

Depression and threats to international peace and collective security: Manchuria 1931–3 and Abyssinia 1935–6

The Great Depression is the single greatest reason for the collapse of international peace. It led to aggression and the collapse of international co-operation in the Manchurian crisis where both the League of Nations and collective security were exposed as hollow concepts. It brought Hitler to power, undermined the Geneva disarmament talks and weakened the United Kingdom and France—the guardians of the status quo. This in turn made it possible for Mussolini to engage in aggression in Africa and bring about the final collapse of any hope for preserving peace, by ending the Stresa Front agreement and providing a useful ally for Hitler.

The impact of the Great Depression

The causes of the Great Depression are not the focus of this prescribed subject. Rather it is how that event influenced the development of international relations in the years after 1929. This should be appreciated not only with reference to the two specific topics, Manchuria and Abyssinia, that are included in the prescribed subject but also in how it had an impact on the ability of the world to continue its search for peace and harmony.

The Depression was not caused by the Wall Street crash of 1929. This was merely the signal that it had arrived. The roots of the Depression can be found in the weakened state of many nations after the First World War, particularly Germany and the United Kingdom which had been economic powerhouses prior to 1914. In addition, the turmoil in Russia and Eastern Europe had further weakened trade and world markets. The burden of war-debts, government deficits, and the political and social turmoil as a result of the First World War had all played a role.

The Depression not only altered the world in a tangible economic form but also devastated its spirit. It resulted in a terrible struggle to survive by any means—nations were no longer willing to co-operate through trade and exchange but adopted an exclusionary, bomb-shelter mentality, where they cut off contact with their neighbours, raised tariffs and ceased to care much about the world beyond their own borders. This narrow attitude was probably worst in the democratic states where citizens demanded that their governments devote their money and resources to domestic problems and ignore the wider problems of the world. No energy was to be wasted on international agreements or the means to enforce them—domestic hardship was to be the focus not armaments to control aggressive foreign states.

Depression did produce aggressive states—those who were driven to extremes of hardship saw war and conquest as a solution to their problems as shown in Japan's attack on Manchuria. The Japanese, terribly afflicted by the decline of world trade, argued that without Manchuria they would starve. The world economic system was broken—it was every nation for itself.

The Great Depression, more than any other reason, brought Hitler to power in Germany, seriously endangering efforts to maintain peace. Hitler had as his primary goal the destruction of the Versailles settlement by whatever means. His solutions to Germany's economic weakness was to advocate territorial expansion—Lebensraum—to seize much-needed resources. This was a clear challenge to those hoping to avoid another war.

A clear understanding of the impact of the Great Depression on the efforts to maintain world peace is therefore crucial. It should be seen as the single greatest reason for the collapse of all previous efforts to develop international understanding and co-operation. The Depression destroyed not only the economic welfare of the world but also its optimistic spirit represented by the spirit of Locarno, Kellogg–Briand, the League of Nations and other attempts at international co-operation. These progressive, idealistic agreements that had encouraged people to imagine a new form of international diplomacy were forgotten or ignored in the selfish, cynical world of the 1930s where the survival of the fittest was becoming the order of the day.

The Depression created the reasons for aggression in the Manchurian crisis and robbed nations of the physical ability and motivation to co-operate to preserve peace. The result was that the League and its founding principle of collective security were exposed as hollow, impotent ideas unable to guarantee or even hold out hope for a peaceful future. The simple fact was that the powers who had pledged support for collective security were now even less able to stand behind it, assuming that they had any desire to still do so.

The Depression seriously weakened Britain and France who had tried to defend the Versailles agreement and the precepts of the League. Their weakness was exposed by the Manchurian crisis which served to encourage further aggression in the form of Mussolini's attack on Abyssinia, ending the Stresa Front agreement and providing Hitler with an ally in his desire for conquest.

Discussion point: Japan's invasion of Manchuria

- Why did they embark on this course of action?
- What response did the international community make to this flagrant act of aggression?

