**Cambridge IGCSE Core Content Option B:**

**The 20th Century: International Relations since 1919**

**Part 2: To what extent was the League of Nations a success?**

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**Background**

During WW1 a number of statesmen began discussing ways to avoid another international conflict. Although a number of options were considered, in the end it was decided to adopt an idea supported by the South African leader Jan Smuts and US President Woodrow Wilson: form a League of Nations.

According to the **Covenant of the League of Nations** its primary aim was to preserve world peace, but it also attempted to promote international cooperation over a wide range of economic and social problems, including disarmament. Although the League had clearly failed in its main aim when WW2 broke out in September 1939, it did resolve some earlier conflicts and performed some useful work in tackling international problems.

**Strengths and weaknesses of the League’s structure and organisation**

The main bodies of the League were:

The Secretariat

* This was the civil service of the League
* It performed all the administrative and financial work:
* Organised conferences
* Distributed agendas
* Monitored budgets
* Published reports

The Assembly

* Met once a year
* Every member of the League had one vote
* Considered matters of general policy
* Controlled the League’s budget
* Admitted new members
* Elected non-permanent members of the Council

The Council

* The executive body of the League
* Met four or five times a year in times of crisis
* Had permanent and non-permanent members
* In 1920 the permanent members were Britain, France, Italy and Japan
* In 1926 Germany became a permanent member
* Number of non-permanent members increased from 4 in 1920 to 11 in 1936

Two largely independent bodies closely associated with the League were:

The Permanent Court of International Justice

* Based in the Hague
* Offered arbitration to countries in dispute
* Provided legal advice to the Council
* Staffed by 11 judges and four deputy judges elected for 9 years by the Council and Assembly

The International Labour Organisation (ILO)

* Based in Geneva
* Included representatives of government, employers and workers among its various committees
* Purpose was to promote good working practices with regard to issues such as working hours, women’s rights, child labour, employers’ liability

The League also set up a number of agencies, committees and commissions:

* **Mandates Commission** – supervised the administration of Germany’s and Turkey’s former colonies by the victorious countries, especially Britain and France.
* **Danzig Commission** – exercised direct League control over the former German city
* **Minorities Commission** – attempted to address ill-treatment of racial minorities
* **Intellectual Cooperation Organisation** – promoted cultural exchanges and intellectual contact between academics, artists and writers
* **Special Committee for Drug Traffic** – campaigned to reduce drug misuse and drug smuggling

**Membership**

The effectiveness of the League of Nations was limited from the start because of the absence of many countries and lack of commitment from others:

* **USA** – the American Senate thought the League would drag them into future wars. Their refusal to join meant the League was deprived of the world’s most wealthy and influential country. This limited the League’s prestige and ability to take action against aggressive countries
* **Germany** – wasn’t allowed to join until it had demonstrated peaceful intentions. This made the league look like a club for victorious powers closely associated with the Treaty of Versailles. Germany was allowed to join in 1926 and became a permanent member of the Council, but Hitler withdrew Germany when coming to power in 1933.
* **USSR (Russia)** – wasn’t invited to join the League because it was communist and committed to the overthrow of capitalism and countries such as Britain, France and Japan had been actively assisting the counter-revolution during the 1918-21 Russian Civil War. Later there was more tolerance on both sides and Russia did join in 1934, only to be expelled in December 1939 following the invasion of Finland
* **Japan** – was an original member but left in 1937 following the invasion of Manchuria and imposition of sanctions
* **Britain and France** – the only major members of the League throughout its existence. They had both been weakened by WW1 and had to shoulder responsibility for trying to make the League work. Yet Britain was also concerned with trying to maintain its empire while France was more concerned with increasing security against Germany. The League often took second place in the minds of British and French politicians.

