

# THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS – THE CHANCE FOR THE PRESERVATION OF WORLD PEACE, ITS RISE AND FALL<sup>1</sup>

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## **Abstract**

The First World War, also known as the “Great War”, had catastrophic consequences for international relations, world politics and, last but not least, the world economy. It was necessary after the war to restart mutual cooperation and relations between countries which were disrupted by the war. The relations between the countries were disrupted also by the Versailles peace system, according to which some empires perished and new states were created. The outlined relations could not be resolved only through peace negotiations, but it was necessary to resolve and regulate these relations comprehensively and systematically “from above”. For this reason, it was desirable to create an independent international organization that would be able to regulate these relations in a neutral and peaceful manner. It was the League of Nations, as the first international organization with permanent institutions, to serve to ensure a world peace, principle of a collective security and international cooperation. Despite considerable efforts, the activities of this organization did not bring the expected results, and the tense relations and power efforts of the aggressors resulted in another catastrophe in the form of the Second World War. In the article, the author focuses on the reasons for the establishment of the League of Nations, its goals, its internal organization, as well as the reasons for its failure and demise.

## **Key words**

*The First World War, collective security, the League of Nations, world peace, termination of activity of League of Nations*

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1 This paper was prepared within the investigation of Grant Project APVV-19-0419 “100 years of Treaty of Trianon”

## 1. Introduction

Relations between individual countries have been formed since the beginning of the existence of various state institutions. Primarily, it was first a matter of forming the so-called neighbourly relations between neighbouring states, which were based either on a relationship of peace and cooperation or on various power efforts to control neighbouring countries. Political, social and trade relations between the individual countries developed in this way.

There is no doubt that if the country intends to prosper, to be 'strong' and internationally accepted, it is necessary to look for allies and supporters. Alliance relations between countries have been strengthened and legalized on many occasions on the basis of various agreements, whether bilateral or multilateral. In this way, these relationships are being strengthened and realized even today. It is not uncommon for countries to conclude various agreements and pacts with each other, on the basis of which they trade, support each other and maintain political and social contacts. The best situation is when these states have the same or at least similar interests. The prominent French lawyer and politician, Léon Bourgeois, based his reasoning on the belief that states, like individuals, are bound together by bonds of mutual interest.<sup>2</sup>

If we look at the history of the creation of relations between individual countries, we can find the necessary need to institutionalize cooperation between them. With the signing of the Peace of Westphalia in 1468, a system of nation-states was created. Until that time, there were empires, city-states, free cities, etc. After the introduction of the transnational relations, especially between traders, international organizations began to emerge from the national – state system. The first international organizations created by governments were the so-called administrative unions. The Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine was the first modern intergovernmental organization. It was created by the Congress of Vienna (1815) and later replaced by the International Commission for Navigation on the Rhine in 1831. The International Telegraph Union (ITU – 1865) is considered to be the oldest intergovernmental organization with a single program goal.<sup>3</sup>

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2 BUJNOVÁ, Helena–PRIVALINEC, Peter: *OSN na prahu 21.storočia*. Bratislava, AG Musica Liturgica, 2007, 11.

3 HORVÁTOVÁ, Petra: *Medzinárodné organizácie*. <https://www.ekonomicky.sk/medzinarodne-organizacie/> (August 12, 2021)

It can be stated that the institutionalized form of cooperation between states in all its forms, from its inception to the present, is constantly growing and has an increasingly significant impact on the development of international relations.<sup>4</sup> And it was no different in the period after the First World War, when it was necessary to establish general world peace and restart the broken relations between the countries, as well as their paralyzed trade ties.

### **2. The League of Nations – the reasons for its creation and its role**

The outbreak of the First World War led to a significant paralysis of the relations between the countries built so far, to the disintegration of society as a whole and to huge losses both in lives and in the economy and trade.