Discuss the impact their action or inaction had on international relations in subsequent years?

TOK link

Integrating areas of knowledge—human sciences and ethics

It is often said that human behaviour is unpredictable, and that it is impossible to study human actions in a scientific manner. Observing human activities involves ways of knowing that include perception, emotion, value judgments and self-knowledge.

Students should consider the relationship between the subject matter and the methods employed by the human sciences—including observation, value judgments, principles of motivation, language usage, statistical evidence, quantitative instruments for gathering information etc.—that may influence the conclusions reached.

Ethics involve a discussion of the way in which we live our lives and justify moral actions. An examination of the past can be problematic as we may make judgments about historical events and personalities from a quite altered contemporary perspective. Conversely, it is also necessary to take into account the legacy of past decisions and attitudes that have a bearing on the present day political and historical context of nation states and the identity and beliefs of peoples living throughout the world today.

Manchuria 1931–3

Comprehension of the reasons for the Japanese takeover of Manchuria must take into consideration a wide range of issues. The first aspect that warrants consideration is the Japanese economy. Japan had undergone an industrial revolution from the late 19th century and had become the largest industrial power in Asia. This growth and development was based, like that of the UK, on the success of her exports to the rest of the world. Japan has few natural resources and, exacerbated by the growth of the population through economic development, could not feed herself. She depended on the export of manufactured goods principally to the United States to maintain her prosperity. The collapse of the American markets and higher US tariffs created enormous hardship in Japan with massive unemployment and reports of starvation in rural areas.

The disastrous economic situation led to a decline in the prestige of the liberal democratic government and demands for action by radical nationalist groups often composed of army officers. They demanded that the government take action to protect the population and insulate Japan from the failures of the liberal capitalist economic system. Their specific objective was to take over the Chinese province of Manchuria which held a vast wealth of natural resources of all kinds.

The decision to go to Manchuria was made easier because Japan had made significant economic investments in the region since the Russo-Japanese war, and had maintained troops in the city of Port Arthur to protect her interests. Furthermore, as a result of civil war in China Manchuria had become an autonomous province under its own warlord. Japan had been pushing to expand her control of China throughout the 20th century and had increased her presence there as a result of the Treaty of Versailles and the concessions forced from a weak Chinese government during the First World War.

Militarily, the Japanese decision to invade Manchuria made good sense and posed few risks. Manchuria lies in close proximity to Japan and its colony Korea (Japanese since 1910). China was dissolved in civil war and could offer no resistance. Since the Washington conference of 1922, Japan had military supremacy in East Asia and none of the Great Powers had the forces or bases in the region to oppose her. Lastly the depression had caused further cuts in armaments spending in the West and the UK, France and the USA were in no position to intervene.

Japan invaded Manchuria on the pretext that her property and citizens had been attacked by Chinese troops. The incident was manufactured by the radical nationalists to force the civilian government to support military action. The Chinese were rapidly defeated and in 1932, Japan established the puppet state of Manchukuo. This was a clear challenge to the principle of collective security and the League. China was a member and appealed for support against Japan. What would or could be done about this flagrant violation of the Covenant and international peace agreements? The short answer is that nothing would or could be done. We need to understand why that was the case.

Legacy for the League

Did the Japanese withdrawal signal the end of the League? The point is debatable but it may not have had as much influence as some authors suggest. Japan and Manchuria were not central concerns to European powers, and the issue may well have been treated as a local one. No vital European interest had been at stake in Manchuria, so it did not necessarily threaten the viability of the principal of collective security in application to a crisis that was more central to Europe.

The USA and the UK were not able to co-operate on a policy with respect to Manchuria. Neither country wanted to be responsible for taking the lead. This made it even less likely that any effective response could be mounted against the Japanese violation of the Covenant. Collective security in the Far East was dead as of this moment. The UK and the USA had entered into a policy of **appeasement** to be able to accommodate the demands of the revisionist powers in the hopes that they would become less aggressive and not create conditions for another world conflict.

