were several Europe-wide wars, such as- The Thirty Years war of 1618-48.¹ The Thirty Years war began as a religious war, fought between Roman Catholics and Protestants in Germany. It developed into a political struggle between the Catholic Habsburg of the Holy Roman Empire (Austria, most of the German

princes and occasionally Spain). They were opposed by Denmark, Sweden, Catholic France and the Protestant princes of Germany. Thirty Years war was a conflict that would involve almost every European power. Though the combatants did not acknowledge it openly, the war would also involve economic issue, particularly trade and the wealth trade created, which shaped European society in the early modern period as much as the religious changes of the reformation.² This war ended with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. Westphalia is a region of northwestern Germany and one the three historic parts of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. This treaty laid down the principle of state sovereignty and the foundation of international law, according to which each state has exclusive sovereignty over its territory. The principle underlies the modern international system of sovereign states and is enshrined in the United Nations Charter, which states that “nothing shall authorize the United Nations to intervene into matters which are essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state.”³ According to the idea, every state, no matter how large or small, has an equal right to sovereignty.⁴ The principle of non-interference was further developed in the 18th century. The Westphalian system reached its peak in the 19th and 20th centuries, but it has faced recent challenges from advocates of humanitarian intervention. The 18th century could claim to be an age of reason (Enlightenment). It was also an age of war. Hopes that Peace of Westphalia (1648) would mark a diminution in warfare, proved very misguided. Hardly a year passed between 1650 and 1800 without fighting involving one or more European powers.⁵

From the 16th century in Europe various developments resulted in economic growth. During the latter half of the 18th century there began a series of changes which revolutionized the techniques and organization of production. These developments resulted in the rise of a new type of economy- An Industrial Economy. This phase is called Industrial Revolution which marks the most fundamental transformation of human life in the history of the world recorded in written documents.⁶ The term ‘Industrial Revolution’ is used to describe the new developments because the changes came rapidly and they had far reaching effects on the history of the world. All these developments which were taking place in Europe denote:

- The extensive application of water, steam power to production system.
- Focus on production in the factory and its formidable mechanization.

- Major changes in the character and exploitation of 'home' and foreign' markets.
- The near disappearance of agriculture for personal conservation.

The period 1789 to 1814 has been termed as 'Europe in the Melting Pot' by historian David Thomson.⁷ During this period revolution in France, France at war, Dictatorship in France and Napoleonic Empire are very important. With Vienna Congress in 1815 the European map was redrawn. In 18th and 19th centuries following developments such as:

- Demands created by Industrial revolution.
- Improvement in transportation and communication.
- Extreme Nationalism: pride and power.
- The 'Civilizing Mission': Men and Ideas.

And other conditions also helped in the growth of Imperialism. The rivalries among the Imperialist powers of Europe led to the beginning of First World War in August 1914, which is also described as the Great War. This began as European war and soon engulfed the whole world as European powers used the resources of their empires, and Japan (August 1914) and America (April 1917) entered the war.⁸ Whole world was divide into two blocks such as- Allied powers (Britain, France, Russia, Japan, Portugal, Italy, Rumania, and Greece etc.) and Central powers (Germany, Austria and their allies). The war which lasted for four years and three months was in many ways novel in human history. The First World War had been believed to be 'a war to end all war'.⁹ It was believed that it would be followed by an era of peace, freedom, democracy and a better life for everyone. When the U.S entered the war Woodrow Wilson¹⁰ declared, "We shall fight for the things which we have always carried nearest our hearts- for democracy, for the rights of those who submit to authority to have a voice in their own governments, for the rights and liberties of small nations, for a universal dominion of right by such a concert of free peoples as shall bring peace and safety to all nations and make the world itself at last free".¹¹ Seven months later, the Russian revolution (1917) took place and the Soviet government issued the Decree on Peace, which called on all the belligerent nations and peoples to enter into negotiations for a peace without annexations and indemnities. The Russian revolutionaries also

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hoped that their example would be followed by the working classes of some other countries of Europe. The Soviet appeal was rejected by the Allies powers, and Germany extorted a heavy price for letting Russia withdraw from the war, which continued for another year. On 8 January 1918, while addressing to Congress, Woodrow Wilson had presented the peace proposals, called the Fourteen Points, which are as follows:

