

AN EXAMINATION OF THE POWER POLITICS IN THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND THE COMMENCEMENT OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR, 1918-1945

EDIAGBONYA MICHAEL

Lecturer, Ekiti State University, Ado-Ekiti, Nigeria Faculty of Arts Department of History and International Studies Email: michaediagbonya01@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the power politics in the League of Nations. It examines the League of Nations as a formal international organisation whose purpose was the maintenance of world peace. It analyses the gross oppression of the major European powers over the smaller nations, as well as engaging in bitter rivalry yet the League of Nations could not take decisive actions. The inability of the League of Nations to prevent the occurrence of the Second World War also came to focus. Data for the study was obtained through oral interview as primary sources and secondary sources such as books, newspapers, articles, theses, dissertation journals etc. It was found that the establishment of the League of Nations became an acceptable concept because of casualties and devastation associated with the First World War. It was demonstrated that the League of Nations later became a toothless bull dog because it could not prevent the constant violations of its covenant by the major European powers. It was also found that the second world could have been avoided if the organisation was proactive in handling the issues that led to the war. It concluded that the League of Nations lacked the cohesive force to adequately intervene in conflict and crises.

Keywords: League, Conflict, Cohesive Force, Rivalry, Covenant.

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INTRODUCTION

The First World War began in 1914 and ended in 1918. In that war, France and Great Britain fought together against Germany, Austria and Hungary [1]. Japan and Russia later joined Britain and France. The United States of America entered the First World War on the side of Britain and France. Nzemekwe posits that every country in Europe now clung with something like religious fervor to the ring of alliance to which it belonged [2]. Armaments began to be assembled. The building of very powerful warships was intensified. Each group of alliance began discussions as to military operations if war should come (Ibid). Europe was so tensed up that any more crisis would ignite the tensed situation. This happened in Sarajevo in August 1914 and the Alliance system reacted to it with mechanical clock-work precision, the First World War was on (Ibid).

The League of Nations, was a formal international organisation whose purpose was the maintenance of world peace and promotion of co-operation among nations in fields of human relationship. It is an institutionalized form of collective action by the sovereign states to maintain the peace [3].

On Feb. 8, 1918, Wilson Woodrow included in his fourteenth points proposal for an organisation that would preserve the political independence and the territorial integrity of all Nations. A covenant attached to the treaty of Versailles formed the basis for the League of Nations which was inaugurated on Jan 11th, 1920. With the devastation brought on by the War, the advancement of peace became a popular theme in international politics in the 1920s [4]. It was said that the efforts to achieve peace rested on Wilson's fourteen points, developed on the basis of many similar ideological schemes that surfaced during the Great War and the Treaty of Versailles which included the foundations of the League of Nations.

Membership

The League of Nations was established as a Confederation of States. It derives its authority from the Governments of the member nations, not directly from the people of the world. It included the original members, those nations that ratified the section of the treaty of Versailles concerning the League and the nations admitted later

There were 41 original members. By 1923, 13 additional nations have been admitted to the League including Austria and Hungary. Germany joined in 1926, Mexico 1931, Turkey, 1932, USSR, 1934 and Egypt, 1937. The League of Nations had its largest membership in 1934 when it has 58 members.

Why USA was Not a Member of the League of Nations

It is established that after the First World War, in fact on Feb. 8, 1918 Woodrow Wilson, the President of USA included in his fourteenth points, proposal for an organisation that would preserve the political independence and the territorial integrity of all nations. When the First World War ended in 1918, a peace treaty was signed in Versailles in France in 1919 in which USA was not a member of the League of Nations.

The membership of the USA in the League of Nations became imperative because the European politics has been turbulent prior to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. There was much muscle flexing and intense suspicion between and among European powers. The major European powers towards the later part of the eighteenth century had been grossly oppressive of the smaller ones as well as engaging in bitter rivalry with their contemporaries [5]. Europe's hostilities during the time and spillover effects to other parts of the globe simply because events or affairs in the world then were

characteristically Eurocentric (Ibid).

Adesola notes that the United States of America that could have ably moderated the malice between and among European powers as well as seemingly utopian ambitions of their leaders had shortly after its colonial independence liberated in what is called the 'Monroe Doctrine (Ibid).