Appeasement A policy practiced by the UK and France in the late 1930s that sought to avoid war with Germany by revising the treaty of Versailles to eliminate the clauses considered unfair by Germany. The policy held that reasonable revisions and negotiations would be the best way to avoid war.

Failure of collective security, Manchuria 1931

The only members of the League with substantial military force were the United Kingdom and France. Neither power had the bases in the Far East to support an effective challenge. Only the UK had a large navy, but, being 5000 miles away, was not in a good position to engage its warships in the Far East. Furthermore, the British Navy was itself in a state of crisis, having recently experienced a mutiny over proposed pay cuts. There was also a crucial absence of motivation to undertake a military mission. Nations normally engage in hostilities when something of vital interest to their security or welfare is at stake. This clearly was not the case with Manchuria and it would not have been possible to convince the British public that such an expedition with the resulting cost in lives and resources was to their advantage. Democracies cannot make major foreign policy decisions that the public will not support—especially wars.

The mood of the 1930s made it even less likely that the United Kingdom would intervene. The public attention was on the internal economic problems of the depression. No one would support money for war when many were hungry and unemployed. Furthermore the anti-war pacifist movements were very strong especially in the UK and people preferred to put their faith in the League or to believe that war should occur only in self-defence.

The United States might have been expected to take a stronger position on the Japanese actions. It was the Americans who had claimed to be a friend of China and who had supported the **Open Door Policy** to prevent China from coming under the influence of a single power. The United States had been suspicious of Japan and her rival for power in the Pacific for many years and might have interpreted their Manchurian action as a serious challenge to American interests. Nevertheless the USA took no action over Manchuria.

Open Door American policy which supported equal access for all countries to trade and economic opportunities. It opposed colonial and other political restrictions to trade and investment.

The precise reasons for this failure to respond, included the lack of armed forces or bases necessary to support any military expedition. The US policy of isolationism which had grown stronger after the

First World War would have made it difficult to develop any enthusiasm for an initiative in Asia—not a vital interest to most Americans. The United States was also severely affected by the Depression and the population was focused on the internal domestic crisis, with little interest in foreign affairs and a marked unwillingness to devote any further resources to them.

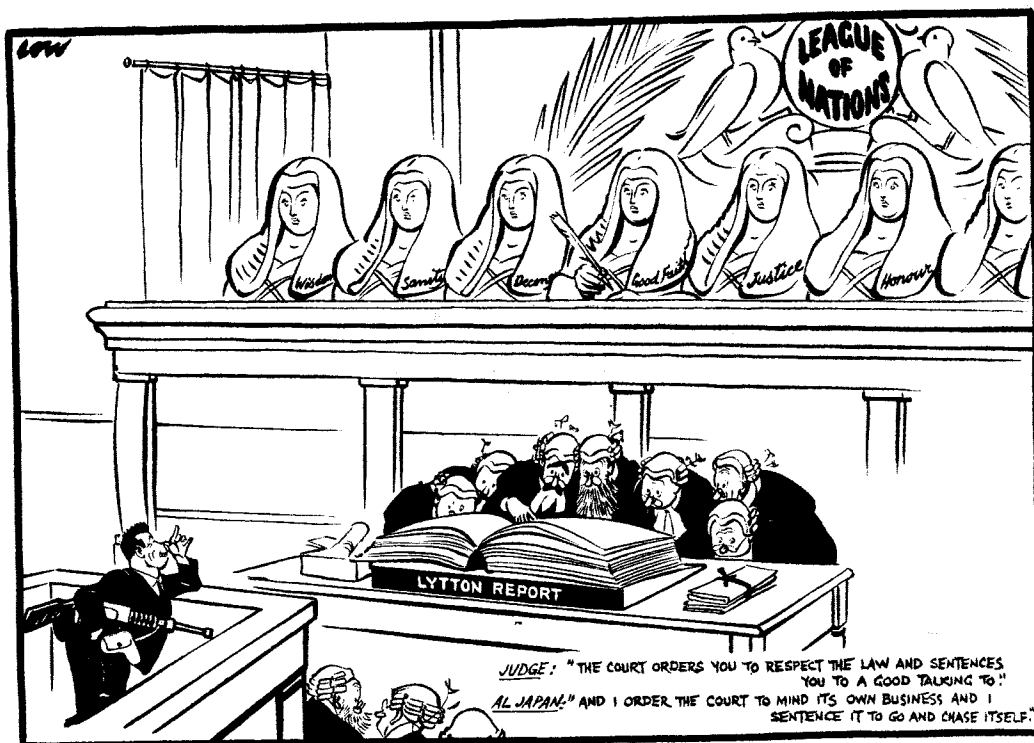
A strategic consideration also influenced British and US policy. The United Kingdom and the United States had extensive property, trading networks and investments in China and the Far East. Neither power was in a position to defend these in the face of Japanese hostility. Any serious attempt to oppose the Japanese action might result in retaliation against these interests.

