

2.2 How successful were the League's attempts at peacekeeping in the 1920s?

In its first ten years, the League dealt with 30 disputes between states. This topic explores some of these issues.

Vilna, 1920

The population of the city of Vilna included Poles, Jews and Lithuanians. After the First World War, the city was recognised as part of Lithuania. However, the Treaty of Versailles had left Lithuania's border with Poland unclear, so Poland brought the issue to the League Council. The League sent a commission to investigate. It drew up a provisional border, confirming that Vilna was part of Lithuania, and both states signed the agreement on 30 September 1920.

Shortly after this, Polish General Lucjan Żeligowski and his soldiers marched into Vilna. He may have been secretly supported by the Polish government, but there is no firm evidence for this. Lithuania was not a member of the League but it was still able to raise the matter with the Assembly. Initially, the League ordered Poland to withdraw from the city. The Polish government said it would do so, but actually sent more troops.

The League announced it would hold a plebiscite in Vilna policed by an international force organised by the League. Both Poland and Lithuania opposed the League's proposal. In March 1921, the League abandoned its plebiscite plan and instead asked a Belgian representative, Paul Hymans, to investigate the situation in Vilna and report to the League.

The Hymans Report was published in September 1921. It recommended that both Lithuanian and Polish languages were granted official status. It also suggested that all **minority groups** in Lithuania should have equal rights to education, religion, language and association. Finally, it recommended that steps be taken to align the two countries' economic and foreign policies.

The Hymans Plan was a delicate balancing act, but both sides rejected it. In January 1922, the League issued a public statement saying that it had exhausted all possibilities. So the occupation of Vilna was allowed to continue. In March 1923, the Conference of Ambassadors recognised Vilna as part of Poland.

Results for the League of Nations:

Successes	Concerns
Left with a difficult issue by the Paris peacemakers, the League responded with an innovative proposal – even if it was rejected.	Some contemporaries were outraged at the Polish takeover of Vilna. The Polish government must have known about the general's actions and the League should have invoked Article 16. The first time the League was asked to deal with an invasion, they failed to do so.
The Vilna issue made headlines around the world, but in the event, there was no war.	Poland had a strong relationship with France, based on a historical alliance, so a country was allowed to benefit from aggression.

KEY TERM

minority group: a recognisable group of people whose religion, language, culture or ethnicity is different from that of most people (the majority) in a country or region

FOCUS TASK 2.4

Write brief answers to the following questions.

- Why did the dispute over Vilna not turn into a war?
- Which of the articles of the League's Covenant were activated by this dispute?
- Was the League's reputation enhanced or weakened by this dispute?

Swap your answers with a partner and give each other feedback. If you have given different responses, justify your answers to your partner.

The Åland Islands, 1920–21

The Åland Islands are located between Sweden and Finland (see Figure 2.2), and both countries claimed them. Although 95% of the population were ethnic Swedes, the islands belonged to Finland. In June 1920, the dispute between Sweden and Finland over the Islands was referred to the Council of the League of Nations. The League ordered an investigation of the issue. It concluded that the island should remain under Finland's rule. The Council felt that awarding the Åland Islands to Sweden would set a dangerous **precedent**, encouraging other Swedish communities living in Finland to make similar claims. Outside the area, other minority groups in Europe might want to do the same.

Alongside the decision to leave the Islands in Finnish hands, the League's report recommended that the Swedes should have more **autonomy** to preserve their traditions and customs. For example, the Swedish language should be taught in schools.

These decisions meant that Finland maintained its borders but that the Swedes who lived on the Islands could keep their Swedish customs. It was the first European international agreement concluded directly through the League of Nations. In the short term, the settlement was a success, but in the 1930s the League's judgement on the Åland Islands was used by the Japanese government to justify expanding its empire to islands in the Pacific.

