

What Were the Consequences of the Failures of the League of Nations in the 1930s?

An examination of how the League's crises in Manchuria and Abyssinia paved the way for the outbreak of the Second World War

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Summary

Background: The League of Nations in the 1930s

Fundamental Weaknesses

By 1930, the League faced severe structural problems that limited its ability to maintain international peace. The absence of major powers undermined its authority from the start.

Membership gaps: The USA never joined; Germany left in 1933; Japan withdrew in 1933; Italy departed in 1937

Unanimity rule: All decisions required unanimous agreement, making swift action nearly impossible

No armed forces: The League relied entirely on member states to enforce decisions

Economic sanctions: Ineffective without universal participation, especially from the USA

The Manchurian Crisis (1931–33)

In September 1931, Japan's Kwantung Army staged the **Mukden Incident**, blaming Chinese saboteurs for an explosion on the South Manchurian Railway. This pretext allowed Japan to invade and occupy Manchuria, renaming it Manchukuo.

Why the League Failed

Distance: Manchuria was too far from Europe for effective military intervention

Self-interest: Britain had economic interests in Asia and wasn't willing to risk war

Slow response: The Lytton Commission took over a year to report, by which time occupation was complete

Consequences of the Manchurian Crisis

Exposed League Weakness

The League's failure to stop Japan's aggression showed powerful nations could defy international law. Moral condemnation without military backing was ineffective.

Encouraged Aggression

Japan's successful defiance emboldened dictators like Mussolini and Hitler. It proved the League would not use force to maintain collective security.

Undermined Collective Security

The principle of member states uniting against aggressors collapsed. Nations began prioritizing self-interest over international cooperation.

Impact on Hitler's Calculations

Hitler observed the crisis while gaining power in Germany. The League's failure convinced him Britain and France wouldn't enforce the Treaty of Versailles. In October 1933, Germany withdrew from the League and Disarmament Conference, beginning Hitler's campaign to overturn Versailles restrictions.

The Abyssinian Crisis (1935–36)

Mussolini's Invasion

In December 1934, a clash occurred at **Wal-Wal** on the Abyssinian-Italian Somaliland border. Mussolini used this as justification for invading Abyssinia in October 1935, seeking to build an Italian empire in Africa.

The League's Inadequate Response

- Economic sanctions imposed but excluded vital oil supplies
- Suez Canal remained open, allowing Italian troops and supplies through
- Britain and France prioritised keeping Italy as an ally against Hitler

The secret **Hoare–Laval Pact** (December 1935) proposed giving Mussolini two-thirds of Abyssinia

By May 1936, Italy had conquered Abyssinia. Emperor Haile Selassie appealed to the League, warning that Abyssinia's fate could befall other nations.

Consequences of the Abyssinian Crisis

Collapse of League Credibility

The crisis exposed the League's powerlessness and hypocrisy, destroying its credibility.

Rome–Berlin Axis Formed

Angered by sanctions, Mussolini formed the Rome–Berlin Axis with Hitler, creating a dangerous fascist alliance.

Hitler Reoccupied the Rhineland

While distracted by Abyssinia, Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland (March 1936), violating the Treaty of Versailles. Britain and France remained inactive.

Stresa Front Collapsed

The 1935 Stresa Front agreement against German aggression collapsed, as Italy's alignment with Germany divided the opposition.

Failure of the Disarmament Conference

Goals and Breakdown

The **World Disarmament Conference** opened in Geneva in February 1932, aiming to reduce international tensions by limiting armaments. However, fundamental disagreements doomed the conference from the start.

October 1933

Germany withdrew from both the Conference and the League of Nations

March 1935

Hitler openly announced German rearmament, reintroducing conscription

June 1934

Conference collapsed without agreement on disarmament

Failure of the Disarmament Conference

Key Issues

- Germany's demands: Hitler insisted on "equality" — either other nations disarm to Germany's level, or Germany be allowed to rearm
- French security concerns: France refused to disarm without guarantees of protection against Germany
- British reluctance: Britain was unwilling to commit to defending French security

The failure made rearmament respectable. Germany's departure signalled that Hitler would pursue military strength regardless of international opinion. Other nations began their own rearmament programmes, abandoning hopes for collective disarmament.

How League Failures Encouraged Hitler and Led to War

Event	How It Encouraged Hitler to Break the Treaty of Versailles	How It Pushed Europe Towards the Second World War
Manchurian Crisis (1931–33)	League's inaction showed lack of force. Hitler, seeing weak resolve, withdrew from League (1933).	Undermined collective security; international law broken without consequence, encouraging aggression.
Abyssinian Crisis (1935–36)	Showed UK/France prioritized self-interest. Hitler remilitarized Rhineland (1936), exploiting diverted attention.	Led Mussolini to ally with Hitler (Rome-Berlin Axis, 1936). Removed Italy as anti-German force, boosting Hitler's ambitions.
Disarmament Conference Failure (1932–34)	Justified Hitler's rearmament, claiming military equality. Publicly announced rearmament (1935) and conscription.	Sparked European arms race. Germany's military growth shifted power, giving Hitler confidence for expansion.

Timeline: From League Failures to World War (1931–39)

September 1931
Manchurian Crisis begins — Japan invades Manchuria

February 1933
League condemns Japan; Japan withdraws from League

October 1933
Germany leaves League and Disarmament Conference

March 1935
Hitler announces German rearmament

October 1935
Italy invades Abyssinia; League imposes ineffective sanctions

March 1936
Hitler remilitarises the Rhineland unopposed

October 1936
Rome–Berlin Axis formed between Hitler and Mussolini

March 1938
Anschluss — Germany annexes Austria

September 1938
Munich Agreement — Sudetenland given to Germany

March 1939
Germany occupies rest of Czechoslovakia

September 1939
Germany invades Poland; Britain and France declare war

Summary

The Collapse of Collective Security

The League's failure to stop aggression in Manchuria and Abyssinia shattered the post-1919 international order. With no serious consequences for Japan and Italy, the principle of nations uniting against aggressors entirely collapsed.

Emboldened Dictators

Hitler, Mussolini, and Japanese militarists learned aggression paid. The League's weakness encouraged their expansionist policies without fear of international opposition.

Undermined Deterrence

Failure to enforce sanctions or military action removed deterrence. Aggressors knew Britain and France would not risk war.

Destroyed Trust

Smaller nations lost faith in collective security. Britain and France pursued appeasement, fracturing the international system into rival blocs.

Final Verdict

While Hitler's aggression immediately caused the war in 1939, the League's failures created an environment where such aggression thrived. By showing international law was unenforceable and aggression was rewarded, the crises of the 1930s paved the way to World War II.