The League of Nations was supposed to maintain peace and resist aggression against any of its members. Yet the League was largely ineffective as it had no armed forces of its own. Moral condemnation and disapproval by the world community was one way that an aggressive nation might be deterred. But Japan could hardly be expected to worry about moral condemnation when its very survival was at stake and the nations condemning her were the products of a failed international economic system.

Japan withdraws from the League

The League's response to the crisis was to send out a fact-finding mission under Lord Lytton. By the time the report was produced, the entire matter was likely to have been forgotten. The Lytton Commission Report, which was issued in 1932, recognized that Japan had some justifiable grievances about the situation in Manchuria but should have tried other solutions before resorting to force. It suggested that China grant independence to Manchuria and that Japan withdraw its forces. This did not represent a strong condemnation but Japan refused to accept the criticism and withdrew from the League of Nations. Manchuria became part of the Japanese Empire as the puppet state of Manchukuo.

Trial by Geneva by cartoonist David Low published by the Evening Standard on 24 November 1932.



Discussion point: Economic sanctions

Economic sanctions depended on the willingness of nations to undertake a boycott or other economic action against the aggressor. It also meant that all nations would have to participate.

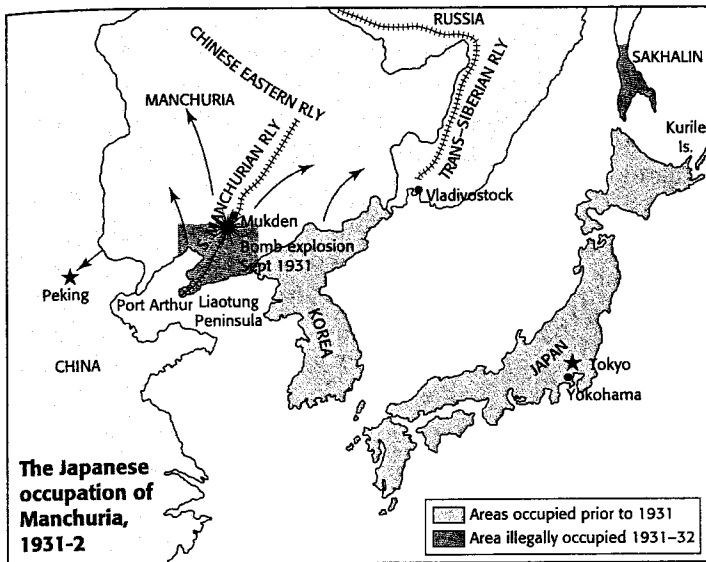


Why wasn't this a realistic option? Discuss in relation to the vested interests of the League and non-League members.

Activity:

Did Manchuria encourage the aggressive action of neighbouring states?

Debate the resolution that "self-defence is the only justification for war".



Source: Catchpole, B. 1983. *A Map History of the Modern World*. Toronto, Canada. Irwin, p. 53.