- i. "Open covenants openly arrived at," i.e. the abolition of secret diplomacy;
- ii. Freedom of the seas;
- iii. Removal of economic barriers between nations;
- iv. Reduction of national armaments "to the lowest point consistent with safety";
- v. Impartial adjustment of colonial claims, with consideration for the interests of the peoples involved;
- vi. Evacuation of Russia by foreign armies;
- vii. Restoration of the independence of Belgium;
- viii. Restoration of Alsace and Lorraine to France;
- ix. A readjustment of Italian frontiers "along clearly recognizable lines of nationality";
- x. Autonomous development for the people of Austria-Hungary;
- xi. Restoration of Rumania, Serbia, and Montenegro, with access to the sea for Serbia;
- xii. Autonomous development for the people of Turkey, with the straits from the Black Sea to the Mediterranean "permanently opened";
- xiii. An independent Poland, "inhabited by indisputably Polish population," and with access to the sea;
- xiv. Establishment of a League of Nations.

League of Nations

The First generation of universal international institution, the League of Nations and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) emerged from what had been prematurely described as "the war to end all wars," World War I.¹²The First World War came to an end with the Treaty of

Versailles which was signed in 1919 in different sessions which were held from January to June. The final character of the Treaty of Versailles was determined almost entirely by the so called Big Three – Woodrow Wilson (U.S.A), Lloyd George (U.K) and Georges Clemenceau (France).¹³ President Wilson, the U.S leader who had reluctantly taken America into the First World War (1914-18), was desperately keen to ensure that in the post-war peace settlement a new world organization would be established which would be able to ensure perpetual peace. He was the statesman most committed to the idea of a League of Nations when the victorious powers met at Versailles to decide the terms of peace. It was Wilson's energy and commitment to the idea of a league, an idea which had been discussed and proposed by many idealistic people, including Jan Smuts of South Africa, Leonard Woolf, and many liberal intellectuals, which forced it onto the Versailles agenda, despite the fact that Clemenceau was deeply sceptical and Lloyd George was only lukewarm about the idea.¹⁴

The League of Nations formally came into existence on 10th January 1920 (Geneva), the same day on which the Treaty of Versailles came into operation. The League was undoubtedly the most daring and innovative proposal to reshape international relations to have put forward in the early 20th century. The League Covenant and the major organs of the new organization were aimed at establishing procedures for the peaceful resolution of international conflicts and disputes.¹⁵ The League had an agreed constitution which was outlined in the Covenant. It provided for a General Assembly and a Council. The assembly contained representatives of all member states who met annually. Each member had one vote. Its function was to decide on a general policy. The council had four permanent seats held by the victors of the First World War- Britain, France, Italy and Japan. The U.S would have held the fifth seat, but it did not join the League because it could not be passed in American Senate. At the time president Wilson led the treaties before the senate (10th July 1919) there were four distinct groups on the League issue. During the prolonged debate over the treaty more than three fourth of the members of the senate were ready to accept membership in the League in some form or other. The pro League democrats had enough votes to reject reservation requiring action by other League countries: the "mild reservationist" but pro-League Republican had enough votes to reject the League unless qualifications were attacked. This deadlock killed the League.¹⁶ In 1926, the number of permanent seats increased to five when Germany joined the League. There were four non-permanent seats that were filled by members elected by the General Assembly for a period of three years. The number

of temporary seats was raised to six in 1926 and to nine in 1929. The Council met at least three times a year. The decision of the Council had to be unanimous. Secretariat was established to carry out the day-to-day work. The Permanent Court of International Justice (Article 14 of Covenant) was also established with headquarters at The Hague in Holland. Its function was to offer 'advisory options' on legal disputes referred to it by Assembly or the Council. The above three new international organizations (The League of Nations, Permanent Court of International Justice and the International Labour Organisation, ILO) collectively constituted the "liberal, nation embracing, and anti-communist version of internationalism" that characterized the inter war period.¹⁷ The American President Woodrow Wilson believed that these institutions were so crucial to post-war peace that he abandoned many of his other "13 points" in order to secure agreement on the League- only to see the entire Versailles rejected by U.S Senate.

