

Increasing militarism in Italy

Italy, like Japan, emerged from the First World War dissatisfied with the gains it had made. The years immediately after the war were marked by great instability as the country tried to cope with its economic problems. Unemployment rose rapidly, and extremists on left and right struggled to take control.

By 1922, Mussolini's Fascist Party, or Blackshirts, had emerged as the dominant group. After staging his 'March on Rome' in October that year, Mussolini was invited by the king to become prime minister. It took some time for him to take complete control of the country, but by 1926 he was firmly established as dictator – he preferred the title 'Il Duce'.

Once in power, Mussolini put into practice the extreme right-wing policies of his Fascist Party. Opposition was crushed and other political parties were banned. He took command of the economy, controlling working conditions, pay and prices by law. His achievements seemed impressive.

New roads were built, marshes were drained, dams were constructed for hydroelectric power, and railways were electrified. In foreign affairs, Mussolini quickly made a name for himself. He built up Italy's armed forces, and was not afraid to use the threat of violence. The Corfu incident of 1923 showed that Mussolini would follow an aggressive, nationalistic foreign policy.

Like other nations, Italy was hit badly by the Great Depression. When unemployment rose, Mussolini turned to foreign adventures to distract the Italian people from the troubles at home. The first victim was the African state of Abyssinia. Mussolini's invasion of 1935–6 went unchecked by other nations, and did much to destroy the credibility of

SOURCE E



Mussolini making a speech.

the League of Nations. From 1936 Italy sent troops to support to the Nationalist side in the Spanish Civil War. At first, Mussolini was suspicious and jealous of the German dictator Adolf Hitler. But the signing of the Rome–Berlin Axis in 1936 marked the first move towards the alliance of Italy and Germany in the Second World War.

QUESTION

Look at Source E. What impression does this photograph give you of Mussolini as a politician?

Why did the League fail in Manchuria and Abyssinia?