Abyssinia 1935–6

The Abyssinian crisis is widely regarded as the ultimate example of the failure of the collective security principle. It sent a clear and perhaps final signal that the League of Nations no longer played an important role in world affairs.

Background to the crisis

The crisis and its impact however cannot be understood without sound knowledge of the significant events in this period, since 1933. The single most important threat to world peace was the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the return to the international scene of Germany, now bent on reasserting her position in the world. The rise of Hitler precipitated a series of events that served to heighten the sense of crisis in the world and to demonstrate the resurgence of German power and ambition. These included the collapse of the Geneva disarmament talks due, in part, to the German position, Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations and Hitler's announcement of rearmament policies in flagrant violation of the Treaty of Versailles.

All European nations were likely to be affected by this new aggressive German posture and Italy was no exception. Until the rise of Hitler, Italy had played a significant role in Europe as a signatory of the Locarno agreement and as a member of the League. She had also been a defender of the Versailles Treaty when, in 1934, she took steps to discourage the German annexation of Austria in defiance of the Treaty. Nevertheless it was clear to Mussolini that his position in central Europe was going to be weakened by the German resurgence and that he might be faced with a confrontation with Hitler if Germany demanded the return of the South Tyrol area that was entirely German speaking. Italy had acquired South Tyrol from Austria as a result of the Treaty of Versailles despite the fact that it was a clear violation of the concept of self-determination.

Mussolini met with the other countries who could be targets of German revisionism—most notably the UK and France—in an attempt to reach an agreement to counterbalance German power. The three countries met in the Italian town of Stresa and reached an agreement in which they pledged to resist any German attempt to modify the Versailles Treaty by force. This agreement, had it continued, might have been effective in restraining Hitler. It would certainly have removed a potential enemy and secured the Mediterranean lifeline to the Suez Canal and India that the UK so valued.

Why Abyssinia?

Why did Mussolini set out on a campaign to conquer Abyssinia? The resurgence of Hitler and the fact that Italy could no longer play a significant role in Western or Central Europe encouraged Mussolini to look elsewhere for territory, empire and a sense of importance. Mussolini had always wanted Italy to play a bigger role in world affairs. This was part of the national strength and pride of the Fascist ideology. One of his ambitions was to expand Italy's colonial holding in Africa in emulation of the French and British and to satisfy his dreams of a "new Roman Empire" in Africa and the eastern Mediterranean. Abyssinia was a logical choice for Mussolini as it was the only African territory available. (All the rest were already claimed.) It was also conveniently located next to two existing Italian colonies and was the location of a humiliating event in Italian history. In 1896, Italy had tried to conquer Abyssinia but failed—the only European nation to be defeated in its attempt to subdue a native African state. Revenge for the defeat at Adowa was a factor in the Italian decision.

There were also economic factors as Mussolini believed that there were oil deposits in the region and that it might be developed as an outlet for the surplus Italian population, destined to migrate to the Americas, in a newly reconstituted Italian Empire. These Italian populations would not only help provide resources and markets for Italian industry but also a pool of army recruits in future years. The native population could bolster the Italian forces much as the French had done with their African recruits.

A final important factor in Mussolini's decision to attack may have come from his relationship with the UK and France forged by the **Stresa front**. Both of them had already conceded that Abyssinia lay within the Italian sphere of interest. He also assumed that their friendship would allow him to pursue his colonial ambitions in return for his allegiance as part of the anti-Hitler coalition. It was not an entirely unreasonable assumption and certainly fitted in well with his support for Realpolitik.

