2.6 The international response to Italian aggression (1935–1940)

Conceptual understanding

Key concepts
- Consequence
- Change
- Significance

Key questions
- Discuss the reasons for the British and French policy of appeasement.
- Examine the response of the international community to Italian aggression.

Stanley Baldwin, Prime Minister of Britain 1935–37

The League of Nations formally comes into being

1920 January

Japanese invasion of Manchuria: condemned by the League of Nations; weak sanctions are imposed

World Disarmament Conference

1931 September

Franklin D Roosevelt is elected president in the USA

Hitler becomes Chancellor of Germany

1932–34

Italy invades Abyssinia

1932 November

Roosevelt invokes the Neutrality Act, preventing the supply of arms to either country

The Stresa Conference

1933 January

The Council of the League declares Italy to be the aggressor in Abyssinia

Italy invades Abyssinia

1934 April

Limited sanctions are applied

Roosevelt invokes the Neutrality Act, preventing the supply of arms to either country

The League's Assembly votes to impose sanctions

1934 July

The Neutrality Act passed (expires in six months)

The Hoare–Laval Pact

1935 April

The Council of the League declares Italy to be the aggressor in Abyssinia

1936 October

Limited sanctions are applied

The League's Assembly votes to impose sanctions

November

The Council of the League declares Italy to be the aggressor in Abyssinia

December
CHAPTER 2.6: THE INTERNATIONAL RESPONSE TO ITALIAN AGGRESSION (1935–1940)

- The USA passes new Neutrality Acts
- The League ends sanctions on Italy
- Italy and Germany intervene in the Spanish Civil War
- The USA passes a joint resolution outlawing the arms trade in Spain
- Italy withdraws from the League of Nations
- Mussolini now accepts Anschluss
- Hitler invades areas of Czechoslovakia, breaking the Munich Agreement
- Italy declares itself a non-belligerent when Germany invades Poland
- Mussolini declares war on Britain and France
- USA passes the Lend-Lease Act

**1936 January**  The French Popular Front wins the election.

**February**  Italy conquers Abyssinia

**May**  Britain and France set up Non-Intervention Committee

**July**

**August**  Neville Chamberlain becomes Prime Minister of Britain

**1937 January**  In an Italian and British agreement, Britain recognizes Italian Abyssinia

**May**  The Munich Conference: Mussolini, Hitler, Chamberlain and Daladier meet

**September**  Italy invades Albania

**1939 March**

**April**  Mussolini attempts to set up a conference to avoid war

**1 September**  Italy invades Egypt and Greece

**3 September**  Mussolini attempts to set up a conference to avoid war

**1940 June**

**1941 March**
What was the policy of appeasement and why was it pursued by Britain in the 1930s?

Appeasement, in this political and historical context, was a diplomatic policy of making concessions to nations in order to avoid conflict. The policy is most closely associated with Britain’s foreign policy in the late 1930s, in particular the Munich crisis of 1938. Appeasement failed to prevent the outbreak of war and came to be seen as a weak and dishonourable policy. It allowed both Mussolini and Hitler to get away with territorial demands, which encouraged Hitler to ask continuously for more, resulting in the outbreak of war in 1939. However, for most of the inter-war years, appeasement was seen as a positive idea, and as part of a long-standing tradition of trying to settle disputes peacefully.

In Britain, there were many reasons to follow a policy of appeasement in the 1930s:

1  **Public opinion**

The Franchise Act of 1918 had increased the number of voters in Britain from 8 million to 21 million; for the first time, women over the age of 30 were given the vote, and from 1928, this was lowered to the age of 21. This huge increase in the electorate meant that politicians were more likely to take notice of public opinion, which was against war and in favour of collective security.

The horror of the First World War had created a widespread feeling that this should be “the war to end all wars”. This anti-war feeling was seen clearly in February 1933, when the Oxford Union debating society voted that “This House would not fight for King and Country”. The destruction by German bomber aircraft of Guernica in Spain in 1937 showed the vulnerability of London to attack from the air and highlighted the need to prevent another war that would clearly have a devastating effect on civilians on the British mainland. As Stanley Baldwin told the House of Commons in 1932, “I think it is as well … for the man in the street to realise that no power on earth can protect him from being bombed. Whatever people may tell him, the bomber will always get through”. It was widely believed that there would be 150,000 casualties in London in the first week of war.

The British public put faith in the League of Nations to maintain peace through collective security. There was even a League of Nations Union in Britain, which had more than 400,000 supporters in 1935. The Union carried out a “peace ballot” in 1935, which appeared to show that the British public fully supported the League and its principles.

