

War, Peace & Politics: From the League of Nations to the United Nations

By Carolina S. Ruiz
Research and Resource Development Associate

ALPHA Education
Digital archive project Primary Source Collection

In This Issue

The League of Nations viewed through Political Cartoons

The Mukden Incident and the Lytton Report

Comparisons between The League and the United Nations

Primary Sources for the Classroom

Excerpts from the League of Nations Covenant and the UDHR Preamble

Introduction

The story of the United Nations - how it was founded and came to be - is usually framed alongside the hopeful story of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) following the catastrophic events of the Second World War. While there is nothing wrong with this story, it is hardly the complete story of the United Nations (UN), or for that matter, the emergence of human rights norms.

In classrooms and other learning environments where the concept and practice of human rights is discussed, studying the origins of the UN and its precursor, the League of Nations (LON) provides opportunities for historical reflection. But besides grappling with the historical significance of the UDHR as an aspirational standard, a historical perspective also helps to root us in the historical present where human rights, access to them and their availability to all, continues to be relevant.

In this way, becoming aware of the fraught history and context of institutions and international agreements - key mechanisms that nations have come to rely on for forging peace through international cooperation - can give us a better understanding of how multi-faceted the paths to peace can be. The hope is that history can give us a deeper appreciation of the challenges we currently face. We know, for example, that to this day, social movements, activists and even governments continue to press for the realization of the promise of human rights.

This issue of ALPHA Education's *Primary Source Collection* features historical sources on the LON as well as basic materials for undertaking comparisons between the UN and the League.

The League of Nations (LON) was established on January 10, 1920 following the First World War by the victors of the First World War. The Covenant that created the League was adopted with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919.

By 1939, the League had 63 member states. While the LON resolved some state conflicts (mostly border disputes) during its early years, it is widely viewed to have failed its mandate to uphold peace and security by the 1930s.

The powerlessness of the League of Nations to prevent further world conflict, the alienation of part of its Member States and the generation of the war itself, added to its demise by 1940.

(See: History of the League of Nations, United Nations Office at Geneva, Library, Registry, Records and Archives Unit)



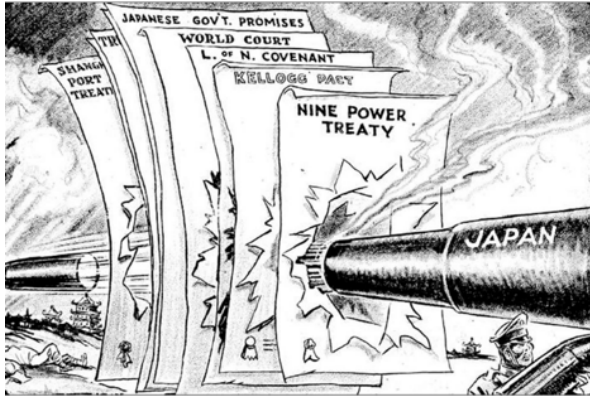
The League of Nations viewed through Political Cartoons

Rabbit: "My offensive equipment, being practically nil, it remains for me to fascinate him with the power of my eye."

This Punch cartoon from 1920 entitled, *Moral Persuasion*, depicts the dominant view of the League of Nations (LON) at the time. The rabbit, a far weaker creature than the snake, is overestimating its own powers (of persuasion) over the large snake that is poised to strike. Following the First World War, the LON was established and given an ambitious mandate: preventing the repeat of the devastating world war that had just ended in 1918. New weapons, via advancements in military technology during the war, resulted in "unprecedented carnage" with over 9 million killed in combat.



*The Command Corteous.
League of Nations. Good Dog - Drop it!*



Manchuria 1931. American Cartoon depicting Japan's Violation of Existing Non-Aggression Treaties

By the end of the First World War, the international trade in weapons technology was a burgeoning industry.

