

Chapter 8: Europe in Crisis – The Road to World War II

Introduction

The period 1919-1939 was marked by rising tensions, failed peace efforts, and aggressive expansionism by authoritarian states. The League of Nations, created to prevent war, proved weak and ineffective. Hitler's foreign policy of **military rearmament, territorial expansion, and racial ideology** led to the systematic dismantling of the Treaty of Versailles. The policy of **appeasement**, pursued by Britain and France, emboldened Hitler and failed to prevent war. The signing of the **Nazi-Soviet Pact (1939)** and the invasion of **Poland (1 September 1939)** triggered the outbreak of **World War II**.

1. The League of Nations and Its Weaknesses

Origins and Goals

- Established in 1920 after the **Paris Peace Conference**.
- Aimed to maintain world peace, promote disarmament, and resolve disputes.
- Created by US President Woodrow Wilson, but the USA never joined.
- Germany and Russia initially excluded.

Failures of the League

- **Lacked military power** - relied on Britain and France, who were reluctant to act.
- **Could not prevent major conflicts:**
 - **Japanese invasion of Manchuria (1931)** - League condemned Japan but took no action.
 - **Italian invasion of Abyssinia (1935)** - Britain and France refused military intervention.
 - **Germany's withdrawal (1933)** - Hitler ignored League sanctions and pursued rearmament.
- **Replaced by the United Nations (1946).**

2. Attempts at International Cooperation (1924-1933)

Efforts to Improve Relations

- **Dawes Plan (1924):** US loans to Germany helped economic recovery.
- **Locarno Pact (1925):** Germany agreed to respect its borders with France and Belgium.
- **Germany joined the League of Nations (1926).**
- **Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928):** Nations agreed to renounce war as a means of solving disputes.
- **Young Plan (1929):** Reduced German reparations further.

Economic Crisis and the Rise of Extremism

- **Great Depression (1929):** Unemployment and economic collapse increased support for radical parties.
- **Germany's economy collapsed**, leading to the rise of **Hitler and the Nazi Party**.
- **Communism and fascism** gained support across Europe.

3. Hitler's Foreign Policy (1933-1939)

Hitler's Aims

- **Dismantle the Treaty of Versailles.**
- **Expand German territory (Lebensraum)** into Eastern Europe.
- **Unite all ethnic Germans** into a single Reich.
- **Destroy communism and the USSR.**

Early Steps (1933-1936)

- **1933:** Germany left the **League of Nations** and began secret rearmament.
- **1934:** Hitler signed a **Non-Aggression Pact with Poland**, temporarily easing tensions.
- **1935:**
 - **Saarland referendum** - 90% voted to rejoin Germany.
 - **Publicly announced rearmament and the Luftwaffe (air force).**
 - **Anglo-German Naval Agreement** - Britain allowed Germany to expand its navy.
- **1936:** Germany **remilitarised the Rhineland**, violating Versailles. France and Britain took no action.

The Rome-Berlin Axis and Expansion (1936-1938)

- **Spanish Civil War (1936-1939):** Hitler and Mussolini supported Franco's fascists.
- **Rome-Berlin Axis (1936):** Alliance between Hitler and Mussolini.
- **Anti-Comintern Pact (1936):** Germany and Japan allied against communism.
- **Anschluss (March 1938):** Germany annexed Austria without opposition.

The Munich Crisis and Appeasement (1938)

- **Sudetenland Crisis:** Hitler demanded control of the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia.
- **Munich Agreement (29 September 1938):**
 - Britain and France, led by **Neville Chamberlain**, agreed to Hitler's demands.
 - **Czechoslovakia was not consulted.**
 - Chamberlain declared **"peace for our time"**.
- **March 1939:** Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia, breaking his promise.
- **Appeasement had failed.**

4. The Nazi-Soviet Pact (August 1939)

- Signed between Hitler and Stalin on 23 August 1939.
- Agreed to divide Poland and Eastern Europe.
- Allowed Hitler to avoid a war on two fronts.
- Stalin gained time to rebuild the Soviet military.

5. The Outbreak of World War II (1 September 1939)

Invasion of Poland

- Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939.
- Used blitzkrieg (lightning war) tactics.
- Britain and France demanded German withdrawal.
- 3 September 1939: Britain and France declared war on Germany.

Conclusion

- The League of Nations failed to maintain peace.
- Hitler's aggressive expansion and appeasement policies led to war.
- The Nazi-Soviet Pact enabled the invasion of Poland, triggering World War II.

Key Terms

- **Appeasement:** Policy of making concessions to avoid war.
- **Lebensraum:** Hitler's plan for German territorial expansion.
- **Anschluss:** German unification with Austria (1938).
- **Munich Agreement (1938):** Gave Hitler the Sudetenland.
- **Nazi-Soviet Pact (1939):** Non-aggression treaty between Germany and the USSR.
- **Blitzkrieg:** German warfare strategy of rapid attacks.