

Why did collective security fail in the 1930s history essay



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The 1930s saw the failure of the League of Nations in terms of Collective Security. Several shortcomings and problems resulted on three major crises that proved the League to be helpless. In the grip of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the major powers of the League (Britain and France) were more inclined to a policy of appeasement.

Basically a more liberal alternative to the Balance of Theory, Collective Security was the idea that nations should group together in condemnation of any aggressor and pursue sanctions against them, whether economical, diplomatic, or military. This idea was enshrined in Articles 10, 11, and 16 of the League's Covenant. There was, however, a major flaw in the League's proposal of Collective Security; none of it was enforceable, nations could choose whether or not comply, therefore making it little more than a code of honour, and since when has honour ever been of any value on politics when it comes to each nation's interests? The aforementioned articles do not specify any particular sanctions or punishments for offending nations, merely stating that the Council will advise upon the course of action to be taken. Following the major events of the 1930s, the League failed spectacularly in upholding international peace and the Second World War broke out in 1939. The League did not meet once during the war and in 1946, its duties were given to the newly formed United Nations.

Aside from the three major crises that occurred (which will be looked into later in this paper) there were some basic problems that prevented Collective Security from ever being a reality. Firstly, the USA preferred an isolationist policy at the time, and was therefore not a member of the League of Nations, and their support and influence was therefore absent from all

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negotiations. Even though the Americans would voice their opinion at times, they took no action. In terms of their military, Britain and France were in a very weak state, and the world knew it. Therefore, their diplomacy helped very little sway as they could not back up their threats with any action; this, plus a lack of Soviet support, meant they could do little but shake their heads at the antics of rogue states such as Germany, Japan, and Italy.

Economically, they were also very weak. The Great Depression had hit both nations hard and their defence spending was down. Furthermore, in British politics, it was the common opinion of politicians that the British public cared little for issues far from home. Who among the public would care for the Manchurians, or Ethiopians, or Czechoslovakians? In the grip of such a terrible depression, it is easy to see why the British politicians would only seek to improve conditions at home. They therefore only declared support for economic sanctions, merely to keep a good image in international politics. It is interesting to note that Winston Churchill, when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer, was a strong opponent of appeasement.

The first major challenge to Collective Security was the Mukden Incident and subsequent Japanese invasion of Manchuria in China. Japan was as hard hit as any other nation by the depression and sought to overcome its economic problems by creating an empire. At the time, the Japanese had control of the Manchurian railway and it was speculated that they had for a long time intended to invade, but simply waited for an excuse to do so. In 1931, the Japanese claimed the railway in Mukden was sabotaged by Chinese nationalists and proceeded to attack the Chinese army in the region (who had recently executed a Japanese spy). The Chinese forces, knowing that the <https://assignbuster.com/why-did-collective-security-fail-in-the-1930s-history-essay/>

Japanese simply wanted an excuse to invade, offered very little resistance. In no time at all, the Japanese had launched a full scale invasion and their tenacious and well trained troops had no problem in overcoming the Chinese army. Within weeks, key locations in Manchuria were already in Japanese hands and by February 1932 the whole of Manchuria was captured. The Japanese controlled state of Manchukuo was set up the same year with the former Chinese emperor running it.

In response to this, China appealed to the League of Nations to do something about the Japanese attack. The League sent a delegation to Manchuria to look into the issue and come to a conclusion about who was to blame. The delegation, however, took until September that year to conclude that the Japanese were to blame and recommend that Manchuria be returned to the Chinese, something the Japanese ignored. In February 1933, a special League Assembly was held to discuss the matter, in which 40 countries agreed that Japan had acted aggressively without justification and that they had to withdraw from Manchuria, which would be returned to China. The Japanese delegate had said at the meeting, due to the fact that China had only recently emerged from a revolution and was still in the midst of a civil war, that China was not a real country. When an agreement could not be reached, Japan informed the League of its intention to withdraw from it. Japan was no longer a member of the League of Nations and in 1933 invaded Jehal, the next Chinese province next to Manchuria.

Economic sanctions were suggested at the League but never put into effect because Japan's main trade partner, the USA, was not a member of the

League. Further, the British had trade interests with Japan and did not want <https://assignbuster.com/why-did-collective-security-fail-in-the-1930s-history-essay/>

to sever trade with them. The League did not even order a halt on arms sales to the Japanese, in fear of a Japanese declaration of war.

The next incident to threaten Collective Security was the Italian invasion of Ethiopia. Ironically, as recently as September 1928, Italy had reaffirmed its Treaty of Friendship with Ethiopia. This was, however, all about to change. The Italians did have some fortified military bases in Ethiopia (without Ethiopian consent it should be added) and because these were never disputed they assumed that the international community recognised it as their right. In December 1934, at a base in Welwel, Ethiopia, an Anglo-Ethiopian boundary commission encountered an Italian fortified base. Once the commission had finished, it withdrew, but left behind its Ethiopian military escort. The escort ended up fighting the Italians. Both parties complained of the other's guilt.

In September 1935, the League of Nations exonerated both parties in this incident. However, due to the delay and the subtlety of the British and French political manoeuvrings, Mussolini perceived the weakness and helplessness of the British and French, and concluded that there were no obstacles in his path. Therefore, on October 3rd, 1935, Italian forces invaded Ethiopia from Eritrea and Italian Somaliland without a declaration of war. Four days later, the League unanimously declared Italy an aggressor but did nothing further. In another display of belligerence, an Italian Baron in Geneva taunted the League of Nations, saying that Italy was ready for war with Europe should they oppose Italy's plans, and that peace would soon follow.