Many factors were responsible for the non-membership of USA in the League of Nations. First was the national policy of isolation and non-interventionism USA at the time of its founding was a weak nation, very vulnerable to the great powers that dominated the world. The main objectives at this time were mainly to enhance its constitution, strengthen its military capacity to defend itself and remove European influence from the North American continent. So the United States policy of non-intervention was maintained throughout most of the nineteenth century.

So for the first 200 years of United States history, this policy of isolation and non-intervention was strictly maintained. This policy was laid from George Washington's farewell address. He was the first President of the United States. In that address he said: "The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible". [6]. Again he said Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none or a very remote relation, hence be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities" (Ibid).

In juxtaposition of that this USA national policy of isolation and non-intervention was again confirmed and authenticated in the inaugural address of President Thomas Jefferson of March 4, 1801. According to him, "Peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none [7].

President Woodrow Wilson won his second term bid with an attractive slogan "He kept us out of war". Just like the charismatic slogan of Barack Obama "I can" won him the re-election bid in the USA. However after the victory of Woodrow Wilson the Americans were surprised that he declared war on Germany and so involved the USA in the First World War. The US congress reacted by refusing to endorse the Treaty of Versailles or the League of Nations.

Second, there were strong criticisms from the Americans as they argued that they did not need the rest of the World and that they were making progress the way and manner they were making decisions concerning peace on their own without foreign intervention.

Third, it can be argued that they feared that, by their full participation in the League of Nations, it could render USA incapacitated to act on foreign policy as it pleased.

Again was the shantung settlement at Versailles Japan threatened to withdraw from the conference of Versailles if it was not settled to its favour. President Woodrow Wilson was disturbed especially considering the way and manner in which the Italians had left Paris in high dudgeon. With serious reluctance Woodrow Wilson obliged for the Japanese to have their way which the Americans saw as shameful. Storry noted that it was partly to congressional dissatisfaction with the shantung settlement in favour of Japan at Versailles that the United States failed to ratify the Peace Treaty and so held aloof from the League of Nations [8].

From the foregoing, it could easily be seen why the attempt made by Woodrow Wilson to bring the United States back to the policy of interventionism and promote international politics failed. So it was not a surprise that US Senate refused to ratify the treaty first in November, 1919 of Versailles and the League of Nations in 1920.

The idea of re-considering USA admission into the League of Nations was totally halted with victory of Warren. G Harding's victory in the American presidential elections in 1920. He led the United States into isolationism again, which became the leading guideline in American foreign policy for two decades [9].

Violations of the Covenant of the League of Nations

In spite of the achievements of the League of Nations, in maintaining world peace, it could not prevent the occurrence of the Second World War because of the constant violations of the covenant of the League. It is on record that the League settled the dispute between Finland and Sweden in 1920. Its also succeeded in partitioning Upper-Silesia between Germany and Poland over the fortification of the Aalavd Islands. It is settled the conflict between Greece and Italy over Carfu in 1933 and supervised the population exchanges among the Bulgarians, Greece and Turkey after the Treaty of Leausane in 1923. [10]. It also arbitrated the dispute between Hungary and Ugoslovia arising from the assassination of King Alexander of Ugoslovia in 1934. More especially it fostered important pioneering studies on international progress in the political social, medical technical and economic field.

However the above laudable achievements notwithstanding, the Second World War broke out in 1939 because of the power tussle among the Nations that constituted the League. [11].

The covenant of the League of Nations stipulated that member states could resign voluntary upon a two years notice. Again they could be expelled if they violated the provisions of the covenant. They could seized to be member of the League if they refused to accept an amendment to the covenant. Later events indicate how the big powers in the League flagrantly violated the provisions of the covenant.

The first obvious problem of the League was that, often it settled disputes between smaller nations successfully but since its has no cohesive force, stronger nations often ignored its decision. The League suffered a serious blow on its prestige when it was powerless to stop the Japanese invasion of China in 1931. Japan was firmly committed to a programme of aggression on the continent of Asia. According to Storry, within a year of the creation of Manchukuo Japanese troops, advanced into inner Mongolia and soon compelled the Chinese to accept a very large of unmilitarized zone between peking and the Manchurian border [8]. Within this zone and infact in North China generally Japanese political and commercial penetration increased at a remarkable pace (Ibid). The Lytton report on the Manchuria affairs was a serious condemnation of Japan's action. Japan flounced out of the League of Nations. Although Japan was isolated because it was hard pressed, in terms of armed strength alone, it was undoubtedly formidable.