Within its mandate of maintaining peace and security, the League of Nations embarked on the adoption of the Geneva Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare (Convention for the Supervision of the International Trade in Arms and Ammunition and in Implements of War following the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907 that was adopted in Geneva on 17 June 1925).

On paper, the initiative was successful because it was adopted. The Arms Trade Convention came into force after it was ratified by at least 14 countries in 1925. Notably, however, none of the weapons producing countries ratified it.

The Protocol on the Prohibition of bacteriological warfare came into force simultaneously with the Convention. But because there were no provisions regarding the supervision or limitation of arms or weapons production, the members (especially states not engaged in arms production) doubted the Convention's effectiveness.

To this date, initiatives to limit the proliferation of arms/weapons continue to be an uphill battle. The United States and Japan signed them in 1925, but neither one moved towards ratification. The US and Japan only ratified the Convention in 1975 and 1970 respectively. While Italy and Germany ratified the Convention in 1928, the course of international relations changed when the Axis powers (Germany, Italy and Japan) withdrew from the League of Nations by 1933.

The Punch cartoon (above left) preceded Japan's walkout from the LON. It depicts the latter as a nursemaid gently scolding Japan, which is represented by a dog with a juicy bone (Manchuria), in its mouth. It was published 12 years after the Rabbit & The Snake. By 1932, the LON's efforts to push disarmament treaties as well as an Arms Trade Convention had failed miserably.

The League's inability to stop Japan from moving ahead with its expansion into Manchuria (Northeastern China) was not the only incident that influenced views of its inadequacy. In 1935, Abyssinia (Ethiopia) was invaded by Italy (under Mussolini). Abyssinia asked the LON for help, but while the League waited for a discussion with Mussolini, the latter used the time to send invading troops to Africa. Later on, the LON issued recommendations suggesting that Italy could take over portions of Abyssinia. Emperor Haile Selassie of Abyssinia went to the League to appeal for help, but LON members, Britain and France had already secretly agreed to give Abyssinia to Italy (the Hoare-Laval Pact).

"Judge: The court orders you to respect the law and sentences you to a good talking to."

Japan: "And I order the court to mind its own business and I sentence it to go and chase itself."



Trial by Geneva, David Low, 1931

Colonialism and Imperialism

Context and Connections

Many of the failures attributed to the League of Nations can be linked to the competing interests of its members, the most influential of whom, guarded their own colonial and imperial interests closely. To this extent, the prevalence of colonialism and imperialist expansion impacted the LON's effectiveness. These colonial interests also shaped the path to war.

Under its Covenant, League decisions (except on matters that concerned procedure) could only be arrived at by unanimous vote. This rule applied both to the League's Council, which had special responsibilities for maintaining peace (the current equivalent of the UN's Security Council), and to the all-member Assembly (the equivalent of the UN's General Assembly). This meant that each member state of the League actually had the power of the veto, and, except for procedural matters and a few specified topics, a single "nay" could kill any resolution.

China: The Cake of Kings and Emperors, Henri Meyer, 1898



This cartoon marks Japan's recognition as one of the dominant "colonizing powers" - seen her with Russia, Germany England France taking a piece of China.



League investigators and railway authorities at the Manchurian Railway (at Mukden). LON investigating team spent 6 weeks of research Manchuria before submitting its report in September 1932.

The Mukden Incident and the Lytton Report

On September 8, 1931, a portion of the Southern Manchurian Railway (SMR) at Mukden was blown up. The administrators of the Japanese-owned railway blamed local Chinese dissidents, but it was soon discovered that troops belonging to Japan's field army in China, the Kwantung army, was responsible for the explosion.

Using the explosion as a rationale and claiming "self-defense," the Kwantung Army proceeded with the occupation of Manchuria. It deposed the existing government and replaced it with the puppet government of Manchukuo. In the 1930s, Manchuria had become Japan's "economic lifeline" - a vital source of raw materials, food crops and cheap labour.