2  **The demands of the dictators seen as justified**

Many British politicians felt that the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh and that Hitler had genuine grievances relating to the First World War. Increasingly, there was a belief that the First World War had been caused by all the powers, not just by Germany and her allies, and thus there was support for the idea of revising the more punitive clauses of the treaty. In particular, Chamberlain believed, mistakenly, that it was possible to do business with Mussolini and Hitler, and to sort out the grievances of these countries rationally and without recourse to war.
In addition, many conservative politicians saw the threat of communism as more dangerous than the threat of fascism.

3 The lack of an alternative policy
Support for appeasement was found in all political parties and there was no clear anti-appeasement party to provide a coherent political alternative. The Labour Party, which was the political party in opposition, supported collective security but did not support rearmament.

4 Economic pressures
There were also economic reasons for following a policy of appeasement. Already weakened severely by the First World War, the Great Depression worsened Britain’s economic situation further still. By the 1930s, Britain was facing competition from other countries that were overtaking its industrial production. It also faced high unemployment: 3 million people were unemployed in the early 1930s. These economic difficulties made it hard to spend money on armaments; no government would be able to maintain support if it cut welfare benefits in order to finance rearmament. It was also feared that rearming too quickly would cause a balance of payments crisis, with too many imports of machinery and raw materials. For these reasons, although rearmament started again in 1932, it was not until 1937 that defence spending increased dramatically.

**The Anti-Appeasers**

Some individuals did speak out against appeasement:

Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden resigned in February 1938 because he disagreed with Chamberlain’s policy of appeasement of Italy.

Winston Churchill called for rearmament to be stepped up and vehemently opposed concessions to Germany (though he did not oppose the appeasement of Mussolini over Abyssinia). He supported the idea of a Grand Alliance of the Anti-Fascist powers.

Duff Cooper was Secretary of State for War (1935–1937) and then First Lord of the Admiralty in Chamberlain’s government until he resigned in protest at the Munich Agreement in September 1938.

You will have seen plenty of David Low’s cartoons in this book. These appeared in the *Evening Standard* newspaper and were consistently critical of appeasement throughout the 1930s. Low was attacked in the right-wing press as a “war-monger” and his cartoons were banned in Germany.
Britain was in a weak military position and, by 1937, with threats from Japan, Italy and Germany, this position was becoming increasingly dangerous. As a result, the British Chiefs of Staff concluded that, until rearmament was further advanced, it should be the main aim of foreign policy to reduce the number of Britain’s enemies. This was reiterated in January 1938 in this statement: “We cannot foresee the time when our defence forces will be strong enough to safeguard our territory, trade and vital interests against Germany, Italy and Japan simultaneously”.

5 Global commitments

Britain had to consider its worldwide commitments alongside its obligations to European countries and the League of Nations. Indeed, most politicians considered British interests to be more global than European. Preservation and defence of the Empire was held to be essential if Britain was to remain a great world power, which was its priority. However, Britain’s imperial commitments were now so vast that they were becoming increasingly difficult to administer and defend.

In addition, the Dominions (the self-governing parts of the British Empire, such as Canada, Australia and New Zealand) made it clear at the 1937 Imperial Conference that they were not prepared to help Britain in another European war.

6 Defence priorities

Worried about the cost of its expenditure, the Treasury was also putting pressure on the Foreign Office. In 1937, the Treasury put forward a report on defence expenditure in which the priorities for defence were to be, in order of importance:

- military preparation sufficient to repulse air attacks
- the preservation of trade routes for the supply of food and raw materials
- the defence of the Empire
- the defence of Britain’s allies.

7 The impact of Neville Chamberlain

Clearly, the financial pressures, the commitments of Empire and the comments from the Chiefs of Staff meant that Chamberlain, when he became Prime Minister in 1937, would have little choice but to follow a policy that looked for conciliation rather than confrontation with Germany and Italy. However, Chamberlain’s own personal views also had an impact. He detested war and was determined to resolve international tension and to use negotiation and diplomacy to bring about a peaceful settlement of Europe. Chamberlain ran foreign policy very much alone, with the aid of his chief adviser, Sir Horace Wilson, but without consulting his Cabinet. He had little faith in the League or in Britain’s allies, France and the USA; he distrusted the Soviet Union, and he believed that Britain should take the lead in negotiating with Hitler. Right up to the moment that war broke out, Chamberlain continued to hope that he could achieve a “general settlement” of Europe to maintain peace.
Why did France align its foreign policy to Britain’s policy of appeasement in the 1930s?

France certainly did not agree with many of Britain’s views regarding Germany and the Treaty of Versailles, and there was no indication in the 1920s that it would follow a policy of appeasement. It faced huge debts after the First World War and, unlike Britain, had suffered economically from the impact of the fighting on its land; about 10% had been laid to waste, which had an impact on industrial and agricultural resources. The huge loss of life, and the resultant trauma to French society, meant that the French population wanted Germany punished and permanently weakened to prevent any future German attack. France had been invaded twice by Germany between 1870 and 1914 and the French wanted to prevent a resurgent Germany at all costs.