KEY TERMS

precedent: an action or situation that has already happened that can be used as a reason why a similar action or decision can be taken or made

autonomy: the right of a country or region to be independent and to govern itself

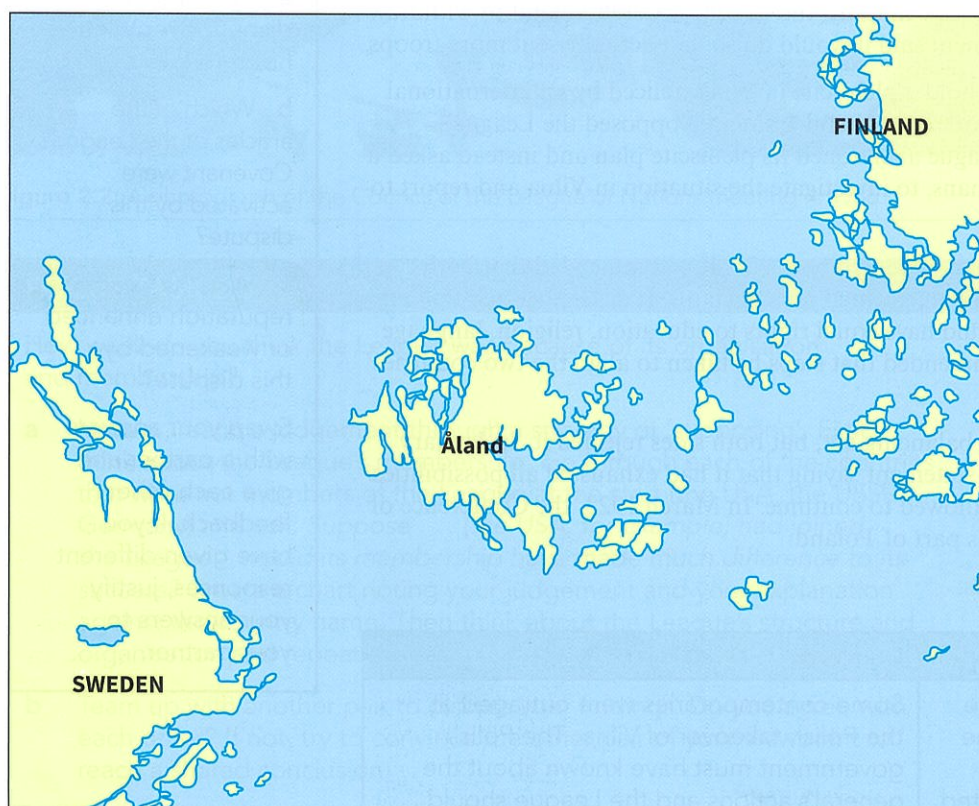


Figure 2.3: A map showing the location of the Åland Islands

Results for the League of Nations:

Successes	Concerns
The development of autonomy was important and Swedish customs were preserved. It was only a formality that the people of the Åland Islands were Finnish citizens.	This dispute raised an important question in relation to President Wilson's principle of national self-determination. How far should the principle be applied?
Finland had preserved its borders to avoid setting a precedent that might lead to other ethnic claims, thus destroying the Paris Peace Settlement.	The way to resolve disputes over island ownership was now established: the island belongs to the country of which it was once a part. This principle was used by Japan in the 1930s to justify its expansion in the Pacific Ocean.

FOCUS TASK 2.5

Write brief answers to the following questions.

- Why didn't the Åland Islands dispute turn into a war?
- Which articles of the League Covenant were used in this dispute?
- Was the League's reputation enhanced or weakened by this dispute?

Swap your answers with a partner and give each other feedback. If you have given different responses, justify your answers to your partner.

The Corfu Incident, 1923

The map in Figure 2.4 shows Greece and its neighbours in the 1920s. In August 1923, an Italian general, Enrico Tellini, was murdered in Greece along with four of his assistants. The men had been working for the **Conference of Ambassadors**, reporting on a border dispute between Greece and Albania. The Greek authorities failed to arrest anyone for the murder so the Italian leader, Benito Mussolini, ordered Italian troops to occupy the Greek island of Corfu. He hoped to force the Greek government to compensate Italy for Tellini's death.

KEY FIGURE

Lord Robert Cecil (1864–1958)

British politician Lord Robert Cecil was one of the men who helped to plan and create the League of Nations. He believed that it should be compulsory for peaceful discussions to take place before any conflict and that there should be a three-month gap between these procedures and any armed conflict. He also argued that Germany should be a member of the League right from the start. Throughout his life, Cecil highlighted the importance of the League for peace in international affairs. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1937.