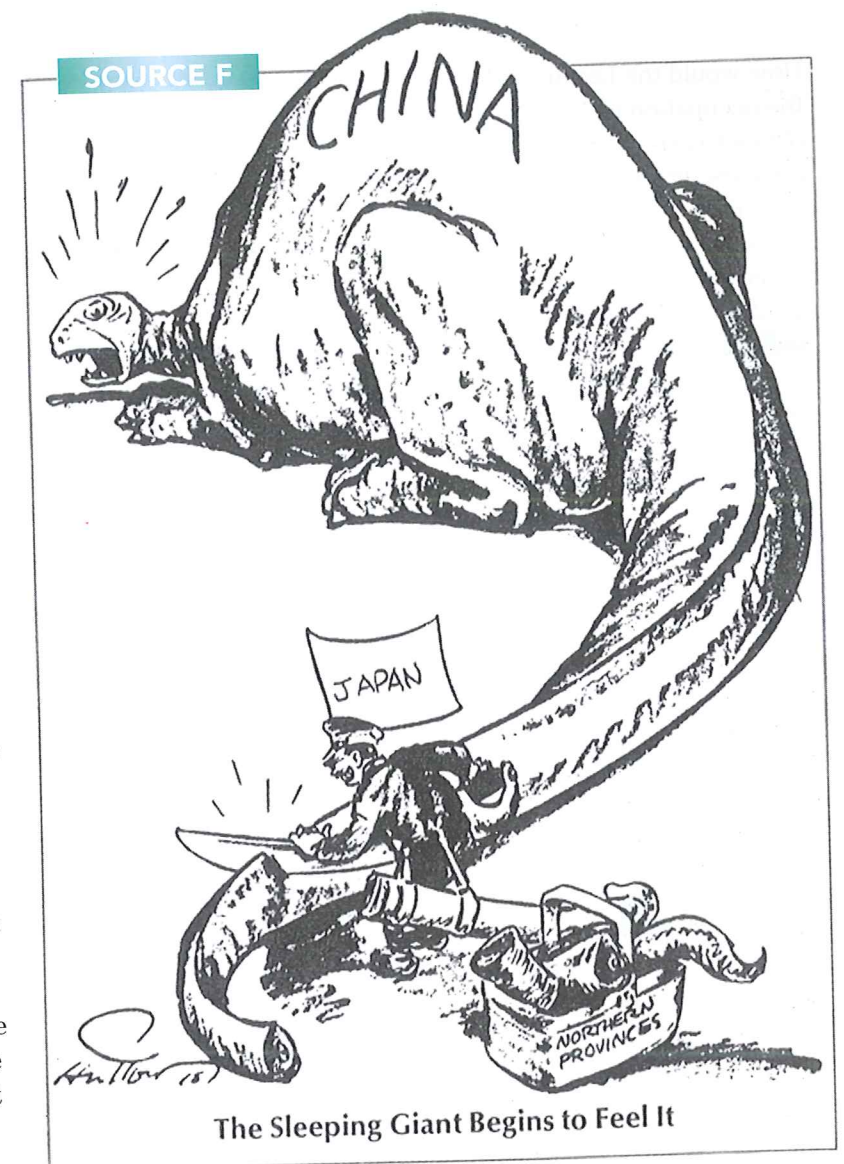
Failure in Manchuria, 1931–3

Manchuria is a part of northern China – fertile and rich in natural resources such as coal and iron ore. In the 1920s China was weak, and in many areas local leaders called warlords were more important than the national government. Japan took advantage of this weakness to expand its interests in Manchuria.

The Japanese already had an army (known as the Kwantung army) stationed in southern Manchuria to protect the territory gained from Russia in 1905. They also owned the South Manchurian Railway. The Chinese regarded the area as theirs, and claimed that they had been forced, first by Russia and later by Japan, to accept foreign domination of Manchuria. By the late 1920s many Chinese were moving into Manchuria to settle, attracted by the availability of land and work. At the same time, the Chinese government was beginning to stand up to the warlords, and the Japanese feared that the Chinese might soon be strong enough to challenge them in Manchuria.

Exasperated by what they believed was their own government's weakness in dealing with China, in September 1931 officers of the Kwantung army staged the Mukden incident. The exact sequence of events remains unclear. However, on the night of 18 September, there was an explosion on the South Manchurian Railway just outside the city of Mukden. The Japanese claimed that this was sabotage by the Chinese, who subsequently opened fire on Japanese railway guards. The Chinese denied this, claiming that all their soldiers in the area were in barracks at the time. Whatever the truth of the matter, the incident was very

SOURCE F



The Sleeping Giant Begins to Feel It

An American cartoon of 1937, commenting on the Japanese invasion of China.

convenient for the Kwantung army and gave it an excuse to begin the takeover of Manchuria.

There is no doubt that the Japanese government was appalled by these events, but as the invasion progressed successfully, an outburst of nationalism swept Japan, leaving the government no choice but to accept what had occurred. In 1932 Manchuria was renamed Manchukuo, and the last Chinese emperor, Pu Yi, swept from power in his own country in 1911, was installed by the Japanese as a puppet ruler.

How would the League of Nations react? At first, the occupation of Manchuria looked like an obvious case of aggression by Japan. However, the Japanese had long-standing economic rights there, agreed by treaty with the Chinese. Most nations were inclined to regard Manchuria as a Japanese sphere of interest, and were not keen to get involved. In addition, the Japanese had successfully sown confusion about the true circumstances of the Mukden incident, and insisted that they were just defending themselves from Chinese attacks. Nevertheless, when China appealed for the League's help, it could not ignore what was going on. The League instructed Japanese forces to withdraw, but it was ignored, and the further advance of the Japanese into Manchuria left little doubt of their intentions.

In truth, there was little that the League could do if Japan remained determined to ignore its authority. For most League members, events in East Asia seemed very distant. China's internal turmoil was well known, and many League members secretly

SOURCE G



Japanese troops after a victory over Chinese forces in December 1931.

sympathised with Japan's attempts to impose 'order' on the region. The League decided to set up a Commission of Inquiry under Lord Lytton, which was sent to the area to gather information and report on what had happened. When the report was published in late 1932, it condemned Japan's actions. The members of the League accepted Lytton's conclusions. The Japanese response was simple: they ignored the report and left the League.