When the USA failed first to ratify the Treaty of Versailles and then to join the League of Nations, the French felt abandoned. When Britain also showed some sympathy with the view that Germany had been treated too harshly at Versailles, the French were appalled at this apparent collapse of the Anglo-American guarantee of the post-war settlement. The French subsequently attempted to uphold the terms of the treaty by force when they occupied the Ruhr in 1923. However, the occupation ended in defeat for France and was followed by a period of appeasement under Foreign Minister Aristide Briand; this can be seen in the Dawes Plan of 1924, the Locarno Agreements of 1925 and the evacuation of French troops from the Rhineland in 1930.

In an attempt to strengthen its position, France also tried to find other allies and signed a series of bilateral agreements through the 1920s with Belgium (1920), Poland (1920 and 1925), Czechoslovakia (1924), Romania (1926) and Yugoslavia (1927). Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia had signed a mutual defence agreement in what became known as the “Little Entente”. France supported this alliance.

However, the frequent changes of government and ideological conflicts in France in the 1930s meant that it was unable to take any action against Germany. German reparations ended and, coupled with the impact of the Great Depression, the French economy stagnated. The franc had been overvalued, exports fell and unemployment increased. In 1932, a coalition of socialists and radicals won the general election. Edouard Herriot was initially elected Prime Minister, but due to his failure to redress the economic issues he was forced to resign and was replaced by Edouard Daladier. Daladier did not bring stability, however,
and there were six different Cabinets in less than two years. Economic problems fostered the growth of right-wing leagues, some of whom emulated Mussolini’s Fascists. Right-wing activity galvanized left-wing unity and led to the formation of the Popular Front, an alliance of left-wing parties. In January 1936, the Popular Front won a resounding victory in the general elections under the leadership of Prime Minister Leon Blum. However, Blum’s government was criticized by the right for expensive domestic reforms when they believed France should have been rearming. Blum was also criticized for his attempts to take a firm stance against internal Fascist threats. Daladier returned as Prime Minister in May 1938 and managed to establish some political stability as he moved to the right and supported a huge in arms spending. These continual changes in government meant that there was little continuity in how to deal with Hitler.

In addition, there was a conflict between France’s foreign policy and its military planning. Despite a series of guarantees to the states of Eastern Europe, which would have required France to demonstrate some offensive capability, its military planning in the 1930s was entirely defensive. This was in contrast to its offensive action in the 1920s, and most clearly seen in the building of the Maginot Line, a chain of fortresses along the Franco–German border. Furthermore, France’s air force was ineffectual and its army limited. As a result, the French became increasingly dependent on Britain. When Britain decided on a policy of appeasement in the 1930s France had to follow its strongest ally’s line.

How was the international response to aggression in the 1930s affected by the weaknesses of the League of Nations?

The international response to acts of expansion and aggression in the 1930s should have been dealt with through the mechanism to facilitate collective security: the League of Nations. However, the League had many limitations:

- It lacked the credibility and economic power of its founding nation, the USA.
- Its key organ of power was the Council, which was led by Britain, France, Italy and Japan, with Germany joining in 1926. The latter three countries were “revisionist” powers who wanted to revise the Treaty of Versailles.
- The Soviet Union was not a member until September 1934.
- The League’s structure and organization was inefficient.
- It was impotent in the face of the aggressive military fascist states, and each time it failed to act effectively it lost more authority.

Without the economic and diplomatic power of the USA, it was up to Britain and France to uphold the League’s resolutions and enforce its decisions. However, Britain was inclined to look after its own interests first, while France had little faith in the League’s ability to contain Mussolini’s Italy or Hitler’s Germany.
What was the impact of US foreign policy on the international response to the expansionist powers?

As has been discussed in Chapter 1.3, the USA did not join the League of Nations in 1919 and it pursued a policy of isolationism in the inter-war period. The USA wanted to be free to engage in trade and investment globally and wished to avoid being drawn into conflicts that were not in its own interests. This policy continued during the 1930s and was strengthened by the impact of the Great Depression and by public opinion, which was staunchly anti-war. Memories of the First World War also remained fresh in the minds of Americans. US isolationists advocated a policy of non-involvement in the affairs of both Europe and Asia. In 1935, the USA passed the Neutrality Act designed to keep the USA out of a possible European war by banning the sale of armaments to belligerents.

First question, part a – 3 marks

What, according to AJP Taylor, was the impact of the USA’s policy of isolationism?

What was the impact of Soviet foreign policy on the international response to the expansionist powers?