As a result of the First World War, some empires were disintegrated and new states were created. It was necessary to restart the war-torn political, diplomatic and economic relations. It was necessary to put the society back on its feet. The ideas of pacifism, European and world integration were gradually promoted in individual countries. The impact of the war on society manifested itself in widespread opposition to the war and pressure to establish an international political organization to ensure international peace and cooperation. According to Bystrický, the course and results of the First World War brought three political tendencies to the forefront of interest: the right of nations to self-determination, the principles of collective security and the democratization of the whole socio-political life, including international relations.<sup>5</sup> As a solution, the program of US President Woodrow Wilson was offered, which was summarized in 14 points and concerned the international organization of the world after the First World War (1914–1918). In Point 14, he formulated the need to establish a League of Nations.

Wilson was the first to create guarantees of peace based on the principles of collective security. According to him, the world should function on principle, not power, it should function according to law, not interests. The American president tried to establish a world order in which resistance to

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4 ROSPUTINSKÝ Peter: *Úvod do štúdia medzinárodných organizácií*. Banská Bystrica, Fakulta politických vied a medzinárodných vzťahov Univerzity Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici, 2011, 9.

5 BYSTRICKÝ, Valerián: *Organizovanie bezpečnosti v rokoch 1918 – 1939. Medzinárodné vzťahy a nádeje na zabezpečenie mieru*. <http://www.historiarevue.sk/historia-2001-06/nato/bystricky.htm> (August 20, 2021)

aggression was based on moral and not on geopolitical reasons. The acceptability of a state's conduct should have been judged on whether its conduct was fair and not on whether it endangered the interests of the Great Powers.<sup>6</sup> In his speech to Congress in January 1917, he said: "*there may not be a balance of power, but a community of power, not organized rivalry, but organized peace.*"<sup>7</sup> Wilson's vision was not a universal world of democracies, but the system of liberal-democratic states who understand each other and accept arbitration and disarm, the world of national self-determination, diplomacy, the mechanism of peaceful change, and alliances of all against any aggressor.<sup>8</sup>

At the plenary session of the Paris Peace Conference on January 25, 1919, the victorious powers approved a resolution according to which the Covenant of the League of Nations became an integral part of the peace treaties. The Covenant of the League of Nations, which also became its legal basis, was incorporated into the text of the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919, as well as the Treaty of Trianon, the Treaty of Saint-Germain and the Treaty of Neuille. The Treaty of Versailles entered into force on January 10, 1920, after its ratification by Germany and the three major powers. Thus, on the basis of the decision of the states participating in the Paris Peace Conference, which ended the First World War, the League of Nations, the predecessor of the United Nations (UN), was established. The headquarters of the League of Nations was Geneva. The first meeting of the Council of the League of Nations was convened by President Wilson on January 16, 1920 in Paris.

The basic principles of the League of Nations were stated in the Preamble of the Covenant:

*„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*

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6 CHMELÁR, Eduard: *Vznik spoločnosti národov*. In: WEISS, Peter: *Zrod myšlienky kolektívnej bezpečnosti a príčiny neúspechu jej aplikácie prostredníctvom spoločnosti národov*. *Medzinárodné vzťahy*, 2006, 4(1), 19-36.

7 WEISS o. cit. 19-36.

8 *Ibid.*

*by the maintenance of justice and a scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations in the dealings of organised peoples with one another, agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations“.*

As follows from the Preamble and all the articles of the Covenant of the League of Nations, the basic principles of this international organization were: the prohibition of wars, justice, and respect for international law. The members of the League of Nations were committed to respecting the territorial integrity and independence of the policies of all Member States against any external aggression. The League of Nations was to represent the so-called „*general association of nations*“. This was the first attempt by the international community to establish an international organization with permanent institutions to ensure world peace and the so-called collective security and the institutionalization of international cooperation.

The idea of collective security was based on the principle of “*one for all and all for one*“. This idea first appeared in the 15th century, when this form was already promoted on a legal basis by the Czech King George of Poděbrady. Subsequently, this idea developed in other countries, and the modern understanding of collective security is usually derived from the Treaty of Osnabrück of 1648, which was part of the Peace of Westphalia. The idea of collective security presupposes the fulfillment of several attributes:

- a) in ensuring the security interests of states, the natural balance of power is replaced by a system of their cooperation,
- b) power relations are in principle managed from a single common center, but the power potentials remain in the hands of national governments,
- c) an attack against any State shall be considered as an attack against all<sup>9</sup>.

