

2.3 How important was the League's humanitarian work?

The League had agencies and commissions to address humanitarian issues such as disease, poverty, **exploitation**, prisoners of war and refugees. Through its actions, the League showed the world how international cooperation could encourage peace by successfully managing these issues. As you read about each commission, consider how successful it was and how important the League's work in this area was. Record your judgement in the table you began in Focus task 2.1.

KEY TERMS

exploitation: the act of using someone unfairly to your own advantage, e.g. people may be exploited in the workplace by being overworked and underpaid

resettlement: the process of helping someone to move to another place to live

The Commission for Refugees

Led by the Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, the Commission for Refugees was established in 1921 to look after the interests of refugees. This included overseeing their return to their home country and, when necessary, **resettlement**. At the end of the First World War, there were between 2 million and 3 million ex-prisoners of war from various nations in Russia. Within two years, the Commission had helped 425 000 of them return home. It established camps in Turkey in 1922 to support the country in dealing with a refugee crisis, helping to prevent disease and hunger. Working in difficult circumstances and with little money, Nansen and his staff used imaginative methods to look after these people. They set up camps and taught new skills to refugees. They provided them with identity papers, such as the Nansen passport, which allowed displaced people to move around more easily.

The League's work with refugees was not always successful. During the 1930s, it made only limited attempts to help Jewish people fleeing Nazi Germany. However, the initial work of the Commission for Refugees showed the world that it was possible to take collective action to help those who had been forced to leave their homes and countries. The League's work was also important in beginning to organise international relief efforts. Its legacy was an agreed set of international rules about the care and protection of refugees that still exists today.

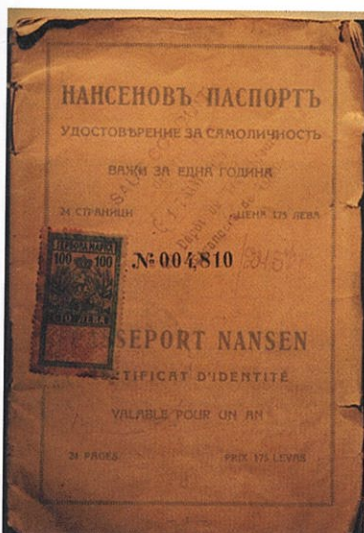


Figure 2.5: A sample Nansen passport



Figure 2.6: Fridtjof Nansen (second from the right) with Greek refugees in Thrace, Greece

The Health Organization

Under the leadership of Ludwig Rajchman, the League's Health Organization became one of its most successful bodies. It established links with countries outside the League, such as the USA, Germany and the USSR to provide an information service, technical assistance and advice on public health matters. For example, it supported the USSR in trying to prevent a typhus epidemic in the early 1920s by organising a public information campaign on health and **sanitation**. By 1923, the worst of the epidemic was over.

The Health Organization reduced cases of **leprosy** and began an international campaign to eliminate mosquitoes, which reduced the spread of malaria and yellow fever. For example, the death rate among workers building the Tanganyika railway in East Africa fell from 50% to 4% as a result of the efforts of the Health Organization. Research institutes based in London, Copenhagen and Singapore developed internationally accepted vaccines for diphtheria, tetanus and tuberculosis.

After the Second World War, the League's Health Organization became the World Health Organization, which is still part of the United Nations.

KEY FIGURE

Rachel Crowdy (1884–1964)

Rachel Crowdy worked as a nurse during the First World War. After the war, she began working at the League of Nations. She became the only woman to head a department, Opium Traffic and Social Issues. She became famous for her thorough investigations into the **trafficking** of women and children, and the drug trade in opium. In 1920, Crowdy went to Poland to help contain a typhus epidemic there. When she retired from the League in 1931, she was guest of honour at the Café Royal in London, where 600 women saluted her achievements.



KEY TERMS

sanitation: the systems for taking dirty water and other waste products away from buildings in order to protect people's health

leprosy: a contagious disease that affects the skin and the nervous system

trafficking: buying or selling goods or people illegally

convention: an informal agreement between leaders and politicians on a matter than involves them all

regulation: a rule or a set of rules for organisations that affect parts of the economy

The International Labour Organization

The International Labour Organization (ILO) was created in 1919. It fought for social justice in the form of safe, healthy and fair working conditions. The ILO could make recommendations to national governments about labour matters. These would appear in the form of **conventions** agreed by the ILO's annual conference. If accepted there, the conventions were presented to national parliaments within one year by League members. The ILO adopted the first six International Labour Conventions, which focused on hours of work in industry, unemployment, maternity protection, night work for women, minimum age and night work for young persons in industry. By itself, the League could not force countries to change their laws and practice, but it did hold countries to account for not making progress in these areas.

Little by little, an international network of labour laws and **regulation** started to develop. By 1939 the work of the ILO had agreed 67 conventions. For example, the ILO's efforts to regulate child labour resulted in children only working an eight-hour day in the Persian carpet industry and their rooms being properly ventilated. The ILO successfully restricted the addition of lead to paint. It also convinced several countries to adopt an eight-hour working day and 48-hour working week. Hours of work

remained on the ILO agenda throughout the 1920s and 1930s, and the organisation was the main forum for international debate and the adoption of international labour standards. This was one of the League's most important achievements.

In August 1934, the USA became a member of the ILO, which widened its impact. During the worldwide Depression in the 1930s, the organisation worked to address the widespread social distress caused by the economic collapse. In 1932, it called for major international action on finance, trade and public works policies to try to overcome the Depression. When the League ended, the ILO became an **agency** of the United Nations in 1946.



