

4 The League years, 1919–1936

A

We must seek by the creation of some international organisation to limit the burden of armaments and diminish the probability of war.

Lloyd George, 5th January 1918.

B

Point 14: A general association of nations must be formed to give guarantees of political independence and territorial integrity to great and small states alike.

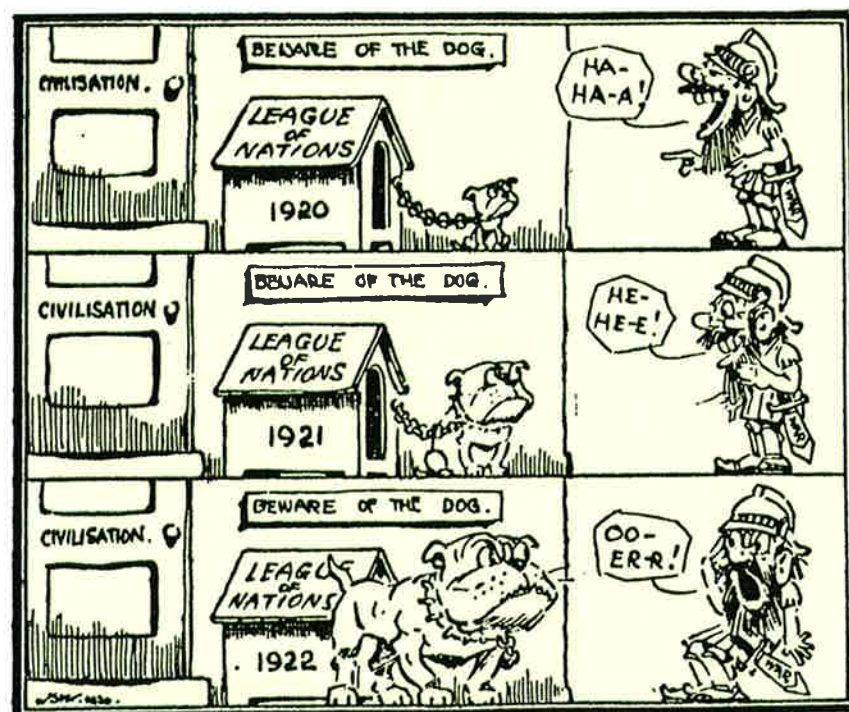
President Woodrow Wilson, 8th January 1918.

Several months before the First World War ended, the Allies began to make clear their war aims. Lloyd George and Woodrow Wilson saw the need to establish an international association to maintain world peace. By the time that the two leaders met at Versailles, the massive death toll and huge destruction of property had convinced them that future international conflicts had to be avoided.

The body that was formed out of Wilson's 14th Point was called the League of Nations. The League's aims and objectives were set out in 26 articles known as the Covenant. Each of the peace treaties contained the 26 Articles and, therefore, those countries which signed the treaties were agreeing in principle with the philosophy of the League. President Wilson

hoped that the Covenant would bind together the signatories and that this would lead to the removal of future international wars. So, for many countries the League offered the idea of collective security. This meant that all members would act together if any member were threatened by an aggressive nation.

OUR WATCH DOG.



So, the League began its life at a time of great optimism, and, during the 1920s, it did have some successes. However, in the 1930s there was a series of failures over Manchuria, Abyssinia, and German infringements of the Treaty of Versailles. By the late 1930s, the League was so discredited that it was unable to prevent war breaking out again in Europe – only 20 years after the end of the 'Great War'.

An optimistic view of the future power of the League of Nations, published in the *Daily Graphic* in June 1920

The aims and organisation of the League

Aims

The main aim of the League was, of course, to keep peace in the world and it was, therefore, committed to reducing armaments. If there were any disputes between nations then peaceful means would be used. But the League had other

important aims – it was to look after the new mandated territories, improve world working and health conditions, abolish slavery, and help refugees.

The organisation of the League would help to achieve its aims and the diagram below shows how the League worked.

The structure of the League of Nations

The Assembly

The Assembly met once a year, and each member country regardless of size had one vote. The Assembly fixed the League's budget and would elect non-permanent members to the Council. Any resolutions that the Assembly made could be ignored by members.

The Council

The Council was made up of the four Great Powers – Britain, France, Italy, and Japan. These were the permanent members and the non-permanent members were chosen in rotation by other members in the Assembly. The Council was designed to cope with emergencies and could be called together at short notice. Any decisions it made had to be unanimous.