**Collective Security**

Collective security was the intended means by which the League was to maintain peace. There were up to three stages to stopping an aggressive power:

1. Moral disapproval – following an act of aggression the Council would meet and vote to condemn the action in the hope that knowing the weight of world opinion was against it the aggressive country would back down
2. Economic sanctions – if moral disapproval failed the Council could impose economic sanctions on the aggressor through trade boycotts and refusal of credit
3. Military sanctions – if economic sanctions failed the Council could send an army to assist the victim of the aggression

In theory this new system looked promising but there were several significant weaknesses:

1. The absence of the USA would reduce the effectiveness of moral disapproval and sanctions
2. All decisions of the Assembly or Council had to be unanimous – i.e. just one negative vote (apart from by the aggressor country itself) would make a motion fail
3. The League did not have an army itself. If military sanctions were to be used, member states would be asked to contribute to a military force. This would take time and there was no guarantee an appropriate army could be assembled. In reality, military force couldn’t be used where a major country was threatening world peace

**Work of the League’s agencies/humanitarian work**

As well as trying to resolve disputes the League attempted to deal with social, economic and military issues that affected peace and well-being in the world through various agencies. The most important were:

**The Refugee Organisation** – faced the problem of many WW1 prisoners-of-war being stranded in Russia, Poland, France, Germany and Turkey. There were about 250,000 Russian s in German or French camps and 300,000 German and Austro-Hungarian soldiers in Russian camps. Also more than 1 million Greeks were made homeless during the 1919-23 Turkish War of Independence. The Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen and his staff worked on a very small budget with the Red Cross to help 450,000 return to their homes or find new homes between 1920 and 1922. Nansen’s work was an imaginative and logistical triumph that brought nothing but praise and thanks for the work of the League

**The Health Organisation** – under the inspirational leadership of Ludwig Rajchman this was one of the most successful of the League agencies. It established links with non-member countries such as Germany, Russia and the USA to provide an information service, technical assistance and advice on health matters. It helped Russia prevent a typhus epidemic in Siberia, in part by organising a public education campaign on health and sanitation. It also helped reduce leprosy and began an international campaign to exterminate mosquitoes, so reducing the spread of malaria and yellow fever. It helped set up research institutions in London, Copenhagen and Singapore which developed vaccines for diphtheria, tetanus and TB. It later became the World Health Organisation, affiliated to the UN.

**The Economic and Financial Organisation** – Following WW1 a number of countries faced economic crisis. Austria was danger of financial collapse. The League devised a rescue plan to bring expenditure into line with reduced revenues. Action was taken to stabilise the currency by controlling interest rate, the circulation of banknotes and the issuing of credit. Austria was also given a large loan. Trade revived, unemployment fell and the budget was balanced. Similarly successful rescue programmes were devised for Hungary, Greece and Bulgaria

**The International Labour Organisation** – this was led by French socialist Albert Thomas Its main objective was to improve working conditions. It collected and published data on working conditions and issued recommendations including the eight-hour working day, the 48-hour working week, annual paid holidays, the right to join trade unions and a minimum employment age. It also published information on health and safety, including demonstrating that using white lead was dangerous. Implementation of recommendations was patchy but it became increasingly difficult for member states to ignore it.

**The Slavery Commission** – aimed to stamp out slavery, slave dealing and practices such as forcing women and children into prostitution. Successes included the freeing of 200,000 slaves in Sierra Leone and the reduction of the death rate for African workers on the Tanganyikan railway from 50% to 4%. Iraq, Jordan and Nepal abolished slavery altogether. However, success was not universal and ‘white slave’ traffic has continued to be a serious social problem.

**The Disarmament Commission** – Article 8 of the League Covenant had called on all nations to disarm ‘to the lowest point consistent with national safety’. However, by the end of the 1920s only the defeated powers disarmed – and that was because they were forced to. A minor success was organising the 1921 Washington Naval Conference. This led to agreement on naval limitation by the USA, Britain, France and Japan.

The Commission failed to convene a World Disarmament Conference before 1932 (see below).