China appealed to the League of Nations for assistance. After investigating the matter, Lord Lytton, a British diplomat, who led the investigating commission, submitted its report to the LON. Upon its recommendations, the LON refused to recognize Manchukuo as a genuine State and proposed a series of measures to re-establish the status quo. China accepted the League of Nations' recommendations for restoring peace in the area, but Japan did not and, as a result, withdrew from the League of Nations. Subsequently, Japan escalated its expansion into China and in 1937, full scale war between China and Japan erupted. China continued appealing to the LON in the face of Japan's intensification of bombings, mass killings and rapes. In the same year, the LON failed to unite on a recommendation to "endeavour its members to deter Japan from continuing its present form of aggression." Likewise, New Zealand's proposal to adopt economic sanctions against Japan was defeated.

References:

Robert H. Ferrell, "The Mukden Incident: September 18-19, 1931," *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (Mar., 1955), pp. 66-72

John R. Stewart, "Manchuria as Japan's Economic Lifeline," *Far Eastern Survey* Vol. 4, No. 23 (Nov. 20, 1935)

Journal of the League of Nations, Transcript of Proceedings, 1937

United Nations Office at Geneva (UNOG) Archives

"The signatories of the Nine Power Treaty of the Washington Conference of February 6th, 1922, by agreeing to "respect the sovereignty, the independence, and the territorial and administrative integrity" of China, to maintain "equality of opportunity in China for the trade and industry of all nations," by refraining from taking advantage of conditions in China "in order to seek special rights or privileges" there, and by providing "the fullest and most unembarrassing opportunity to China to develop and maintain for herself an effective and stable government," challenged to a large extent the claims of any signatory State to a "special position" or to "special rights and interests" in any part of China, including Manchuria. " Excerpt from the Lytton Report, 1932

Comparisons between The League and the United Nations

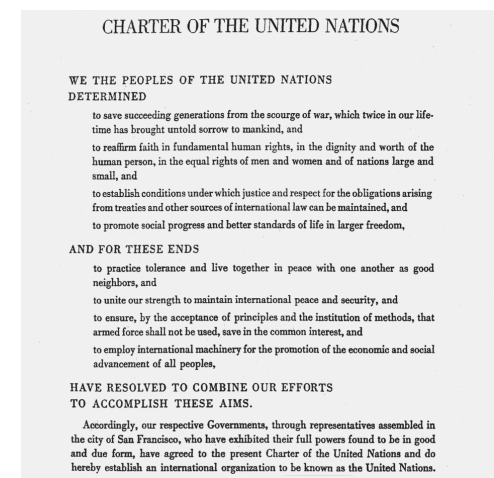
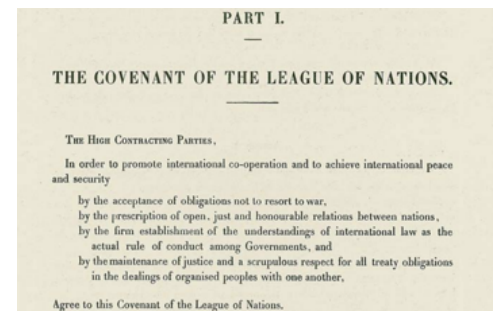
The major difference between the League of Nations and the United Nations as institutions is deeply linked to the historical contexts of their establishment.

While the League of Nations was intended to be a collective organization, its member states were far from considered co-equal and sovereign states even in principle. In spite of its best intentions on paper for maintaining peace, the LON was established during a time when colonialism was the accepted norm, and this system was treated by the colonial powers as legitimate state practice.

Just as abolitionists established a political movement that challenged the institution of slavery, pockets of resistance to colonialism emerged in the colonies, as well as found support within movements located in Western colonialist states as early as the late 1800s around the time when the United States embarked on its own expansion into Asia. Notably, the International Convention against Slavery, which was adopted in 1926, was one of the League's early accomplishments.

As far as the League was concerned, however, the existence of colonies and the colonizers' power over the territories/peoples under them were never quite open to debate.

