

HL Paper 3



Free
Sample

History for the IB Diploma Programme



Europe

Pearson

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Europe and the Second
World War (1918–49)

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Key concepts:

Cause and
consequenceContinuity and
changePerspectives and
significanceSuccesses and challenges of the League
of Nations in Europe

Figure 2.1 Delegates from dozens of countries convene at the League's inaugural General Assembly in Geneva, 1920

After the First World War, the world pinned its hopes on a bold new experiment in peacekeeping – the League of Nations. In Europe, this organization sought to replace the old ways of secret alliances and war with collective security and international cooperation. It also strove to provide a fairer organizational structure, where inclusivity and authority was balanced between all member states in its Assembly, and in its smaller Council, which was led by the **great powers**. This chapter examines how the League achieved notable successes in the 1920s by settling disputes and fostering dialogue yet also faced mounting challenges as nationalism and unresolved tensions grew. From early triumphs like the peaceful resolution of the Åland Islands dispute (1921) to serious crises such as the Italian aggression in Abyssinia (1935), the League's story in Europe is one of prominent ideals colliding with harsh realities. The League's mixed record reveals much about the interwar period. It highlights the era's historical significance: the first attempt at global governance, the limits of international law without great-power commitment, and ultimately how the League's collapse paved the way for another world war.

Timeline

1918 (11 November)	Armistice ends fighting in First World War
1919–20	Peace settlement—Treaty of Versailles signed (June 28, 1919); League of Nations established (10 January 1920)
1922 (October)	Benito Mussolini becomes prime minister of Italy
1929 (October)	Wall Street Crash triggers global economic crisis

1933 (January–March)	Hitler is appointed Chancellor of Germany; Enabling Act grants dictatorial powers
1935–36	Germany rearms and remilitarizes the Rhineland; Rome–Berlin Axis declared; Spanish Civil War begins
1937–38	Sino–Japanese War escalates; Anschluss with Austria; Munich Agreement cedes Sudetenland; Kristallnacht
1939 (March)	Germany dismantles Czechoslovakia and annexes Memel from Lithuania; Italy occupies Albania
1939 (23 August)	Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact between Germany and the USSR
1939 (September)	Germany invades Poland; Britain and France declare war; USSR invades eastern Poland; Poland partitioned
November 1939–March 1940	Winter War (USSR invades Finland)
1940 (9 April)	Germany invades Denmark and Norway
1940 (10 May)	Germany invades the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg; Winston Churchill becomes British prime minister
1940 (10 May)	Winston Churchill is elected as prime minister of Britain. By this point the countries under German control are: Austria; Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia (Czech lands); Poland (German-occupied; eastern Poland under Soviet control); Denmark; Norway (campaign ongoing; major areas under German occupation); Free City of Danzig incorporated into Germany; Memel/Klaipėda region annexed and Slovakia was a German-aligned client state
1940 (May–June)	Britain's Darkest Hour: Dunkirk evacuation; collapse of France; invasion fears peak; Churchill's 'Blood, toil, tears, and sweat' (13 May), 'We shall fight on the beaches' (4 June), and 'Their Finest Hour' (18 June)
1940 (June)	Fall of France; German forces enter Paris (June 14) 1940, and the French government fled the capital
1940 (July–October)	Battle of Britain; The Blitz on UK cities (September 1940–May 1941)
1941 (April–June)	Germany conquers Yugoslavia and Greece; Operation Barbarossa launches; Siege of Leningrad begins
1941 (August)	Atlantic Charter outlines Allied war aims
1941 (7–11 December)	Japan attacks Pearl Harbor; US declares war on Japan; Germany and Italy declare war on the US
1942 (January–November)	Wannsee Conference coordinates the 'Final Solution'; turning points: Midway in the Pacific, Second El Alamein, and Operation Torch in North Africa
1943 (February)	Stalingrad: German 6th Army surrenders; Axis momentum broken
1943 (July–September)	Allies invade Sicily; Mussolini deposed; Italy signs armistice; Germans occupy northern/central Italy
1944 (June–August)	D-Day landings in Normandy; Operation Bagration destroys German Army Group Center; Liberation of Paris

