

MODERN WORLD GCSE / AS LEVEL HISTORY REVISION
NOTES

**THE FAILURE OF THE LEAGUE OF
IN THE 1930'S**

A. The Effects of the Great Depression on the work of the League in the 1930's

In October 1929, America was plunged into economic depression with the advent of the Wall Street Crash. The Great Depression quickly spread throughout the world ; a slump in world trade led to the collapse of banks and businesses, high unemployment and social discontent. In some countries, such as Germany and Japan, it helped to bring right - wing governments to power. In the case of Germany, the onset of depression in 1930 led to a growth in support for the Nazi Party which culminated in Hitler being made Chancellor in 1933. Countries like Germany, Japan and Italy believed that aggressive foreign policies would help to divert its' peoples' attentions away from depression at home and so in all three cases, the 1930's was a decade of invasion and expansion.

B. The Japanese invasion of Manchuria, 1931 - 1933

Since 1918, Japan had emerged as the most important Asian power. Even before the onset of depression in 1929, the Japanese army was anxious to invade the Chinese province of Manchuria ; this, of course was against the wishes of the Japanese government in Tokyo. The Great Depression hit Japan very hard indeed. Industries across Japan, in particular silk, collapsed and unemployment soared. Anger from the Japanese people at the government's failure to sort out the

economic problems prompted the army's invasion of Manchuria in September 1931.

The Kwantung(Japanese) army claimed that the Chinese had deliberately blown up a section of the South Manchurian Railway as an act of sabotage. The railway was already controlled by Japan and so the army used this as an excuse to invade and occupy Manchuria. This was against the wishes of the Japanese government but there was nothing that it could do as the army refused to withdraw. The army swiftly gained control of Manchuria, re - naming it Manchukuo.

China appealed to the League for help. The League instructed the Japanese army to withdraw but this was ignored. The reality was that the leading members of the League (Britain and France) were neither in a position to intervene nor had the will or interest to do so. Both Britain and France were facing economic depression ; further action in the form of economic sanctions would have harmed what little trade still survived. Neither favoured military sanctions as this would have involved sending armies which would have proven expensive. For many, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria was a minor dispute on the other side of the world that few people really cared about.

Nevertheless, the League needed to be seen to be doing something to assist and so in 1932, a commission of Enquiry under Lord Lytton was sent to Manchuria on a fact finding mission. The Commission published a report at the end of 1932 that condemned the Japanese invasion which was accepted by the League. The Japanese government, now under the control of the army, rejected the report and withdrew from the League in 1933. Japan then seized control of Jehol, a neighbouring province of Manchuria. In 1937, Japan launched a full scale invasion of mainland China.

The League had failed to handle the crisis successfully and this failure was noted by other countries intent on beginning aggressive foreign policies. The League's reputation had been damaged rather than destroyed. Still, many believed that the League was strong and

would deal with any crisis that occurred in Europe. The League faced this test in 1935 with the Italian invasion of Abyssinia.

C. The Italian Invasion of Abyssinia, 1935 - 1936

Benito Mussolini became dictator (Il Duce) of Italy in 1922. Like all other European countries, Italy was badly affected by the onset of depression in 1929. He believed that an aggressive foreign policy would help to sustain confidence in his government and turn peoples' minds away from the depression. Mussolini dreamt of re-creating the Roman empire ; his first step towards building a new Italian empire was the north African country of Abyssinia.

Italy already had colonies in northern Africa ; these were Eritrea and Somaliland. Mussolini's next target was Abyssinia, a country that Italy had failed to conquer in 1896. By 1935, he was ready to launch his invasion. He realised that it was a gamble because both Italy and Abyssinia were members of the League and any invasion was bound to involve the League. Even before the invasion, Britain and France made it clear that any invasion would result in action being taken by the League. At the same time, Mussolini knew that both countries were keen not to lose Italy's friendship at a time when Hitler was re-arming Germany.

Mussolini's invasion in October 1935 was a gamble that paid off. The well armed Italian troops quickly defeated the Abyssinian armies. The Abyssinian emperor, Haile Selassie, immediately demanded help from the League. The League responded swiftly by imposing economic sanctions ; all member countries were instructed to cease trading with Italy. This, however, did not cover all goods and crucially, oil, iron and coal were exempt. This meant that Mussolini was able to continue supplying his armies in Abyssinia. Also, Britain chose not to deny Mussolini access to Abyssinia through the Suez Canal ; again this ensured that he could keep his armies supplied.

Behind the scenes the British and French foreign secretaries, Hoare and Laval, decided to try to negotiate a settlement. The Hoare -

Laval Pact (February 1936) gave over 50% of Abyssinia to Italy and guaranteed further lands to Italy to the south. Mussolini was never given a chance to consider the Plan as it was leaked to the British and French press. In both countries, there was a public outcry against the treatment of Abyssinia which led to the resignations of both Hoare and Laval.

As leading members of the League, Britain and France still chose not to confront Mussolini directly. By the summer of 1936, he was fully in control of Abyssinia. The League's reputation was now in tatters. Thereafter until the outbreak of war in 1939, the League played a minimal role in working to keep the peace. In particular, Hitler after 1936 and Japan after 1937 exploited the failure of the League to keep the peace.