A League of its own

The League of Nations has been much derided as a historical irrelevance, but it laid the foundations for an international court and established bodies that the United Nations maintains today, says Ruth Henig.

The conventional view of the League of Nations, which was set up by the peacemakers at the end of the First World War, is that it was a complete failure having been unable to prevent the outbreak of a second major European conflict in 1939. Some dismiss it as a total irrelevance and those who study it as 'eccentric historians'.

It is high time that these verdicts are challenged and that the League is seen for what it was, a bold step towards international cooperation which failed in some of its aims but succeeded comprehensively in others. I am one of those 'eccentric historians' who has studied the League for over 30 years and who argue that its creation marked an important step on the road to our contemporary global system of international organisation, coordinated through the United Nations, which was built on the foundations of the League's experience.

It is undoubtedly the case that expectations of what the League might be able to achieve were too high. It was hoped that some of its mechanisms would be able to prevent international crises from escalating into full-scale conflict as had happened in 1914. But they relied on means such as delay to allow impartial enquiry to take place and on member states accepting the rules and conventions of the League Covenant. It was clear early on that the League, which had no army of its own or members' troops to enforce its will, would not be able to combat overt aggression. As Lord Balfour, a former British prime minister and foreign secretary, commented in 1924: 'The danger I see in the future is that some powerful nation will pursue a realpolitik in the future as in the past ... I do not believe we have yet found, or can find, a perfect guarantee against this calamity.'

Nor was the League able to secure agreement among the leading powers of the world to reduce their armaments. Looking back 80 years, with the benefit of recent experience of international arms negotiations, we can see that the expectations placed on the League to bring about disarmament...
were completely unrealistic. But at the time, the failure of the League's Disarmament Conference of 1932–34, coupled with its inability to secure strong and agreed action against Japanese aggression in Manchuria and the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, caused its leading members and their publics to lose faith in the ability of the League to promote peace.

And yet its work in some areas was groundbreaking and increasingly effective. The Permanent Court of International Justice, established under Article 14 of the League Covenant, started work in 1922 and was kept busy from the outset, giving advisory opinions to the League Council or deciding cases submitted to it by individual governments. By 1939 it had heard 66 cases and its success showed that a standing international court had a role to play in the gradual acceptance by states that rules had a place in international politics. The International Court of Justice established after the Second World War by the United Nations reproduced in almost identical form the League's Permanent Court and has continued to extend its international authority to the present day.

The International Labour Organisation was another body operating under the aegis of the League to ensure just and humane conditions of labour in member countries and to promote the physical, moral and intellectual well-being of industrial wage-earners. It flourished in the interwar period and pursued its objectives vigorously through conferences and the adoption of labour conventions. After 1945 it became a specialist agency under the United Nations and has continued with its mission, operating virtually unchanged to the present day. Many other specialist United Nations bodies, such as the Economic and Social Council, the World Health Organisation, the International Refugee Organisation and UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Science and Cultural Organisation), were built on the foundations of the pioneering work carried out by League agencies before 1939.

One of the most innovative aspects of the League's operation was the establishment of its secretariat, organised along the lines of an international civil service, with members drawn from over 30 countries including the United States. The League's secretariat became internationally respected for the quality of its officials and as a unique repository of information and experience relating to international organisation and administration. Moreover, the role of secretary-general carried increasing importance. Again, its structure and working methods were adopted by the United Nations and also by the European Economic Community in the late 1950s, one of whose strongest advocates was former League official Jean Monnet.

There can be no doubt that the creation of an international body in 1920, powered by the leading states of the world and able to pre-empt conflict by bringing to the table for settlement disputes which threatened to disturb international peace, was a dynamic step forward in international diplomacy. So was the establishment of an annual League Assembly at which small and medium powers could raise issues, give their views on world developments and put pressure on the great powers.

Such gatherings promoted international collaboration and compromise and helped to bring into existence what historian Susan Pedersen refers to as a 'different dynamic of international co-operation', when those who worked on its behalf began to craft the norms and agreements by which our world is (now) regulated, if not quite governed. It was indeed the world's 'first sustained and consequential experiment in internationalism'; a significant and exploratory first phase which paved the way for a second, more effective and lasting period of international collaboration under the United Nations. Rather than dwell on its weaknesses or condemn its failures, we should applaud the League's successes, while continuing to learn important lessons from its history.

Ruth Henig is a politician and former lecturer in modern European history at the University of Lancaster. Her new book The League of Nations (Haus Publishing) was published on January 10th, 2010 to mark the 90th anniversary of the birth of the League of Nations.