December 1944–January 1945	Battle of the Bulge in the Ardennes
1945 (April–May)	Allied linkup at the Elbe; Hitler commits suicide; Germany surrenders (Victory in Europe [VE] Day, May 8)
1945 (August–September)	Atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; Japan surrenders (Victory over Japan [VJ] Day, 2 September)
1945–46	United Nations Charter signed (26 June 1945) and enters into force (24 October 1945); Nürnberg trials of major Nazi leaders (November 1945–October 1946)
1946–47	Churchill's 'Iron Curtain' speech (5 March 1946); Truman Doctrine (12 Mar 1947); Marshall Plan proposed (5 June 5 1947)
1948–49	Berlin Blockade and Allied Airlift; blockade lifted (12 May 1949)
1949	North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) founded (4 April); Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany) proclaimed (23 May); USSR detonates first atomic bomb (29 August); People's Republic of China proclaimed (1 October); German Democratic Republic (East Germany) established (7 October)

Aims, organization, and structure

The League of Nations emerged from hopes for a more peaceful world after the devastation of the First World War. US President Woodrow Wilson championed the idea of a league of nations in his Fourteen Points (January 1918) to prevent future wars. At the Paris Peace Conference in 1919, the victors of the First World War – the 'Big Four' of Britain, France, the United States, and Italy – agreed in principle to create this new international organization. A commission to draft the League's **Covenant** was established, and by April 1919 the Covenant of the League of Nations was incorporated as Part I of the Treaty of Versailles. On 28 June 1919, 44 states signed the Covenant, and in January 1920 the League officially came into existence as the first worldwide intergovernmental organization devoted to peace.

Figure 2.2 The 'Big Four' world leaders meet at the First World War Peace Conference in 1919



The aims of the League

The Covenant of the League set out the organization's grand purpose: 'to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security'. In practice, this mission was broken down into several key aims.

Collective security

The League was founded on the principle of **collective security** – the idea that peace could be kept if all nations acted together to resist aggression. If any member of the League was attacked, all other members were obliged to consider it an attack upon themselves as well. This was meant to deter any country from resorting to war. In Article 10 of the Covenant, members pledged to respect and preserve each other's territory against external aggression, and the League could act (diplomatically, economically, or militarily) to protect a victim of aggression.

Arbitration

The League looked to replace the chaos of war with law and negotiation. Members agreed in Article 12 of the Covenant that if disputes arose between them, they would submit the issue to **arbitration** by the League's Council and not resort to war until at least three months after a decision or report was made. The League could investigate international disputes and encourage a fair, negotiated settlement.

Disarmament

Another fundamental aim was global **disarmament** – reducing the arms races that had contributed to the First World War. Article 8 of the Covenant asserted that the maintenance of peace required nations to limit their armaments 'to the lowest point consistent with national safety'.

Cooperation

Unlike previous peace efforts, the League's Covenant was not limited to political matters. It recognized that peace also depended on global cooperation in economic, social, and humanitarian fields. Thus, the Covenant empowered the League to address 'matters of international concern for the improvement of life and health and the prevention of disease', as well as economic and financial cooperation, transit, and the welfare of vulnerable people.

Organization and structure

The Covenant created an organizational structure for the League of Nations to carry out its aims. The League's core organs were the Secretariat, comprising the Assembly and the Council, along with the affiliated Permanent Court of International Justice. Each had specific roles.

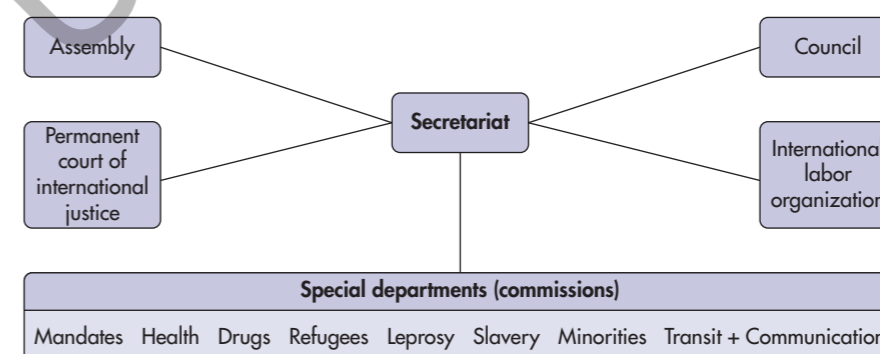


Figure 2.3 The structure of the League of Nations

Visit theworldwar.org and search for 'The Fourteen Points' for more information on the origins of the League of Nations.