The International Court of Justice

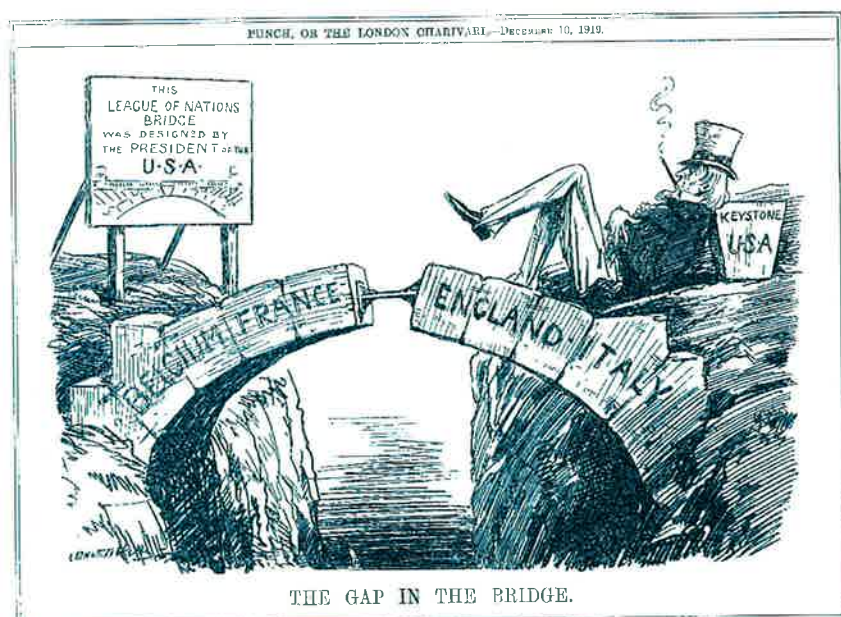
This was set up to deal with any legal disputes that members might have. There were 15 judges from 15 different member states and its headquarters was at The Hague in the Netherlands.

The Secretariat

To ensure that the administrative work of the League was carried out effectively and efficiently, there was a Secretariat. This consisted of a Secretary-General and civil servants (chosen from member states). The headquarters of the League was in Geneva, Switzerland.

Agencies and Commissions

There was a wide range of other bodies which were created to fulfil the League's aims – the International Labour Organisation, Mandates Commission, and the Minorities Commission were among the more important.

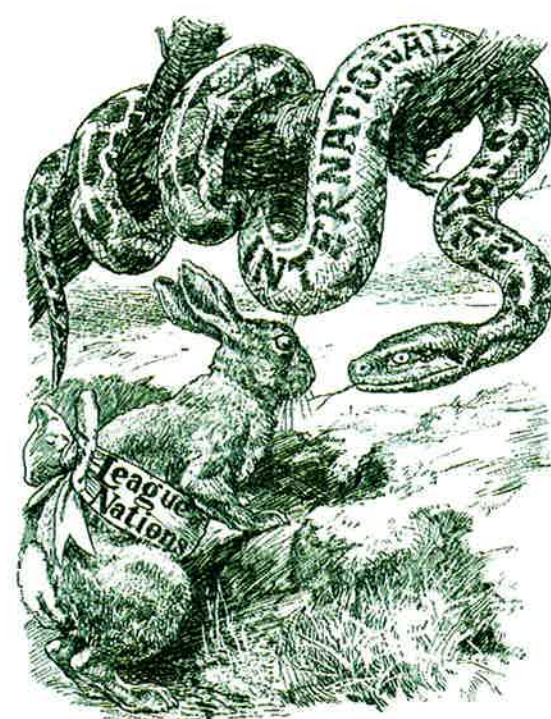


▲ The view of *Punch* in December 1919 on America's decision not to join the League of Nations

But, despite the high hopes that nations had for the League, there were initial problems which showed up its many weaknesses. The League did not contain all nations. The United States of America decided not to join – Congress voted against American membership and this left out the world's strongest power. Russia was not allowed to join because her leaders were keen to promote world revolution, and this was contrary to the ideals of the League. The Central Powers (Germany, Austria, Bulgaria, and Turkey) were not allowed to join, initially, as a punishment for having caused the War. It was, therefore, difficult to see the League as a body which spoke for the world. The map opposite shows the development of the membership of the League during the 1920s and 1930s.

Perhaps the most important weakness of the League was its inability to stop any state ignoring its decisions. The League could apply diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and even military measures to enforce a member to toe the line. However, the League was never able to call on its members to create an international peace-keeping force. This lack of any real