The Ethiopian armies were no match against Italy's modern army with its tanks and aircraft and after seven months of war, Ethiopia was defeated and <https://assignbuster.com/why-did-collective-security-fail-in-the-1930s-history-essay/>

its emperor, Haile Selassie, had fled the country, much to the disgust of the Ethiopian people. During the war, the Italians had even used poison gas against the Ethiopians and the League's proposed armaments embargo was ignored.

In June the following year, Haile Selassie was in Geneva, and gave a speech to the League of Nations. He said that they had to now decide whether they supported Collective Security, or International Lawlessness. This was all of to avail, as Britain and France soon recognised Italy's control of Ethiopia and, also in June, the Italians formed a constitution that joined Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Italian Somaliland into one administrative unit, split into 6 provinces. In response to a failed assassination attempt on the Italian commander in Ethiopia, Graziani, the Italians executed 30, 000 Ethiopians, mostly from the young and educated in society. Italy had extended its empire as the League's members merely dithered and debated among themselves.

The third and final crisis that more or less finished off the League and brought about the end of Collective Security was the Munich Agreement and Germany's subsequent invasion of Eastern Europe.

The nation of Czechoslovakia was formed in 1919 from territory of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. In a typically cack-handed attempt by the Allies at creating a post-WWI nation, the country had around 7. 5million Czechs, 3. 2million Germans, 2. 3million Slovaks, 560, 000 Magyars, and 100, 000 Poles. This multiethnic society had many issues, particularly among the Germans, who resented being ruled by others. The Germans were mainly concentrated in an area called the Sudetenland. The Sudeten Germans

Peoples Party, formed in 1931, had demanded that the region be given to Germany; a demand ignored by the Czech government because it could encourage other ethnicities in Czechoslovakia to demand independence and because the Sudetenland was very rich in natural resources like lignite and coal.

Therefore, in 1938, Adolf Hitler instructed his generals to prepare for the invasion of Czechoslovakia. Although France had signed a defence pact with Czechoslovakia, Hitler was confident that the French would do nothing to interfere in order to avoid war with Germany. The British policy favoured peace above all else because it was simply not in any position to impose any threats on Germany. The might of Britain's armed forces was the Royal Navy, which could not access the landlocked nation of Czechoslovakia and the Royal Air Force was still undergoing a change from biplane to monoplane aircraft and was therefore in no fit state for action, especially against Germany's Luftwaffe, whose might Hitler had been displaying for quite some time.

Therefore, Neville Chamberlain (prime minister of Britain) and Edouard Deladier (president of France) met with Hitler in a place called Bertsgaden, near Munich, to discuss Germany's claim to the Sudetenland. Chamberlain was informed by his military staff that in the first 60 days of fighting alone, despite the capable Czechoslovakian army, over a million Czechoslovakians would be killed by the German bombing alone, necessitating the need for mass graves. The British and French propose that all territory in Czechoslovakia with more than 50% German population should be handed over to Germany. These talks, however, failed, and, at Mussolini's

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suggestion, Hitler calls for a meeting to be held in Munich between Britain, France, Germany, and Italy to discuss the matter again. It is noteworthy that Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union were not invited to these talks, much to the anger of Joseph Stalin. This time, Chamberlain persuades Deladier that they must appease Germany in order to maintain peace, which he agrees on. Without Czechoslovakian consent, the British and French bowed to Hitler's demands and signed the Munich agreement, giving Germany the Sudetenland and making it clear to the Czechoslovakians that, if they objected, they had to face Germany's army alone. This was done on the condition that Germany would make no further territorial claims.

Chamberlain returns to Britain and is hailed as the man who saved Europe from war. The Czechoslovakian frontier guards were ordered to leave their posts; Germany took control of the Sudetenland, and soon violated the agreement by stationing military units in the region.

These three incidents in the 1930s completely undermined the whole concept of Collective Security. Collective Security sought to condemn and punish aggressors, to protect the sovereignty of its members, and maintain peace in general. The League of Nations failed in this respect, the biggest proof of this is the Second World War that followed these events. The British and French merely tried to appease the aggressive states, a policy which only delayed war. Furthermore, the USA maintained its isolationist policy until the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour, when they finally entered the war. The League was powerless to enforce any effective sanctions against offending states, often due to an unwillingness to act on the part of the

British and French, their inability to cooperate with Russia, and America's abstention from taking part.

Whether or not the powers could have enforced the League's decisions is a debateable point. According to Churchill, the Royal Navy was perfectly capable of sinking any Italian ship in the Mediterranean headed for Ethiopia. It could also be argued that Britain could have used its Navy, in agreement with France's more considerable Army, to force Germany to come to terms. Although the Royal Navy could not access Czechoslovakia, it could still have threatened to blockade German ports if Germany wanted to invade. Instead, the British signed a treaty with Hitler allowing Germany to have a navy one third the size of Britain's. The British and French did not prevent the Italians from using the Suez Canal during the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and the fact that they merely threatened sanctions but did not enforce them achieved nothing but to push Italy into an alliance with Nazi Germany.

To top all of this, the Soviets tried to invade Finland in 1939-40. Stalin was worried about the proximity of Leningrad to the Finnish border, which he feared was vulnerable to Nazi artillery fire. When the Soviets attacked, the British and French condemned it, and sent reinforcements to Finland that ousted the Soviets. This seems like the British and French realising, too late, that they had lost the fight for peace. The Second World War began with Germany's violation of the Munich Agreement by invading Poland. Too late the British and French took up arms to fight for peace. Germany already controlled much land beyond its borders, Italy had furthered its imperial ambitions in Africa, and Japan was steadily spreading its empire in Asia and the Pacific.

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Collective Security had therefore failed in all respects. The First World War was called the “ War to End All Wars” and the League of Nations was established in an effort to prevent another global conflict; it failed, another World War was fought, and the League did not meet once during the 6 years of conflict. In 1946, its duties were transferred to the newly created United Nations.

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