The organization of the League was innovative for its time – it tried to balance inclusivity (all member states in the Assembly) with efficiency and authority (a smaller Council led by the great powers), supported by a permanent staff and Court to give continuity and legal backbone.

The Assembly

This was the main discussion body, like a global parliament of nations. All member states were represented in the Assembly, each with one vote, regardless of size or power. The Assembly met in Geneva at least once a year to discuss issues within the League's competence. The Assembly had authority over admitting new members, overseeing the budget, and amending the Covenant. Decisions in the Assembly were generally required to be unanimous (each country had veto power on most matters). This unanimity rule was meant to ensure that all nations agreed on League actions, though in practice it often made decision-making slow and difficult. Importantly, the Assembly gave small and medium powers a voice in international affairs equal to that of great powers – an unprecedented step toward international democracy.

The Council

This was a smaller executive body with the primary responsibility for addressing international crises and conflicts. It initially consisted of the major powers as permanent members and a few non-permanent members elected by the Assembly. In 1920, the Council's permanent seats were held by Britain, France, Italy, and Japan; Germany was given a permanent seat after it joined in 1926, and the Soviet Union received one after joining in 1934. Non-permanent (rotating) members were added over time (from four initially, and up to 11 by 1936) to broaden representation. The Council met more frequently (several times a year or when crises erupted) and its task was to supervise the peaceful settlement of disputes. It could investigate conflicts, call on nations to end aggression, and in theory decide on enforcement measures (e.g. sanctions or military action) against aggressors. While unanimity provided a check so that the League would not act against a major power's vital interests, it also meant that collective action could be blocked by any one dissenting member. The Council embodied the tension between power and principle: it gave great powers a leading role in maintaining peace, but it also depended on those same powers to restrain themselves and act in the global interest.

The Secretariat

This was the League's civil service, an international administrative staff that carried out the day-to-day work of the League at its Geneva headquarters. Led by a Secretary-General (the first was Sir Eric Drummond of Britain), the Secretariat prepared reports, organized conferences, drafted resolutions, and handled the huge amount of correspondence and record-keeping for the League. It was a neutral bureaucracy that supported the Assembly and Council. The Secretariat also managed the League's various agencies and committees. In a way, the Secretariat was a forerunner of today's international civil servants in the United Nations. Though not often in the limelight, it was essential for the League's functioning, and it helped develop habits of cooperation among officials from different countries.

You will learn more about the United Nations on page xx.

The Permanent Court of International Justice (PCIJ)

Established in 1921 and overseen by the League, the PCIJ was an important judicial organ of the League's system. It was based in The Hague (Netherlands) and composed of 15 independent judges from various countries. The Court could hear legal disputes

between states on issues such as treaty interpretation, and it could also give advisory opinions on questions referred by the Council or Assembly. States were not obliged to submit their disputes to the Court, but many did, and some states accepted the Court's **compulsory authority** in advance for certain matters. During its existence, the PCIJ heard dozens of cases and issued 32 judgments on contentious issues (as well as 27 advisory opinions) – helping to peacefully resolve disputes ranging from border disagreements to diplomatic incidents. While the Court had no direct means of enforcement, its authority and reasoning carried weight, and it contributed to the development of **international law**.

Commissions and committees

In addition to these main organs, the League of Nations also created a host of specialized agencies, commissions, and committees to handle specific tasks (for example, the Mandates Commission to oversee former colonies turned into League **mandates**: a Slavery Commission, a Permanent Central Opium Board to tackle drug trafficking). These will be described shortly in the context of the League's humanitarian and technical work.

