

## International Relations Between the Wars

International relations between World Wars I and II can be divided into three general periods. They are:

1. 1919-23 (a period of tension)
2. 1924-29 (an improvement in international relations)

### 3. 1930-39 (a worsening of relations) Let's

examine each period in closer detail:

#### A Period of Tension (1919–23)

Following the First World War and the harsh conditions imposed on the losers by the treaties drawn up at the Paris Peace Conference, international relations in Europe grew tense.

Both Turkey and Italy defied the League of Nations in the early aftermath of the Great War.

In 1922, Turkey (who had lost Smyrna to Greece under the Treaty of Sevres) rejected the League's settlement and chased the Greeks out of Smyrna. In order to avert a massacre of the British garrison at Chanak, the commander there proposed the Turks a fairer deal. The League eventually replaced the hated Treaty of Sevres with the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

Turkey was the first nation to successfully challenge the decisions made at the Paris Peace Conference (and the message that violence can pay dividends was not lost on other nations).

The problem of German reparations caused great tension between France and Germany. Germany simply could not afford to pay.

Lloyd George attempted to reconcile France and Germany at the Genoa Conference in 1922.

#### The Genoa Conference (1922)

The Genoa Conference was the idea of the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George.

The Germans were threatening to stop paying reparations payments.

The Conference was called in an attempt to:

- Ease the strain in Franco-German relations over reparations.
- Discuss the state of European war debts to the United States.
- Discuss the possible resumption of diplomatic links with Soviet Russia.

Unfortunately the Conference failed.

The French refused to compromise over the question of reparations. The Americans refused to attend.

The Germans and Russians withdrew and signed a mutual agreement at Rapallo (1922).

**NOTE:** The Russians, who were exhausted economically during the Civil War of 1918–21, were anxious to re-establish diplomatic and trade links with the West. Following the Treaty of Rapallo, schools were set up in Russia to train German troops in the use of forbidden weaponry (heavy artillery, tanks, aeroplanes, poisonous gas, etc.).

When the amount to be paid by Germany in reparations became fixed at £6,600 million in 1921, the German economy began to suffer.

The knowledge that hundreds of millions of pounds worth of German wealth would be sucked out of the country for many years ahead undermined the German currency.

The German Mark, which had steadily been losing value against other currencies since 1914, slid into an even steeper decline following the announcement of the amount of reparations to be paid.

For example, there were 4.2 marks to one US dollar in 1914, and 18,000 marks to one US dollar in January 1923.

As the mark dropped in value, the Germans were unable to meet the foreign equivalents in reparations payments. The German government printed more and more money to help meet their debts.

This, of course, fuelled inflation even more.

When the Germans could not pay their reparations in January 1923, the French occupied the German Ruhr (her industrial heartland) and took the goods for themselves.

In November 1923, there were 4,200,000,000,000 (4.2 billion, or  $4.2 \times 10^{12}$ ) marks to one US dollar.

As paper money dropped in value, the Weimar government had 300 paper-mills and 2,000 printing works working 24 hour shifts in order to supply their needs.

The French occupation of the Ruhr was followed by strikes, riots and the sabotage of trains carrying coal to France. The French replied with arrests and executions.

A position of deadlock had been reached; the Germans could not pay and the French would not leave German soil until they were sure they would get their money.

It was in order to break this deadlock that the Dawes Plan was drawn up in London in 1924. The Dawes Plan allowed Germany to pay annually only what she could reasonably afford.

### The Washington Conferences (1921–2)

The Washington Conferences were an attempt to improve relations between the USA and Japan.

The USA became increasingly worried by growing Japanese power in the Far-East and her influence in China.

During the First World War Japan had seized Kiaochow and all the German island colonies in the Pacific.

Japan agreed at Washington to:

- Limit the size of her navy to  $\frac{3}{5}$  of the size of the British and American navies.
- Withdraw from Kiaochow and the Shantung province of China (which she had occupied since 1914).

In return, Japan:

- Was allowed to keep the former German Pacific islands as mandates.
- Received the promise of the western powers not to build any new naval bases within striking distance of

Japan. In addition, the USA, Japan, Britain and France agreed to:

- Respect the neutrality of China.
- Respect each others possessions in the Far East.

At the time, the agreements were considered to be a great success, and relations between the USA and Japan were improved.

In reality, though, Japan soon became the supreme power in the Far East.

She had the world's third largest navy (which she could concentrate in the Far East).

Although Britain and America had larger navies, they were spread far more widely around the world.

The Japanese build-up of power was to have dire consequences for China in the 1930s.

Japan invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria in 1931 and later China herself (in 1937).