Figure 2.7: Child labourers

ACTIVITY 2.4

Look at the photograph of child labourers in Figure 2.7. It was taken before the ILO was formed. Discuss the following questions in small groups.

- a What issues can you see that the ILO would be concerned about?
- b The ILO's conventions did not have the force of law. Does this mean that the efforts of ILO staff were wasted?
- c Child labour still exists today. What does this tell you about the difficulties of the ILO's work? How might this affect your judgement about the importance and effectiveness of the League's agencies?

KEY TERM

agency: an organisation that acts on behalf of other organisations. In the League of Nations, different agencies focused on specific issues under the authority of the Council

The Slavery Commission

The Slavery Commission aimed to end enslavement and the trade in enslaved people across the world. Its work included supporting people forced to become sex workers. Its main success was ending enslavement in the mandates that had been established by the Treaty of Versailles (see Chapter 1). The League secured a commitment from Abyssinia to end slavery as a condition of membership in 1923, and worked with Liberia to abolish forced labour and the enslavement of people between tribes. Records were kept to control enslavement, sex work and the trafficking of women and children.

Partly because of pressure from the League of Nations, Afghanistan abolished slavery in 1923, Iraq in 1924, Nepal in 1926, Transjordan and Persia in 1929, Bahrain in 1937 and Abyssinia in 1942. Overall, efforts by the League of Nations freed around 200 000 enslaved people. The League's humanitarian work was very important in making the issue a priority for many member and non-member states. By itself, the League could not abolish slavery, but its reports, photographs and observations kept the issue in the public eye.

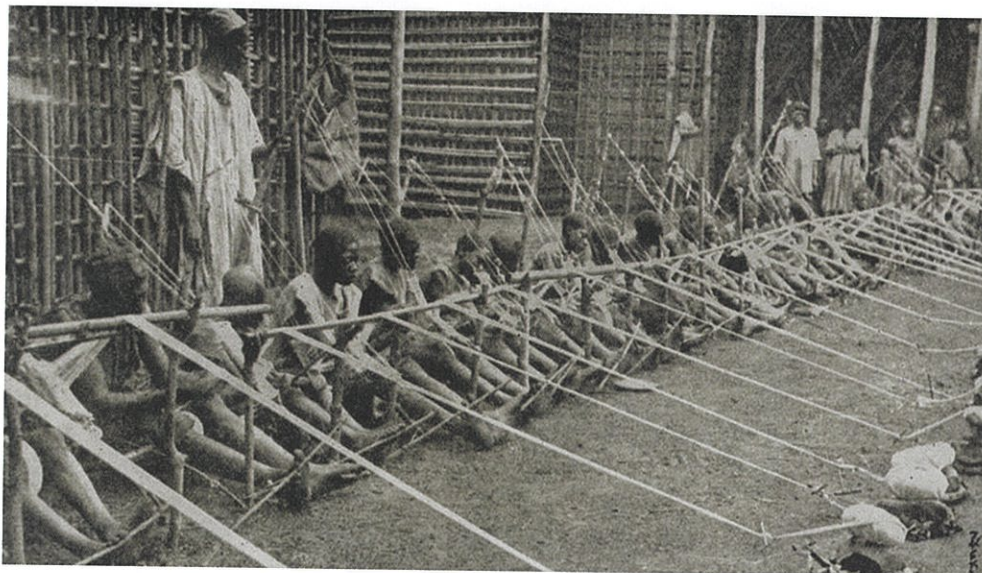


Figure 2.8: A photograph showing child labour in Cameroon, 1919

FOCUS TASK 2.8

In pairs, discuss the following questions. You can use the judgements: very important / important / little importance.

- a What did the League do to improve the social and economic conditions in which people worked around the world?
- b What did the League do to improve the health of people around the world?
- c If the League had not acted to bring together international resources, how would individuals and groups have been affected?

Create a poster that highlights the importance of the League's humanitarian work. Include the different commissions and agencies and highlight some of their achievements.

THINK LIKE A HISTORIAN

Working for the League of Nations in the 1920s required specific skills and knowledge. In pairs, choose one part of the League, such as the Secretariat and the General Assembly, and remind yourselves of its role. Under two headings, 'Essential' and 'Desirable', write a list of skills and knowledge that you would want candidates to have if they applied for a post in your division.

Today, the United Nations tries to achieve similar aims to the League. In what ways would your two lists be different from the ones you drew up for the 1920s if you were recruiting for a similar role today?

Key points

The League of Nations' humanitarian work

- The League of Nations did a variety of humanitarian work. Some tackled immediate problems such as the prisoners of war in Russia; others improved situations for people over the longer term, such as working to eliminate diseases.
- The Commission for Refugees helped people who had been displaced by the war and paved the way for international relief efforts during times of conflict.
- International Labour Organization (ILO) gave guidance on working conditions that ultimately helped both children and adults to live longer and healthier lives.
- The Health Organization contributed significantly to preventing and treating diseases including malaria, typhus and leprosy around the world.
- The Slavery Commission worked with both member and non-member states to secure commitments to end enslavement and the trade in enslaved people.

2.4 How far did the Depression make the work of the League more difficult in the 1930s?

What was the Great Depression?

The Great Depression was a series of connected economic developments that affected countries around the world in 1929 and lasted well into the 1930s. Where order books for cars and household products had once been full, the 1930s saw a downturn in demand, and cuts in production and trade soon followed. Factories closed, farmers went bankrupt, and millions lost their jobs and joined long lines of the unemployed. To make matters worse, the banking system failed and people lost their money. Although it began in the USA, countries in Europe and Asia, particularly Germany, Italy and Japan, all faced similar problems.