**Cambridge IGCSE Core Content Option B:**

**The 20th Century: International Relations since 1919**

**Part 3: Why had international peace collapsed by 1939?**

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**The collapse of international order in the 1930s**

The 1930s was a decade of increasing tension and conflict in Europe and the Far East. Few were surprised when war broke out again in September 1939. The first major act of aggression had come with Japan’s invasion of Manchuria in 1931. Over the next eight years Abyssinia, China, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Memel, Albania and Poland fell victim to the ambitions of Italy, Germany and Japan. Things had looked so different in the mid to late1920s when the League of Nations seemed to be having success and international agreements such as the Locarno Treaties and Kellogg-Briand Pact suggested an age of peace and tranquillity was at hand.

**Long-term consequences of the peace treaties of 1919-23**

The peace settlement had left several countries feeling dissatisfied. Japan was disappointed because its idea for a racial equality clause had been rejected and it had expected to receive a greater share of Germany’s former trading rights in China. Italy had hoped to receive the Adriatic port of Fiume and a greater share of the former colonies of Germany and Turkey. Germany objected to most of the Treaty of Versailles – the territorial provisions, the disarmament clauses, war-guilt and reparations.

The dissatisfied powers were likely to seek changes when they could. Germany’s anger was intensified by the belief among many that it had been ‘stabbed in the back’ by the ‘November Criminals’ in 1918.

Despite leaving Germany angry, the Treaty of Versailles did not prevent her from growing into a powerful country again. She still had significant resources.

Almost all Hitler’s foreign policy actions and demands involved violations of the Treaty of Versailles or Treaty of Saint Germain – rearmament, Anschluss, takeover of the Sudetenland, the occupation of Prague, the seizure of Memel and claims made over Danzig and the Polish Corridor. Challenging the hated treaties helped make and keep Hitler popular in Germany.

The Treaty also had an impact on British and French opinion. To begin with the British were satisfied by the harsh, punitive nature of the treaty. However, some began to question its fairness. By the early 1930s a common view in British government circles was that the treatment of Germany had been too harsh. The emergence of Hitler and the Nazis was seen as an understandable response to excessive punishment. It followed that British politicians should assist Germany in achieving peaceful revision of the treaty which the British had been partially responsible for imposing.

The French thought the treaty hadn’t been harsh enough. They had wanted to permanently disable Germany in order to guarantee their own security. By the mid-1930s it was clear Hitler was seeking to overturn the settlement. The French didn’t feel strong enough to stand up to Hitler on their own so they acted in partnership with the British.

The Versailles Settlement had also created several inconsistencies or anomalies:

* The separation of East Prussia from most of Germany by the Polish Corridor
* The placing of Danzig, overwhelmingly populated by Germans, under League of Nations control
* The placing of 3 ½ million Germans under Czech rule in the Sudetenland

German people saw these as grievances to be dealt with. The British were sympathetic over many issues but wanted them addressed in a peaceful manner.

**Consequences of the failures of the League of Nations in the 1930s**

After WW1 collective security administered by the League of Nations was meant to be the main way of preserving world peace. By 1929, despite some early problems, the League had grown in membership and influence. However, within six years the Great Depression and the Japanese invasion of Manchuria and Italian invasion of Abyssinia effectively finished off the League which had a significant effect on the future actions of Japan, Italy and Germany

When Japan invaded Manchuria the eyes of the world were focused on the League. This was its first serious challenge from a great power. If the League was firm and decisive it would act as a warning to others wanting to expand their territory. Its failure had the opposite effect. Japan realised that without the membership of the US or Russia there was little the League could do to stop further expansion at the expense of China.

Although Russia was admitted to the League in 1934 it was clear Stalin’s immediate concern was agricultural and industrial reform. Therefore the Japanese invasion of China continued without effective challenge in 1937.

Both Italy and Germany were encouraged to think they could also achieve their territorial ambitions. However, when Mussolini invaded Abyssinia it at first seemed the League were jolted into taking firm action as they imposed economic sanctions on Italy. But these sanctions excluded coal and oil and the League was exposed as guilty of double-dealing when the Hoare-Laval Pact came to light.

