



The League of Nations in the 1930s

This is a transcript of [The League of Nations in the 1930s podcast](#) from www.mrallsophistory.com

While my last podcast considered the League of Nations in the 1920s, we could argue that the League's problems and ultimate failure in the 1930s stems from the last major world event of the 20s. Due to the Wall Street crash, the world was plunged into huge economic depression which ultimately led to strained relations between countries as they tried to survive at all costs. While the 1920s saw presented a mix of both success and failure for the League of Nations, the 1930s arguably saw its complete collapse.

The first failure of the League in the 1930s was a dispute over the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. In an attempt to overcome the effects of the worldwide depression, Japan took over this area of China after claiming Chinese aggression against their railway there. In response, China asked the League of Nations for help, as specified in the Covenant of the League.

The first problem with the League's response to Manchuria was that it took their representative, Lord Lytton, over a year to reach a judgement. This delay showed their inefficiency at responding to crises, and when they finally did reach a judgement in February 1933 by ordering Japan to leave Manchuria the Japanese refused. As a result of not liking the decision, Japan left the League instead and stayed in Manchuria!

The League was left in a precarious situation. Britain and France, the leading powers within the League, were reluctant to impose trade sanctions or even a ban on weapons for fear of further damaging their own economies by losing valuable trade. Furthermore, they didn't really consider imposing any military action due to the problems that would cause. The League had been defied by Japan, and its reputation was badly damaged. While the League continued its work in the aftermath of Manchuria, dictators like Mussolini and Hitler almost certainly noted the weakness of the League in dealing with Japan.

The Manchuria crisis was a popular topic for cartoonists in the 1930s, and a number of artists produced pieces that highlighted Japan's flouting of international agreements and the ineffectiveness of the League of Nations. Find copies of these cartoons – the Japanese soldier trampling over the League and a Japanese gun blasting through international peace agreements and try to explain what the messages of the cartoons are.

Before the fatal blow of the Abyssinia Crisis, the League's reputation suffered again during the World Disarmament Conference. Despite hold-ups and setbacks the conference did eventually get underway in 1932 but, due to the presence of the new German Leader, Adolf



Hitler, it ended in chaos. Hitler argued that Germany should be allowed to rearm to a level equal to that of the other powers. The French representatives at the conference were horrified, and Hitler subsequently used the French attitude as an excuse to withdraw from both the Conference in 1933 and the League in 1934. We'll explore Hitler's own road to World War 2 in a separate podcast, some of which runs concurrently with the final nail in the coffin for the League of Nations: The Abyssinia Crisis.

Italy, like other world powers, was suffering from the depression brought on by the Wall Street Crash in 1929. Mussolini had long wished to expand its overseas empire, and hoped that seizing Abyssinia would take the nation's mind off the current economic difficulties and boost his popularity for expanding Italian territory. Thus in October 1935 the Italian army invaded Abyssinia.

The leader of Abyssinia, Haile Selassie asked the League for assistance, and quickly condemned the Italian invasion. However, its effectiveness was lessened due to the arguably selfish interests of Britain and France to maintain good relations with Mussolini as a potential ally against the growing power of Hitler's Germany.

Despite this, the League began to impose some economic sanctions against Italy including a ban on weapons, rubber and metal. However, it was decided not to ban oil exports and not to close the Suez Canal – a move which could have ended the Abyssinian campaign very quickly. These half-hearted sanctions damaged the League's credibility but even more damaging was the secret deal Britain and France tried to negotiate with Mussolini behind the League's back.

Hoare and Laval, the British and French foreign ministers, devised a secret plan that would give Mussolini two thirds of Abyssinia if he called off the invasion, known as the Hoare-Laval Pact. However, the scheme was leaked to the press and in the subsequent outcry they both lost their jobs. It was not enough to save Abyssinia, however. Italy went on to conquer the country and subsequently leave the League of Nations. The League had been destroyed from within, undermined by the scheming of Britain and France in the Hoare-Laval Pact and now having lost a potential ally against Hitler. Indeed, Mussolini himself went on to strike a deal with Hitler – the Rome-Berlin Axis – having seen Hitler use the diversion of the crisis to move into and remilitarise the Rhineland.

This was the fatal blow: the League had failed yet again to do its job. It was so bad that even the new British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, decided it was best for him to sort out international problems himself rather than use the League of Nations. However, his policy of appeasement was to become one of the contributing factors in the Road to World War 2.



So why did the League fail in the 1930s? There are really six key issues that you should think about:

- The self-interest of its leading members such as Britain and France, as evidenced through the Hoare-Laval Pact
- The absence of the USA and other important countries. It was impossible to deal with countries if, as soon as they didn't like something that the League said, they quit – for example Japan, Germany and Italy
- They had economic sanctions that didn't work. Because not all the countries were part of the League, if the League countries decided to impose economic sanctions the other countries outside the League could just continue trading – especially in light of the Depression. The USA was really a bit of a 'loose cannon' here, since it was more interested in defending its own economy.
- The Treaties it had to uphold were seen as unfair. Throughout much of the 1930s countries such as Britain were starting to reflect on things such as the Treaty of Versailles and were realizing that in 1919 the peacemakers were rather harsh. Why should the League need to keep defending things that people in the 30s were beginning to believe were wrong?
- The League's decisions were often very slow. It took almost a year to decide what to do over Manchuria, by which time the Japanese army had gained complete control of the area.
- There was a lack of troops. The League of Nations relied on the armies of its key members – Britain and France. In the 1930s, with the problems of the world depression hanging over them, Britain and France were not too keen on giving their troops to the League.

The League of Nations was just one of many reasons why World War 2 eventually took place. There's no doubting that the League of Nations' failure to effectively intervene in key issues such as Manchuria and Abyssinia gave Hitler confidence that he could get away with his own expansion. But for that we'll need to look at the next podcast – the [Road to World War 2](#).