KEY TERM

Conference of Ambassadors:

a diplomatic organisation established at the Paris Peace Conference, and based in Paris, to supervise the completion of issues that were resolved by the peace treaties

Greece appealed to the Council of the League of Nations. Italy argued that its occupation was not an act of war. The British representative on the Council, Robert Cecil, disagreed. He wanted the League to impose sanctions on Italy and to send some ships from the British navy to the coast of Corfu as a warning. However, the British government did not want to risk damaging trade relations with Italy. Instead, the Council decided to send a commission to the Albanian–Greek border to investigate Tellini's death. The commission reported that it could find no evidence that Greece had failed to investigate the murder properly. On 25 September, the Conference of Ambassadors met to consider the report. As a result of Italian pressure, Greece was made to pay 50 million lire as compensation. Two days later, the Italians began evacuating Corfu.

Results for the League of Nations:

Successes	Concerns
Greece was able to appeal to the Council when it felt it was not being fairly treated by the Conference of Ambassadors.	Italy committed an act of war, but this injustice was not punished by the other Great Powers. The League failed to stop Italy from invading the Greek Island of Corfu even though Greece asked for help.
Italy and Greece did not go to war and Italian forces did not stay in Greek territory for long.	The League of Nations had little involvement in the final settlement of the crisis. It appeared that the Conference of Ambassadors was more important.
–	The Corfu Incident was seen as a serious failure for the League. It showed that powerful nations could still bully a less powerful neighbour (Greece was a small, weak country with no powerful friends on the Council).



Figure 2.4: A map showing south-eastern Europe in 1925, including Greece, Corfu, Albania and Bulgaria

FOCUS TASK 2.6

Write brief answers to the following questions.

- a Why didn't the Corfu incident turn into a war?
- b Which of the League's articles were used to resolve the dispute?
- c Do you think the League's reputation was enhanced or weakened by this dispute?

Swap your answers with a partner and give each other feedback. If you have given different responses, justify your answers to your partner.

Greek-Bulgarian confrontation, 1925

It is unclear exactly what started the confrontation between Greece and Bulgaria in 1923. Whatever the facts, fighting broke out between the two countries and the Bulgarian government appealed to the League to intervene.

The League ordered an end to the fighting and said that troops from both sides should withdraw to their own country. The Greek government was ordered to pay \$218,250 in compensation. Both countries accepted this decision. British, French and Italian officials travelled to the area to confirm that the Council's instructions had been obeyed. The confrontation was over.

Results for the League of Nations:

Successes	Concerns
The Council's demand to end military action as a first step was obeyed.	Greece thought that the League's involvement in the Corfu Incident two years earlier resulted in a different outcome for Italy than the one on the Greek-Bulgarian border. It felt like there was one rule for powers like Italy and another for smaller countries like Greece, so the League was not treating nations fairly.
The Council then investigated the reasons for the incident and reported them. In the past, small border incidents like this had started wars.	–

On this occasion, the only major concern to weigh against the successes was the unequal treatment of smaller powers like Greece. However, the League's action in 1925 should be considered in context. It may have looked for a time as though Greece and Bulgaria were about to go to war, but in fact neither country was in a position to conduct a serious military campaign. Both had domestic difficulties: Greece was struggling with a million refugees from Turkey, and Bulgaria had been mostly demilitarised. Furthermore, neither Greece nor Bulgaria was allied to a Great Power that could have acted to support them. This alone was likely to have prevented the war from growing in importance and involving neighbours. This prospect was always the great fear of any diplomat who remembered the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914 (see Introduction Part 2).

FOCUS TASK 2.7

Write brief answers to the following questions.

- a Why didn't the Greek-Bulgarian dispute turn into a war?
- b Which of the articles of the League's Covenant were activated by this dispute?
- c Was the League's reputation enhanced or weakened by this dispute?

Swap your answers with a partner and give each other feedback. If you have given different responses, justify your answers to your partner.

THINKING SKILLS

The year is 1929. You have been invited to Geneva, where the League of Nations has its headquarters, to a **summit** on how the League has operated so far and to address its weaknesses. Write answers to the following questions.

- What is the League's greatest weakness, in your opinion?
- Is the organisation fit for purpose? If not, why not?
- Does the Covenant need to be changed? If so, how?
- How well is the relationship between the major powers and smaller ones working?
- Overall, what recommendations would you give to ensure greater success in the future?

KEY TERM

summit: a formal meeting between government leaders from two or more countries

ACTIVITY 2.3

You should now have partially completed the table you created in Focus task 2.2. Look back over this table and at the tables in this section showing the results for the League of Nations of each dispute. Compare the different disputes. Write two paragraphs in response to the following questions.

- a What patterns do you see in terms of differences in the nature of the disputes?
- b How far do you think these explain why they led to different results?

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