



Internationalism Between the Wars

During the 1920s, politicians, scientists, veterans, activists, and every-day citizens sought to increase international connections with the goal of ending war and making the world a better place. The League of Nations, the Kellogg-Briand Pact, scientific conferences, trade unions, and Interpol were just some of these attempts. This video overviews these changes, as well as the long history of internationalism before the twentieth century. But the internationalism of the 1920s quickly fell apart during the 1930s as the League of Nations failed to curb increasing nationalism and authoritarianism.



00:01

*Raj Bhat
Timeline: 1914 – the
assassination of Archduke
Ferdinand of Austria
1919 – the signing of the
Treaty of Versailles*

RAJ BHAT: World War I is often called the first “total war.” Between 15 and 19 million people died and more than 40 million were injured. No one wanted to repeat that experience again. They hoped that World War I would be the war to end all wars. So, nations around the world began to collaborate in a process we call internationalism. Their goal was to work together to avoid another great or total war. Yet, the fact that we call World War I the first world war indicates that internationalism didn’t necessarily work the way they’d hoped. The question is, why not?

00:52

Wartime musical poster

*Photo of the Kellogg-
Briand pact, 1928*

*An animated map shows
all the countries around
the world that renounced
war*

April 6, 1927, was the tenth anniversary of the United States’ entry into the First World War as France’s ally. On that day, the foreign minister of France, Aristide Briand, addressed Congress. He did not speak about America’s military strength. Instead, he proposed that France join the U.S. in a treaty to end war for all time. A year and a half later, Briand and U.S. Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg signed a treaty renouncing war as a tool of foreign policy. Countries from around the world soon joined them. This included world powers like Germany and Great Britain, but also the only remaining free countries in Africa, Ethiopia and Liberia; Latin American countries like Guatemala and Honduras; small European states like Bulgaria and Finland; and independent Asian powers such as China and Siam. The Kellogg-Briand Pact, as this treaty came to be known, was an example of “internationalism,” a reaction to the kind of nationalism that helped to cause the First World War.

02:00

*Photo montage: injured
soldiers; nurses;
recovering veterans in a
hospital*

*A billboard promotes
global trade; men work on
various construction jobs*

Internationalism is the idea that people and states can work together to solve problems and create greater prosperity. This was a particularly important idea between 1919 and the early 1930s, and was the motivating force in international politics and social movements. The First World War caused enormous human suffering. Politicians, veterans, and everyday citizens began to look for a way to avoid future conflicts. Internationalism provided the prospect of one global democratic society that could end war. The end of the war also brought a great deal of economic suffering. Internationalism promised to increase trade between countries, hopefully providing jobs and improving the availability of food and other goods. So internationalism was, first, a grand idea to achieve peace and economic prosperity through diplomacy and politics between nations.

03:05

*An Amsterdam Olympics
poster; photos of Red
Cross workers and
unionizers*

But internationalism was also an ideal expressed in many nonpolitical areas at the time, including global sporting events, like the Olympics; international aid organizations like the Red Cross; multinational businesses; and international labor unions. Scientific associations also embraced internationalism, meeting to share ideas with the hope of promoting human progress on a global scale. In 1927, the Fifth Solvay Conference brought together the greatest physicists of the age, among them Max Planck, Werner Heisenberg, Marie Curie, Erwin Schrödinger, Niels Bohr, and Albert Einstein.

03:50

Photo of a conference

Social groups also held international conferences. They exchanged ideas about fighting alcoholism, ending poverty, stopping slavery, and improving the treatment of laborers. At the same time, governments began to share information and resources to fight crime, founding the international police organization Interpol in

*Photos of socialist groups
in conference*

04:35

*A brief history of
International Relations*

*A drawing of the
“congress” system in 1815*

05:17

*An illustration of the
Berlin Conference; a
satirical drawing of a
European man standing
over the whole of the
African continent*

05:55

*The League of Nations and
the Search for Peace*

*League of Nations: 1920-
1946*

07:25

*Comic drawing of the
“bridge” of the League of
Nations missing a piece
in the middle – that piece
was the United States*

1923. Another version of internationalism emerged among socialist groups. The Communist International, sponsored by the Soviet Union, aimed to link together workers around the world. It was an effort to overthrow capitalism everywhere, including European colonies in Africa and Asia.