Western hostility towards the Soviet Union also affected its response to Italian and German aggression. The Western democracies had cut off all diplomatic and economic ties with the Bolshevik government in 1917 and had invaded Russia in an attempt to overthrow the new regime. This failed, but the USSR was not included in the Paris Peace talks and the Russian Bolshevik leader, Vladimir Lenin, had called the League of Nations, on its foundation, “a band of robbers”. Relations remained hostile until the end of the 1920s when some diplomatic links and economic agreements were made. Britain remained particularly concerned with the potential threat from communism and, following a “red scare” in 1927, did not restore diplomatic links until 1930.
A Soviet poster by D. Melnikova, produced in Moscow, in the Soviet Union, June 1930. The text reads “Proletarians of all countries, Unite!”.

First question, part b – 2 marks
What is the message of the artist in this poster?

The Soviet Union under Stalin (from 1929) wanted to build “socialism in one country”, which meant that it would not commit to exporting the revolution until the process was complete in the USSR. Nevertheless, the activities of the Communist International in Europe and Asia alarmed the democracies. Stalin’s foreign policy began to shift away from hostility towards the West when the Soviet Union became threatened by the expansionist policies of Japan in Asia, and by Hitler’s stated aim of acquiring Lebensraum in the East of Europe at the expense of the Soviet Union. Between 1931 and 1932, Stalin signed non-aggression pacts with Afghanistan, Finland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and France. There was a tangible shift in Soviet foreign policy towards the pursuit of a “Popular Front” against fascism. To this end, the Soviet Union joined the League of Nations in 1934 and signed mutual assistance pacts with France and Czechoslovakia in 1935.

However, the aim of forming a Popular Front against fascism failed because Britain and France were following a policy of appeasement. It was clear to the Soviet Union during the Spanish Civil War that Britain in particular feared communism more than fascism. The final catalyst for the Soviet Union to abandon its attempts to work with the British and French in order to contain the fascist aggressors came at the Munich Conference in September 1938. Despite its assistance pact with Czechoslovakia and the territorially strategic importance of that country to the Soviet Union, Stalin was not invited to the Munich Conference.
What was the international response to the Italian invasion of Abyssinia in 1935–36?

Both the French and the British had attempted to keep Mussolini on side as a key guarantor of the post-war settlement, specifically to contain German ambitions to unite with Austria. As previous chapters have described, the three countries had come together to form the Stresa Front in March 1935. At this meeting, the French gave Mussolini the impression that they would tolerate an Italian expansion in East Africa. French Foreign Minister Pierre Laval had suggested that Italy could go ahead and acquire political influence in Abyssinia, as the French interests there were only economic. Although the French had not condoned a military takeover of the country, Mussolini believed at this point that they would not resist.

Britain had been silent on the matter of Abyssinia when Mussolini mentioned his plans during the Stresa Conference. Mussolini hoped this meant Britain would have the same attitude as the French. The Italians were concerned about the potential British response to military action, particularly as the British could threaten to attack the Italian navy.

The British demonstrated that they wanted to appease Italian expansionist plans when Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden went to Rome in June 1935, with a plan that would give Italy the Ogaden region of Abyssinia and compensate Emperor Haile Selassie’s Abyssinia with access to the sea via British Somaliland. The Italians now saw that Britain wanted to accommodate them, and so they rejected the plan. This perception was further reinforced by a report Italy had “acquired” from the British foreign office, stating that Britain would not resist an Italian invasion of Abyssinia.

When Mussolini invaded Abyssinia in October 1935, there was widespread international public outrage and condemnation from the League of Nations. British public opinion was against the invasion and in favour of action by the League. As there was a general election in Britain in November 1935, public opinion at the time was all the more important; a pro-League stance had helped the National government to secure power in November 1935. However, as you will see from the sequence of events below, the League proved ineffective in dealing with the crisis.

Source skills
Source A
Laura Fermi, Jewish-Italian writer and political activist, who emigrated to the USA in 1938 to escape from Mussolini’s Italy, in Mussolini (1966).

In England, in view of the coming elections, the “peace ballot”, and public opinion, the government embraced an all-out policy in favor of the League of Nations and the imposition of economic sanctions on aggressor nations. At the end of September Winston Churchill spoke in London and “tried to convey a warning to Mussolini”, as he recalls in The Gathering Storm: “To cast an army of nearly a quarter-million men, embodying the flower of Italian manhood, upon a barren shore two thousand miles from home, against the goodwill of the whole world and without command of the sea, and then in this position embark upon what may well be a series of campaigns against a people and in regions which no conqueror in four thousand years ever thought it worthwhile to subdue, is to give hostages to fortune unparalleled in all history.”
It is tempting to speculate what effect these words may have had on Mussolini, if he read them, as Churchill believed he did. The chance seems negligible that at this late date, committed as he was to the Ethiopian war by both the fatalistic drive of his own determination and the amount of money he had spent in the undertaking, Mussolini would have allowed this warning to dissuade him. (To an interviewer from the Morning Post, he said that the cost of preparation was already 2 billion lire – 100 million pre-war dollars – and asked “Can you believe that we have spent this sum for nothing?”) …