Both Mussolini and Hitler were delighted that the League seemed weak and unable to put internationalism ahead of national interests. This made further aggression from Italy very likely and Hitler became confident to could successfully challenge the Treaty of Versailles.

The League also failed to achieve disarmament. Indeed, following a period of reduced spending on defences during the Depression and with the public against large-scale military spending Britain and France decided to rearm as a deterrent to Italy and Germany.

By the summer of 1936 it was clear that rearmament was a top priority, but it was unlikely to preserve world peace on its own. Whilst defences were being built-up a policy of appeasement was adopted towards the dictators. Both rearmament and appeasement can be seen as the result of failures of the League of Nations.

**Hitler’s foreign policy aims**

Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933. He foreign policy involved trying to make Germany great again by:

* Destroying the Treaty of Versailles – introducing conscription; building up the army, navy and airforce; securing Germany’s western frontier by remilitarising and refortifying the Rhineland; regaining territory taken from Germany
* Creating a Greater Germany – Grossdeutschland – all German speaking people would be brought into the Reich; the frontiers of Germany would be extended to cover areas where the population were largely German, including Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia and Poland
* Destroying communism – in conflict with Soviet Russia
* Acquiring living space – Lebensraum – Hitler thought it the entitlement of Germans to have extra land for recreation and cultivation. This would be achieved by expanding eastwards into Poland and Russia
* Building a central European empire as the most powerful state in Europe and perhaps the world

**Hitler’s foreign policy, 1933-35**

At first Hitler’s foreign policy in action could be seen as quite tame, trying to achieve equality with powers such as Britain and France, rather than heading to war:

* 1933: Germany refused to pay any more reparations, left the World Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations and secretly began rearming
* January 1934: Ten-year non-aggression pact with Poland removed the prospect of war with Poland if Hitler decided to make a move against Austria or Czechoslovakia
* July 1934: attempted union – Anschluss – with Austria. This followed the murder of Austrian Chancellor Dolfuss by Austrian Nazis. In the resulting confusion Hitler was poised to strike but Mussolini signalled his disapproval by moving Italian troops to the Brenner Pass. Hitler backed down and denied any responsibility for the murder
* January 1935: Saar plebiscite – this took place in accordance with the Treaty of Versailles. Over 90% voted in favour of return to Germany. Germany had now peacefully and legally regained its first piece of lost territory
* March 1935: reintroduction of conscription – Hitler announced his intention of building up his army to 36 divisions (550,000 men) and creating a military airforce. This was a direct challenge to Italy, Britain and France. They responded by forming the Stresa Front which issued a strongly worded protest against this breaking of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. France, Czechoslovakia and Russia also signalled concern by signing mutual assistance pacts
* June 1935: Anglo-German Naval Agreement – this allowed Germany to have a fleet which was 35% the size of Britain’s, with submarines at 45%. It essentially legalised German naval rearmament and was made without the prior agreement of France or Italy. It gave the impression that following national interests regardless of others was acceptable and it encouraged Mussolini to be equally selfish in extending Italy’s colonies

**Hitler’s foreign policy, 1936-38**

By the beginning of 1936 Hitler had been in power for three years and no Germans had fired shots in anger against a foreign power. During the next three years it was still not clear to most western statesmen what Hitler intended. His methods were questionable but his objectives often appeared quite reasonable.

1. **Rhineland**

The Treaty of Versailles had declared the Rhineland a demilitarised zone and authorised an army of occupation of the west bank of the Rhine for 15 years. In fact allied troops left after 10 years. The demilitarised Rhineland was a constant reminder to Germans of their humiliation. It allowed western armies to invade at will – as the French and Belgians had done in January 1923.

With two divisions of troops against a possible opposition force of 200 divisions, German forces marched into the Rhineland in March 1936. As Hitler had predicted, neither Britain nor France had any desire for war over this issue. The Rhineland was widely regarded as Germany’s ‘backyard’ and both French and British leaders realised it would be foolhardy to risk European peace over whether or not German troops should be allowed to occupy part of their own country. The French were also in the middle of a financial crisis and six weeks away from elections.

Hitler followed his Rhineland triumph with further promises of peaceful intentions, suggesting a 25-year non-aggression pact with the western powers.