As already mentioned, the main reason for the creation of the League of Nations was to prevent further wars, to maintain peace and guarantee international security on the basis of the principle of collective security, and to develop international cooperation in various fields. The members of the Society were committed to respecting and defending the territorial integrity and political independence of all members of the Society. Based on the above, the main goals of this organization can be established and defined as follows:

- maintaining world peace through collective security,
- protection of the territorial integrity and independence of states,

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9 KREJČÍ, Oskar: *Mezinárodní politika*. Praha, Ekopress, 2001, 164.; WEISS op. cit. 19-36.

- support for diplomacy,
- arms restrictions,
- social, political and economic cooperation.

### *Maintaining world peace through collective security*

The main impetus for the creation of an international institutionalized organization after the First World War in the form of the League of Nations was the maintenance of world peace and stability in international and political relations, as well as in economic relations between countries, which were important for trade re-development. The League of Nations was to provide a forum for resolving and settling disputes peacefully and to prevent disputes from going to war.

### *Protection of the territorial integrity and independence of states*

The territorial integrity and independence of the state is a basic precondition for the existence of the state as a territorial unit. The territorial integrity or integrity of states is generally expressed in their Constitutions. For example, in the Constitution of the Slovak Republic, territorial integrity is expressed in Art. 3, which states that *“the territory of the Slovak Republic is uniform and indivisible”*. Paragraph 2 of this Article states that *“the borders of the Slovak Republic may be changed only by constitutional law”*. After the First World War, new states were formed, also on the basis of the disintegration of great empires. The borders of these newly created states were firmly defined and these states were declared independent. The tense political situation, which was also caused by this new European order, could have resulted in disputes and the disruption of the territorial integrity and independence of the newly created states. For this reason, it was essential not only to maintain peace during the states, but also to protect and preserve the territorial integrity of new states and their independence. This was also one of the reasons for the creation of an organization such as the League of Nations. President Woodrow Wilson is one of the greatest protagonists of a commitment to territorial integrity for all states. His well-known Point 14 of peace programme was about commitments to guarantee political independence and territorial integrity for both large and small states. This revolutionary proposal took the form of Article 10 of the

League of Nations Agreement, the approval of which meant formal support for the territorial integrity of states.<sup>10</sup> Pursuant to Art. 10: “*The Members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all Members of the League. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression the Council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be fulfilled.*” Pursuant to Art. 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations enshrines collective security and measures against any aggressive force and was extended by Article 17 of the Covenant of the League of Nations to non-member countries. Art. 16 of the Covenant ordered Member States to apply an economic and financial blockade to an attacker in the event of an unprovoked attack. Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations also provided that aggressive conduct would have the effect of exclusion by the Council from the League of Nations. Following a unanimous decision, the League of Nations could also recommend its members to help the victims of aggression, even militarily.

After the First World War, the territorial integrity was supported by several declarations and international multilateral agreements. In 1931, the League of Nations supported the Stimson Doctrine,<sup>11</sup> which denied legitimacy to the territorial changes brought about by force and aggression.

### *Diplomacy support*

In general, the term ‘diplomacy’ is the activity of negotiating, maintaining relations between nations. It is also an activity regulating relations between states or resolving disputes arising between countries on an international scale. The League of Nations was created to solve the lack of diplomacy and to promote dialogue other than militarism in resolving disputes. All legal matters between states were to be referred to the International Court of Justice, which was the highest court of appeal, and its purpose was to promote and defend the concept of international justice.

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10 Zacher, Mark: The Territorial Integrity Norm: International Boundaries and the Use of Force. *International Organization*, 2001, 55(2), 219.

11 Named after US Secretary of State Henry Stimson, who served in 1929–1933.

*Arms restrictions*

The League of Nations aimed to limit the production of dangerous weapons and to promote disarmament. The defeated and victorious states were to be disarmed to the lowest level corresponding to internal security. In support of this goal, a Disarmament Commission was set up to carry out an arms survey. It also acted as an advisory body to the Council on military, maritime and air issues.

