Chapter 4

International relations, 1919–33

SUMMARY OF EVENTS

International relations between the two world wars fall into two distinct phases, with the division at January 1933, the fateful month in which Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany. Before that, there seemed reasonable hope that world peace could be maintained, in spite of the failure of the League of Nations to curb Japanese aggression in Manchuria. Once Hitler was firmly in control, there was little chance of preventing a war of some sort, either limited or full-scale, depending on one's interpretation of Hitler's intentions (see Section 5.3). The first phase can be divided roughly into three:

- 1919–23
- 1923–9
- 1930–3

(a) 1919 to 1923

In the aftermath of the First World War, relations were disturbed by problems arising from the peace settlement, while the newborn League of Nations struggled to sort things out.

- Both Turkey and Italy were dissatisfied with their treatment; Turkey was prepared to defy the settlement (see Section 2.10). The Italians, soon to come under the rule of Mussolini (1922), showed their resentment first by the seizure of Fiume, which had been awarded to Yugoslavia, and then in the Corfu Incident (see Section 3.4(d); later, Italian aggression was turned against Abyssinia (1935).
- The problem of German reparations and whether or not she could afford to pay caused strained relations between Britain and France, because of their different attitudes towards German recovery. France wanted a weak Germany; Britain wanted an economically strong Germany which would be able to buy British exports.
- An attempt by Lloyd George to reconcile France and Germany at the 1922 Genoa Conference failed miserably.
- Relations deteriorated still further in 1923 when French troops occupied the Ruhr (an important German industrial region) in an attempt to seize in goods what the Germans were refusing to pay in cash. This succeeded only in bringing about the collapse of the German currency.
- Meanwhile the USA, while choosing to remain politically isolated, exercised considerable economic influence on Europe by, among other things, insisting on full payment of European war debts.

- Russia, now under Bolshevik (Communist) rule, was viewed with suspicion by the western countries, several of which, along with Japan, intervened against the Bolsheviks in the civil war which ravaged Russia during 1918–20.
- The new states which came into existence as a result of the war and the peace settlement – these included Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary and Poland – all had serious problems and were divided among themselves. These problems and divisions had important effects on international relations.

(b) 1924 to 1929

There was a general improvement in the international atmosphere, caused partly by changes in political leadership. In France, Edouard Herriot and Aristide Briand, in Germany Gustav Stresemann, and in Britain James Ramsay MacDonald, came to power, and all were keen to improve relations. The result was *the Dawes Plan*, worked out in 1924 with American help, which eased the situation regarding German reparations; 1925 saw the signing of *the Locarno Treaties*, which guaranteed the frontiers in western Europe fixed at Versailles: this seemed to remove French suspicions of German intentions. Germany was allowed to join the League in 1926 and two years later, 65 nations signed *the Kellogg–Briand Pact*, renouncing war. The 1929 *Young Plan* reduced German reparations to a more manageable figure; all seemed set fair for a peaceful future.

(c) 1930 to 1933

Towards the end of 1929 the world began to run into economic difficulties, which contributed towards a deterioration in international relations. It was partly for economic reasons that Japanese troops invaded Manchuria in 1931; mass unemployment in Germany was important in enabling Hitler to come to power. In this unpromising climate, the World Disarmament Conference met in 1932, only to break up in failure after the German delegates walked out (1933). With such a complex period, it will be best to treat the various themes separately.

4.1 WHAT ATTEMPTS WERE MADE TO IMPROVE INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND HOW SUCCESSFUL WERE THEY?

(a) The League of Nations

The League played an important role, settling a number of international disputes and problems (see Chapter 3). However, its authority tended to be weakened by the fact that many states seemed to prefer signing agreements independently of the League, which suggests that they were not exactly brimming with confidence at the League's prospects. Nor were they prepared to commit themselves to providing military support in order to curb any aggressor.