1. **Spanish Civil War, 1936-39**

In July 1936 General Franco started the Spanish Civil War when he led a right-wing revolt against the democratically elected, republican government of the Popular Front – a mixture of socialists, communists and anarchists. Franco’s right-wing, nationalist alliance included the Falange, Spain’s fascist party founded in 1933.

Hitler and Mussolini supported their fellow fascist. Stalin supported the Republicans. The Spanish Civil War became a battleground for rival ideologies and 1000s of volunteers – including George Orwell - went to Spain to fight fascism. After 30 months of bitter struggle and 750,000 deaths the Nationalists won and Franco established a fascist-style government.

The war had given Hitler a number of opportunities:

* Hitler hoped that if Franco was successful the Spain would become an ally of Germany on France’s south-western border and giving the German navy access to Spanish naval bases. However, after winning the Civil War Franco opted to remain neutral during WW2, concentrating on Spain’s domestic problems.
* The German airforce – Luftwaffe – were able to practise and perfect dive-bombing techniques in the assault on Guernica in what could be considered a dress rehearsal for WW2.
* As Italy and Germany were acting together Hitler was able to persuade Mussolini to abandon Britain and France. Whilst not yet a formal alliance, Mussolini spoke of the ‘Rome-Berlin Axis’ in a speech in November 1936
* The long drawn-out conflict in Spain allowed Hitler to take successful action over Austria and Czechoslovakia whilst western diplomats were distracted from affairs in central Europe
1. **Anti-Comintern Pact**

The Anti-Comintern Pact was signed by Germany and Japan in 1936, with Italy joining in November 1937. It was in name directed against the Comintern – or Communist International – which was the Soviet agency for promoting worldwide communist revolution. The real purpose was to ensure that neither Germany nor Japan would assist Russia if Russia attacked either of them.

1. **Anschluss**

A large proportion of Austria’s 7 million population was German-speaking. Although the Treaty of Versailles had forbidden the uniting of Germany and Austria, the Treaty had already been disregarded on several occasions. Hitler’s main potential problem was with Italy as Italy had regarded Austria as within her sphere of influence. However, Hitler’s relations with Mussolini had improved since Mussolini had prevented Anschluss in 1934.

In February 1938 Hitler met the Austrian Chancellor Schuschnigg to discuss the persecution of Austrian Nazis by government forces. Schuschnigg was bullied into appointing Seyss-Inquart, a leading Austrian Nazi, as Minister of the Interior. Suspecting that Hitler wanted to destroy Austrian independence, Schuschnigg decided to hold a plebiscite on this issue on 13th March 1938. When Hitler found out he demanded Schuschnigg resign and be replaced by Seyss-Inquart as Chancellor. Seyss-Inquart immediately requested the assistance of Germany in restoring order.

Hitler first secured Mussolini’s support then ordered the German army into Austria on 12 March 1938, proclaiming the Anschluss to have taken place. Plebiscites held in early April confirmed these events in both Austria and Germany, with an overwhelming majority in favour.

The Anschluss was Hitler’s most daring act to date. For the first time the German army had been used across German frontiers. Britain and France issued protests, but nothing more. They didn’t have the support of Italy and any action would have seemed to be against the wishes of the Austrian people.

Hitler had increased German territory, population and resources, adding to Germany’s military capacity. He had also increased his confidence and contempt for the opposition of Britain and France.

1. **Sudetenland**

3 ½ million Germans, former subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, lived in the Sudetenland. It was within Czechoslovakia but on the border of Germany. Hitler particularly hated Czechoslovakia because it was the creation of the Treaty of Saint-German, part of the Versailles Settlement; it had an alliance with Russia and France; and it had a democratically elected government.

The Sudeten Germans, led by Konrad Henlein, were complaining of being discriminated against by the Czech-dominated government. Hitler encouraged their protests and demonstrations. He considered seizing the Sudetenland in May 1938 but was dissuaded by the prospect of war with Czechoslovakia, Russia, France and Britain. However, fearful of the possibility of Hitler using force, western statesmen were very keen to reach some agreement with Hitler over the Sudentenland. A series of high level meetings – summits – were held in Germany:

**Berchtesgarden, 15th September 1938**

Hitler met British PM Neville Chamberlain and agreed, subject to approval by the British, French and Czech governments that the areas of the Sudetenland in which the majority of the population were German should be given to Germany.