While LON appeals to respect other countries' peoples, territorial integrity in the context of conflict or war did not necessarily cite the principles of sovereign equality between states, they were profoundly linked to these ideas. Eventually, the liberal ideals and principles (particularly equality) that were widely invoked in the establishment of the League, would eventually expose the contradictions between its rhetoric and practice.



From the top: The League of Nations Covenant, Photo of the opening session, 1920, The UN Charter Preamble, Photo from the signing of the UN Charter in San Francisco, 1945.



David Low, 1950

Like the League, the UN has a checkered past. By the 1950s, the UN gave the United States' unlimited authority to direct military action in the Korean War, a war that is now widely recognized as a proxy war that was fought between Western states and Communist states.

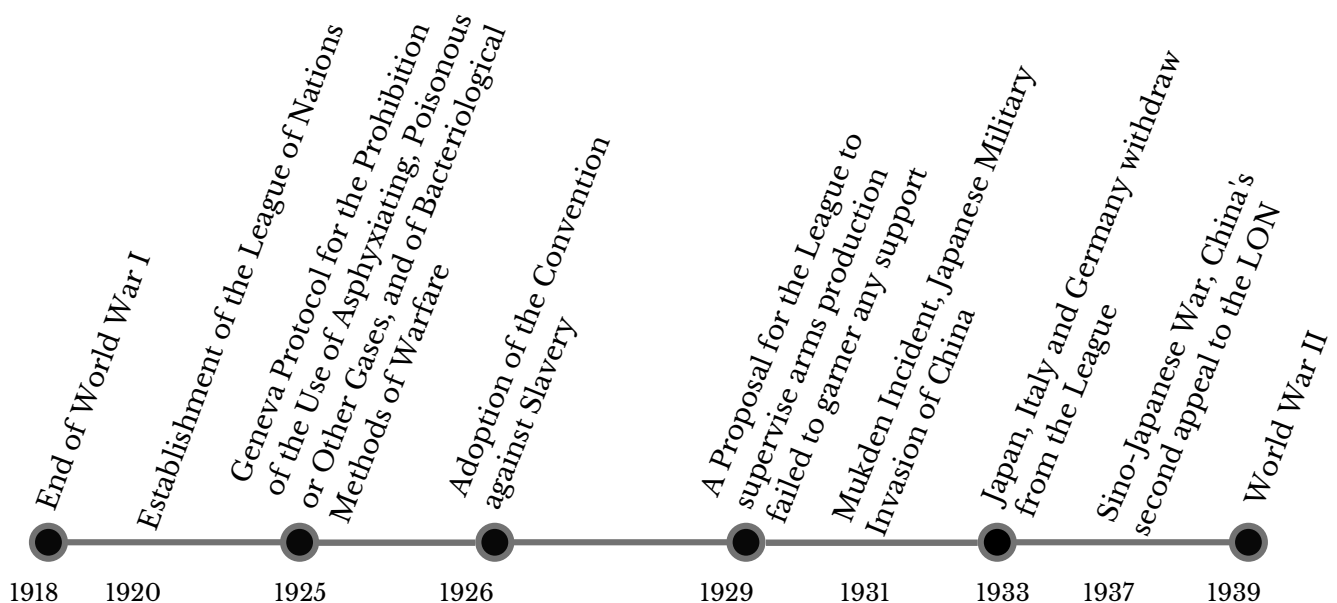
Whereas the League took the existing balance of powers for granted – wherein victor states divided the spoils of the war after WWI – the UN was established with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its core or guiding principles.

This means that in contrast to the League, which accepted the status quo, the UN (in its Charter, see: Art.1, Sec.2) went as far as to recognize the "right of peoples to self-determination." In this way, the adoption of "universal human rights" norms transformed the basis of state relations.

But, for many colonized the promise of self-determination did not materialize after the birth of the UN. Likewise, for many marginalized groups, as the promise of human rights would not come automatically with the formal adoption of the UDHR.