While taking up a position against the Ethiopian war and for the League’s policies, Great Britain was unofficially assuring France that she would try to water down the sanctions on Italy, if imposed, and connived with France in an embargo on arms to Ethiopia through the control of the port of Djibouti, the only access to Abyssinia from the sea. It is said that Haile Selassie, placing pathetic confidence in traditional British justice, could not understand why it was so difficult to procure the modern arms and equipment he needed and was trying so desperately to buy. But then, during the war, the unofficial embargo was lifted, in part at least.

Source B
A cartoon by David Low, published in the UK newspaper, the Evening Standard, on 24 July 1935.

The text reads “On the throne of justice. See no Abyssinia; Hear no Abyssinia; Speak no Abyssinia.”

First question, part b – 2 marks
What is the message of the cartoonist in Source B?

Second question – 4 marks
With reference to its origin, purpose and content assess the values and limitations of Source A for historians studying the international response to the Abyssinian crisis in 1935–36.
The response of the League, Britain and France

- On 6 December 1935, following the Wal Wal incident (see page 137), Abyssinian Emperor Haile Selassie asked the League of Nations to arbitrate; however the League’s arbitration committee found neither side responsible.

- On 7 January 1935, a Franco–Italian agreement was made. In return for Italian support to contain Hitler, France gave Italy parts of French Somaliland, improved the official status of Italians living in Tunisia and tacitly allowed Mussolini to do as he pleased in Abyssinia.

- On 17 March 1935, following a large build-up of Italian forces in East Africa, Emperor Haile Selassie appealed directly to the League, as a member state, for its support. The Italian mobilization continued and on 11 May Selassie appealed to the League again.

- On 20 May, the League held a special session to discuss the crisis and on 19 June Selassie requested League observers be sent to the region. Talks between officials from Italy and Abyssinia broke down at The Hague.

Despite Anglo–French efforts to appease Mussolini and British attempts via Anthony Eden to find a peaceful resolution, it was clear from the beginning of July that Italy wanted a war of conquest. The British declared an arms embargo on both sides on 25 July, perhaps in response to Mussolini’s assertion that sales of arms to Abyssinia would be seen as “unfriendliness” towards Italy. It also removed its warships from the Mediterranean, an act which enabled Mussolini to have free movement of supplies to East Africa.

At the end of September, Selassie again asked for neutral observers, but on 28 September he also began to mobilize his poorly equipped and outdated army. Without a declaration of war, Italian forces invaded Abyssinia on 3 October.

On 7 October, the League duly found Italy the aggressor and began the process of imposing sanctions; however, this process was slow and the sanctions were limited. They did not embargo key war materials, such as coal, steel and oil, and the sanctions were not carried out by all members of the League. The British government had not wanted to implement harsh sanctions as Britain wanted to revive the Stresa Front and to maintain good relations with Mussolini. However, the British government was also under pressure to uphold the authority of the League.

Nevertheless, Britain decided not to close the Suez Canal, a significant route for Mussolini’s troops and for supplies to East Africa, to Italian shipping. Austria, Hungary and Nazi Germany ignored the sanctions completely. The USA actually increased exports to Italy. The sanctions, therefore, did little to impede the Italian war effort and, as discussed in the previous chapter, they in fact rallied Italian domestic support behind Mussolini.
Even when the Italians used chemical weapons in Abyssinia, the League failed to take further action.

The Hoare–Laval Pact

In their attempt to maintain the Stresa Front against a resurgent Germany, the French and British came up with an appeasing plan to end the conflict and the tension it had caused. In December 1935, French foreign secretary, Pierre Laval and British counterpart, Samuel Hoare drew up the Hoare–Laval Pact, which sought to pacify Mussolini by giving him most of Abyssinia. Selassie would receive access to the sea. However, the plan was leaked in the French press. Public opinion in both Britain and France was outraged by this apparent duplicity and demanded support for the League’s policy. The British and French governments were forced to denounce the pact and sanctions continued. Laval and Hoare resigned.
**Thinking and communication skills**

Read this source. Discuss the key impact of the Hoare–Laval Pact on domestic politics in Britain and France.

Using this source, identify political opposition to appeasing Mussolini that existed in Britain and France.