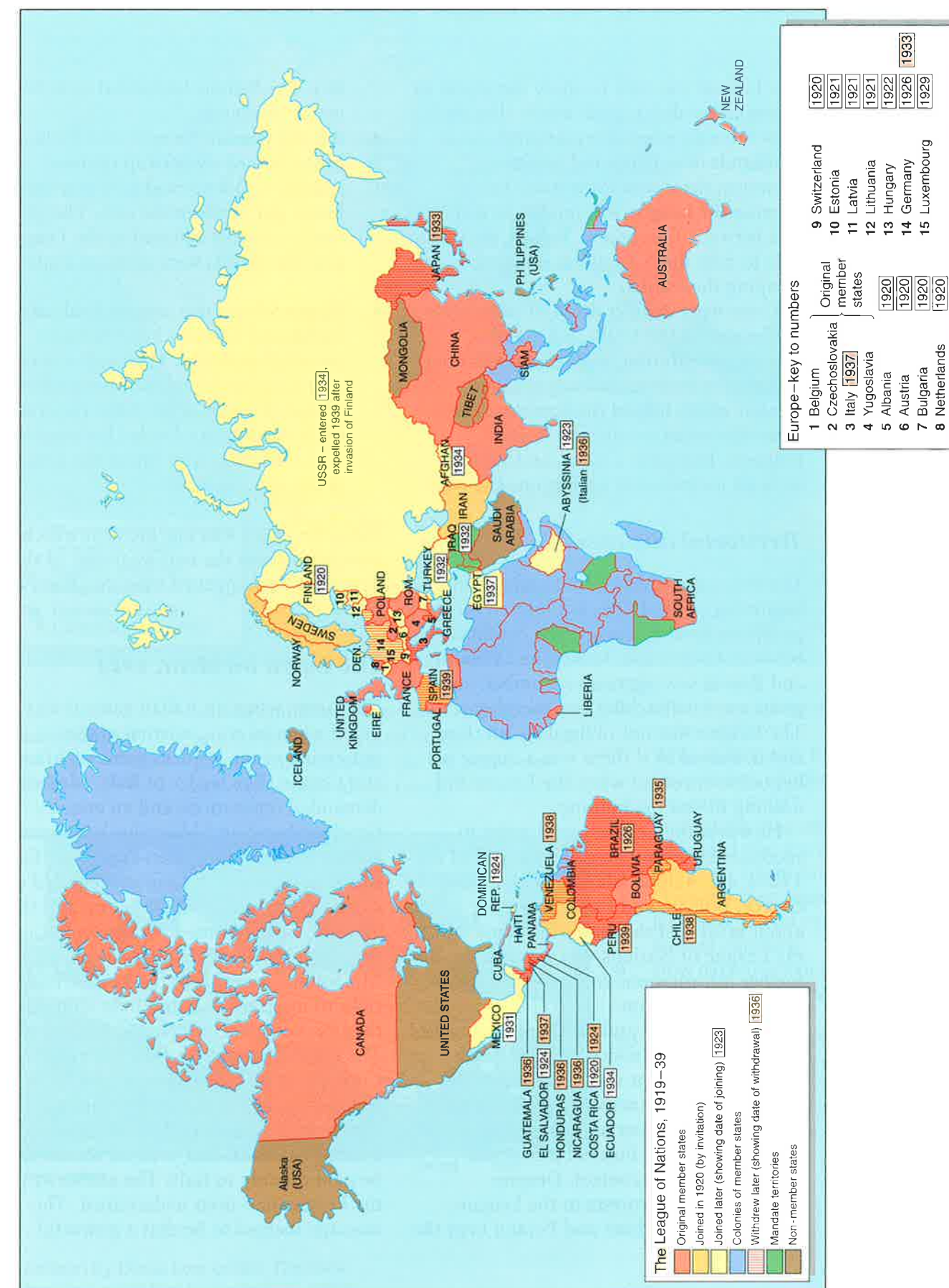
military power meant that in a crisis the League would be unable to combat any nation which used force. It soon became clear that if the stronger nations of the world wished to settle issues without using the League then it was powerless. Military measures were never applied and sanctions were used only once (against Italy, and then rather halfheartedly).



The Rabbit: "MY OFFENSIVE EQUIPMENT BEING PRACTICALLY NIL, IT REMAINS FOR ME TO FASCINATE HIM WITH THE POWER OF MY EYE."

▲ This *Punch* cartoon from 1936 shows the weakness of the League in combating aggression

- 1 Why were world leaders optimistic in 1920 that future wars could be avoided?
- 2 What were the main aims of the League of Nations?
- 3 Describe how the most important bodies of the League operated.
- 4 To what extent could critics of the League say that it did not speak for the whole world? You may need to refer to the map to answer this question.
- 5 What measures could the League take to ensure that members followed its decisions?



The work of the League in the 1920s

The League was able to show the world its potential for doing good works directly after the war, when it repatriated thousands of soldiers and refugees. However, there was some irony here, because the League was unable to stop the war between Greece and Turkey, yet it was able to help the 1.5 million refugees escaping the conflict.

There were distinct areas of success for the League in the 1920s, e.g. against slavery, prostitution, and drug trafficking. There were even economic packages created which helped the economies of some European countries – Austria, Bulgaria, Hungary, Greece, and Estonia were all recipients of such economic help.

Territorial disputes

The two wars which were fought at the beginning of the 1920s did foretell future problems for the League. The conflicts between Greece and Turkey, and Poland and Russia saw aggressive member states go to war by attacking non-member states. The League was not obliged to interfere and it seemed as if there was a degree of hypocrisy involved when the League did nothing to end the fighting.

However the League could point to successes in several areas by the end of the 1920s, e.g. Aaland Islands, Silesia, Iraq, Greece, Bolivia, and Peru. Below are details about several of the major incidents which the League of Nations was involved in. For further information, you will need to look at the map opposite.