**Successes and failures in peacekeeping during the 1920s**

**Successes:**

* **Aaland Islands, 1921** – these islands in the Baltic Sea were claimed by both Sweden and Finland. Most of the islanders wanted to be ruled by Sweden. The League investigated and awarded the islands to Finland but with safeguards for the islanders including demilitarisation. Sweden accepted the judgment.
* **Upper Silesia, 1921** – this valuable industrial area was on the border between Germany and Poland. It was granted to Poland in a the draft Treaty of Versailles but following German protests it was agreed to hold a plebiscite. The overall result suggested it should be awarded to Germany but in some rural parts there was a clear majority in favour of Poland. Following riots and protests the League proposed a partition which both sides accepted: Eastern Upper Silesia went to Poland; Western Upper Silesia to Germany.
* **Mosul, 1924** – in 1924 Turkey claimed this Kurdish-populated province of British-mandated Iraq. The league investigated and made an award in favour of Iraq. Turkey accepted the judgment.
* **Bulgaria, 1925** – Greece was ordered to pay £45,000 compensation to Bulgaria after its invasion of Bulgarian territory. This invasion was judged a disproportionate response to a shooting incident on the shared border in which a Greek sentry was killed in an exchange of fire. Greece accepted the ruling, but felt she had been unfairly treated.

**Failures:**

* **Vilna, 1920** – this city with a largely Polish population was made capital of the newly created state of Lithuania. A Polish army seized the city in 1920. Lithuania appealed to the League. The League asked Polish troops to withdraw while a plebiscite was arranged. Poland refused. The matter was passed to the Conference of Ambassadors who awarded Vilna to Poland.
* **Occupation of the Ruhr, 1923 –** when Germany defaulted on its reparations repayment in 1922 the matter should have been referred to the League. Instead, France and Belgium ordered troops to occupy the Ruhr in January 1923. This seemed to confirm the impression that the League was little more than a victors’ club for the pursuit of victors’ interests.
* **Corfu Incident, 1923 –** In August 1923 Italian Prime Minister Mussolini ordered the naval bombardment and occupation of the Greek island of Corfu in response to the murder of an Italian general and some of his staff who had been patrolling part of the border frontier between Greece and Albania. The murders had taken place on Greek soil. Mussolini had demanded 50 million lira compensation and the execution of the assassins but Greece had been unable to locate the culprits.

Greece appealed to the League. Their initial response was to condemn the invasion but Mussolini insisted final arbitration should go to the Conference of Ambassadors. They ordered Greece to pay the compensation and Italy to withdraw its troops from Corfu.

It seemed Italy’s bullying tactics had paid off and that Greece had to pay an excessive amount of compensation. The Conference of Ambassadors seemed to have taken the line of least resistance without regard to the principles of international justice. This incident exposed the ineffectiveness of the League when dealing with a relatively major power.

Further evidence of weakness of the League in the 1920s can be found in the fact that some important international agreements were made outside the League:

* **Locarno Treaties, 1925** – the mutual frontiers of France, Belgium and Germany were agreed amongst these countries and with the support of Britain and Italy.
* **Kellogg-Briand Pact, 1928** – beginning with France and the US, in total 65 countries signed this pact renouncing war. It amounted to little more than an international statement of good intentions
* France also made various pacts with Eastern European countries including Poland and Czechoslovakia

It was clear that even leading members of the League had little faith in its ability to deal with a major challenge.

**The impact of the World Depression on the work of the League after 1929**

In October 1929 the Wall St Crash marked the beginning of a worldwide economic recession. There was a dramatic contraction in production and trade and a steep rise in unemployment over the next three years. Every country was affected, especially the USA and Germany, where unemployment peaked at 6 million – approximately one third of the workforce. Other consequences included:

* Reduced inclination of League members to impose economic sanctions as all countries were desperate to maintain their existing trade contacts
* Extremists coming to power in Germany – the Nazis had been a fringe party with less than 3% support before the Depression but they picked up support during it
* Encouraged militarism in Japan – the Japanese army realised Japan’s survival depended on overseas trade. In 1931 they decided to take the law into their own hands (see below)
* Governments were under pressure to balance the books. Serious rearmament was delayed so League members lacked the military means to deal with aggressors
* Countries became under pressure to find new markets and sources of raw materials. One way this could be done was through colonisation or the annexation of new territories. This was likely to involve war.