Early in December Hoare took the plan to Paris. Laval welcomed it. Mussolini, warned by his equally erring experts that the war was going badly, was ready to accept it. The next step was to present it at Geneva; then, with the League’s concurrence, to impose it on the Emperor of Abyssinia – a beautiful example, repeated at Munich, of using the machinery of peace against the victim of aggression. But something went wrong. Hardly had Hoare left Paris on his way to Geneva than the so-called Hoare-Laval plan appeared in the French press. No one knows how this happened. Perhaps Laval doubted whether the National government were solidly behind Hoare and therefore leaked the plan in order to commit Baldwin and the rest beyond redemption. Perhaps Herriot, or some other enemy of Laval’s, revealed the plan in order to ruin it, believing that, if the League were effective against Mussolini, it could then be turned against Hitler. Maybe there was no design at all, merely the incorrigible zest of French journalists …

At any rate the revelation produced an explosion in British public opinion. The high-minded supporters of the league who had helped to return the National government felt cheated and indignant … Baldwin first admitted that the plan had been endorsed by the government; then repudiated both the plan and Sir Samuel Hoare. Eden took Hoare’s place as Foreign Secretary. The Hoare-Laval plan disappeared. Otherwise nothing was changed. The British government were still resolved not to risk war.

The results of the international response to the Abyssinian crisis

The Hoare–Laval pact sealed the fate of the League of Nations in 1935. It had been exposed as a sham. The attention of Britain and France was drawn away from East Africa and closer to home when Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland in March 1936. France was prepared to let Mussolini complete his conquest in return for his support against Hitler, and the French would not support any further action regarding sanctions.

**Source skills**

**Telegram from Haile Selassie to the League of Nations, 6 May 1936.**

We have decided to bring to an end the most unequal, most unjust, most barbarous war of our age, and have chosen the road to exile in order that our people will not be exterminated and in order to consecrate ourselves wholly and in peace to the preservation of our empire’s independence … we now demand that the League of Nations should continue its efforts to secure respect for the covenant, and that it should decide not to recognize territorial extensions, or the exercise of an assumed sovereignty, resulting from the illegal recourse to armed force and to numerous other violations of international agreements.

**First question, part a – 3 marks**

What, according to Haile Selassie, should the League of Nation’s do in response to Italian aggression in Abyssinia?
Selassie fled on 2 May, and the Abyssinian capital, Addis Ababa, fell to Italian forces. However, there was no official surrender by Abyssinia and a guerrilla war continued against the Italians. Selassie made pleas for support from the League and on 30 June, despite the jeering of Italian journalists, he made a powerful speech criticizing the international community for its inaction. He moved for a resolution to deny recognition of the Italian conquest. He concluded with the ominous and prophetic statement, "It is us today. It will be you tomorrow".

Despite Selassie’s impassioned speech, his resolution failed; on 4 July, the League voted to end its sanctions, which were lifted on the 15 July. The new “Italian Empire” was recognized by Japan on 18 November 1936 in return for recognition of its own occupation of Manchuria. In 1938, Britain and France recognized Italian control of Abyssinia, although the USA and USSR refused to recognise the Italian Empire.

Source A

**Article from the UK newspaper, The Guardian, 3 October 1935.**

Mussolini’s long-expected invasion of Abyssinia began at dawn yesterday, with thousands of young Italian infantrymen cheering as they crossed the border from Eritrea and began the heavy slog up the valleys.

Italian bombing planes roared overhead, striking first at the border town of Adowa, scene of Italy’s humiliating defeat at the hands of the Abyssinians in 1896. Two of the bombers were reported to be piloted by Mussolini’s sons, Vittorio, aged 19, and Bruno, aged 18, while a third had his son-in-law, Count Galeazzo Ciano, as pilot.

Tonight the Italian force, under General Emilio de Bono and numbering 100,000 men, including Eritrean soldiers, is reported to be advancing on a 40-mile front and to be within 12 miles of Adowa. Another army, commanded by General Graziani, is mounting a drive north from Italian Somaliland, but is reported to be held up by rain-soaked tracks …

The Abyssinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs has telegraphed the League of Nations in Geneva, denouncing the Italian aggression as a breach of the League Covenant. The Abyssinians claim that the first bombs on Adowa struck a hospital bearing the Red Cross. Mussolini raised the curtain on his African adventure with a speech on Wednesday afternoon from the balcony of his office in the Palazzo Venezia, in Rome. “A solemn hour is about to break in the history of our fatherland,” he said. The wheel of fate had begun to turn and could not be stopped.

In London, the British cabinet held a two-hour meeting on the crisis in the morning, and in the afternoon key ministers and service chiefs were called to Downing Street. It is being stressed that any action by Britain must be coordinated with France. But the French are saying they will not do anything to upset the accord they recently reached with Italy.