Liberal minded people in Europe and American began to place Japan in the same camp as fascist Italy and the new Nazi Germany (Ibid). The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 brought in the conflict of interest between the country with France and Britain, the Leading members of the League of Nations. It will be recalled that the League of Nations had three main organs which were the Assembly the Council and Secretariat Decisions on political issues was made by the Council, whose membership vary from 8-15. Some of these members were permanent while others were not. The permanent members were originally France, Great Britain, Italy and Japan. Germany was a permanent member from 1934-1939. The exit of Japan from the League was a serious misfortune as the League lacked the collective will to prevent Japanese aggressions. Again the League lacked the cohesive force to adequately intervene.

The League of Nations failed to prevent the chachowar between Bolivia and Paraguay in 1932-1945. Paraquay left the League. When German joined the League in 1925, it pursued a policy aimed at undermining the status quo of Versailles relying on the principle of national self-determination as a dynamite to crack the foundation of the territorial status quo [5]. This policy was at a cross-purpose with that of France. The threat by Germany to ally itself with the Soviet Union compelled Britain and France to embark on a policy of appeasement as series of concessions were granted to Germany which later weakened the League of Nations.

Adesola maintains that Italy welcomed the comeback of Germany within certain limits, as a means of weakening France and its Eastern European allies especially the defunct Yugoslavia (Ibid, p.

61). In the 1930s, when the impotence of the League has become obvious, Italy used Germany just as Germany was using the defunct Soviet Union as a common menace and a challenge to Great Britain and France's domination of the Mediterranean (Ibid; pp 61-63). Italy attacked Ethiopia and refused to comply with the decisions of the League. The Polish government ignored the decisions of the League of Nations to cede Vilnius to the Lithuania in 1931.

This power politics among the member nations of the League affected the organisation which rendered it incapacitated within the period under focus. [12].

The failure of the disarmament conference sponsored by the League of Nations in 1932 was a serious challenge towards the realization of its objectives. Maurice Vaisse opines that the disarmament conference was convened too late under hostile conditions as there was confrontation between France and Germany (Vaisse, 1993). With the failure of the conference Germany started to re-arm in 1933 and re-militarized the Rhineland in 1934. Germany denounced the treaty of Versailles in 1936 and annexed Austria in 1938 without fear of the League.

Germany and Italy interfered in the Spanish Civil-War in 1936 to 1939. Italy withdrew from the League in 1937 after having completed the invasion of Ethiopia. Another challenge of the League of Nations was that it was not a universal organisation. It is not compulsory that all nations in the world must belong to an organisation however it is encouraged that major power players in the world should belong in order to avoid major crisis. There are known powerful nations that are capable of disturbing the peace of the world. Such nations include USA, USSR, Japan Britain, France, Germany, Italy etc. Japan left the League in 1931 while Italy resigned in 1937. USSR was expelled in 1939 by the League. Germany also resigned its membership unfortunately the most powerful nations of the League, Britain and France were always at confrontations with one another (Ibid). The USA that could have acted as a strategic balance in the League as European nations were flexing muscle and engaging in bitter rivalry was not a member.

Attempt made by the League of Nations to make the body universal failed. Article 17 of the covenant of the League gave the League authority in case of a dispute between two states, one or both of which were not members of the League to invite the non-member to accept the obligation of membership in the League for the purpose of such dispute, upon such conditions as the council may deem fit [13].

Unfortunately, there is the issue of declaration of war by member states is not clearly stated in the covenant. Adesola explains that the preamble of the covenant stipulated the acceptance of obligation by members not to resort to war [5] yet Article 22 also provided that members should not resort to war until three months after the award by the arbitrators [14]. In Article 3 paragraph 14, the members agreed that they would not resort to war against the other members of the League which complies with the judicial decision of the dispute [15]. Again Article 15, paragraph 6, states that any party to the dispute that abide by the Council's report and its recommendations shall not be visited with war [16].

It becomes highly laughable that inspite of the Articles of the covenant directed at preventing or discourages war among the member states, strong or powerful nations openly violate the covenant by declaring war on each other. The League is always powerless to punish offenders. The League was helpless when Germany armies invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939 and could do nothing to prevent the outbreak of World War II when Germany attacked Poland. The last important action taken by the League was the expulsion of USSR later in 1939 when it attacked Finland.