- **Vilna:** Poland and Lithuania quarrelled over this city which had a mixed population but was predominantly Polish. Lithuania was created in the peace settlement and its capital was to be Vilna. The Poles objected and simply seized control. Despite Lithuania's protests to the League, nothing was done and Poland kept the

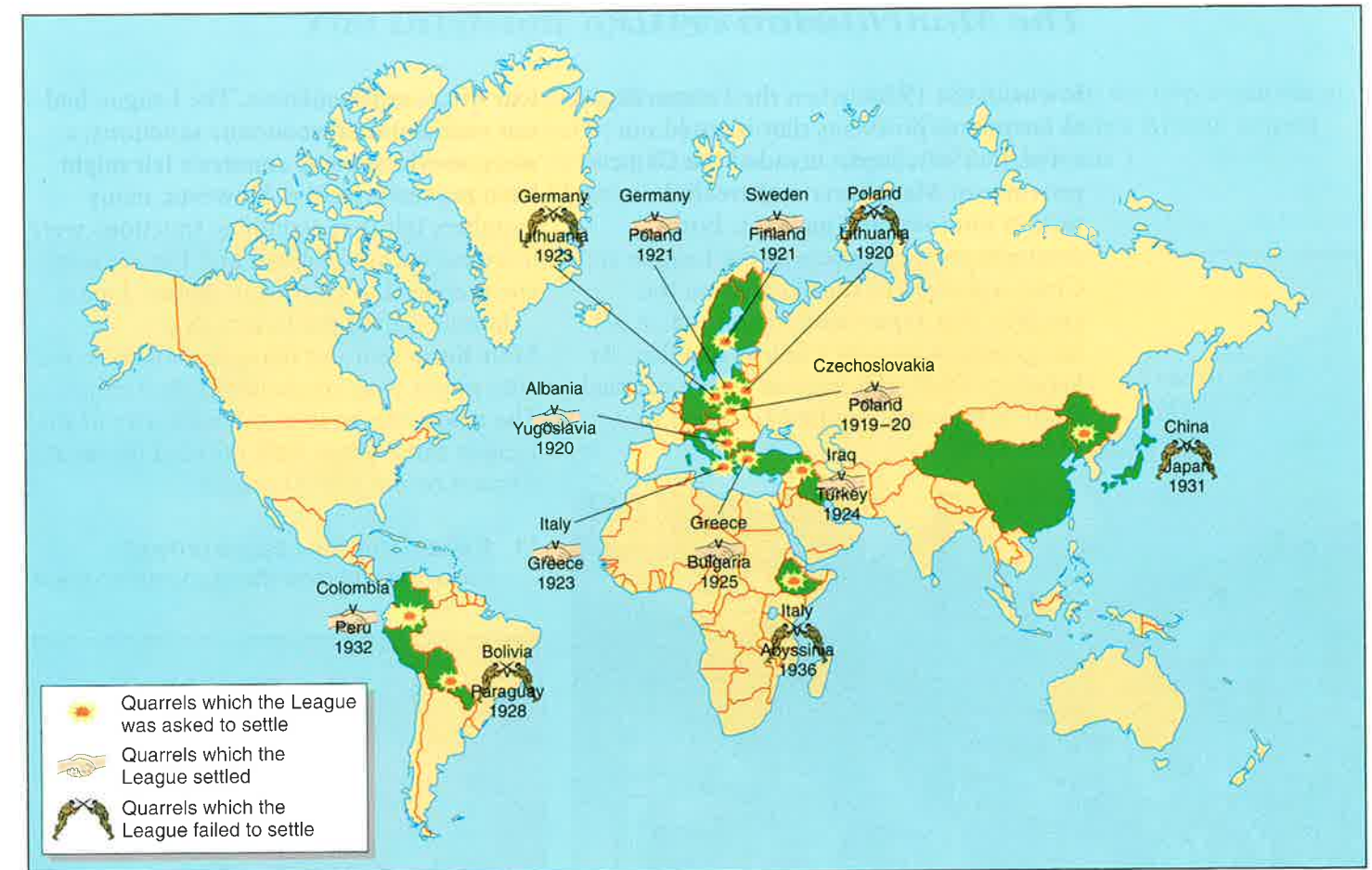
city. The League had failed in its first major challenge.

- **Aaland Islands:** Sweden and Finland both claimed ownership of these islands, and it seemed as if war could break out between the two. The issue was eventually referred to the League and the islands were given to Finland.
- **Upper Silesia:** this area of land on the Polish and German borders had a mixed population. The League was able to solve the issue of ownership by means of a plebiscite. After the voting, the territory was divided between the two countries, who found the League's decision acceptable.

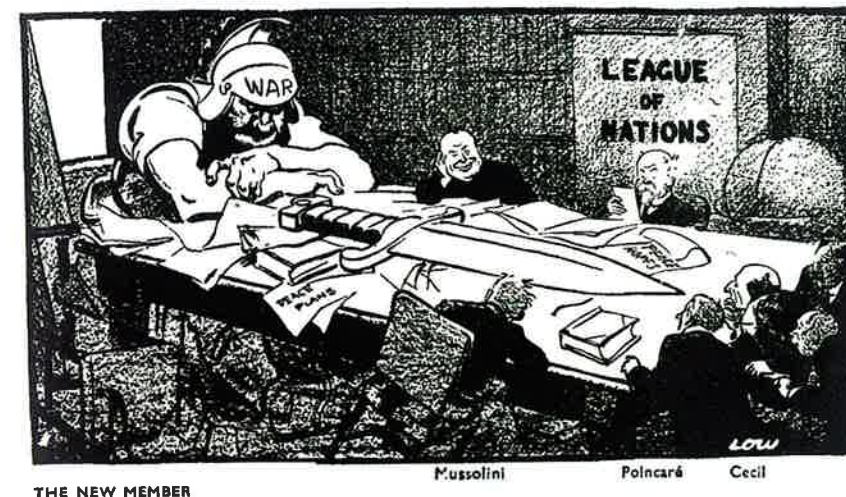
However, there was one incident which seemed to show the real weakness of the League. This happened over the island of Corfu in 1923.

