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*League of Nations Union*

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THE FIRST YEAR OF THE  
LEAGUE OF NATIONS

## AN ANNIVERSARY ADDRESS

*(January 10th, 1921)*

JUST a year ago, on January 10th, 1920, the League of Nations was born. Nearly two months ago, the first full meeting of all the members was held at Geneva—when the forty-two Member-States gathered together for the first meeting of the Assembly. These forty-two States represented a total population of over one thousand one hundred millions—approximately three-quarters of the population of the earth. Before the Assembly separated, six other States were elected—Finland, Austria, Bulgaria, Costa Rica, Albania, and Luxemburg. The total membership of the League to-day, therefore, consists of forty-eight States.

Great as is this success, the League of Nations will not be fully constituted until all the nations of the world are included in its membership. As M. Motta, the President of the Swiss Confederation, said in his speech of welcome at the first meeting of the Assembly: "The more universal the League of Nations becomes, the more its authority and impartiality will be guaranteed." This view was also expressed by very many of the delegates at Geneva, and recently by our own Prime Minister, when he said: "The League of Nations will not achieve its real purpose until all the nations of the world are represented in it." There are three States still absent whose ultimate membership is essential—the United States of America, Germany, and Russia.



## THE UNITED STATES.

The first of these is the United States. The Delegates at the Assembly showed clearly that they were ready and willing to consider any amendment to the Covenant which might meet the situation, and make it possible to secure the adhesion of the United States at an early date. The great virtue of the Covenant is that its constitution is not rigid and unchangeable. It can be amended where experience shows that amendment is advisable. Suggestions for amendment have, indeed, already been made by Delegates from the Scandinavian countries, from some of the South American countries, and from Canada. The Assembly briefly considered these proposals, but decided that it would be wise to wait a little longer before making changes. All the amendments are to be referred to a Committee of Investigation. The Council will consider their report, and next September the Assembly will be in possession of information and experience which will enable it to consider amendments with authority. We may reasonably hope that, as a result, some practical arrangement may be made which will secure the adhesion of the United States.

## GERMANY.

As to Germany, let me quote from one of the fearless speeches of Mr. George Barnes at the Assembly: "I believe, in fact I know, that the views of the working masses of Great Britain are that those ex-enemy States should be admitted to the League as speedily as possible, and I believe that view is shared also by the workers of the world." You will remember that Article I. of the Covenant lays down, as one of the conditions for the election of new States, "that it shall give effective guarantees of its sincere intention to observe its international obligations." On this matter it is encouraging to read the recent words of the Prime Minister: "I am sanguine that Germany will exhibit such a real desire to carry out her Treaty obligations that there will be no obstacle interposed by anybody in the way of her introduction." A vote of two-thirds of the Assembly is required for the election of new members. Austria and Bulgaria have already been elected, not by a two-thirds majority, but by unanimity. A great step has thus been taken. Let us hope that this year, with the election of Germany, a further advance may be made in the reconciliation of the nations.

## LORD ROBERT CECIL ON THE LEAGUE'S WORK.

Now what has the League of Nations achieved in its first year of life? I cannot answer this question more effectively than by reading to you an extract from a letter written by the Chairman of the League of Nations Union—Lord Robert Cecil—and circulated to all its branches shortly after the close of the meeting of the Assembly: "A dangerous dispute between Sweden and Finland has been put in a fair way to settlement; hostilities between Poland and Lithuania have been arrested; an International Court of Justice has been established; three Powers—the United States, Spain, and Brazil—have been induced to mediate on behalf of Armenia; two hundred thousand prisoners of war have been repatriated from and to Russia; a campaign against typhus has been organised and assisted; the Financial Conference at Brussels has made proposals for mitigating the economic chaos in Europe; a Health Organisation has been started; and two very important and successful Labour Conferences have been held."

This is not an exhaustive list, but it shows conclusively that the League of Nations has taken its place as a beneficent factor in the great work of world reconstruction after the war. Many people complain that its achievements have not been greater. They underestimate the enormous amount of spade work which is required; firstly, to get the machinery of the League into working order, and, secondly, to secure behind the League the driving force of an insistent and instructed world public opinion. The real fact is that the achievements of the League during the past twelve months are full of hope for the future success of its work. The Council of the League has done solid and effective work, and, by the universal testimony of those who took part, it may now be said without fear of contradiction that the meeting of the Assembly was a magnificent success. A real international atmosphere, a genuine effort at mutual understanding, and an enthusiasm and energy past praise, marked its sittings.