Dissolution of the League of Nations and the Commencement of the Second World War

Infact, by January, 1940 the League had ceased functioning effectively on political matters and on April 18, 1946 at the final session of the Assembly, the League's physical assets were turned over to the United Nations Organisation and its social and economic functions were fused with those of the Economic and Social Council of the UN [17].

When on December 7, 1941, Japan attacked the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, an action which was intended to keep the Pacific fleet from interfering with the military actions the Japanese was planning in South-East Asia against overseas territories of the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States. The League of Nations could not take any decisive action. The reaction of USA was to declare war on Japan on December 8, 1941. This action of USA on Japan led Germany and Italy to declare war on USA on December 11, 1941. The prompt intervention of the League of Nations could have brought peace to these nations and the Second World War could have been avoided. So it can be argued that the League of Nations after about twenty years of existence collapsed with the outbreaks of World War II. Put differently, the deficiency of the League of Nations led to the outbreak of the Second World War which started in 1939 and ended in 1945.

Thereafter, the League lost all its influence in international events. On April 18th 1946, the League which has continue to exist throughout the World War II on a reduced scale was officially dissolved. Most of its services and properties were transferred to the United Nations which took over most of its functions. When France and Great Britain, the two strongest supporter of the League of Nations signed the Munich pact in 1938, it became clear that all the major-powers had lost confidence in the organisation.

USSR defeated Germany with the assistance of the Western Allies particularly Britain and USA. On May 2, 1945 Berlin fell because of the efforts of Soviet armies which then closed in on Berlin. On May 7, 1945, the USSR with the Western Allies accepted the surrender of Germany. As a result of failure of the League of Nations to settle disputes amicably among nations and its obvious challenges, the Second War broke out.

United Nations Organization

According to Adesola, the name 'United Nations' was coined by former United States of American President, Mr. Franklin D. Roosevelt [5]. Its charter came into being when representatives of 50 countries met at the United Nations Conference at San Francisco between 25th April to 26th June, 1945. They deliberated on the basis of the proposals worked by the representatives of China, Soviet Union, United Kingdom and United States of America (Ibid; 66-61). It officially came into existence on the 24th October, 1945.

The aims as contained in the charter are as follow:

- To maintain international peace and security
- To develop friendly relations among nations
- To co-operate internationally in solving international economic, socio, cultural and humanitarian problems and in promoting respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms
- To be a center for harmonizing the actions of nations in attaining common ends [18].

In order to avoid a re-occurrence of a another world war, more powerful, efficient and effective international organization was formed in 1945 when the Second World War ended. This organization is called United Nations Organization.

CONCLUSION

The League of Nations was a formal international organization whose main aim was the maintenance of world peace and promotion of co-operation among nations. It was clear that prior to 1914, armaments began to be assembled in preparation for war Europe was tensed. It was therefore not surprising that the Sarajevo Saga of August 1914 led to the emergence of the First World War. It can be argued that if an international organisation of high repute was in existence, may be the First World War could have been avoided.

When eventually the war ended in 1918, a covenant attached to the treaty of Versailles formed the basis for the League of Nations which was inaugurated on January 10th, 1920. The establishment of the League of Nations became a popular and an acceptable concept because of the causalities and devastation associated with the First World War.

It derives its authority from the Government of the member nations, not directly from the people of the world. Unfortunately, it became a toothless bull dog because the major European powers towards the later part of the eighteenth century had been grossly oppressive of the smaller ones as well as engaging in bitter rivalry and the League of Nations could not take decisive actions. In spite of the contributions of the League of Nations in maintaining world peace, it could not prevent the occurrence of the Second World War because of the constant violations of the covenant of the League. The League lacked the cohesive force to adequately intervene in conflict and crises.

There were known powerful nations that are capable of disturbing the peace of the world. Such nations include USA, USSR, Japan, Britain, France, Germany and Italy. Japan left the League in 1931 while Italy resigned in 1937. USSR was expelled in 1939. Germany also resigned its membership. Unfortunately, the most powerful nations of the League, Britain and France were always at confrontations with one another. USA that could have acted as a strategic balance in the League was not a member. Hence it was not a surprise that the Second World War broke out in 1939. April 18, 1946 was the final session of the Assembly, the League's physical assets were turned over to the United Nations Organisation and its social and economic functions were fused with those of the Economic and Social Council of the UNO.

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