

The role and legacy of the League of Nations
in bringing peace and stability in the world

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The League of Nations (LN) as an intergovernmental organization, that was founded after the end of the WWI as a result of the Paris Peace Conference and Treaty of Versailles, aimed to maintain the peace, security, to ensure the process of disarmament and to prevent the emergence of the new world conflict. The stated goals of the organization were supposed to be achieved through the principle of collective security and diplomatic negotiations, the members of which were eager to conduct in order to come to common decision. However, the organization has demonstrated its inefficiency when it comes to the prevention of the wars and regional conflicts, because it neither managed to control disarmament nor to preserve peace around the globe. The disintegration of the organization was followed by the gradual withdrawal of its members and non-participation of the US, even though the former American President Woodrow Wilson was one of the initiators of the establishment of the League of Nations. Nevertheless, the organization demonstrated some successes and significant failures during 26 years of its activity and the contemporary UN has inherited some of the features of the League of Nations. Therefore, it is important to analyze the cases in which organization failed and succeeded to pursue its objectives and how the legacy of the League of Nations influenced the activity of the United Nations.

One of the potential failures of the organization in the goals achievement refers to the issue of the disarmament. In accordance with the Article 8 of the Covenant the objective of the League was to develop the disarmament plans for each state that would assure the significant reduction in the number of national arms among member states (*Covenant of the League of Nations* 1919). The Treaty of Versailles also imposed some obligations on the allies to disarm and the attempts to deprive the defeated countries of the possession of weapons were considered as a further step towards the implementation of the agreement. In the beginning, it was decided to hold the World Disarmament Conference that would promote the limitation of arms. The US President Franklin D. Roosevelt initiated the conduct of

conference, because he believed that in case each state was prepared to limit the possession of arms which can trigger the attack, then the borders and the independence of every country would be secured (Evangelista 2005, p. 251). However, not every state shared the opinion of the former American leader. For instance, the French government was not willing to decrease the possession of weapons without the guarantee that France would be provided with help in case of being attacked. The countries of Eastern Europe including Poland and former Czechoslovakia were concerned about the possibility of attack that could come from the West and they also were willing to be guaranteed the military support. In other words, countries that suffered during the WWI needed the protection from other members of the League of Nations in case an act of aggression takes place from the West and from Germany in particular.

As it is known, at the time when the mentioned Conference was taking place, the level of nationalism in Germany had significantly increased. The nationalistic movements in that country to some extent were induced by the imposition of several conditions of the Versailles Treaty on Germany, which had been deprived of its colonies, weapons and was obliged to pay enormous reparations. It is commonly assumed that the oppression of Germany facilitated the increase in the support of right-wing parties and led to the situation when Nazis came to power. Afterwards, the fear of the rise of nationalism in Germany and its attempts to reconstruct German army made France and other states unwilling to disarm. Despite the fact that the Commission on Disarmament managed to reach agreements among Spain, Italy, France and Japan regarding limitation of weaponry, the Commission was unsuccessful to prevent the remilitarization of Germany and military build-up conducted by those countries (Goldblat 2002). Moreover, the League of Nations did not react on the events that preceded the beginning of WWII including the occupation of some Austrian territories by Germany under Hitler's rule and the remilitarization of the Rhineland region that violated the Versailles Treaty and changed the balance of power in Europe. Consequently, the members of the

League increased their military potential instead of seeking the way to disarm and Japan along with Germany withdrew from that organization that led to its gradual dissolution and beginning of war. The former British foreign secretary and the head of intergovernmental organization asserted that the growth in the re-armament along with the sense of insecurity made the war unavoidable (Summy 2014, p.16). As it can be noticed, the League of Nations did not manage to pursue successful disarmament among its members, because of inability to find the compromise and to agree upon arms parity between Germany and France.

Another issue where the organization failed to achieve its goals refers to the notion of collective security, which is generally understood as a joint response of states to the aggression of another state. Palmer and Perkins (2007) stated that the League of Nations failed to enforce the collective security, because the US did not become a member of that organization since its establishment, while the power of Soviet Union has been rising at that time. One might note that the US Congress rejected Wilson's proposals to join, because the membership in the League would impose the obligations, which contradicted to the US interests. Moreover, the USA pursued the policy of isolationism which implied that American government was not willing to interfere into external affairs of other countries. At the same time, the US refusal led to the situation when the other great powers of organization were concerned that the collective efforts of its members could be used against them (Kegley 2007).