The occupation of Manchuria did not end Japanese aggression in China. Early in 1932 Japanese and Chinese troops clashed in Shanghai, and during four weeks of fighting Japan bombed parts of the city. In February 1933 the Japanese occupied Jehol province, which bordered on to Manchuria. These actions were just a prelude to the full-scale invasion of the Chinese mainland that commenced in July 1937. In the months that followed, fighting spread through much of China, and by 1938 many of China's most important cities were under Japanese occupation. Many historians regard July 1937 as the true starting date of the Second World War.

The League had been exposed as powerless to deal with Japanese aggression in Manchuria. However, because these events took place in East Asia and not in Europe, they were not too damaging to the League's authority. It was easy for the League's supporters to continue to believe that, if a similar crisis occurred in Europe, where vital interests of the great powers were at stake, the League would be able to cope with it.

SOURCE H

On arrival at the site of the explosion, the patrol was fired upon from the fields on the east side of the line. Lieutenant Kawamoto immediately ordered his men to deploy and to return the fire. The attacking body, estimated at five or six, then stopped firing and retreated northwards. The Japanese patrol at once started in pursuit and, having gone about 200 metres, were again fired upon by a larger body, estimated at between three and four hundred.

The Japanese account of events given to the Lytton Inquiry.

SOURCE I

Instructions had been received that special care was to be taken to avoid any clash with Japanese troops in the tense state of feeling which existed at the time. On the night of 18 September, all the soldiers of the 7th Brigade, numbering about 10,000, were in the North Barracks. The west gate in the mud wall surrounding the camp, which gave access to the railway, had been closed. At 10 p.m. the sound of a large explosion could be heard, immediately followed by rifle fire.

The Chinese version of events given to the Lytton Inquiry.

SOURCE J

An explosion undoubtedly occurred on or near the railroad between 10 and 10.30 p.m. but the damage was not sufficient to justify military action. The military operations of the Japanese during this night cannot be regarded as legitimate self-defence.

An extract from Lord Lytton's report, published in October 1932.

QUESTION

Read Sources H, I and J.

Did Lord Lytton believe either the Japanese or the Chinese? How can you tell?

Failure in Abyssinia, 1935–6

In October 1935, Italy, one of the founder members of the League of Nations, attacked Abyssinia, a poor, undeveloped state in north-east Africa. Most historians believe that the resulting crisis was a death-blow to the League, which found it impossible to take effective action to stop the Italian aggression.

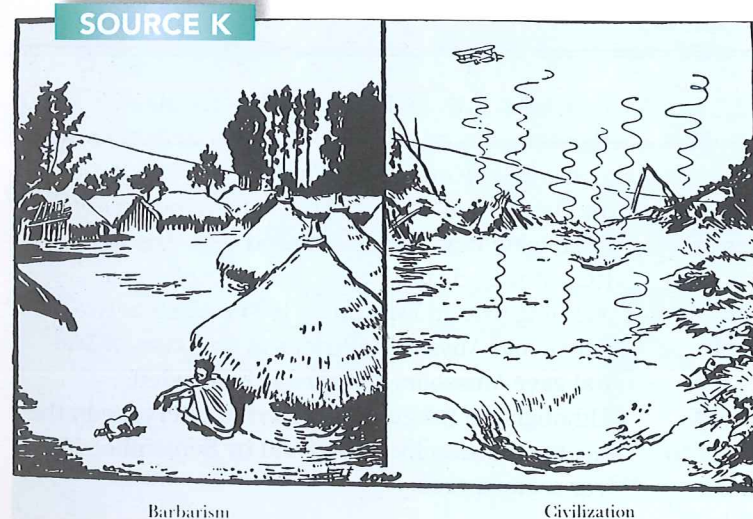
Abyssinia was almost the only part of Africa not under European control and, being located next to the Italian colonies of Eritrea and Somaliland, it was an obvious target for Mussolini's colonial

ambitions. Italy had attempted to conquer Abyssinia before, and one of Mussolini's aims was to avenge the humiliation suffered by the Italians at the Battle of Adowa (1896). Despite the Treaty of Friendship that Italy had signed with Abyssinia in 1928, it was clear by 1934 that Mussolini was planning war. In December 1934 a clash between Italian and Abyssinian troops at the oasis of Wal Wal gave Mussolini the excuse he needed. Although the League attempted to intervene in the dispute, tension increased and by September 1935 war seemed near.