*Social, political and economic cooperation*

During the First World War, social, political and economic cooperation between countries was disrupted. The First World War left problems such as inflation, unemployment, hunger, social disintegration, distrust of smaller states against larger states. After the end of the war, the establishment of peace and on the basis of the signing of peace agreements, relations between the countries were gradually renewed. The League of Nations was also to contribute to this, one of the aims of which was to promote social, political and economic cooperation between countries, on a global scale. The above mentioned was supported and implemented by Art. 23 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which states that:

„Subject to and in accordance with the provisions of international conventions existing or hereafter to be agreed upon, the Members of the League:

(a) will endeavour to secure and maintain fair and humane conditions of labour for men, women, and children, both in their own countries and in all countries to which their commercial and industrial relations extend, and for that purpose will establish and maintain the necessary international organisations;

(b) undertake to secure just treatment of the native inhabitants of territories under their control;

(c) will entrust the League with the general supervision over the execution of agreements with regard to the traffic in women and children, and the traffic in opium and other dangerous drugs;

(d) will entrust the League with the general supervision of the trade in arms and ammunition with the countries in which the control of this traffic is necessary in the common interest;

(e) will make provision to secure and maintain freedom of communications and of transit and equitable treatment for the commerce of all Members of the League. In this connection, the special necessities of the regions devastated during the war of 1914-1918 shall be borne in mind;

(f) will endeavour to take steps in matters of international concern for the prevention and control of disease.“

### **3. The League of Nations – its internal organization**

When it was founded, the League of Nations originally had 42 members, consisting of states, dominions and colonies that governed independently. Gradually, the number of members increased, and in 1935 the League of Nations had 60 members. Even though the American president was the creator of the idea of the birth of the League of Nations, the United States refused to join the organization. One of the reasons was that the United States refused to participate in and get involved in disputes between European states. They tried to avoid armed conflict and refused to take on guarantees to defend Europe's post-war order on the basis of the Versailles peace treaties. The United States pursued a policy of isolationism in the postwar period. It is interesting to note that it was the United States, on the one hand, that developed the concept of the League of Nations and the principles of collective security, and on the other hand, it ignored these principles, thus avoiding accepting responsibility and making commitments against aggression.<sup>12</sup>

The Soviet Union was not invited to this organization until 1934, when it became a member, but in 1939 he was expelled from the League of Nations at the suggestion of France and Great Britain. Japan, Germany and Italy withdrew from the League of Nations in 1930. This fact also confirms critical interstate relations, an overall unfavourable situation that did not favour world peace for a long time.

The Czechoslovak Republic, which was an original member of the League of Nations, played a significant role in its functioning, and representatives of the Czechoslovak Republic held important positions within its organization. In addition, the Czechoslovak Republic was a member of the Council of the League of Nations.

The main bodies of the League of Nations were the Assembly and the Council. The Permanent Secretariat was also a body. The meeting consisted

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12 BYSTRICKÝ op. cit.

of representatives of all members of the League of Nations. Each member had one vote. The Assembly met at least once a year, in September, and could meet more frequently if it was necessary. The Assembly was made up of several commissions, namely the Legal Commission, the Technical and Intellectual Commissions, the Arms Reduction Commission, the Budget Commission, the Social Commission, the Political Commission, the Mandate Commission and the Slavery Commission. One of the basic powers of the Assembly was the power to deal with all important issues concerning the League of Nations, especially those relating to world peace. The Assembly adopted resolutions, recommendations, elected non-permanent members of the Council. The Assembly had the exclusive right to admit new members, make changes to the founding treaty, revise other treaties, approve the budget, etc.

The Council of the League of Nations was composed of permanent and non-permanent members. Permanent members included the powers listed in the Pact, namely France, Great Britain, Italy and Japan. The permanent members also included countries designated by the Council, such as Germany (from 1926 until 1933, when it left the League of Nations at its own discretion), and the Soviet Union from 1934 to 1939. The Council also had 11 non-permanent members elected by the Assembly. Each member of the Council had one vote. Until 1933, the Council met three times a year, then four times a year. The functions of the Council were functions in the field of peaceful dispute resolution. The Council could make recommendations for member states to adopt common measures against the aggressor in the event of aggression. The Council was responsible for formulating arms proposals and restrictions. With the consent of the Assembly, it could expel individual members from the League of Nations.