One of the examples demonstrating how the collective security under the League failed refers to the Manchurian Crisis. After the Russian-Japanese war was over, the Japan were given the right to rent the part of the South Manchuria Railway which shared the border with China. Japan had plans to invade into the Manchuria region that belonged to China and it made provocations when Japanese soldiers put explosive materials in order to damage the train and to accuse China of that. Consequently, under the pretense that China was guilty for

explosions in the railway, the Japan invaded, occupied Manchuria and set up its own government and threw Chinese people from there. The government of China addressed the League of Nations and requested to resolve the issue. The members of organization agreed to send special commission that would evaluate the incident and to adopt the appropriate resolution. In the beginning, the Japan was issued formal reprimand that in case it did not agree to withdraw its forces from the Manchuria, the proper action would be taken that involved the sanctions. Afterwards, the resolution which condemned the Japanese involvement into Chinese territory was passed by League's members, but Japan utilized its veto power in order not to let the document to be adopted. Later on, the commission sent by League issued the report which was called Lytton Report. According to the report, the Japan was recognized as guilty state which violated the principles of international law and it insisted that Japan had to withdraw its troops from the occupied territory (Dennett 1932). Consequently, the Japan refused to accept the fact that it had to leave the Manchuria where it possessed its economic interests and decided to exit from the organization.

From this example, it can be concluded that League was unable to condemn and to take proper action against Japan due to number of reasons. Firstly, the preparation for the report, which consequently triggered Japanese exit from the organization, took significant amount of time. During that period, Japan managed to strengthen its control over the Manchurian territory and to escape from punishment by League members. Secondly, a number of states possessed significant economic links with that country and therefore, the they were unable to agree upon the sanctions against Japan or regarding the prohibition to sell weapons. Thirdly, the refusal of US to take any actions and to support the organization apart from stating its concerns has demonstrated that the international community was not capable to preserve peace and the non-interference of League members into the conflict has established the precedent for further conflict, when Ethiopia was invaded by Italy and the

result was almost similar. Therefore, as Karen Mingst pointed out the collective security did not work, because states acted as it was not their collective interest to provide proper response due to the significant difference between the ideologies and interests which countries pursued (Mingst 1999).

Apart from the significant failures, the League of Nations had managed to resolve territorial disputes, which was one of the aims of that organization. One of the cases where League succeeded refers to the dispute between Greece and Bulgaria. The relations between those countries were quite intensive in the beginning of the 20th century, because of the disagreement concerning the possession of Macedonia. However, the Crisis between Greece and Bulgaria deteriorated relations even further. It started when the Greek soldier was shot by Greek border officer, while illegally crossing the Bulgarian border, because of attempt to reach his escaped war-dog. The Greek government requested compensation and apologies from Bulgaria and having received refusal it attempted to conquer the Petrich town. Therefore, the Bulgarian authorities addressed the issue in front of the League. The organization passed a resolution that ordered to a ceasefire and that Greeks had to withdraw its forces from Bulgaria and to provide financial compensation. The decision was accepted and implementation by both parties even though Greece complained that it did not intend to occupy part of Bulgarian territory, while the seize of Petrich took place as a result of Bulgarian refusal to apologize for the murder of Greek soldier (Fellows 2012, p.132). In addition, the League had sent military observers from the UK, Italy and France in order to assure that the Greek troops were withdrawn from Bulgaria and to make sure that there would not be any further incidents involving Greek and Bulgarian soldiers. In general, the League of Nations was adequate successful in the mentioned dispute resolution, because it managed to prevent the possible escalation of the Greco-Bulgarian conflict and to find the solution that led to the peaceful end of the clash between the countries.

When it comes to the legacy of the League of Nations, it could be claimed that, even though organization proved to be more inefficient rather than capable to pursue all its objectives, its legacy had significant impact on the contemporary international system. Despite the fact that the international order has changed since the dissolution of the League and number of conflicts took place since that time, the key objectives of the current UN, which differs from the previous organization, remains the same as League attempted to pursue. Having compared the Covenant of the LN (1919) and the Charter of UN (United Nations 1945) one might note that primary goals were to promote the cooperation in the matters of peace and security on the international level.

Besides the objectives of the former and contemporary organization, the way how LN functioned had impact on the structure of the current UN. A number of LN bodies and organs including the General Assembly, Security Council, International Court of Justice (ICJ) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) continued to perform its functions in the UN. The mentioned organs and bodies of UN inherited the structure from the League, but the changes concerning the membership took place. For instance, as a result of Yalta Conference which has redrawn the borders after the WWII and restore the balance of power, the permanent members of the UN Security Council became different from those of LN.

To draw the conclusion, the successes and failures of the League of Nations can be traced in the number of examples. The organization did not managed to achieve its goals when it comes to the issue of disarmament and collective security due to the rise of nationalism in Germany prior to WWII and the concerns of Poland and Czechoslovakia of being attacked from the West. In addition, the inability to persuade US to become the member of League, the reconstruction of the German army and passive reaction on the events that preceded the beginning of WWII were also the factors that led to the failure of the League to succeed. However, the League of Nations demonstrated a success when it comes to the

territorial disputes resolution. Particularly, the situation around the Greco-Bulgarian conflict showed the success of the League, which managed to prevent the possible escalation of the conflict and found the solution that led to the peaceful end of the clash between the countries. Moreover, the legacy of the League had significant impact on the contemporary international system and the current UN has inherited some of the features of the former organization, particularly its objectives, bodies and organs.

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