The League was in an impossible situation. Both Italy and Abyssinia were member states, bound in theory to accept the League's authority in settling their dispute. But it was obvious that Mussolini wanted war. If he invaded Abyssinia, the League would have to take action. But what action? Everything would depend on the attitude of Britain and France, the two great powers in the League. If they were determined enough, Mussolini might be forced to back down. However, they needed Mussolini's friendship because they saw him as a potential ally against Germany.

In January 1935, the French foreign minister, Laval, met Mussolini in Rome. A number of secret agreements were made, some of which concerned Abyssinia. Laval thought he was making economic concessions in North Africa so as to win Mussolini's friendship. But Mussolini interpreted France's approach as an indication that he could do as he liked in Abyssinia. In any case, Mussolini assumed that Britain and France, both major colonial powers themselves, would not object to Italy acquiring another African colony of its own. There was some surprise, then, when Britain tried to warn Mussolini off from invading Abyssinia. In September, Sir Samuel Hoare, the British foreign secretary, made a vigorous speech to the Assembly of the League, calling for collective resistance to any Italian aggression.

In spite of the warnings, Italy's invasion of Abyssinia commenced on 3 October 1935. The



Abyssinian forces stood little chance against the modern Italian army, but the country was huge and the roads poor, so the Italian troops were not able to advance quickly. At first, it seemed the League would take the strong action that Hoare had demanded. Within a week the League had condemned Italy as an aggressor, and soon afterwards it imposed sanctions, by which League members were forbidden to trade with Italy. Crucially, however, the sanctions were not extended to basic war materials such as coal, iron and oil. Even Mussolini later admitted that this would have stopped the invasion within a week. But Britain and France were unwilling to risk provoking Mussolini more than necessary. As a result, they kept the Suez Canal open to the Italians, allowing Mussolini to supply his armies in Abyssinia.

Behind the scenes, Britain and France undermined the apparently tough actions of the League. Desperate for a settlement with Italy, Hoare and Laval met in December and agreed a plan that was designed to bring the invasion to an end. Abyssinia would be split up, with Italy gaining much of the fertile lands in the north and the south of the country. Another huge area in the south would be reserved for Italian economic expansion and settlement. Abyssinia would be reduced to half its original size, and limited to the barren, mountainous region. The only compensation for Abyssinia would be a narrow strip of land providing access to the Red Sea – the so-called 'corridor for camels'. The Hoare–Laval Plan was never put to Abyssinia or Italy. Almost immediately, details of it were leaked to the press, causing a public outcry. Hoare and Laval were forced to resign. However, the damage had been done. Everyone now knew that the British and French had been talking tough, but were not prepared to back up their threats with action. Just the opposite – they seemed willing to reward Mussolini for his aggression.

A British cartoon of 1936 commenting on Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia.

The League was, of course, completely powerless when its most important members would take no effective action. Abyssinia was left helpless against the Italians, who now pressed home the invasion with greater determination. Only the difficulty of the terrain could slow the advance of the Italian troops, who were using modern weapons such as bombers, tanks and poison gas, against Abyssinian troops often armed only with spears. On 5 May 1936 Italian troops entered the Abyssinian capital, Addis Ababa, in triumph.

Three days earlier the Abyssinian emperor, Haile Selassie, had fled the country. He travelled to Geneva, where on 30 June he addressed the Assembly of the League of Nations. He spoke for three-quarters of an hour, summarising the events of the war and protesting against the failure of the League to deal with the invasion. His speech marked the end of the League's existence as an important international organisation. Nobody took it seriously in future, and it played no significant part in the events which, from 1936, rushed its members towards another world war.