The lack of opposition to Italy

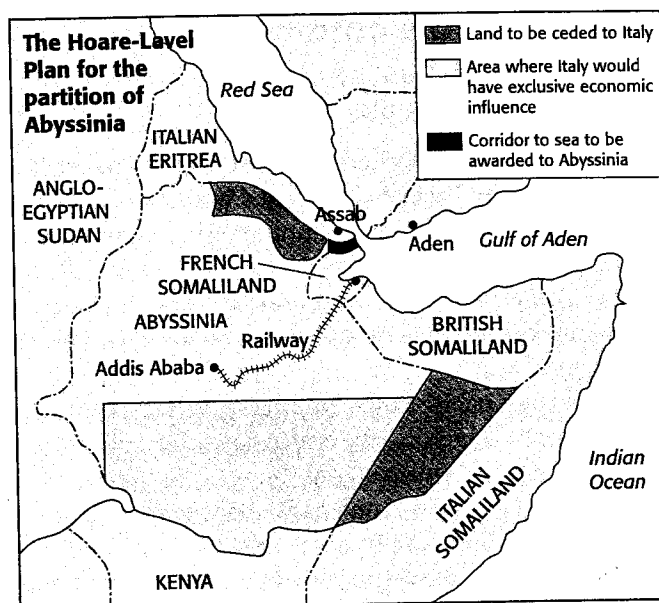
The conflict began in a small way in 1934 with a border skirmish between Abyssinia and Italian Somaliland. This was an excuse for Mussolini to move large numbers of troops into the region in preparation for a full-scale invasion. The dispute had been referred to the League for arbitration in September 1935.

Stresa Front An agreement signed in 1935 by Britain, France and Italy to maintain the Locarno agreement and support the independence of Austria. It might have deterred Hitler but it collapsed as a result of Abyssinia.

Activity:

- What was the purpose of the Hoare-Laval pact? Why is it referred to as an example of Realpolitik?
- Conduct a debate on the resolution that "sacrificing Abyssinia was less important than maintaining the Stresa Front".

The invasion began in October 1935. On 7 October Italy was declared the aggressor and on 18 November 51 states voted to impose economic sanctions against Italy. The sanctions did not include oil and steel and the UK did not close the Suez Canal to Italian shipping. Even apart from the fact that the sanctions excluded strategic material like oil, they were ineffective as so many large nations (such as Germany and the United States) were not bound by them. These sanctions were little more than an irritant. The UK and France found themselves in a difficult situation. They had either to make the sanctions work, so that the League was seen as a genuine force for peace, or they would have to placate Italy in order to maintain the Stresa front against the real threat: Hitler. In the end they accomplished neither.



Hoare-Laval Pact A plan devised by the French and British foreign ministers to settle the Abyssinian crisis and avoid losing Italy as an ally against Hitler. It failed due to the lack of public support and Mussolini's refusal to accept only part of Abyssinia.

Their solution was a compromise known as the **Hoare-Laval Pact** named after the French prime minister and the British foreign secretary. The proposal was to give Mussolini two-thirds of Abyssinia including the most fertile regions and leave the rest as an independent state. The compromise never took effect as the plan was leaked to the press and caused an enormous negative reaction among the public, especially in Britain. The compromise was abandoned: Hoare resigned and the Italian invasion continued.

There was no way to stop the Italian invasion without force and neither the UK or France was prepared to go to that extreme. By May 1936 the war was over and the whole of Abyssinia was in Italian hands. The damage caused by this event was monumental both to the League and to the concept of collective security, in its impact on the viability of Locarno and Stresa as barriers to German aggression. Hitler exposed the complete collapse of these agreements through his reoccupation of the Rhineland in March 1936.

The significance of the crisis

The significance of Abyssinia should not be underestimated. The League and its concept of collective security were exposed as entirely hollow, the more so because the leading powers in the League were unwilling and unable to apply it. The UK and France could not apply any sanction or take any action that risked a war—their populations would not support it. The result was that while they denounced the aggressors, they did not prevent their actions or protect the victims, only serving to annoy those responsible and reveal the weakness of the powers defending Versailles and the League.

In addition it was clear to Mussolini that the United Kingdom and France were unwilling to support his goals in Africa and the Balkans. If he wanted to fulfil his territorial ambitions, his only option was to associate himself with a more powerful nation: Germany. Hitler also saw that UK and France were not willing to resort to force even when their opponent was as weak as Italy and this strengthened his determination to press forward with Germany's territorial demands and revision of the Versailles settlement.