The "mandate system" that had been established during the era of the LON would eventually evolve into the "Trusteeship" system under the UN as powerful states struggled to hold on to their territories and colonies in Africa, Asia and the Pacific. The language and promise of human rights would continue to figure in the struggles for decolonization as well as in broader social movements for social justice for years to come.

Selected Highlights from the League of Nations' History



Primary Sources for the Classroom

Primary Sources are records that were created during the historical period and event under study. They are usually found in archives or other institutions that keep official records. Primary source documents provide immediate, first-hand accounts of an event or incident. They can be anything from records of interviews and testimonies to reports and communications.

Other archival media can be graphic representations such as photographs, film and other materials like maps and/or drawings. While personal diaries and memoirs are not “official” or meant for publication, these records can serve as important contemporaneous sources of historical information, especially when they are kept by witnesses, whether they are survivors or perpetrators. Media reports during the period, which quote from actual witnesses and participants during the event under study, are also primary sources.

Secondary sources are one step removed from primary sources, which means they are generally works created from the use of primary sources. A good example of this is a history textbook. The value of primary sources lies in their direct link to the period or event which they reference. In addition, documents which form part of regularly updated official records have an aura of authenticity about them simply because the key motivation or purpose for keeping them is the regular course of business or operations.

While many primary documents (including declassified material) may be found in national archives and libraries and are widely accessible to the public, not all official documents in relation to World War II have been preserved. It is reported for example that the Japanese Military destroyed a lot of records and documents (as well as burning its sites of operation) before the arrival of Allied Forces. Likewise, the classification of key documents as “Top Secret” by countries such as the United States and Russia (the former U.S.S.R.) and others, at the height of the Cold War limited the availability of historical information.

Analyzing Primary Sources

- (1) What is in the document/material? (Content)
- (2) What is the document? (Type of document/Purpose of the Record)
- (3) Who produced/created the document? Who took the photo or film? (Individual/Institution)
- (4) When was it produced/where? How soon after the event? (Context)

Excerpts from the League of Nations Covenant (1920) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1945)

The new emphasis on human dignity and individual human rights in the UDHR (and its subsequent covenants) marked a difference from previous peace and international cooperation agreements. By analyzing and comparing the texts of the UDHR Preamble with the League of Nations' opening statement, we can identify key shifts in the language which eventually transforms the subjects and the objects of international agreements. The implications of these changes are still being developed and debated today.

Whereas "contracting parties," (States) were the main subjects and objects under the League's Covenant, International Human Rights as standards, are supposed to apply to individuals. And while an individual person's ability to claim those human rights and to assert them is still a developing field within international law, States have been increasingly bound to provide protection from human rights abuse not just for citizens, but also for non-citizens such as residents and refugees.

For a complete copy of the documents, visit: refworld.org by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR)

THE COVENANT OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

THE HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES,

In order to promote international co-operation and to achieve international peace and security by the acceptance of obligations not to resort to war, by the prescription of open, just and honourable relations between nations,

by the firm establishment of the understandings of international law as the actual rule of conduct among Governments, and

by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organized peoples with one another,

Agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Preamble

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world,

Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations,

Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY proclaims THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

ALPHA Education is a registered charitable organisation founded in Toronto, Canada. In its pursuit of justice, peace and reconciliation, the organisation fosters awareness and a critical understanding of the often overlooked history of World War II in Asia. Our goal is to activate historical memory and dialogue to promote reconciliation, healing, closure, and cross-cultural understanding. ALPHA Education engages educators and students, empowers youth, supports research and connects with local and international communities.



THE ALPHA TEAM: Flora Chong, Executive Director, Gen-ling Chang, Deputy Executive Director, Judy Cho, Program Director, Fred Tsang, Director of Finance, Alex Ng, Administrator, Carolina S. Ruiz, Research and Resource Development Associate, Charmaine Ching, Museum Project Associate, Jing Cui, Museum Researcher, Mitchell Wilson, Education Program Associate