While the League struggled with big **power politics**, many of its sub-organizations achieved notable successes in improving people's lives in the 1920s, reflecting the League's aim of international cooperation on social issues. Key agencies and their impacts included:

- The League's Health Organization (the forerunner of today's World Health Organization) coordinated international efforts to combat disease including leprosy, malaria, and yellow fever. It also standardized epidemiological reporting and helped countries improve public health administration.
- The International Labour Organization (ILO) was created in 1919 to improve working conditions and justice for workers worldwide. During the 1920s, the ILO issued international labor standards on issues like working hours, child labor, unemployment, and rights of association.
- The League's Slavery Commission gathered information on slavery worldwide and pressured governments to act to abolish it. With League encouragement, several countries outlawed slavery completely in the 1920s.
- The League also helped combat forced labor and human trafficking.

Many historians consider these social achievements to be the League's true 'successes'. They did not grab headlines like political crises, but they improved lives and forged international networks of experts that endured.

Enforcing peace: How could the League act?

Writing noble aims into a covenant was one thing – enforcing those principles was another. The League of Nations had several mechanisms for enforcing its decisions, though each came with limitations: If a country violated the Covenant by attacking another, the League could formally condemn that nation's actions. In an era when global opinion was becoming important, this moral pressure was meant to shame aggressors and rally world sentiment against wrongdoing. However, this mechanism relied on the aggressor caring about its international reputation. The League could also call on its members to impose **sanctions** – cutting off trade and financial ties with the offending state. However, sanctions could also harm League members' economies, and if all major nations did not participate, the aggressor might find ways to avoid such punishments. The League's Covenant envisioned that force *could* be used against an aggressor as a last resort, but the League had no armed forces of its own. Article 16 of

Enforcement measures



Enforcement measures refer to the actions the League of Nations could take to maintain peace and respond to acts of aggression. Measures could be:

- Sanctions – economic or trade restrictions aimed at pressuring an aggressor state to comply with League decisions.
- Military action – in theory, the League could call on member states to use armed force against an aggressor, though this was rarely applied.

the Covenant indicated that the League's Council could advise member nations on how their military forces should be used to protect the Covenant's goals. In practice, the major powers were very reluctant to commit troops to League operations, especially if their own national interests were not directly threatened.

In summary, the League's enforcement powers were constrained. **Moral authority** was high but definitive power was low without member commitment. The League's influence was based on principles and reputation rather than force. It relied on international opinion to pressure states into compliance, since it had no army of its own. This imbalance meant that the League worked best when it dealt with smaller disputes or issues where member nations willingly cooperated.

Structural weaknesses of the League

Many of the challenges the League of Nations faced can be traced to flaws in its structure and membership. Some key structural weaknesses included:

- All important decisions in both the Assembly and the Council had to be unanimous (except in rare procedural cases), which effectively gave each great member **veto** power over League interventions. The unanimity rule was intended to ensure that the League only acted when there was a broad consensus, but in practice it meant inaction whenever there was not complete agreement.
- The absence of the United States – a leading economic and military power – meant the League's collective security system missed a crucial pillar. Other large nations (Germany, the Soviet Union) were also initially outside the League. Without these major nations, the League from the start lacked universality; it never truly achieved 'world' coverage.
- The League's structure assumed that the main Allied powers (especially Britain and France) would lead the way in enforcing peace. These powers held permanent Council seats and had the strongest militaries – but they were often not willing to act unless their own interests were at risk.
- The League was closely tied to the 1919 peace settlements. Many in Germany and other nations defeated in the war saw the League as enforcers of a victor's peace that they considered unjust.

In summary, the League's structure reflected a mixture of high idealism and hard realities. Yet it was hindered by structural and organizational flaws.

Activity 1

ATL Thinking



i In practice, nearly all League of Nations decisions required unanimous consent, but the Covenant carved out a few procedural exceptions. For example, in December 1920 the League's Assembly voted to admit Bulgaria as a new member by the required two-thirds majority, overriding France's objection. The League's Covenant explicitly allowed admitting new members by such a supermajority in the Assembly, treating it as a procedural matter exempt from unanimity. This case illustrates how certain administrative decisions – like membership admissions, budgetary questions, or key appointments – could be decided without full unanimity, even though virtually all substantive resolutions demanded unanimous agreement of the Assembly and Council.