## THREE ILLUSTRATIONS.

In the course of a brief speech it is impossible to deal in detail with all the activities of the League during the past twelve months. Let me say a few words, however, on three of the achievements mentioned by Lord Robert Cecil, one dealing with its organisation, the creation of a Permanent Court of International Justice; one dealing with its political work, the intervention of the League in



the dispute between Sweden and Finland; one dealing with its work in the general interests of humanity, the repatriation of prisoners of war.

#### THE WORLD'S LAW COURT.

Take the Permanent Court of International Justice. It was the first item on the agenda of the first business meeting of the Council, held in London last February. The Council was promptly carrying out Article 14 of the Covenant, the creation of a world law court, "competent to hear any dispute of an international character." Ten distinguished international lawyers from ten countries, including, it is interesting to note, Mr. Elihu Root, of the United States, were appointed to draft the Constitution. They met at the Peace Palace at the Hague, and after five weeks' work completed the draft. This was then considered by the Council at a special meeting in Paris. Then the draft of the lawyers, amended by the Council, came before the Assembly. Then the Assembly referred it to a special Committee under the chairmanship of M. Leon Bourgeois. After prolonged discussion the special Committee referred it to a special sub-Committee of ten lawyers, five of whom had been on the original Hague Committee, with five others who were present as delegates at the Assembly. Then the amended draft was again discussed by the whole Assembly, and finally, at 7 p.m. on Monday, December 13th, 1920, a date which will become historic, the great decision was taken. The Assembly unanimously declared its approval, and M. Paul Hymans, the President, announced: "By a solemn and unanimous decision the Statute of the International Court of Justice is now set up. We have accomplished a grand work."

Thus a reform, "long desired, passionately sought after," to use Mr. Balfour's words in the House of Commons, was realised in the first year of the life of the League of Nations.

#### THE AALAND ISLANDS DISPUTE.

Next, take as an example of its work in the interest of the preservation of peace, the League's intervention between Sweden and Finland concerning the dispute on the Aaland Islands. I will briefly state the situation. Finland has severed its connection with Russia and is now recognised by the European States as an independent Republic. In the Gulf of Bothnia, between Sweden and Finland, is a group of Islands known as the Aaland Islands. Finland claims them as part of her territory. The Islanders claim the right of self-determination and have declared their wish

to join Sweden. In the spring of this year, two of the Islanders were appointed as a Deputation to go to Sweden to interview the Prime Minister and the Parliament. When they returned, to report on a successful visit, they were met by the Finnish Minister of War. After a bitter interview they were arrested and taken to Finland. Sweden asked for explanations, and, dissatisfied with the answer, withdrew her Ambassador from Finland. The Finns next sent a machine-gun corps and other soldiers to the Islands. A breach between the two countries seemed imminent. Here was obviously a case for the League of Nations. The eleventh Article empowers any member of the League to bring to the attention of the League any danger of the outbreak of war. One of the members, Great Britain, did so. At once, the Secretary-General, Sir Eric Drummond, communicated with the two countries, with Sweden, already a member of the League, and with Finland, which had already sent in an application for election. And so a great event took place last July. A special meeting of the Council of the League was held at St. James's Palace, London. Not only were the eight members of the Council present, but facing each other, at either side of the Council table, were the Prime Minister of Sweden and an Ambassador of Finland. They were arguing out their dispute publicly in the presence of the Council of the League of Nations. There has been no war. The three principles of the Covenant dealing with disputes between States, namely, delay, publicity, conciliation, have had their effect.

#### REPATRIATION OF PRISONERS OF WAR.

As a third example of successful work by the League its action in connection with the repatriation of prisoners of war takes high place.

Early last year at the request of the Supreme Economic Council the League took steps for the relief of prisoners of war in territories under the control of the Soviet Government of Russia. Investigation into the extent of the problem revealed the astounding fact that there were still about half a million prisoners of war, 250,000 of them in Russia and Siberia, and practically the same number of Russian prisoners in Central Europe. Most of these prisoners were suffering extreme hardships, many of them had been absent from their homes four, five, and even six years, thousands had already died of disease or starvation. These half a million men were still alive and suffering, a lamentable position eighteen months after the Armistice.