Source B

**Speech by Sir Samuel Hoare, British Foreign Secretary, to the League at Geneva, 11 September 1935.**

I do not suppose that in the history of the Assembly there was ever a more difficult moment for a speech … On behalf of the government of the United Kingdom, I can say that they will be second to none in their intention to fulfill within the measure of their capacity, the obligations which the Covenant lays upon them. The League stands, and my country stands with it, for the collective maintenance of the Covenant, especially to all acts of unprovoked aggression.
Without doubt, the international response to the Abyssinian crisis had a profound effect on European diplomacy. It had fatally undermined the League of Nations as a credible body for dealing with aggressor states. It also ended the Stresa Front. Both France and Britain believed after this conflict that appeasement was the only route they could take to avoid a conflict with Hitler’s Germany. Thus the crisis had shifted the balance of power to Germany’s advantage. Mussolini would now move towards a full alliance with Hitler.

Source C
Extract from speech by Haile Selassie to the League of Nations, June 1936.

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 … What real assistance was given to Ethiopia by the fifty-two nations who had declared the Rome Government guilty of breach of the Covenant and had undertaken to prevent the triumph of the aggressor? … I noted with grief, but without surprise that three powers considered their undertakings under the Covenant as absolutely of no value … What, then, in practice, is the meaning of Article 16 of the Covenant and of collective security? … It is collective security: it is the very existence of the League of Nations. It is the value of promises made to small states that their integrity and independence be respected and ensured … it is the principle of the equality of states … In a word, it is international morality that is at stake.

First question, part a – 3 marks
What key criticisms of the League’s response to the Abyssinian Crisis are made in Source C?

Second question – 4 marks
With reference to its origin, purpose and content, assess the values and limitations of Source B for historians studying the international reaction to the Abyssinian crisis.

First question, part b – 2 marks
What is the message of the cartoon?
How did the USA respond to the invasion of Abyssinia?

President Roosevelt sent Mussolini a personal message on 18 August 1935. He stated that the US government and people believed that the failure to arrive at a peaceful settlement in East Africa would be a calamity and would lead to adverse effects for all nations.

However, the United States would not take any direct action, as was made clear in a radio address by Secretary of State Hull on 6 November 1935. In this broadcast, he said it was the USA’s duty to remain aloof from disputes and conflicts with which it had no direct concern.

How did Britain and France respond to the Italian invasion of Albania, 7 April 1939?

Britain, along with France, condemned the Italian invasion of Albania and, as Italy had previously guaranteed the sovereignty of the Balkans, this was a turning point for Chamberlain. He no longer trusted the dictators and now went as far as to guarantee Greek borders with British military support. Churchill had urged a more direct response by sending in the Royal Navy, but Chamberlain did not agree. Mussolini was, however, surprised at the appeasers’ commitment to Greece.
Italian leaders were ignorant of the real British reaction. Despite the comparatively muted protests, the aggressive nature of Italian policy did provoke a response. The foreign policy committee decided on 10 and 11 April to issue a guarantee to Greece, and, under intense French pressure, agreed to extend one to Romania, while making a concerted effort to bring Turkey into an eastern Mediterranean security arrangement. Greece accepted its guarantee, although it refused in the first instance to join in guaranteeing other countries independence. In Turkey, the Inonu government cited constitutional difficulties, and, more seriously, concerns about its own security in the absence of a British guarantee. Nevertheless, on 13 April both Chamberlain and Daladier issued public statements in their respective parliamentary chambers guaranteeing Greece and Romania against aggression. Although the issuing of guarantees would in the end be significantly less than an ironclad, interlocking security system against Axis aggression, it did signal that the patience of the Western democracies with Mussolini’s decision to invade Albania may have brought potential gains in Italy’s strategic situation but at the cost of further alienating the Chamberlain cabinet and furthering the division of Europe into two competing blocks. By the middle of April, British strategic intelligence listed Italy amongst Britain’s likely enemies. British planners also shifted the emphasis in war planning to concentrate the British fleet in the eastern Mediterranean at the expense of the commitment to the Far East, a clear signal that resistance to Axis aggression had assumed a higher priority after Mussolini’s attack.

**Question**

In pairs, and with reference to the source above, discuss the extent to which the invasion of Albania in 1939 marked a turning point in British policy towards Italy.

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**What was the reaction of Britain to Italian expansion in 1940?**

As you have read in Chapter 2.3, when Italy joined the war in June 1940 Mussolini’s forces invaded Egypt and invaded Greece from Albania. The British then counter-attacked Italian forces in North Africa in Operation Compass and pushed them out of Egypt, defeating them at Beda Fomm in Libya in February 1941. The British Navy, which had been feared by the Italian navy (as you have read earlier), had sunk half the Italian fleet in harbour at Taranto on the 11th November, 1940. The British then occupied Crete.