SOURCE L

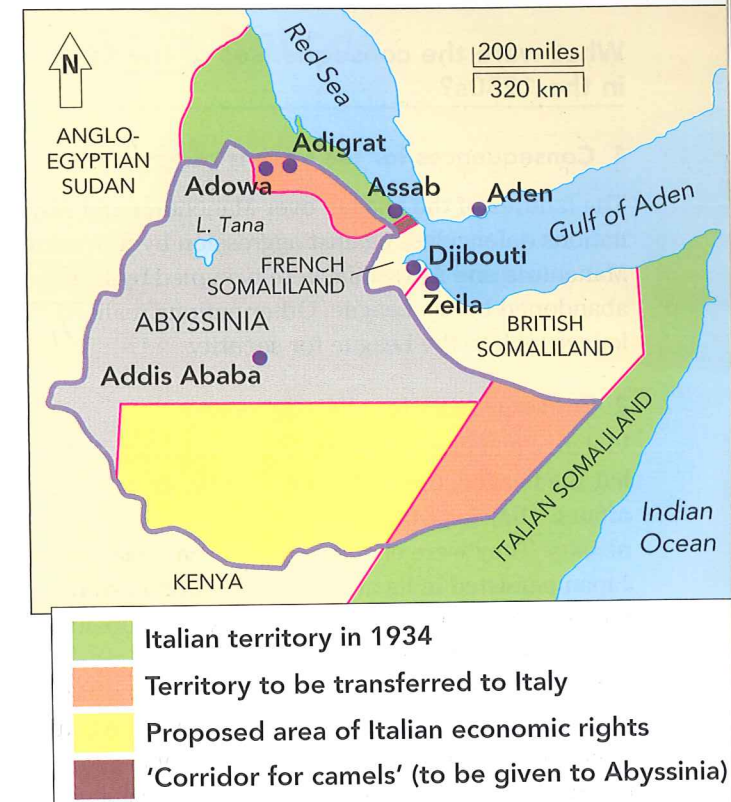
I, Haile Selassie, Emperor of Abyssinia, am here today to claim that justice which is due to my people, and the assistance promised to it eight months ago, when fifty nations asserted that aggression had been committed in violation of international treaties.

Haile Selassie addressing the Assembly of the League of Nations, 30 June 1936.

SOURCE M

The bombing was magnificent sport. One group of Abyssinian horsemen gave me the impression of a budding rose unfolding as the bomb fell in their midst and blew them up.

Description by Mussolini's 19-year-old pilot son of one attack in Abyssinia by the Italian air force.



The Hoare–Laval Plan.

SOURCE N

The real death of the League was in December 1935, not 1939 or 1945. One day it was a powerful body imposing sanctions, seemingly more effective than ever before; the next day it was an empty sham, everyone scuttling from it as quickly as possible. What killed the League was the publication of the Hoare–Laval Plan.

The judgement of the British historian, A.J.P. Taylor, on the impact of the Abyssinian crisis on the League.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Look at Source K. What was the cartoonist's opinion about the invasion? Use details of the cartoon to explain your answer.
- 2 Why was the League so ineffective in dealing with the Abyssinian crisis?
- 3 Why was the Abyssinian crisis a death blow to the League, when the Manchurian crisis was not?

What were the consequences of the failures of the League in the 1930s?

1 Consequences for the victims of aggression

The failures of the League over Manchuria and Abyssinia left weak nations defenceless against aggression by powerful neighbours. Manchuria and Abyssinia were occupied by foreign powers and abandoned by the League. Other nations realised that they could no longer look to the League for security.

2 Consequences for the aggressors

Violence and aggression were shown to pay. Although Italy and Japan left the League, they continued to play an active part in international affairs. They kept the territory they had gained and suffered no penalty. They were encouraged to take further aggressive actions. Japan persisted in its attacks on China (Source O). Italy intervened in the Spanish Civil War, and later occupied Albania (April 1939).

3 Consequences for Britain and France

The weakness of Britain and France in dealing with the Abyssinian crisis mirrored the weakness of the League itself. Up to 1936 they could pretend that collective security was the way to deal with international aggression. From 1936 onwards they had to find different ways of dealing with the dictators. Above all, they had to accept that nobody would do this for them. Although they continued to appease Hitler (see page 83), re-armament began in earnest as the democracies faced up to the fact that, in the end, they might have to fight another war.