The Corfu incident, 1923

This arose when an Italian general was killed when he was assisting in the redrawing of the borders between Albania and Greece. The leader of Italy, Mussolini, demanded reparations and an enquiry. The Greeks refused and Mussolini's response was to bombard and then invade the Greek island of Corfu. The League suggested that a committee of enquiry be set up and that 50m lire be paid into a Swiss account until the committee reported. However, Mussolini claimed that the League had no right to interfere and that Italy would leave the League if this interference continued. The League passed the issue over to the Conference of Ambassadors (this body had been set up at the end of the war as a temporary measure until the League established itself) and ordered the money to be paid directly to Italy. The authority of the League had been undermined. The message seemed to be that a powerful



▲ The successes and failures of the League of Nations by 1936



THE NEW MEMBER

▲

This cartoon by David Low called 'The New Member' was published in September 1923

nation could resort to force and threats and its demands would be met. Source C shows what some people felt about the actions of Italy at the time.

- 6 What were the successes of the League in the 1920s?
- 7 What evidence is there to show that the League was unable to prevent wars in the early 1920s?
- 8 Look at the map above. Some observers have said that the League was a complete failure from the very beginning. Does the map support or contradict this judgement? You must explain your answer carefully.
- 9 How did Mussolini undermine the authority of the League in the crisis over Corfu?
- 10 Look at Source C. What is the cartoonist trying to say about the Corfu incident?

The Manchurian crisis

It was in the 1930s when the League began to encounter problems that it could not solve. In 1931, Japan invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria and created a serious international incident. Both countries were members of the League and China appealed to the Council on the grounds that Japan had committed an act of aggression against a fellow member. By February 1932, the Japanese had occupied all of Manchuria and had renamed it Manchukuo.



▲ Invading Japanese troops in China

The League's response to the invasion was to set up a Commission of Inquiry, which was led by Lord Lytton from the United Kingdom. It took the Commission seven months to publish its report which clearly condemned the actions of Japan. When the vote was taken to accept the report, only Japan voted against it. Directly afterwards, Japan withdrew from the Assembly and ended its membership of the League. Thus the League had failed its biggest test so far. Japan did not return Manchuria to China, and, just as over Corfu, it seemed as if a powerful nation could behave without

fear of the consequences. The League had not even imposed economic sanctions, a weapon which some countries felt might have proved effective. However, many members felt that economic sanctions were not used because Britain and France were not prepared to go to war against Japan.

In many ways the failure over Manchuria sent out many signals to those who might wish to challenge the League. The next crisis to dent the authority of the League came when Italy invaded the weak African country of Abyssinia.

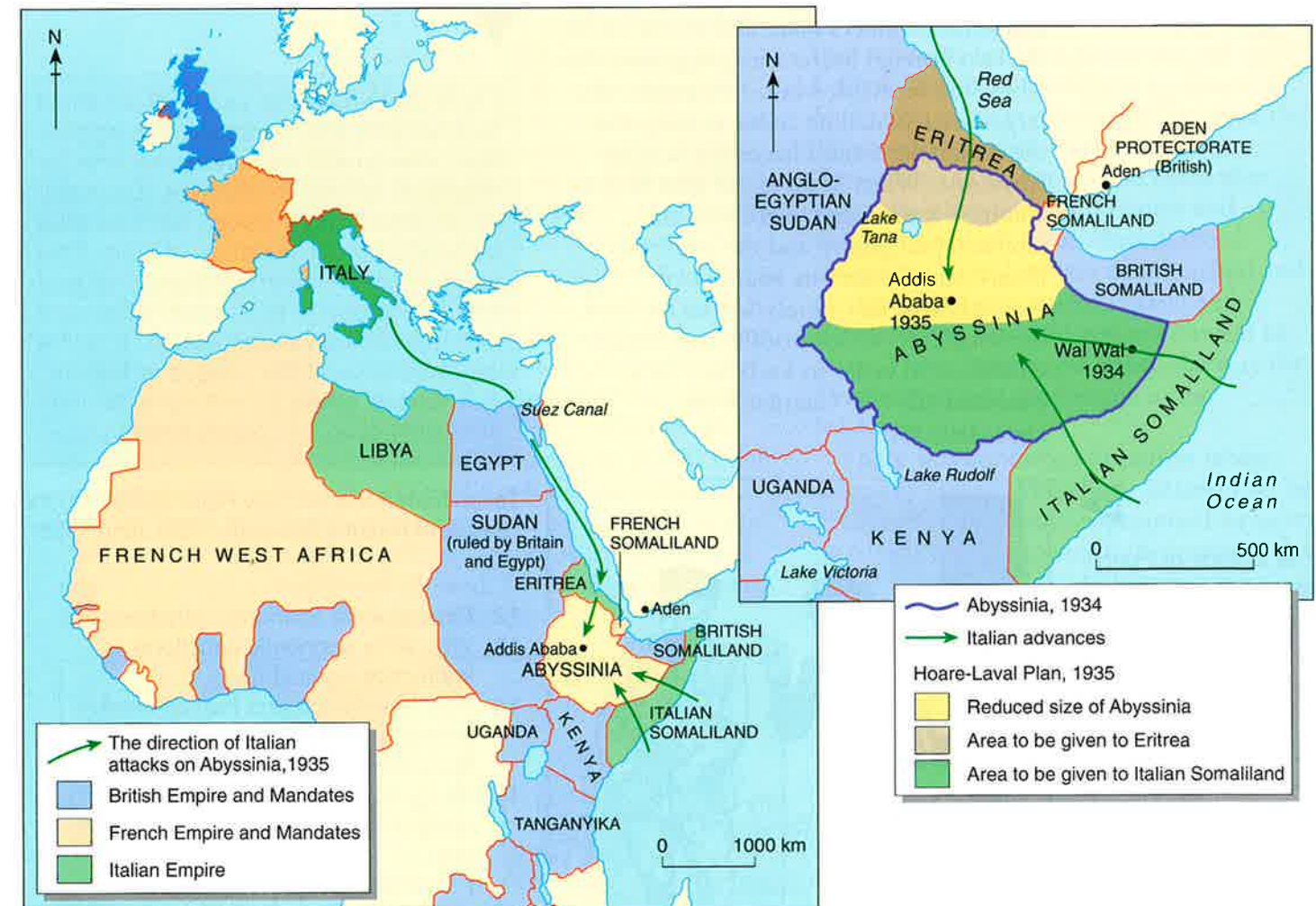
11 Explain why the League proved unsuccessful over the Manchurian crisis



