

CHAPTER 4:

FAILURES OF THE LON (in the 1930s)

FAILURE OF DISARMAMENT

Efforts at Disarmament in the 1920s

Washington Naval Conference (1921) — Success

- Negotiated outside the League to limit the size and number of warships held by Britain, France, Japan and the United States • Organised by the United States, which was not a League member • Ratio of tonnage of capital ships of Britain, the United States, Japan, France and Italy set at 5:5:3:1.67:1.67

Locarno Treaties (1925) — Partial Success

- Negotiated outside the League between Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia • Germany accepted its western borders, including the demilitarisation of the Rhineland
- Weimar government agreed to settle any disputes with the above-mentioned countries through the League

League Commission to prepare for World Disarmament Conference (1926) — Failure

- Failed as Britain and France refused to co-operate

Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928) - Failure

- Negotiated outside the League between 15 countries including the United States, France, Germany, Britain, Italy and Japan
- Agreement that force should not be used to settle disputes
- No clear way to enforce the pact

The World Disarmament Conference (1932-1934)

Concerned with the increasing tensions in the world, the League managed to persuade the United States and almost 60 other states to attend the World Disarmament Conference. It was held at the League's headquarters in Geneva in February 1932.

Limiting Offensive Weapons

- The Conference concentrated on trying to control the destructive power of offensive weapons. The Conference produced resolutions to prohibit the bombing of civil populations and chemical warfare, as well as limiting the size of artillery and the tonnage of tanks.
- Despite the positive start, the leaders could not agree on a few matters.
 - It was difficult to get all countries to agree on what offensive and defensive weapons were.
 - The resolutions passed did very little to ensure how the limitations on weapons would be achieved.
 - For example, the bombing of civilians was to be banned, but all attempts to agree to abolish planes capable of bombing were unsuccessful. Even the proposal to ban the manufacture of chemical weapons was unsuccessful.
 - Individual countries used the Conference to raise their own particular issues.
 - For example, Italy demanded to have a navy the same size as that of France.

Dealing with Germany

- The biggest issue at the Conference was what to do with Germany. Most countries shared the view that the terms limiting the size of Germany's military in the Treaty of Versailles were perceived to be unfair.
- However, there was disagreement on how a fairer arrangement should be achieved.
 - The first option was for every country to disarm to a level that Germany had been forced to.
 - The second option was to allow Germany to rearm to a level closer to that of the other powers. There was a lot of reluctance to allow either option.
 - The experience of the disarmament attempts in the 1920s had shown that most countries would not disarm.
 - France, which was wary of Germany due to its painful experience from WWI, pressured the League against taking up the second option. The French demanded that either France continue to have a much larger armed forces than Germany, or Britain and the United States guarantee

to fight alongside France if a war ever broke out between France and Germany.

- The disagreements continued. Britain and the United States were reluctant to commit themselves to guaranteeing France's future security. At the same time, Germany accused France and the other major powers of hypocrisy.
- In July 1932, Germany put forward proposals for all countries to disarm down to its level. *When the Conference failed to agree on the principle of "equality", the Germans walked out and the Conference broke up.*

The Conference Reconvenes

- Although the Conference had broken up, the League's officials continued to work behind the scenes with Germany and the other powers.
 - In December 1932, the other powers agreed to discuss equality for Germany, and Germany agreed to return to discussions and the Disarmament Conference reconvened in February 1933.
 - By this time, Germany had a new leader, Adolf Hitler, and appeared to be genuinely interested in making progress on disarmament
 - However, Hitler was not interested in disarmament and had secretly started Germany instead.
 - Even as his military commanders were secretly making plans for rearmament, Hitler pretended to engage with the other powers on the issue of disarmament. In May 1933, Hitler promised not to rearm Germany if all other nations agreed to disarm in five years. He was clearly trying to put pressure on the other powers, particularly France. The discussions continued throughout 1933 but there was little progress.
 - Hitler was playing a clever game. He appeared to be calling for large-scale disarmament. In doing so, he could claim to be a supporter of peace and progress. However, he knew full well that the other powers would not disarm to the same level that Germany faced under the Treaty of Versailles. This gave him the justification he needed to rearm Germany.
 - *In October 1933, he pulled Germany out of the Disarmament Conference and from the League of Nations.*

THE ABYSSINIAN CRISIS (1934-1936)

