

The failure of the League of Nations and the war

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The League of Nations did not succeed in halting the march to war. The absence of the United States from the outset, then the withdrawal of Japan, Germany and Italy, its powerlessness in the face of the aggressions of the 1930s and the expulsion of the Soviet Union after the invasion of Finland in 1939 marked its decline.¹ During the Second World War the organisation barely survived, while part of its services left Geneva.² It was dissolved in 1946.

The war put Geneva's vocation to the test. The International Committee of the Red Cross carried out considerable work on behalf of prisoners of war, but it ran up against the limits that Part D described in the face of persecution and extermination. Switzerland, surrounded, restricted the admission of refugees. International Geneva, silenced by the war, seemed doomed.

This episode recalls a reality that the financial centre knows well: a city's international vocation depends on the international order within which it operates. When that order collapses, the city loses its function. The Geneva of 1940 was as isolated as the Geneva of the fairs after 1462. Its rebirth would once again depend on decisions taken elsewhere.

1 Notes

1. Wikipedia (en), "League of Nations": "The Senate voted on the ratification on 19 March 1920, and the 49–35 vote fell short of the needed 2/3 majority"; Germany admitted on 8 September 1926, withdrew in 1933; Japan withdrew in 1933; Italy left in 1937; USSR admitted on 18 September 1934 and "expelled on 14 December 1939 for invading Finland"; the League "ceased operations on 18 April 1946"; Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS; Historical Dictionary of

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Switzerland), art. “Société des Nations (SdN)”: “Legally, the League ceased to exist on 31 July 1947”. ↩

2. Wikipedia (en), “Economic and Financial Organization of the League of Nations”: “In May 1940 [...] Loveday decided to move together with around two-thirds of the EFO staff [...] and eventually relocated the organization at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey”; Wikipedia (en), “League of Nations” (relocation of administrative functions during the war). ↩

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