Failure of the League of Nations

While the League of Nations had some success, it ultimately suffered many failures before its demise during World War II. These failures, especially in the 1930’s, cruelly exposed the weaknesses of the League of Nations and played a part in the outbreak of World War Two in 1939. During the 1920’s the failures of the League of Nations were essentially small-scale and did not threaten world peace. However, they did set a marker – that the League of Nations could not solve problems if the protagonists did not ‘play the game’.

Created at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the League’s Covenant was embedded in the text of the Treaty of Versailles at the insistence of its great patron, Woodrow Wilson. But when the U.S. Senate expressed reservations regarding the League, to protect U.S. sovereignty and freedom of action, the President rejected the arguments. The Senate then rejected the Treaty, and the United States never joined the League of Nations.

The League did have success in settling refugees after World War I, and some success with minor territorial disputes in Europe after the founding of several new countries in the east. However, it did not stop battles from taking place over territory, sending the message that the League would be weak in enforcing any of its proposed solutions to diplomatic or militaristic troubles. Article 11 of the League’s Covenant stated: “Any war or threat of war is a matter of concern to the whole League and the League shall take action that may safeguard peace.” Therefore, any conflict between nations, which ended in war and the victory of one state over another, had to be viewed as a failure by the League.

The first crisis the League had to face was in north Italy. In 1919, Italian nationalists, angered that the “Big Three” had broken promises to Italy at the Treaty of Versailles, captured the small port of Fiume. The Treaty of Versailles had given this port to Yugoslavia. The newly created played no part in the dispute, even though it had been set up with the specific task of maintaining peace.

The next crisis the League faced was at Teschen, which was a small town between Poland and Czechoslovakia. Its main importance was that it had valuable coalmines there, which both the Poles and the Czechs wanted. As both were newly created nations, both wanted to make their respective economies as strong as possible and the acquisition of rich coal mines would certainly help in this respect. In January 1919, Polish and Czech troops fought in the streets of Teschen. The League was called on to help, and decided that the bulk of the town should go to Poland while Czechoslovakia should have one of Teschen’s suburbs. This suburb contained the most valuable coalmines and the Poles refused to accept this decision. Though no more wholesale violence took place, the two countries continued to argue over the issue for the next twenty years.

Many years before 1920, Vilna had been taken over by Russia. Historically, Vilna had been the capital of Lithuania when the state had existed in the Middle Ages. After World War One, Lithuania had been re-established and Vilna seemed the natural choice for its capital.
However, by 1920, 30% of the population was from Poland with Lithuanians only making up 2% of the city’s population. In 1920, the Poles seized Vilna. Lithuania asked for League help but the Poles could not be persuaded to leave the city. Vilna stayed in Polish hands until the outbreak of World War Two. The use of force by the Poles had won.

In 1920, Poland invaded land held by the Russians. The Poles quickly overwhelmed the Russian army and made a swift advance into Russia. By 1921, the Russians had no choice but to sign the Treaty of Riga, which handed over to Poland nearly 80,000 square kilometres of Russian land. This one treaty all but doubled the size of Poland. The League’s response was to take no action. Russia by 1919 was communist and this “plague from the East” was greatly feared by the West.

The Treaty of Versailles had ordered Weimar Germany to pay reparations for war damages. These could either be paid in money or in kind (goods to the value of a set amount). In 1922, the Germans failed to pay an instalment. The Allies refused to accept this and the anti-German feeling at this time was still strong. Both France and Belgium believed that some form of strong action was needed to ‘teach Germany a lesson’. In 1923, contrary to League rules, French and Belgian troops invaded the Ruhr – Germany’s most important industrial zone. Within Europe, France was seen as a senior League member – like Britain – and the anti-German feeling that was felt throughout Europe allowed both France and Belgium to break their own rules as were introduced by the League.

For the League to enforce its will, it needed the support of its major backers in Europe, Britain and France. Yet France was one of the invaders and Britain was a major supporter of her. To other nations, it seemed that if you wanted to break League rules, you could. Few countries criticized what France and Belgium did. But the example they set for others in future years was obvious. The League clearly failed on this occasion, primarily because it was seen to be involved in breaking its own rules.

All of these failures were secondary to the much larger crises in the 1930’s. What they did show the world was that the League could not enforce a settlement, and dictators were keen to exploit this where they could.

In Asia, Japan defied the League’s directives. In Europe, Mussolini would test the League’s resolve with Italy’s invasion of Abyssinia. In December 1934, a dispute about the border between Abyssinia and the Italian Somaliland flared into fighting. In January 1935, Haile Selassie, the emperor of Abyssinia, asked the League to arbitrate. In July 1935, the League banned arms sales to either side, and in September 1935, it appointed a five-power committee to arbitrate. In October 1935, the League’s committee suggested that Italy should have some land in Abyssinia. Instead, Italy’s 100,000-strong army invaded Abyssinia. The Italian troops used poison gas and attacked Red Cross hospitals. Britain and France refused to intervene. In December 1935, news leaked out about the Hoare-Laval Pact - a secret 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. By May 1936, Italy had conquered Abyssinia.