Summary of the outcomes

Collective security and the League of Nations were exposed as entirely hollow concepts.

- Diplomacy still worked in the era of self-interest. Nations would only become involved in issues which affected their vital interests. Therefore, there was no support for a campaign against Italy over Abyssinia.
- The United Kingdom and France were exposed as militarily weak and lacking in any motivation to defend the Versailles Treaty at threat of war.
- The strong pacifist movements in Western countries made it very difficult to develop any enthusiasm for collective security beyond an intellectual interest.
- Revisionist nations such as Germany and Japan were encouraged to continue their campaigns and expand their territory as it was clear that there was no effective opposition to their plans.
- Mussolini allied with Hitler—partly due to the failure of the UK and France to support him and partly out of the recognition that they were unlikely to win a major conflict in the event of a European war.
- This created a serious strategic problem for the British in the Mediterranean, and the potential for disaster in the event of a European war.

Recommended further reading

- Blinkhorn, Martin. 2000. *Fascism and the Right in Europe 1919–1945*. London, UK. Pearson Education.
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- Joll, James. 1961. *Britain and Europe*. London, UK. Adam and Charles Black.
- Laver, John. 1992. *Imperial and Weimar Germany 1890–1933*. Sevenoaks, UK. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Lederer, Ivo. 1960. *The Versailles Settlement*. Boston, USA. Heath and Company.
- Overy, Richard. 1994. *The Inter-War Crisis*. London, UK. Pearson Education.
- Radway, R. 2002. *Germany 1918–45*. London, UK. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Traynor, J. 1991. *Challenging History Europe 1890–1990*. London. Nelson.
- Wolfson, Robert and Laver, John. 2007. *Years of Change: European History 1890–1990*. 3rd edn. Tunbridge Wells, UK. Hodder and Stoughton.
- Robson, Mark. 2002. *The Rise of Fascism 1915–45*, 3rd edn. Tunbridge Wells, UK. Hodder and Stoughton.

Exam practice

Source analysis

These documents refer to the Abyssinian Crisis, 1935–6, and the League of Nations.

Source A

Extract from the Conservative Election manifesto, 1935.

The League of Nations will remain, as heretofore, the keystone of British foreign policy ... We shall therefore continue to do all in our power to uphold the Covenant and maintain and increase the efficiency of the League ... We shall take no action in isolation, but shall be prepared faithfully to take our part in any collective action decided upon by the League. We shall endeavour to further any discussions which may offer the hope of a just and fair settlement, provided that it be within the framework of the League and acceptable to the three parties to the dispute—Italy, Abyssinia and the League itself.

From the Conservative Election Manifesto, *The Times*, 28 October 1935

Source B

Extract from a speech by Pierre Laval at Geneva, 2 November 1935.

Now that the Co-ordination Committee has fixed the date for the entry into force of certain economic measures, I should like to remind you that ... my country is loyally applying the Covenant ... We have all ... another duty to fulfil, one that is dictated by the spirit of the Covenant. We must endeavour to seek, as speedily as possible, an amicable settlement for the dispute. The French Government and the United Kingdom Government are agreed to co-operate in this sphere.

This duty is particularly imperative for France, which on 7 January last signed a treaty of friendship with Italy. I shall therefore stubbornly pursue my attempt ... to find elements that might serve as a basis for negotiations. It is thus that I have initiated conversations, though I have never had the slightest intention of putting the results into final shape outside the League. It is only within the framework of the League that proposals can be examined and decisions reached.

Source C

Extract from a speech by Neville Chamberlain to the 1900 Club, reported in *The Times*, 11 June 1936.