In short, the Depression made the work of the league very much more difficult.

In the 1930s there were still some positive achievements of the League. Agencies, committees and commissions continued good work. The Saar Commission, for example, successfully organised the plebiscite which led to the return of the region to Germany in January 1935. Also, border disputes between Bolivia and Paraguay and between Peru and Columbia were resolved.

However, on the whole it was a disastrous decade for the League. It was proven to be completely inadequate in the face of determination to pursue national rather than international interests:

**Manchuria**

Manchuria was a province of north-east China with part of its southern frontier bordering Korea. It was a sparsely populated province, rich in mineral wealth, agricultural land and forestry.

Since 1905 the Japanese had been in control in Korea, with trading rights extending into Manchuria. Japanese guards were permitted along the route of the South Manchurian Railway to maintain order in a chaotic area and protect Japanese business interests.

Japan was very badly affected by the Depression. Japan depended on imports to feed its rapidly growing population. These had to be paid for with exports. Japan’s main export commodity was silk – a luxury. As exports declined due to falling overseas demand Japan faced a growing economic crisis.

Manchuria seemed to offer the answer to Japan’s problems: it could provide a source of food and raw materials, a market for Japanese exports and land for the surplus Japanese population.

In September 1931 Japanese soldiers staged an incident on the South Manchurian railway at Mukden and used the excuse of Chinese banditry to launch an invasion of the local area. China appealed to the League. The Japanese government promised to withdraw, but it soon became clear that the civilian government was no longer in control of events. The Japanese army proceeded to occupy the whole area. In March 1932 Manchuria was renamed Manchukuo.

At this stage the League could have called for sanctions, but failed to do so because:

* None of the European powers wanted to reduce their trade with the Far East and let US firms take over lost business
* Military sanctions would have involved sending a naval task force to the other side of the world with uncertain prospects of success
* Britain and France feared sanctions against Japan might provoke attacks on their colonies in the Far East which included Hong Kong and Singapore

So the League appointed Lord Lytton to lead a commission of enquiry to Manchuria. Together with a four-man team, including a representative from the US, Lytton spent six weeks in the province and concluded that although the Japanese were provoked by the Chinese, the invasion was not justified.

The Lytton Report was considered by the League Assembly in February 1933. The findings were accepted by a vote of 42 to 1. Japan’s response was to leave the League.

The League had not acted quickly enough. By the time Lytton arrived in the Far East in April 1932 the invasion was a fait accompli and the Japanese were strengthening their control in Manchuria. The Assembly finally voted 18 months after the original Japanese action.

Perhaps the League could never have done anything to resolve the crisis. With neither the USA nor Russia members of the League the European powers couldn’t call upon nearby military forces and the chances of economic sanctions working at a time of world recession were slim.

**Failure of the World Disarmament Conference, 1932-34**

The arms race and in particular the naval arms race between Britain and Germany was considered to have been a cause of WW1. After 1918 disarmament was considered to be vital to promoting world peace.

The Disarmament Commission arranged a Disarmament Conference to meet in Geneva between 1932 and 1934 to debate issues around disarmament and agree resolutions. 54 states attended the Conference. Although disarmament was a particularly attractive idea at a time of Depression, individual states did not trust each other:

* France, Poland and Czechoslovakia were all worried about their future defensive security in the event of an attack by Germany and were reluctant to place their faith in a system of collective security that had already shown flaws
* France was only willing to disarm if additional guarantees were provided by Britain and the US. Such guarantees were not provided
* Hitler had no intention of disarming. He used the excuse that France was not serious about disarming to leave the Conference. Shortly afterwards Germany left the League
* With the exit of Japan it soon became clear that general disarmament was not going to happen

In 1935 Hitler announced his violations of the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles and German military build-up began. Japan and Italy soon followed.