Another body of the League of Nations was the Secretariat, which was the only permanently active body consisting of the Secretary-General and his two deputies. The League of Nations had three Secretaries-General: the British diplomat of Scottish origin James Eric Drummond (1876–1951), in office between 1920 and 1933, the French senior civil servant and diplomat Joseph Louis Avenol (1879–1952), in office between 1933 and 1940, and the Irish diplomat Seán Lester (1888–1959), in office between 1940 and 1946.

The Secretariat also included three Undersecretaries and a number of officials, who were divided into different sections, e.g. legal, political, disarmament section, section for minorities, economic section, financial section,

etc. In essence, the Secretariat performed, in particular, the administrative and technical tasks of the Council and the Assembly, engaged in research activities and was based in Geneva.

The League of Nations also initiated the establishment of a judicial body called the International Tribunal of Justice, based in the Peace Palace in the Hague. The legal basis for the creation of a judicial body was Art. 14 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, which instructed the Council to prepare a proposal for the establishment of a Permanent Court of International Justice. The Statute of this Court and the Signatory Protocol were adopted by the Member States. The Statute entered into force on October 8, 1921 and the Court started its operations in 1922. The main requirements in establishing this judicial body were that the court should have jurisdiction not only to hear and decide any dispute of an international nature submitted by the parties to the dispute, but also to issue an advisory statement on the dispute or the issue submitted by the Council or the Assembly.<sup>13</sup> The authors differ on the question of whether or not the International Tribunal for Justice was a body of the League of Nations. Some of the authors state that it was an internal body of this international organization,<sup>14</sup> while others state that although the League of Nations played a significant role in initiating the establishment of this tribunal, it has never become part of it in the form of an official body.<sup>15</sup> However, whether it was an official body or not, it is undeniable that the International Tribunal for Justice played an important role in the functioning of the League of Nations and in the fulfillment of its goals. The existence of this tribunal was also presupposed by the Covenant of the League of Nations itself, and an important fact is that the Permanent Court of International Justice, in addition to performing the function of resolving international disputes, also played an advisory role in relation to the Council and the Assembly. The connection between the League of Nations and the Permanent Court of International Justice is undeniable on the basis of the facts mentioned above.

The auxiliary organization of the League of Nations was the International Labour Organization (ILO), which was established on June 28, 1919 at the Paris Peace Conference as an autonomous organization based in Geneva

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13 ČUCHRAČOVÁ, Martina: *Historický vývoj pokusov o vytvorenie medzinárodných súdov*. In: GIERTL, Adam—GREGOVÁ ŠIRICOVÁ, Ľubica: *Medzinárodné súdnictvo a medzinárodné právo*. Košice, Pavol Jozef Šafárik University in Košice, 2012, 16.

14 For example: WEISS op. cit. 2.

15 For example: Čuchračová op. cit. 16.

and was later annexed to the League of Nations. Currently, it is a specialized United Nations employment agency. In addition to these bodies and organizations, there were a number of other subsidiary bodies and advisory commissions, such as the International Institute for Intellectual Cooperation, the main interest of which was libraries.

Expenses that incurred in connection with the functioning of the League of Nations were covered by national membership contributions. The official languages were English and French.

#### **4. The fall of the League of Nations – the reasons for its disintegration**

The League of Nations, as conceived in the Covenant of the League of Nations, was a groundbreaking 'project' to ensure the world peace, of course, under the condition that all Member States (permanent and non-permanent) should adhere to the principles on which the League of Nations was founded and guided. Woodrow Wilson's intention to secure global peace based on the principle of collective security, to help smaller countries from the aggression of larger ones, would also be fulfilled if the founders and Member States themselves did not resign to peacekeeping, mainly because of their economic interests and inconsistent approach against the gradually rising tensions between countries. However, soon after the start of its activities, it became apparent that the League of Nations would not meet the set goals. The main reason for the failure of this organization was that the founding powers saw in this organization only a means to ensure their military victory over Germany and a tool to pursue their world-class goals or at least attempts to control Europe.<sup>16</sup>

The fall of the League of Nations was caused by many circumstances. Its shortcomings were due to the weaknesses of the Covenant of the League of Nations itself. The Covenant did not contain a total ban on war and did not give this organization the power to apply effective sanctions for violations of peace and international security.<sup>17</sup> Also, the arms control efforts of the League of Nations envisaged by the Covenant were unsuccessful. Aggressive efforts to occupy smaller countries with larger ones continued to emerge. For example, the first serious disturbance of peace was the Japanese occupation

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16 POTOČNÝ, Miroslav: *OSN 1945-1960*. Praha, SNPL, 1960, 11.