The Origins of the Abyssinian Crisis

- In 1896, Italian troops tried to invade Abyssinia but were defeated by a poorly equipped army of tribesmen. Mussolini wanted revenge for this humiliating defeat.
 - He also wanted the fertile lands and mineral wealth of Abyssinia. Most importantly, he wanted glory and conquest. His style of leadership clamoured for military victories.
 - In December 1934, there was a dispute between Italian and Abyssinian soldiers at the Wal-Wal oasis in Abyssinia. Mussolini used this as an excuse and claimed the oasis as Italian territory. He demanded an apology from Abyssinia. At the same time, he began preparing the Italian army to invade it.
 - The Abyssinian Emperor, Haile Selassie, appealed to the League for help, but was unsuccessful. On the surface, Britain had the influence and resources to act decisively on Abyssinia's behalf. In addition, the location of Britain's and France's colonies also meant that both countries could send troops to defend Abyssinia. However, they chose not to do so.
1. In January 1935, Mussolini agreed to negotiate with the League over Abyssinia. At the same time, he began moving his armed forces into Italian bases in Eritrea (in Africa), next to Abyssinia.
 2. While tensions between Italy and Abyssinia were escalating, Britain, France and Italy signed an agreement called the Stresa Front in April 1935. It was a coalition formed to oppose Hitler's announced intention to rearm Germany, which violated the terms of the Treaty of Versailles.
 3. As the year wore on, there was public outcry in Britain against Mussolini. Under pressure, the British Foreign Secretary, Samuel Hoare, made a speech to the League supporting collective security and the rights of small nations.
 4. Britain and France were anxious not to upset Mussolini because they saw him as a potential ally against Hitler's Germany. As a result, there was no serious action taken by these two great powers or the League of Nations against Mussolini. On 4 September, after eight months of deliberation, a committee reported to the League that neither side could be held responsible for the Wal-Wal Incident. The League put forward a plan that would give Mussolini some parts of Abyssinia. Mussolini rejected it.
 5. Fearful of driving Italy into the arms of Germany, the foreign ministers of Britain and France, Samuel Hoare and Pierre Laval, secretly discussed the Hoare-Laval Pact with Mussolini in December 1935. They wanted to give Mussolini two-thirds of Abyssinia. In return, Mussolini would call off the invasion. This pact was made while the League was still discussing sanctions against Italy. Hence, when the details of the Hoare-Laval Pact were leaked to the French press the people of France and Britain regarded the plan as an act of treachery against the League. Both Hoare and Laval were sacked and the plan was dropped.

6. In October 1935, Mussolini's army was ready and he launched a full-scale invasion of Abyssinia. Despite brave resistance, the Abyssinians were no match for the modern Italian army equipped with tanks, aeroplanes and poison gas.
7. The League immediately set up a committee to discuss what sanctions to impose against Mussolini. Sanctions would only work if they were imposed quickly and decisively. Each delay would allow Mussolini to build up his stockpile of raw materials.
8. Eventually, the League banned arms sales and all loans, as well as the export of rubber, tin and metals, to Italy. It also banned all imports from Italy.
9. In February 1936, the League concluded that stopping oil sales to Italy would exhaust its supplies in two months. However, the League's delay in committing to a decision meant that it was all too late. The United States refused to support a ban on oil sales and, instead, increased its supplies of oil to Italy.
10. More importantly still, the Suez Canal, which was owned by Britain and France, remained open to Italy's supply ships.
11. Both Britain and France were afraid that closing the canal would result in war with Italy. This failure was fatal for Abyssinia. Only six countries officially protested against Mussolini's actions. In May 1936, Italy finally conquered Abyssinia. The Abyssinian Emperor, Haile Selassie, went into exile.

The League Loses Credibility

- The Abyssinian Crisis damaged the global confidence in the League for good.
 - The leak of the Hoare-Laval Pact details damaged its reputation. Furthermore, the failure to impose sanctions on Italy decisively led to the Italian takeover of Abyssinia. As a result, Hitler was convinced that the League would not be able to hinder Germany's plan of expansion.
- In the midst of the Abyssinian Crisis, German troops marched into the Rhineland in March 1936. This was an act against the Treaty of Versailles but the League did nothing to stop it.
 - By November 1936, Italy and Germany signed an agreement, called the Rome-Berlin Axis, which the League could do nothing about. Its lack of authority in enforcing peacekeeping measures resulted in the collapse of collective security. This eroded its credibility and showed its ineffectiveness in resolving conflicts and maintaining world peace.