

# International relations between the First and Second World Wars

## The Versailles Settlement

The Great War (1914–18) had shaken the world to its core. Once it was over, the big question became 'How do we prevent a repetition?' The Versailles Peace Conference attempted to ensure future peace on a basis of punishing Germany by projecting war guilt on it and saddling it with massive reparations, re-drawing borders supposedly in favour of national self-determination, and setting up a League of Nations to enable countries to bring disputes to the international community for arbitration. Very quickly these principles proved inadequate.

In the 1920s, attempts were made to shore up the provisions of the Versailles Settlement. In the 1930s, disruptive powers destroyed or ignored them. The war did not solve 'the German problem' (i.e. how to integrate a newly formed power at the heart of Europe). It only changed its nature. Other key issues arose, notably:

- attempts at disarmament to inhibit future wars
- the emerging challenge of Soviet Russia, which had been excluded from the Versailles conference altogether
- anticolonial struggles and the emergence of non-European powers, notably Japan and China

Keeping Germany under control clashed with ensuring that enforced economic weakness did not drive it into the hands of a new rival – Communist Russia. The Treaty of Rapallo (1922), an agreement between the two outcast nations, Germany and the Soviet Union, was an unwelcome surprise for Britain, France and the USA.

## Propping up Versailles

In the 1920s, a series of treaties tried to normalise Germany's position and alleviate the widespread negative economic consequences of reparations, which helped wreck the German economy and, thereby, impoverish its trading partners as well. Disarmament conferences – the Genoa Conference (1922), the Dawes Plan (1925) to reschedule Germany's imposed debt, and the Treaty of Locarno (1926), which brought reconciliation between Germany and its former enemies to the west – addressed these issues. Germany entered the League of Nations in 1926 and 'the spirit of Locarno' appeared to have prevailed.

## The unravelling of Versailles – Europe

After the game-changing Wall Street Crash (1929), the 'Versailles system' began to collapse, the League of Nations proving unable to stem the growing tide of conflict. Throughout the thirties, the dissatisfied powers sought to restore what they thought were lost rights, prestige, territories and international standing. Mussolini's Italy tried to restore imperial glory by dominating the Mediterranean and invading Abyssinia (today, Ethiopia) in 1936. Hitler's Germany began to assert its right to ethnic territories like the western fringe of Czechoslovakia (the Sudetenland) and even to Austria, both of which it absorbed in 1938 after the Munich Treaty earlier that year. Britain and France were transfixed by contradictory concerns over German resurgence and the growing military power of the Soviet Union, preventing them from making a decisive choice until it was too late.

## The unravelling of Versailles – the Far East

The USA and Britain feared the expansion of Japan – especially towards the Philippines, Hong Kong and Singapore – after Japan attacked Manchuria in 1931. This invasion set off a Chinese–Japanese war, which lasted until the collapse of Japan in 1945, and was fatally intertwined with a Chinese civil war between Nationalists and Communists, which lasted until the Nationalists collapsed in 1949.

**1922**

Genoa Conference of Great Powers fails to solve problems of reparations, dealing with the Soviet Union or multiple border disputes in Europe

**1923**

France occupies the Ruhr to enforce payment of reparations by Germany

**1925**

Locarno Conference and Treaty bring reconciliation between Germany and its former enemies

**1931**

Japan invades Manchuria

**1938**

Treaty of Munich. Britain, reluctantly supported by France, 'appeases' Hitler's Germany and appears to encourage its eastward expansion

**1939**

Nazi–Soviet Pact shocks Britain and France as Stalin attempts to postpone war with Germany

**1922**

**1922**

Rapallo brings Germany and Soviet Union into a loose alliance

**1924**

**1924**

Dawes Plan reschedules Germany's reparations repayments

**1926**

**1928**

**1930**

**1929**

Wall Street Crash

**1932**

**1934**

**1935**

Italy invades its former colony of Abyssinia

**1936**

**1938**

Germany takes over the Sudetenland and Austria

**1938**

**1939**

Invasion of Poland. Second World War begins

**1940**

Japanese imperial troops march into Beijing in August 1937

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