(b) The Washington Conferences (1921–2)

The purpose of these meetings was to try to improve relations between the USA and Japan. The USA was increasingly suspicious of growing Japanese power in the Far East, and of Japanese influence in China, especially bearing in mind that during the First World War, Japan had seized Kiaochow and all the German islands in the Pacific.

- To prevent a naval building race, it was agreed that the Japanese navy would be limited to three-fifths the size of the American and British navies.
- Japan agreed to withdraw from Kiaochow and the Shantung province of China, which she had occupied since 1914.
- In return she was allowed to keep the former German Pacific islands as mandates.
- The western powers promised not to build any more naval bases within striking distance of Japan.
- The USA, Japan, Britain and France agreed to guarantee the neutrality of China and to respect each other's possessions in the Far East.

At the time, the agreements were regarded as a great success, and relations between the powers involved improved. In reality, however, Japan was left supreme in the Far East, possessor of the world's third largest navy, which she could concentrate in the Pacific. On the other hand, the navies of Britain and the USA, though larger, were spread more widely. This was to have unfortunate consequences for China in the 1930s when the USA refused to become involved in checking Japanese aggression.

(c) The Genoa Conference (1922)

This was the brainchild of the British prime minister Lloyd George; he hoped it would solve the pressing problems of Franco-German hostility (the Germans were threatening to stop paying reparations), European war debts to the USA and the need to resume proper diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia. Unfortunately the conference failed: the French refused all compromise and insisted on full reparations payments; the Americans refused even to attend, and the Russians and Germans withdrew, moved to Rapallo, a resort about 20 miles from Genoa, and signed a mutual agreement there (see Section 4.3(b)). When, the following year, the Germans refused to pay the amount due, French troops occupied the Ruhr, and deadlock quickly developed when the Germans responded with a campaign of passive resistance (see Section 14.1(c) for full details).

(d) The Dawes Plan

Worked out at a conference in London in 1924, this was an attempt to break the general deadlock. The three newcomers to international politics, MacDonald, Herriot and Stresemann (German Foreign Minister 1924–9), were eager for reconciliation; the Americans were persuaded to take part, and the conference was chaired for part of the time by the American representative, General Dawes. No reduction was made in the total amount that the Germans were expected to pay, but it was agreed that they should pay annually *only what they could reasonably afford until they became more prosperous*. A foreign loan of 800 million gold marks, mostly from the USA, was to be made to Germany. The French, now assured of at least some reparations from Germany, agreed *to withdraw their troops from the Ruhr*. The plan was successful: the German economy began to recover on the basis of the American loans, and international tensions gradually relaxed, preparing the way for the next agreements.

(e) The Locarno Treaties (1925)

These were a number of different agreements involving Germany, France, Britain, Italy, Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The most important one was that *Germany*, *France*

and Belgium promised to respect their joint frontiers; if one of the three broke the agreement, Britain and Italy would assist the state which was being attacked. Germany signed agreements with Poland and Czechoslovakia providing for arbitration over possible disputes, but Germany would not guarantee her frontiers with Poland and Czechoslovakia. It was also agreed that France would help Poland and Czechoslovakia if Germany attacked them. The agreements were greeted with wild enthusiasm all over Europe, and the reconciliation between France and Germany was referred to as the 'Locarno honeymoon'. It was regarded as Stresemann's greatest success to date. Later, historians were not so enthusiastic about Locarno; there was one glaring omission from the agreements – no guarantees were given by Germany or Britain about *Germany's eastern frontiers with Poland and Czechoslovakia*, the very areas where trouble was most likely to arise. By ignoring this problem, the British gave the impression that they might not act if Germany attacked Poland or Czechoslovakia. For the time being though, as the world enjoyed a period of great economic prosperity, such uneasy thoughts were pushed into the background and Germany was allowed to enter the League in 1926 with a seat on the Permanent Council. Stresemann and Briand (French Foreign Minister 1925–32) met regularly and had friendly discussions; often Austen Chamberlain (British Foreign Minister 1924–9) joined them. The three of them were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In September 1926 Stresemann and Briand reached agreement on the withdrawal of French troops from the Rhineland. This 'Locarno spirit' culminated in the next piece of paper-signing.

