

A History of the League of Nations

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The official opening of the League of Nations. Courtesy of the Library of Norway.

The League of Nations was an international organization based in Geneva, Switzerland. It was created after the First World War as a forum for countries to come together and resolve international disputes.

The idea for the League was first proposed by President Woodrow Wilson as part of his plan to establish peace in Europe. However, the United States never became a member.

The last of the Fourteen Points

After the chaos of World War I, Wilson wanted to help establish stability and peace in Europe. He created a list of ideas to do so, calling it his Fourteen Points.

Speaking before the U.S. Congress on January 8, 1918, Wilson brought up the last of his Fourteen Points: a "general association of nations."

Many of Wilson's previous points would be more difficult to put into place. In calling for the formation of a "general association of nations," Wilson voiced the wartime opinions of many diplomats and thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. They believed there was a need for a new type of standing international organization dedicated to fostering international cooperation, providing security for its members, and ensuring a lasting peace.

After four years of brutal war, Europe's population had been reduced considerably. Many in the United States were optimistic that a new organization would be able to solve the international disputes that had led to war in 1914, so Wilson's outline of a League of Nations was wildly popular. However, it proved exceptionally difficult to create, and Wilson left office never having convinced the United States to join it.

Including the League in the Treaty of Versailles

The hatred for war, shared by many countries, was the main idea that led to the creation of the League of Nations. This was reflected in all of Wilson's Fourteen Points. The points were based on theories of international security and organization that had been debated among philosophers, politicians and law experts before and during the war. After adopting many of these ideas, Wilson took up the cause with excitement. He tried to whip up enthusiasm for the organization as he traveled to the Paris Peace Conference in January 1919.

The Treaty of Versailles was being written at this conference. The treaty was a peace agreement between the participants of World War I. It said that Germany was to blame for the war, should pay for damages it caused and must give back land it took from other countries. Many countries debated about how the treaty was written and how land should be divided.

Wilson used his tremendous influence to introduce the idea of the League of Nations in the Treaty of Versailles. An effective League, he believed, would increase cooperation between countries and make them less upset about the terms of the treaty.

Wilson and other major leaders, Georges Clemenceau of France and David Lloyd George of the United Kingdom, drafted the Covenant of the League of Nations as Part I of the Treaty of Versailles. Most important for Wilson, the League would establish the official borders of countries and protect the political independence of states that belonged to it. It would also allow the League to take "any action...to safeguard the peace," and create the procedures to punish countries that did not comply with the agreement.

Many Republican politicians did not like the idea

The Treaty of Versailles caused great division in the U.S. Politicians debated the role of the U.S. in world affairs for years: Should the U.S. be heavily involved in the problems of other countries or focus on problems at home? Wilson returned to the United States in February 1919 to submit the Treaty and Covenant to Congress for its ratification.

While popular support for the League was still strong, opposition had already begun. Spearheading the challenge was the Senate majority leader, Henry Cabot Lodge.

Lodge spoke for Republicans who opposed the League. They feared getting too involved in Europe's politics, which had become more complex because of the 1919 peace settlement. The Republicans believed the United States should stay focused on affairs on its side of the world, as it had traditionally done.

In March 1920, the Treaty and Covenant were defeated by a 49-35 Senate vote. Later that year, Warren Harding was elected president on a platform that opposed a League of Nations.

The League idea spawned the United Nations

The United States never joined the League. Most historians believe the League operated much less effectively without U.S. participation than it would have otherwise.

However, even while they didn't want to become members of the League, the Republican Presidents of the period actually agreed with many of the League's goals. The Harding, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover administrations associated the United States with League efforts on several issues.

However, members of the U.S. Congress were worried that too much cooperation with the League would eventually lead to the United States joining. So they helped make sure the U.S. kept its distance from the League.

Additionally, growing disappointment with the Treaty of Versailles lessened support for the League in the United States and the international community. Over time, the Treaty of Versailles was discredited as being impossible to enforce or too extreme in its beliefs.

Soon enough, World War II arrived. It once again demonstrated the need for an effective international organization to mediate disputes.

The U.S. Congress and Franklin Roosevelt's administration then came together to support the creation of the new United Nations.