The invasion of Abyssinia

Once again, the League had to face a serious problem caused by the aggressive actions of one of its member states. In 1935, Italy invaded Abyssinia following a

border clash between the two countries at Wal Wal. (Part of Italy's African empire bordered on Abyssinia.)



▲ The British, French, and Italian Empires in North and Central Africa, and the Italian attack on Abyssinia. The detailed map shows the terms of the Hoare-Laval Plan.

The Italians had had designs on Abyssinia for many years and wished to enlarge their African empire. They were able to engineer a crisis and soon captured large areas of land. This was not surprising because they were using the latest in military technology (including poison gas).

Abyssinia appealed to the League and for once action was relatively speedy. Economic sanctions were applied and it was hoped that these would prevent nations from trading with Italy. Unfortunately, the sanctions did not include coal, iron, steel, and oil – the very materials a country needs if it wishes to

fight a war! Some members even continued trading with Italy and of course those nations such as the USA and Germany who were not members of the League felt no pressure if they too continued to trade with Italy.

Britain and France repeatedly stated that they supported the actions of the League but they did little else to stop Mussolini. The crisis in Abyssinia was quite problematic for Britain. If Italy were condemned too sternly, then Mussolini might be tempted to ally with Hitler and the new found friendship between Britain, France, and Italy would be ruined. If

Britain had really wanted to stop Italy it could have prevented supplies reaching the Italian forces by closing the Suez Canal.

In late 1935, Britain and France did attempt to bring an end to the war. However, their solution turned out to be one which brought disgrace on both countries. Samuel Hoare and Pierre Laval, the two Foreign Secretaries, suggested that Abyssinia be divided into two parts – the larger area should be ceded to Italy and the remainder would become a smaller Abyssinia. When news of the plan became common knowledge, there was an international outcry and the infamous Hoare-Laval plan was abandoned. Nevertheless, this simply served to show the lengths to which Britain and France would go, in order to keep Italy as a potential ally (see Chapter 5 on appeasement).

D

The attitude of *Punch* to the Abyssinian crisis



Abyssinia was defeated and absorbed into the Italian Empire in 1936. The deposed Emperor of Abyssinia, Haile Selassie, made an impassioned speech to a special assembly of the League and accused the

Great Powers of breaking their promises to the small nations of the world. Abyssinia had not been saved by the promise of collective security. A further consequence of the Abyssinian crisis was the departure of Italy from the League.

I was defending the cause of all small peoples who are threatened with aggression. Abyssinian warriors asked only for means to defend themselves. On many occasions I have asked for financial assistance for the purchase of arms. That assistance has been constantly refused me. The problem is a much wider one than that of Italy's aggression. It is the very existence of the League of Nations. Are states going to set up a terrible precedent of bowing before force?

Taken from the speech by Haile Selassie to the League of Nations Assembly, 30th June 1936.

- 12 Explain what economic sanctions are.
- 13 Why were economic sanctions so ineffective against Italy.
- 14 How had Britain and France shown themselves to be weak and selfish over Manchuria and Abyssinia?
- 15 The cartoonist in Source D is trying to make a serious point in a humorous way.
 - i What is the serious point?
 - ii How is it made funny?
- 16 The cartoon is British and is critical of Britain and France. How reliable is this cartoon likely to be?