Figure 2.4 Political cartoon 'The Gap in the Bridge' (Punch magazine, 1919)

This famous British cartoon by Leonard Raven-Hill, published in December 1919, depicts the League of Nations as a bridge missing its central cornerstone. The bridge's arch is labeled with the major Allied powers 'England', 'France', 'Italy', 'Belgium', and the missing keystone is marked 'USA'. Uncle Sam (as a personification of America) sits to the side, smoking, instead of completing the bridge. The sign on the left notes, 'This League of Nations Bridge was designed by the President of the USA' – a pointed irony, since Woodrow Wilson proposed the League, but the United States refused to join. The cartoon's message is clear: without the US, the League's structure has a gaping hole. The stability of the entire bridge (the League) is in question without the American keystone to support it.

Discuss the following with a partner.

Why do you think the cartoonist chose a bridge to represent the League of Nations?

- What do the other stones (Britain, France, Italy, etc.) suggest about who was supporting the League?
- Explain the irony in the caption about the bridge being 'designed by the President of the USA'. What perspective does this convey about the USA's responsibility for the League's success or failure?

Activity 2

ATL Thinking, communication

The concept of perspective is crucial in history. In a small group, role-play a conversation between three characters in the 1920s–30s, each with a different perspective on the League: (1) a French government official who worries about security against Germany, (2) an American isolationist senator who opposes joining the League, and (3) a smaller-nation diplomat (for example, from Norway or Czechoslovakia) who supports the League's ideals.

Discuss: 'Is the League of Nations achieving its aims?' and 'Should nations trust the League to keep them safe?' Make sure each character's viewpoint comes across.

After the role-play, reflect on how **national perspective** might shape one's attitude toward the League.

Conclusion

The League of Nations embodied a tension between high ideals and practical limitations. Its aim was revolutionary but also potentially unrealistic in a world still driven by national interest. The League's structure, which required unanimity and gave major powers permanent seats, made decisive action almost impossible. These flaws meant that the organization's idealistic vision of peace often collided with the political realities of its members.

Even so, many in the 1920s genuinely believed the League could work. Its early years reflected global optimism that law and dialogue could replace war. Historians writing later judged it harshly, yet in doing so, they often overlooked the ambition behind its design. The League's ideals, though imperfectly realized, laid the groundwork for the United Nations and revealed both the necessity and fragility of global cooperation.



Conceptual Focus

Judgments of the League of Nations have changed over time with *perspective*. In the 1920s, many people genuinely believed in the League and worked hard to make it succeed – optimism about the League’s mission was widespread. Only with hindsight after the Second World War did the verdict on the League turn overwhelmingly negative. Historians’ assessments have likewise been influenced by when they were writing. Those writing before 1940, witnessing the League in action, often kept ‘a reliably stable, but diminishing optimism’ that the League could overcome its challenges. In contrast, many post-1945 historians, armed with knowledge of the League’s ultimate collapse, have viewed it as a failure due to its inherent weaknesses. This divergence highlights the role of *perspective* – our judgment of the League can change depending on whose eyes we are looking through and what events we know about.



Checkpoint

In pairs, discuss the following:

- What were the primary aims of the League of Nations as established in 1919?
- What were the main organs of the League (Assembly, Council, Secretariat, etc.), and how was decision-making usually carried out in the League?

Write a paragraph to explain why the League’s structure (for example, the requirement for unanimous decisions or the absence of major powers like the USA) became a weakness in enforcing its ideals.

Exam practice

1. ‘The League of Nations was little more than a victors’ club – a body with lofty ideals but no real power.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement?
2. ‘In the 1920s, the League of Nations was successful in maintaining peace in Europe.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement?
3. ‘Collective security under the League of Nations was doomed to fail in the absence of general disarmament.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement?
4. ‘The Abyssinian Crisis of 1935–36 dealt a fatal blow to the League of Nations, shattering the illusion of collective security.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement?
5. ‘The expansionist foreign policies pursued by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy during the interwar years made the outbreak of the Second World War inevitable.’ To what extent do you agree with this statement?