**Communication and thinking skills**

**From Andrew Roberts. The Storm of War: A new History of the Second World War, (2009) page 120–121.**

In mid-September Mussolini, fancying himself a second Caesar, sent [his] Tenth Army to invade Egypt with five divisions along the coast, taking Sidi Barraini. He stopped 75 miles short of the British in Mersa Matruh, while both sides were reinforced. It was a nerve-wracking time for the British in Egypt … On 8th December 1940, Lieutenant-General Richard O’Connor, commander of the Western Desert Force [numbering only 31,000 men, 120 guns and 275 tanks], counter-attacked fiercely against a force four times his size, concentrating on each fortified area in turn. Operation Compass had close support from the Navy and RAF, and, aided by a collapse in Italian morale, by mid-December O’Connor had cleared Egypt of Italians and 38,000 prisoners were taken.

**Question**

In pairs discuss what this source suggests about how the Italians were pushed back in North Africa in 1940.
Therefore, the initial military response by the British led to reversals for the Italians. However, the British were in turn pushed back when German forces arrived. The British evacuated Greece in May 1941 and had been pushed back by German forces to El Alamein in Egypt by June 1942.

**Full document question: The international response to Italian aggression, 1935–36**

**Source A**
*Extract from the Covenant of the League of Nations, 1919.*

Article 16 – Should any member of the League resort to war in disregard of its covenants under Articles 12, 13 or 15, it shall be deemed to have committed an act of war against all other members of the League, which hereby undertake immediately to subject it to the severance of all trade or financial relations, the prohibition of all exchange between their nationals and the nationals of the covenant-breaking state, and the prevention of all financial, commercial or personal business between the nationals of covenant-breaking state and the nationals of any other state, whether a member of the League or not.

It shall be the duty of the Council in such cases to recommend to the several governments concerned what effective military, naval or air force the members of the League shall contribute to the armed forces to be used to protect the covenants of the League.

**Source B**
*A photograph of US protesters, 1936.*

**Source C**
*Sir Samuel Hoare’s resignation speech, delivered in the House of Commons in London, 19 December 1935.*

It was clear ... that Italy would regard the oil embargo as a military sanction or an act involving war against her. Let me make our position quite clear. We had no fear whatever, as a nation, of any Italian threats. If the Italians attacked us ... we should retaliate with full success. What was in our mind was something very different, that an isolated attack of this kind launched upon one Power ... would almost inevitably lead to the dissolution of the League.

... It was in an atmosphere of threatened war that the conversations began, and ... the totality of the member States appeared to be opposed to military action.

... [It] seemed to me that Anglo-French co-operation was essential if there was to be no breach at Geneva. For two days M. Laval and I discussed the basis of a possible negotiation ...

... These proposals are immensely less favourable to Italy than the demand that Mussolini made last summer.

... I believe that unless these facts are faced... either the League will break up, or a most unsatisfactory peace will result from the conflict that is now taking place. It is a choice between the full co-operation of all the member States and the kind of unsatisfactory compromise that was contemplated in the suggestions which M. Laval and I put up.
Source D


The bargain they tentatively struck was immediately leaked in the French press, and reports of the “Hoare-Laval pact” caused an uproar in Britain. The government was forced to repudiate Hoare’s negotiations in Paris, and Hoare himself resigned, to be replaced by Anthony Eden, who was perceived as a strong League supporter. The British government now led the way at Geneva in calling for economic sanctions against Mussolini, and dragged a reluctant French government behind it. But the French would not support oil sanctions, whilst the British were reluctant to agree to the closure of the Suez Canal, both measures which would have caused major problems for the Italian war effort. The French had not abandoned hopes of restoring the Stresa front, and the British did not want to run a serious risk of unleashing a naval war in the Mediterranean – even though British naval commanders there were confident that the outcome would be a British victory. For such a war would threaten vital imperial communications, and Japan would not be slow to exploit the situation to further its own expansionist ambitions in China. So League action was muted, with the result that Italian troops were able to overrun Abyssinia, crush resistance by the use of poison gas amongst other weapons, and proclaim the Italian conquest of a League member state. The League of Nations had suffered its second serious setback in five years, and this time had failed to prevent aggression much nearer to Europe.

Once again, the great powers had shown their inability to work together to resolve serious threats to peace or to protect the interests of weaker League members. These lessons were not lost on Hitler.

First question, part a – 3 marks

In Source A, what key points are made about the League regarding its response to a member state resorting to war?

First question, part b – 2 marks

What is the message of the photograph in Source B?

Second question – 4 marks

With reference to its origin, purpose and content, assess the values and limitations of Source C for historians studying the international response to the Abyssinian crisis.

Third question – 6 marks

Compare and contrast the views expressed in Source C and D regarding the Hoare–Laval Pact.

Fourth question – 9 marks

Using the sources and your own knowledge, examine the impact of the Anglo–French response to the Abyssinian crisis.
References