### The Tensions Ease under Stresemann & Briand (1924–29)

The period 1924–29 saw a general improvement in the international atmosphere in Europe.

It was brought about partly by changes in political leadership; particularly by Edouard Herriot and Aristide Briand in France and Gustav Stresemann in Germany.

Ramsay MacDonald, the new British Prime Minister, was also keen for reconciliation.

It was MacDonald, Herriot and Stresemann who attended the Conference in London in 1924 at which the Dawes Plan was worked out.

### The Locarno Treaties (1925)

The Locarno treaties were a number of different agreements involving Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The Treaties appeared to herald the dawn of peaceful relations in Europe.

Germany, France, and Belgium agreed to stay within the confines of their own boundaries, and to respect those of each other.

They were given the added security that if one of them broke this agreement, Britain and Italy would aid the nation being attacked.

Germany also signed agreements with Poland and Czechoslovakia promising arbitration over possible future disputes (but Germany refused to guarantee her frontiers with Poland and

Czechoslovakia). France agreed to help Poland and Czechoslovakia in the event of a German attack.

The Locarno treaties were greeted with great enthusiasm in Europe as they seemed to guarantee peace. Locarno had a central weakness though:

No guarantees were given by either Britain or Germany concerning the eastern frontiers of Germany with Poland or Czechoslovakia.

Britain gave the impression that she might not act if Germany attacked Poland or Czechoslovakia; an impression that was not lost on Hitler in 1938–9.

For the time being though, everything looked rosy in the European garden.

The Locarno Treaties appeared to offer a real prospect for peace and the German and French leaders Stresemann and

Briand (French Foreign Minister from 1925–32) met regularly on friendly terms.

German industry had recovered under the provisions of the Dawes Plan and France was receiving her reparations payments.

Germany was admitted to the League of Nations in 1926 and Europe appeared to be on a more peaceful footing.

This new-found friendliness led to further peace-keeping moves. The 'spirit of Locarno' was behind the Kellogg–Briand Pact of 1928.

### The Kellogg-Briand Pact (1928)

The Kellogg-Briand Pact originated from the mind of the French Foreign Minister Briand.

Briand proposed that France and the United States should each renounce war as an instrument of national policy. Frank B. Kellogg, the American Secretary of State, proposed that the 'whole world' should be involved.

Eventually, 65 different nations signed the Pact.

However, the Pact made no mention of sanctions against any nation which broke its pledge. It relied solely on the goodwill of the nations involved.

Japan, for example, signed the Pact, but it did not prevent her from invading Manchuria just three years later (in 1931).

From then on, the World slipped further and further towards global conflict.

### The Decade of German, Italian & Japanese Aggression (1930–39)

The German recovery of the mid-1920s ended with the Wall Street Crash of October 1929 and the World economic depression which followed in its wake.

In order to combat depression, America called in its short-term loans (most of which had gone to prop-up German industry).

As a result, German industry collapsed.

World export markets shrank as recession set in, and unemployment became a feature of all European industrial economies based on export trade.

A massive rise in German unemployment allowed the Nazi Party to gain votes between 1930–33. There were 6 million unemployed in Germany in 1933.

Hitler blamed Germany's ills on the 'November criminals' who had signed the 'diktat' of Versailles.

In January 1933, Hitler came to power as the leader of the largest party in the German Reichstag. Within months, Hitler had created a one-party totalitarian state.

In 1933, Hitler withdrew Germany from the League of Nations.

From 1935 onwards, Hitler openly defied the Treaty of Versailles by announcing German rearmament.

As we will see later (in great detail) Hitler adopted an aggressive militaristic foreign policy which eventually led to World War II in 1939.

Italy and Japan — who became Germany's natural allies in the combat of international Marxist communism — also pursued aggressive foreign policies.

Fascist Italy invaded Abyssinia in 1935 (and from then on drew closer and closer to Nazi Germany and moved further away from Britain and France).

Japan — who sought an economic empire in the east to combat depression — invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria in 1931 and China herself in 1937.

The Japanese then began to cast hungry eyes on the British, French and Dutch colonies in the Far East.

These colonies were rich in raw materials (oil, rubber and tin); and from 1939 their owners were too involved in the war in Europe to be able to defend them properly.

In 1941, Japan occupied French Indo China (where they set up military bases).

The resulting American oil embargo, placed on Japan in order to combat Japanese aggression in the east, led the

Japanese to attack the American Pacific fleet at Pearl Harbour, in Hawaii, on 7<sup>th</sup> December 1941. The World was now engulfed in a global conflict of gigantic and terrifying proportions.