Two acts of aggression had weakened the effectiveness of the League, and by 1936 many felt that it was now a toothless organisation. The weaknesses of the League had become evident as the 1930s unfolded. By 1936, Germany had broken many of the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles and there were many in Europe who felt that another war would not be long in coming.

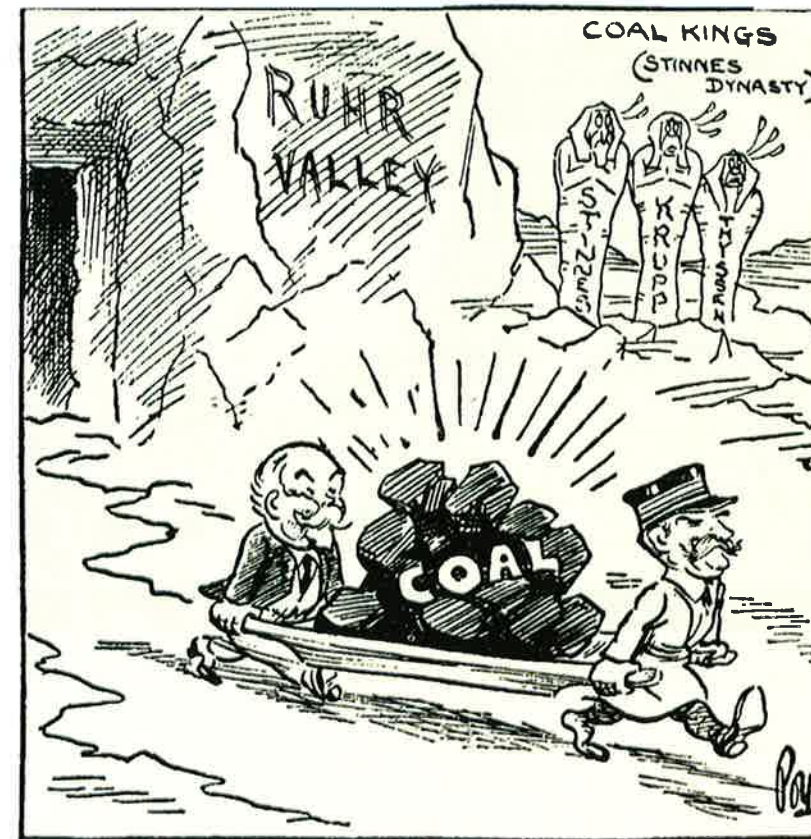
The League and Germany

War broke out in Europe in September 1939, only 20 years after the end of the First World War. Clearly, the high hopes and optimism of the League's founders were not met. Germany's aggressive acts after 1935 were never challenged by the League, and after 1938, the League was largely an irrelevant body ignored by the major powers of the world.

Germany was not allowed to join the League directly after the First World War and was informed that membership would depend on the acceptance of the peace settlement. There was widespread hatred of the Treaty of Versailles in Germany and it seemed that membership would take some time to achieve. Moreover, the feelings of France appeared to dominate European diplomacy, and this had resulted in the severe treatment of Germany. In 1923, the French occupied the Ruhr industrial area because Germany had been unable to pay the reparations. Troops were sent in and violence followed. Source E was published in a British newspaper.

Daily Mail cartoon about the occupation of the Ruhr by France in 1923

E



Exclusive picture from the "Valley of the Tomb of the Kings."

The League did not condemn the French action and the occupation lasted several months. The situation was solved when the USA, a non-member of the League, became involved and loaned Germany money to pay the reparations. After 1924, it did seem that relations between Germany and the League improved. Under the guidance of Gustav Stresemann, Germany accepted the Treaty of Versailles. By the Locarno Agreements (1925) it was accepted that Germany's frontiers with France and Belgium were not to be altered, the Rhineland would remain demilitarised and Germany's frontiers with Poland and Czechoslovakia would not be changed by force. These agreements paved the way for Germany joining the League in the following year.

There was continued optimism when Germany signed the Kellogg-Briand Pact in 1928, whereby countries promised never to go to war again. However, the hopes of the world were dashed the following year when the Great Depression began. In Germany the death of Stresemann added to their problems.

It was the Disarmament Conference of 1932-33, which saw a rift emerge between Germany and the League. Britain and France appeared to be rather slow in embracing the idea of disarming, and Hitler declared that Germany would completely disarm if France and Britain did. The Conference lasted several months and little progress was made. In October 1933, the Germans withdrew from the Conference and also announced that they were leaving the League. As far as they were concerned, it was Britain and France who had caused the failure of the Conference. The Disarmament Conference then broke up and with this the hopes of any lasting peace in the world seemed to evaporate.