4 Consequences for the League of Nations

The Manchurian and Abyssinian crises destroyed the idea of collective security by demonstrating that League members would not act together firmly in the face of determined aggression. This also destroyed the credibility of the League as a peacekeeping organisation.

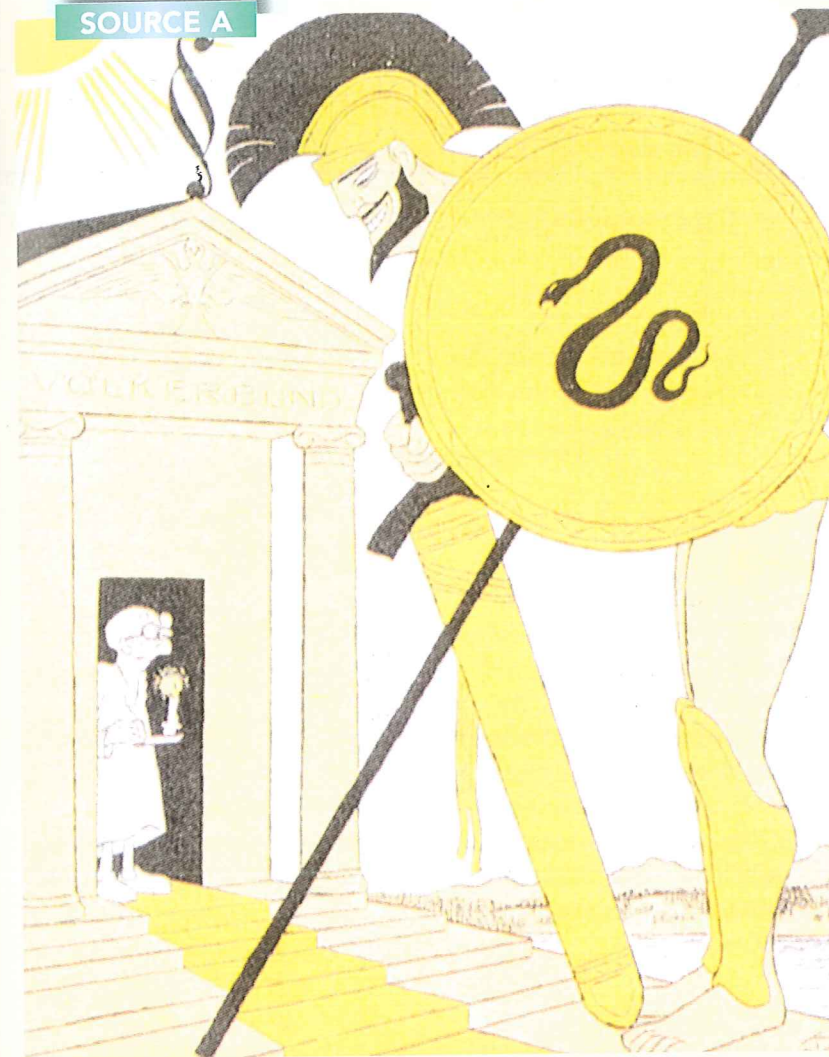


SOURCE O

Japanese soldiers celebrating the capture of Hankow, China, in 1938. The League had failed to stop this attack.

Paper 1-type assessment: The League of Nations

SOURCE A



A German cartoon of 1936 commenting on the Abyssinian crisis. The soldier is saying to the League: 'I am sorry to disturb your sleep, but I wanted to tell you that you don't need to bother yourself about this Abyssinian business any more. It's been settled elsewhere.'

QUESTIONS

Section A Questions

- 1a Study Source A. Explain the message of this cartoon. Support your answer by referring to details of the cartoon and your own knowledge. (6)
- b Explain why the Italian invasion of Abyssinia was important in the history of the League of Nations. (9)

Section B Questions

- 2a What were the aims of the League of Nations? (4)
- b Explain why not all the major powers joined the League of Nations when it was set up. (6)
- c 'The most important factor in the failure of the League of Nations was the fact that the USA was not a member.' Do you agree with this statement? Explain your answer. (10)