The push for peace between countries was a significant part of internationalism after the end of the First World War, but the history of treaties, leagues, and unions between nations goes back more than 3,000 years, to the first formal alliances between ancient Egypt and the kingdom of the Hittites. In modern Europe, 19th-century coalitions had been created to fight the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. These alliances culminated in the “Congress” system at Vienna in 1815. Here, European “great powers” would coordinate policies and activities.

But European internationalism of the 19th century had its limits. At the Berlin Conference in 1885, Europeans agreed to help each other carve Africa up into many colonies. This conference was an example of great cooperation among European powers, but Africans—presumably the people that would be most impacted—were not represented in negotiations. Europeans recognized each other as nations, but they did not consider African territories to be nations with rights of self-determination.

Ironically, the scramble for African territories eventually caused a great deal of tension. In spite of the attempt at coordination to “share” Africa equally, conflict arose between France, Britain, Germany, and other European states. Even international collaboration within Europe disappeared in the run-up to the First World War. By 1914, nationalism had reached a fever pitch and overwhelmed any sense of mutual sentiment across national borders. After the war, however, many Europeans recognized that nationalism had contributed to the horror and death of the conflict. Sentiment turned once again against nationalism and toward internationalism.

Probably the most significant institution of internationalism after the First World War was the League of Nations. After the war, the victors began to eagerly divide up the land and colonies of the defeated Central Powers, but some Allied leaders also sought a way to prevent destructive wars in the future. They included U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, South African Prime Minister Jan Smuts, and a British official named Robert Cecil. They were backed by social organizations, and in particular, women’s associations, who were against war.

These statesmen created the League of Nations to help foster diplomacy and cooperation rather than warfare. After 1919, almost all of the countries of the world began to join. However, there were some problems from the beginning. The United States voted to stay out, Communist Russia was excluded, and the document that created the League also gave Britain and France much more power than the smaller states that signed on.

The League focused on many international concerns, including health and social issues, drug and human trafficking, and labor conditions. In addition, the League

sponsored a series of disarmament conferences throughout the 1920s, though they met with little success. The most important role of the League was peacekeeping and conflict resolution. But although it managed to solve many minor conflicts between small states, it progressively failed to limit bigger invasions by the increasingly aggressive nationalist powers. It failed to address Japanese incursions in China, or to stop Italy from invading Ethiopia, a member-state of the League. Finally, the League did nothing to stop German and Italian aggression in the Spanish Civil War.

08:48

Photo of a Nazi rally

By the late 1930s, the League— and internationalism in general— had failed, and nationalism was on the rise again. With economic problems looming in many countries, populations and leaders found it easy to blame their rivals and enemies across the border for their financial woes. New governments in several large industrial states, like Germany, Italy, and Japan, were openly hostile to internationalism. Others— the U.S., Great Britain, and France— were unwilling to sacrifice their own goals to defend international peace. The Soviet Union stood isolated and alone, supporting a separate communist internationalism that the other governments feared.

*Photo of military soldiers
in line*

As for the Kellogg-Briand Pact? It ultimately failed to stop the Second World War. In 1939, as Germany invaded Poland and the war really began to take shape, it stood in ruins.

09:52

*Poster representing the
flags of the United Nations
Organization*

Surprisingly, however, the pact is technically still in force today. Large parts of it were incorporated into the charter that brought the current United Nations Organization into effect. Yet even today, signatory countries— including the United States— often ignore its demand that conflict be resolved through diplomacy, rather than fighting.