**Bad Godesburg, 22nd September 1938**

Chamberlain reported to Hitler that the British, French and Czech governments had given their approval. Hitler then claimed he must have all the Sudetenland immediately and that there would be war if the Czechs didn’t withdraw from Sudeten areas by 1st October. Chamberlain was appalled at Hitler’s change of heart and returned to London to prepare for war. Instructions were given for the mobilisation of the French army and British navy.

**Munich, 29th September 1938**

When Hitler realised he was on the brink of war he agreed to Chamberlain’s suggestion, supported by Mussolini, of an international conference at Munich to settle the dispute. They were joined by Edouard Deladier, French PM. They agreed that the Sudenteland would be transferred to Germany over a 10-day period. Plebiscites would be held in any areas where there was a doubt over the dominant nationality. The four powers would guarantee the remainder of Czechoslovakia once Polish and Hungarian claims had been met.

When presented with the terms of the Munich Agreement the Czech government had little option but to agree to the break-up of their country – their alternative was to face the might of Germany alone.

A few hours after the signing of the main agreement Chamberlain made a personal visit to Hitler armed with a document he invited Hitler to sign. This pledged Hitler and Mussolini to do everything to promote the peace of Europe and use the ‘method of consultation’ to resolve any mutual differences. Hitler had no objection to adding his signature to a collection of vague promises. Chamberlain returned to London claiming he had brought ‘peace for our time’.

**Analysis of Appeasement**

The British and French acceptance of the Munich Agreement in particular can be both criticised and defended in a number of ways:

Against:

* Britain and France had abandoned Czechoslovakia to her fate
* Hitler had been appeased but was effectively encouraged to see Britain and France as weak and continue to push for more territory
* Britain and France could have gone to war against Hitler at this stage with the support of the 36 divisions of the Czech army fighting behind their well-prepared defences
* In the event of war Britain and France might have had the assistance or neutrality of Russia
* Germany gained time to strengthen its army, navy and airforce

For:

* Chamberlain didn’t think Britain was sufficiently prepared for war in 1938
* Britain’s air defences were incomplete and vulnerable to a knockout blow from the Luftwaffe
* The British Dominions – Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa – were not united behind the prospect of war in 1938; they were by September 1939
* A war over the Sudetenland would have been seen as against the principle of self-determination

After WW2 appeasement was looked back on as a policy of concession, weakness and cowardice that made war more rather than less likely. However, the appeasers were all people of intelligence with a sense of realism. There are a number of further points that can be made in defence of the British policy of appeasement in general:

1. **It allowed the correction of the injustices of Versailles**

By the 1930s many thought the Treaty of Versailles had been too harsh on Germany. There was some sympathy for Hitler’s demands. Few thought it unreasonable that Germany should be allowed the means to defend itself and make common cause with the substantial pockets of Germans living under foreign rule.

A strong-arm approach would have risked upsetting public opinion and offended the British Dominions who supported the notion of self-determination and intensifying the German sense of injustice.

1. **It was sensible in the light of the increasing militarism of Japan and Italy**

Japan and Italy were also aggressive, militaristic regimes. There was a danger Britain could have found herself at war against Japan, Italy and Germany with France as her only major ally. Appeasement reflected the reality of Britain’s military weakness whilst she rearmed and improved her air defences.

1. **It was popular**

The appeasers were all leaders of democratic countries where governments were decided by free elections. Politicians need to take account of public opinion to survive. Public opinion in Britain and France was overwhelmingly for peace after the horrific experiences of WW1. There was little support for rearmament or a stronger stand against Germany, Italy and Japan.

1. **It was sensible in the light of the threat of communism**

In the 1930s there was also the threat of Soviet Russia and world communism. Some western politicians feared communism more than Nazism. One way to reduce the potential threat from Russia was to ensure there was a strong, anti-communist state in central Europe, committed to its destruction. Germany was such a country. Anti-communists found it convenient to support appeasement.