The Council acted promptly and appointed Dr. Nansen, the famous Norwegian explorer, to serve as their repre-



sentative. He at once entered into negotiations with the Government of the Soviets, with the German, Finnish, and Esthonian Governments, and indeed with all the Governments interested and in particular with the International Committee of the Red Cross, a body which had already done splendid humanitarian work on behalf of the prisoners. Money was provided by Governments and by Red Cross Societies in America and Europe; transport by sea and land was arranged, and by October 31st Dr. Nansen was able to report that 158,000 prisoners had been repatriated over the Baltic, and that plans were in hand for the repatriation of many more *via* Vladivostock and over the Black Sea. Here may I quote from the magnificent speech of Dr. Nansen at Geneva on the 18th November last, when he made his report to the Assembly on his work for the League: "Before I close my remarks, I think it would be opportune if I drew the attention of the Assembly to one aspect of the question which has struck me with increasing force as I have gone more and more deeply into the problems with which I have been faced. This is the appalling amount of suffering which has been undergone by the hundreds and thousands of men who have been made prisoners during the Great War. It would be difficult for anybody who has not had personal experience of it to understand the despair which settles on the minds and in the hearts of men who have been prisoners, cut off from all communication with their homes and families for periods of four, five or even of six years. Never in my life have I been brought into touch with so formidable an amount of suffering as that which I have been called upon to endeavour to alleviate. But that suffering has been only an inevitable result of a war such as that which convulsed the world in 1914. It is right for the League to deal with questions such as that of bringing the prisoners to their homes, but the real lesson which I have learnt from the work which I have undertaken is this—that it is vital for the League to prevent for evermore a recurrence of catastrophes from which such incalculable human suffering must inevitably result."

Among the great benefits that the League gives to the world, is the fact that it brings to the general service of mankind such men as Dr. Nansen; not only the Statesmen of the greater nations, but also of the smaller nations. Let us remind you of some of them, of M. Paul Hymans, who has represented Belgium on the Council of the League during the past year, and was elected as the brilliantly successful President of the first Assembly at Geneva; of M. Motta, the President of the Swiss Confederation; of

M. Ador, another distinguished Swiss; and of Mr. Benes, the able Foreign Minister of Czecho Slovakia. These men and others like them are now able to devote their great abilities not only to the service of their own countries, but to the service of the world as a whole. The world gains.

#### MR. BALFOUR ON THE LEAGUE.

The League of Nations is now a fact. As Mr. Balfour said, in the House of Commons last month, when making his report on his work as one of the Delegates of Great Britain: "The League of Nations may be, and will be, modified; the pact may be changed, and will be changed, but that you can ever consent to go back to the international disorganisation which preceded the League of Nations, that you can ever give up carrying out tasks which only the League of Nations can carry out, that you will consent to do that willingly, that civilisation will submit to retrace one of the greatest steps ever taken, that, I frankly admit, seems to me absolutely incredible."

#### THE PRINCIPLES OF THE COVENANT.

The year 1920 witnessed the birth of the League of Nations. It is in the power of the peoples of the world to make that year the first year in a new era for humanity. In these days of tragic disappointment, of world-wide unrest and misgiving, let us pledge ourselves to stand firm in support of its principles as set forth in the Preamble:—

"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 organised peoples with one another;

The High Contracting Parties agree to this Covenant of the League of Nations."

To promote these great principles the League of Nations Union has been formed in this country.



### THE WORK OF THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS UNION.

What is the League of Nations Union? It is a British Society formed on October 13th, 1918, by the amalgamation of two previously existing societies, which, during the concluding years of the war, had been working for the establishment of a League of Nations as one of the fruits of peace. Its President is Lord Grey of Fallodon, the Chairman of its Executive is Lord Robert Cecil.

At the time of its foundation the membership of the Union was about 3,000. At the end of 1919 this had increased to 10,000. To-day it stands at over 60,000, and is increasing at the rate of more than 1,000 a week. But the Union will not feel that it has begun to break the back of its task until it has carried its message of international co-operation and goodwill to the whole of our population, and until the membership of the Union itself is numbered not in tens of thousands but in millions.

Its activities are in the nature of public education; the mobilisation of adult public opinion. Everything now depends on getting the peoples of the world enthusiastically behind the League, and this cannot be done without a vigorous campaign of education and propaganda, and this campaign of education and propaganda is, so far as Great Britain is concerned, the task of the League of Nations Union. Largely owing to its activities the ideals of the League are taking a strong hold upon the imagination of the British people. It is for the Union to ensure that those ideals become inseparably interwoven with the fundamental British ideals of civilised government.