F

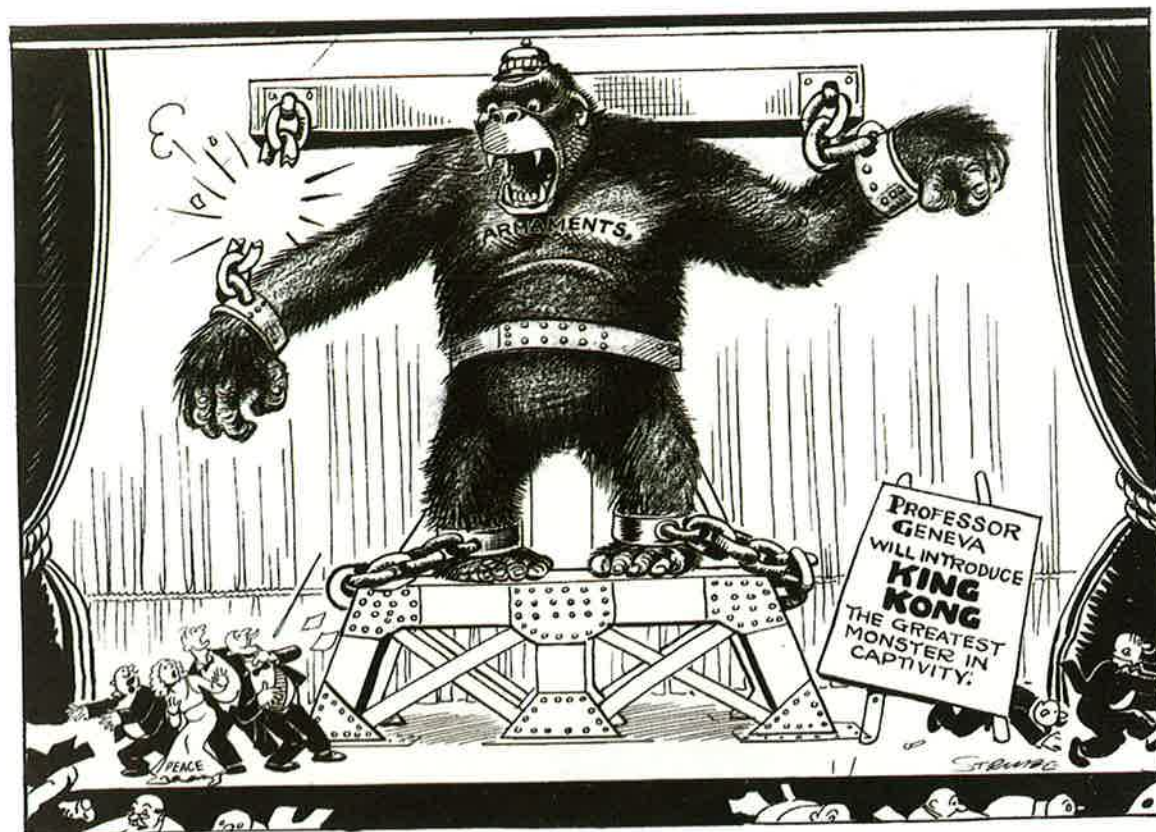
David Low's comment in December 1928 on the slow pace of disarmament in the decade after the end of the First World War



PEACE (SADLY): "THIS LOOKS VERY LIKE THE POINT WE STARTED FROM."

G

Published five years later than Source F, in 1933, this cartoonist is commenting on the failure of the Disarmament Conference



17 Look carefully at Sources F and G. If the main aim of the League was to secure peace and reduce arms, what do

they tell you about the achievements of the League?

The League's failure to punish Japan and Italy over the invasions of Manchuria and Abyssinia sent the wrong kind of signals to Hitler. He saw that if he were to challenge the authority of the League there would be little to fear from the consequences of his actions. Although Germany was no longer a member of the League, Hitler's actions during the years 1935-38 broke the Treaty of Versailles and, therefore, he should have been resisted.

His first deliberate breaking of the treaty was to introduce conscription in 1935. He planned to build an army of some 550,000 troops, far in excess of the 100,000 permitted by Versailles. The League did nothing to stop this rearmament. During that same year Britain appeared to condone German rearmament when Germany was allowed to build 35% of Britain's naval tonnage. The Treaty of Versailles was broken again the following year when German troops were sent into the Rhineland – a flagrant violation of the de-militarisation clause. Once again the League did nothing in the face of military action.

The League's weakness was further shown when Austria was absorbed into Germany in 1938 and parts of Czechoslovakia ceded to her in the autumn of that year. To observers the League was no more than a paper tiger and the Treaty of Versailles had become impossible to uphold.

The events of 1939 showed the helplessness of the League (the seizure of Czechoslovakia, Memel, and the invasion of Poland); and when European war broke out in September 1939 it was impossible to defend the League.

Was the League at all successful? It was rather optimistic of the victorious nations in 1919 to think that they could maintain peace by excluding major powers. It was

equally optimistic to believe that the absence of the USA was of no consequence. If the League were to succeed, then it had to include all nations, if not then the idea of collective security was illogical. There were enough indications in the 1920s that if the League were challenged then any response had to be speedy and above all firm.

You should now be in a position to write at length about the League of Nations. Answer the following question using the information from this chapter and the various sources it contains.

18 Some historians have said that the League of Nations failed because it gave in to force. Study all the sources in this chapter and use your own knowledge to explain whether you agree with this view.

Essay: 'The League of Nations was based on sound ideas but it had too many weaknesses and these proved to be its downfall.' Do you agree?

You may wish to refer to the following points:

membership

disarmament

economic sanctions

Great Depression

selfish members

militaristic states