The aggressions [in Abyssinia] was patent and flagrant, and there was hardly any country to which it appeared

that a policy of sanctions could be exercised with a greater chance of success than against Italy. There is no use for us to shut our eyes to realities. The fact remains that the policy of collective security based on sanctions has been tried out ... The policy has been tried out and has failed to prevent war, failed to stop war, failed to save the victim of aggression. I am not blaming anyone for the failure ... I want to put forward one or two conclusions which, it seems to me, may fairly be drawn ... I see, for instance, the other day that the President of the League of Nations Union issued a circular in which he said that the issue hung in the balance and urged a campaign of pressure on members of Parliament with the idea that if we were to pursue the policy of sanctions and even intensify it, it was still possible to preserve the independence of Abyssinia

That seems to me the very midsummer of madness. If we were to pursue it it would only lead to further misfortunes which would divert our minds as practical men from seeking other and better solutions. ... If we have retained any vestige of common sense, surely we must admit that we have tried to impose upon the League a task which it was beyond its powers to fulfil.

Source D

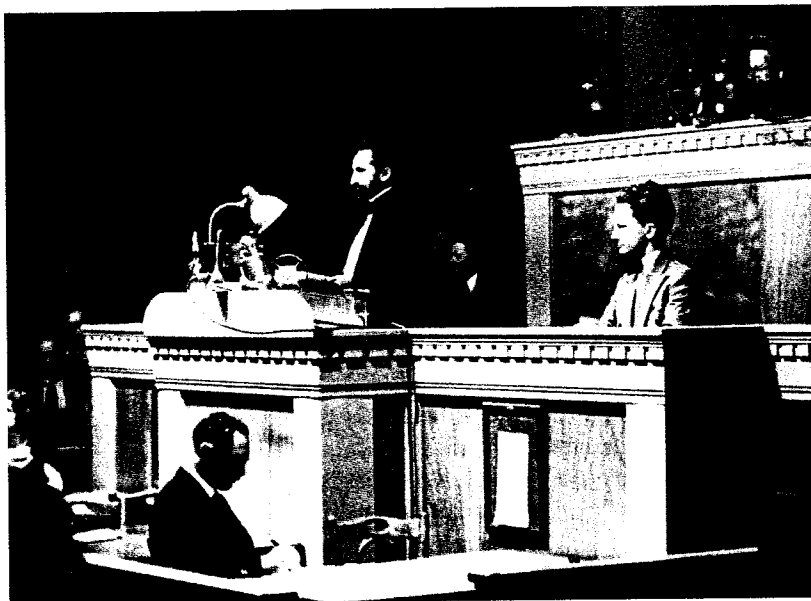
Extract from a speech by Emperor Haile Selassie to the League of Nations Assembly, 30 June 1936.

I assert that the issue before the Assembly today is not merely the question of a settlement in the matter of Italian aggression. It is a question of collective security; of the very existence of the League; of the trust placed by States in international treaties; of the value of promises made to small States that their integrity and independence shall be respected and assured. It is a choice between the principle of the equality of States and the imposition upon small Powers of the bonds of vassalage. In a word, it is international morality which is at stake...

On behalf of the Ethiopian people, a Member of the League of Nations, I ... renew my protest against the violations of treaties of which the Ethiopian people have been the victim. I declare before the whole world that the Emperor, the Government and the people of Ethiopia will not bow before force, that they uphold their claims, that they will use all means in their power to ensure the triumph of right and respect for the Covenant.

Source E

A photograph of Emperor Haile Selassie addressing the League of Nations on 30 June 1936, and accusing Italy of being an aggressor and using poison gas in the invasion of Ethiopia, which began on 3 October 1935.



Source-based questions

- 1 a According to Source D, what were the issues before the League of Nations Assembly? *[3 marks]*
b What message is conveyed by Source E? *[2 marks]*
- 2 Compare and contrast the views expressed in Sources A and B about the relations of their countries with the League of Nations. *[6 marks]*
- 3 With reference to their origin and purpose, assess the value and limitations of Sources C and D for historians studying the treatment of the Abyssinian crisis by the League of Nations. *[6 marks]*
- 4 Using the sources and your own knowledge analyse the statement made in Source C that the Abyssinian crisis was a task imposed upon the League of Nations "that it was impossible to fulfil". *[8 marks]*