**Abyssinia**

Abyssinia was the last independent state in Africa. It was ruled by Emperor Haile Selassie. It was between Italy’s other territories in East Africa: Eritrea and Somaliland. In 1896 an Italian army had been humiliatingly defeated at Adowa in northern Abyssinia in a failed attempt to colonise the country. Ever since then Italians had been set upon revenge.

Mussolini was looking for ways to boost his popularity. War with Abyssinia looked like a low-risk way of achieving this. Conquest of Abyssinia would also help to resolve the disappointments of 1919 when Italy failed to get a significant share of Germany’s and Turkey’s colonies. The Abyssinian army, equipped with outdated rifles and spears and arrows was unlikely to be a match for Italian tanks, planes and poison gas.

Following a border incident at Wal Wal in December 1934 Mussolini began a build-up of Italian forces in Eritrea and Somaliland. The two-pronged attack involving 250,000 men was launched in October 1935 without any formal declaration of war. The world was shocked at the ruthlessness of Italian action as primitive villages and small towns were destroyed with modern military equipment.

The invasion was a clear example of unprovoked aggression. The League condemned it and imposed economic sanctions. For a while it seemed strong and resolute. But it soon became clear economic sanctions were having little impact because:

* Essential war materials such as oil and coal were not included in the list of banned goods to trade
* The Suez Canal, Italy’s main link to Africa, was kept open for fear of possible Italian naval attacks on the British colonies Gibraltar and Malta

In December 1935 the British and French governments drew up a secret deal – the Hoare-Laval Pact. Italy would receive two-thirds of Abyssinia in return for stopping the war. The remaining mountainous area of Abyssinia would be compensated by being given a narrow strip of territory to provide access to the sea through Italian Eritrea.

Mussolini indicated that he would accept this deal, but news of it leaked to the French press. In a storm of public protest the plan was abandoned and foreign ministers Hoare and Laval resigned.

The war continued. The Abyssinian capital, Addis Ababa, was captured in May 1936. Sanctions were lifted in July 1936.

The League had failed to give effective help to Abyssinia. During the crisis Britain and France had been pursuing contradictory objectives. On the one hand they felt duty-bound to support the League, but on the other they were fearful of offending Italy in case it made Italy become an ally of Germany. This latter motive became dominant as Germany was increasingly feared.

The League never recovered from this blow. Italy were so offended at the imposition of even limited sanctions that it left the League in 1937 and became an ally of Germany anyway.

**Aftermath**

While the committees and commissions of the League continued to perform useful, if largely unpublicised, work during the late 1930s, the league was ignored on most major foreign policy issues.

The League played little or no part in the diplomacy leading up to the Anschluss between Germany and Austria in March 1938. It wasn’t consulted over the Sudetenland Crisis and Munich Conference of September 1938. Britain and France realised the only way to check Germany was to re-arm and seek military allies.

In the 1930s three of the permanent members of the Council – Japan, Italy and Germany had left the League. Soviet Russia was expelled for invading Finland in November 1939. Following the German invasion of Poland in September 1939 there were no further meetings of the league until April 1946 when it was wound up and its assets transferred to the newly formed United Nations.

Although the League had failed on the whole, elements of the League such as the Permanent Court of International Justice and the International Labour Organisation were built into the UN. The UN also had a similar structure in the form of an assembly and council. The central ideas of collective security and working together to solve the world’s social and economic problems lived on.

**Useful Websites**

**The National Archives**

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/themes/league-of-nations.htm

**History Learning Site**

http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/leagueofnations.htm

**BBC History**

http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/wwone/league\_nations\_01.shtml

**Spartacus Educational**

http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/FWWleague.htm

**The Avalon Project**

http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th\_century/leagcov.asp

**History Today**

http://www.historytoday.com/ruth-henig/league-nations-league-its-own

**GCSE History**

http://www.gcsehistory.org.uk/modernworld/interwarperiod/index.htm