International Institutions as Peace Maker

In its role as peacemaker, in the 1920s the League got mixed success. It was able to resolve some political disputes. In 1920, there was a quarrel between Finland and Sweden over Aaland Island, and the League's verdict in favor of Finland was accepted. The next year Germany and Poland agreed to divide Upper Silesia between them. Similarly, when Greece invaded Bulgaria on the issue of some shooting incident, the League intervened and Greece agreed to withdraw troops and pay damage to Bulgaria. Turkey claimed the province of Mosul, an area very rich in oil-fields, which was part of British mandated territory of Iraq. The League's decision in favour of Iraq was accepted. The League intervened in settling squabbles in South America: between Peru and Colombia, and between Bolivia and Paraguay.

The prestige of the League suffered a setback when the Conference of Ambassadors in Paris overturned its decision. In 1924 British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, who belonged to the Labour Party and was an enthusiastic supporter of the League, introduced a resolution designed to commit all League members to a collective military action in the event of unprovoked aggression. Such an arrangement suited the French who supported the resolution. But in Britain, in 1925, the government changed and the new conservative government rejected the proposal. Collective Security System was laid down under Articles 10, 11 and 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations. Article 10 made it the obligation of every state 'to respect and preserve against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political

independence of all members of the League'. Article 11 stated the basic principle of collective security as 'any war or threat of war, whether immediately affecting any member of League or not, is hereby declared a matter of concern to the whole League'. Article 16 laid down the obligations and responsibilities of member states.¹⁸ It was supposed to be the key article, as it enabled the League to invoke economic or military sanctions against a defiant state. In practice every state could decide whether they wished to participate in economic or military sanctions. In practice every Under the League of Nations, the system of Collective Security was conceived as an instrument of thwarting any attempts of aggression. However, because of the disagreements and differences among the major powers that won the First World War, the League of Nations could only vaguely institutionalize the idea of collective security which lacked adequate provision.¹⁹ A key principle of League was that all decisions had to be by unanimous vote. Needless to say this made it very difficult, indeed well nigh impossible, for the league to act swiftly and effectively in times of international crisis.

In the 1930s, Japan and Germany flouted the League. In 1931, when Japan invaded Manchuria, a province of China, China appealed to the League. The League condemned this aggressive act and ordered Japan to withdraw. When Japan refused, the League appointed a commission under Lord Lytton, which reported that, since both sides were at fault, Manchuria should be governed by the League. Japan refused to withdraw its army from Manchuria. Instead it withdrew from the League in March 1933.²⁰ In this case the question of even economic sanctions was not raised because the West was reeling under economic crisis. In October 1935, Mussolini invaded Abyssinia (Ethiopia). Economic sanctions were imposed against Italy which was abandoned later. The reason was that, by this time, France and Britain had begun to perceive a threat from Hitler and did not want to annoy Mussolini. This had disastrous consequences. Hitler seizure of Ruhr, Hitler's Anschluss with Austria and Hitler's invasion of Czechoslovakia was also against the spirit of League of Nations.²¹ In October 1933 Germany withdrew from the League of Nations.

Conclusion

The First World War encouraged the world to invest in an International Organization to deal with conflict. Many believed that such an organization would help the world to avoid war. As a result, the League of Nations was born. However, despite its initial success, it could not prevent the Second World War (1939-1945).²² Many more people died

and were wounded in this war than ever before. Despite its failure to maintain peace and security, however, the League did at least provide evidence of a desire to establish an international institution capable of maintaining peace. In this sense it paved the way for the UN. The framers of UN Charter borrowed some elements of League structure in designing the new world IGO. For the future world organization the Lessons of the League such as- clear cut obligations, need for teeth, need for new procedures etc., are to be kept in mind. From the League's experience it was realized that a more universal body was needed.²³ The League had always been limited in its membership and so robbed of authority which many hoped it would have as a representative world body. The United States had never belonged. Germany belonged only for a brief between 1926 and 1933. The Soviet Union belonged for a still shorter time, between 1934 and her expulsion in 1939. Italy and Japan left in the early thirties. And huge areas of the world, then still under colonial rule, possessed no voice at all in the organization. To a large extent the League was run and controlled by Europe. There was a general demand that any new organization such as UNO should be in a much more real sense a world body. Above all the great powers should all be members and play a dominant role if it was to carry influence. The UNO was founded as a successor to the League of Nations. It was established in 1945 immediately after the Second World War.

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