17 See also: KLEPACKI, Zbigniew M.: *Slovník medzinárodných organizácií*. Bratislava, Pravda, 1979, 546.

of Manchuria in 1931. Although the League of Nations morally condemned the aggression, under the influence of the Great Powers, it refused to use even economic sanctions. It was clear that the world organization would not be able to provide protection and assistance to the victims of aggression in the event of a conflict. These concerns were allayed only by the fact that armed conflict arose far from the European continent. Italy's attack on Ethiopia in October 1935 already directly threatened peace in Europe. Although the League of Nations declared economic sanctions against Italy, the way in which it organized aid to victims of aggression had no effect. Small states lost confidence in the League of Nations and naturally doubted that the League of Nations would help them in the event of an attack. The principle that the Great Powers did not intend to use the positives contained in the Covenant of the League of Nations and even weakened the effectiveness of collective action against the aggressor in order to promote their goals and plans began to be strongly affirmed. It turned out that not all states had the same interest in collective resistance to a specific aggression and are not willing to take a potential risk. By applying the principles of collective security, the League of Nations was not able to create the conditions to prevent the aggression of the Great Powers and to provide effective protection and assistance to the victims of the attack. The Great Powers, even within the League of Nations, promoted in particular their power interests and never used the provisions of the Covenant of the League of Nations to defend small countries when there was aggression against them.<sup>18</sup>

The League of Nations was not able to achieve greater success in other areas of activity either. The system established by the Covenant did not help to eliminate colonialism at all. Economic and social cooperation also yielded modest results. The activities of the League of Nations were limited to some proactive steps in concluding several multilateral agreements. The League of Nations did not achieve much success in the field of codification of international law either.

Even the internal organization of the League of Nations was not set up properly. The competencies of the Assembly and the Council were not significantly differentiated. The voting system, which was based on the principle of unanimity, meant that in many cases one state could defeat any action. Following the appearances of Japan, Germany and Italy, the League of Nations could not take an active part in reconciliation, much less in resolv-

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18 BYSTRICKÝ op. cit.

ing the conflicts that were growing between the imperialist states. When the Second World War broke out as a result of these conflicts, society found itself in the role of a silent witness to the events. It did not function during this period at all.

The League of Nations disappeared sequentially. At the 21st ceremonial sitting on April 8 to 18, 1946, it transferred its mission to the United Nations, the Charter of which was signed on June 26, 1945 by representatives of 50 member countries, and on October 24, 1945, this new organization began its activities. The League of Nations legitimately ceased to exist on July 31, 1947.<sup>19</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

As stated in the introductory part of this article, after the First World War, which caused the disintegration of society, as well as the disruption of political and economic relations, it was desirable to create an independent international organization that could re-establish and regulate relations between countries in a neutral and peaceful manner. The League of Nations, as the first international organization with permanent institutions, initially sought to maintain peace and favourable economic relations, but the power interests of its members were a huge obstacle to achieving its goals set out in the Covenant. The power interests of some countries, the policy of isolationism, and the organization's neutral position in sanctioning aggressors disrupted international relations and strengthened the position of aggressors, which resulted in the Second World War. The next world war had much more catastrophic consequences than the previous one. Only after the establishment of peace after the end of the Second World War did the powers that pursued only their own interests and the policy of isolationism begin to understand that peace could only be maintained if all states accepted each other and cooperated with each other. An important means of achieving this goal is organized cooperation on the ground of an international organization, namely the United Nations. The United Nations 'took over' the mission of the League of Nations and many of its goals, and it is commendable that it still exists and operates today.

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19 See also: BUJNOVÁ—PRIVALINEC op. cit. 17.