**Czechoslovakia, March 1939**

In March 1939 Britain and France largely abandoned their policy of trying to appease Hitler in favour of a policy of deterrence. This major change was caused by further events in Czechoslovakia.

Czechoslovakia was a multi-national state inhabited by Czechs, Magyars, Slavs, Ruthenes and others. Once the Sudetenland was transferred to Germany the rest of the state began to break up. Hitler wanted to gain control of the rest of Czechoslovakia which remained rich in agriculture and industry. Czech President Hacha was bullied into allowing the German army to occupy Prague on 15th March 1939.

Until this point every territorial change sought by Hitler could be could be justified on the grounds of self-determination. Hitler was now taking land just to increase the power of Germany. He was now making a bid to dominate Europe by force.

**The British-French guarantee to Poland**

The British and French could do little to save Czechoslovakia, but there was no longer any doubt about his ambitions. Poland was almost certainly going to be his next target because:

* Poland had been (re)created by the Treaty of Versailles
* Poland included territory that had been part of Germany before 1919, including West Prussia
* The Polish Corridor separated East Prussia from most of Germany
* Danzig, in the Polish Corridor, was populated mainly by Germans

Hitler began by demanding the return of Danzig and the establishment of German-controlled transport links across the Polish Corridor. Whilst such demands might have seemed reasonable, the occupation of Czechoslovakia convinced Britain and France that they could no longer trust Hitler’s claims to have only peaceful intentions. On 31st March a British-French guarantee was given that Poland would receive their support if attacked.

Britain and France also considered making a grand eastern alliance against Germany to present her with a prospect of a war on two fronts if Poland was attacked. For this to be successful Russia had to be persuaded to join. Unsuccessful attempts were made to achieve this by the British and French during the spring and summer of 1939. Stalin feared he was being drawn into a war with Germany. Therefore, whilst Poland was left with guarantees from Britain and France, neither country could provide immediate assistance if Poland was attacked.

**The Nazi-Soviet Pact, August 1939**

To great international surprise it was announced in late August 1939 that Germany and Russia had agreed a ten-year non-aggression pact. It was known as the Nazi-Soviet or Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. It included secret clauses relating to the future partition of Poland.

This was shocking in the light of the opposing ideologies of fascism and communism and Hitler’s open hatred of and desire to destroy communism and Russia herself. However, for Hitler it would give him the opportunity to deal with Britain and France after taking over Poland and for Stalin it would give him the chance to strengthen his defences and improve his military machine during a war between Germany and Britain and France which he expected to last for many years. Stalin also feared war on two fronts because of the hostility of Japan.

The Pact sealed the fate of Poland. If Hitler invaded now, as he made immediate plans to do, there was nothing Britain and France could do except to wage a general war against Germany. Hitler did not expect Anglo-French opposition to be any more serious than it had been over Czechoslovakia. He also felt stronger as Germany and Italy had become formal allies in the Pact of Steel of May 1939.

**The outbreak of war**

Britain and France declared war on Germany following the German invasion of Poland on 1st September 1939. The immediate cause for the declaration was that Germany had ignored an ultimatum demanding the withdrawal of her armies. It had become clear that Germany was aiming for European domination. Not to have declared war would have been seen as acceptance of this domination.

The British and French declaration of war surprised Hitler. He thought that after the Nazi-Soviet Pact had been agreed the British and French would not be in a position to give effective help to Poland. He also thought, given previous developments – rearmament, the Rhineland, the Anschluss, the Sudetenland -that it would be out of character for Britain and France to go to war over a territory over which Germany had strong claims.

It could be argued that war broke out because of a miscalculation on Hitler’s part, but there seems little doubt war would have broken out sooner or later anyway. After March 1939 British and French patience had run out and war had been seen as inevitable.

**Recommended websites**

**The National Archives**

<http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/education/interwar.htm>

**BBC**

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/history/mwh/ir1/chamberlainandappeasementrev1.shtml>

**Imperial War Museum**

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/history/the-road-to-1939>

**History on the Net.com**

<http://www.historyonthenet.com/WW2/causes.htm>

**Spartacus Educational**

<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/2WW.htm>

**Slideshare**

<http://www.slideshare.net/maggiesalgado/causes-of-the-second-world-war-12594336>