(f) The Kellogg–Briand Pact (1928)

This was originally Briand's idea; he proposed that France and the USA should sign a pact renouncing war. Frank B. Kellogg (American Secretary of State) proposed that the whole world should be involved; eventually 65 states signed, agreeing *to renounce war as an instrument of national policy*. This sounded impressive but was completely useless because no mention was made of sanctions against any state which broke its pledge. Japan signed the Pact, but this did not prevent her from waging war against China only three years later.

(g) The Young Plan (1929)

The aim of this new initiative was to settle the remaining problem of reparations – the Dawes Plan had left the total amount payable uncertain. In the improved atmosphere, the French were willing to compromise, and a committee chaired by an American banker, Owen Young, decided to reduce reparations from £6600 million to £2000 million, to be paid on a graded scale over the next 59 years. This was the figure that Keynes had urged at Versailles, and its acceptance ten years later was an admission of error by the Allies. The plan was welcomed by many in Germany, but the Nazi party campaigned against accepting it, because they thought it offered Germany far too little. They wanted a much quicker and a much more radical revision of the peace settlement. Even before there was time to put the Young Plan into operation, a series of events following in rapid succession destroyed the fragile harmony of Locarno:

1 First came the death of Stresemann (October 1929), reportedly from overwork at the age of only 51. Tragically this removed one of the outstanding 'men of Locarno', a German leader who aimed at peaceful change in Europe and hoped that his country's economic recovery would be successful enough to prevent the extremists of both right and left from gaining power in Germany.

2 The Wall Street Crash on the American stock exchange in the same month soon developed into a worldwide economic crisis – the Great Depression, and by 1932 there were over six million people unemployed in Germany. Hope was kept alive by *the Lausanne Conference* (1932), at which Britain and France released Germany from most of the remaining reparations payments. However, in January 1933 Hitler became German Chancellor, and after that, international tension mounted.

(h) The World Disarmament Conference (1932–3)

Although all member states of the League of Nations had undertaken to reduce armaments when they accepted the Covenant, only Germany had made any moves towards disarmament, as Stresemann regularly pointed out. In fact the rest seem to have increased their arms expenditure – between 1925 and 1933 world expenditure on arms rose from $3.5 billion to around $5 billion. The World Disarmament Conference met in Geneva to try and work out a formula for scaling down armaments. But if no progress could be made during the Locarno honeymoon, there was little chance of any in the disturbed atmosphere of the 1930s. The British said they needed more armaments to protect their empire. The French, alarmed by the rapid increase in support for the Nazis in Germany, refused either to disarm or to allow Germany equality of armaments with them. Hitler, knowing that Britain and Italy sympathized with Germany, withdrew from the conference (October 1933), which was doomed from that moment. A week later Germany also withdrew from the League.

In retrospect, it can be seen that the statesmen of the world had only limited success in improving international relations. Even the 'Locarno spirit' proved an illusion, because so much depended on economic prosperity. When this evaporated, all the old hostilities and suspicions surfaced again, and authoritarian regimes came to power, which were prepared to risk aggression.

4.2 HOW DID FRANCE TRY TO DEAL WITH THE PROBLEM OF GERMANY BETWEEN 1919 AND 1933?

As soon as the First World War ended, the French, after all they had suffered in two German invasions in less than 50 years, wanted to make sure that the Germans never again violated the sacred soil of France; this remained the major concern of French foreign policy throughout the inter-war years. At different times, depending on who was in charge of foreign affairs, the French tried different methods of dealing with the problem:

- trying to keep Germany economically and militarily weak;
- signing alliances with other states to isolate Germany, and working for a strong League of Nations;
- extending the hand of reconciliation and friendship.

In the end, all three tactics failed.

(a) Trying to keep Germany weak

1 Insistence on a harsh peace settlement

At the Paris peace conference the French premier, Clemenceau, insisted on a harsh settlement.

- In order to strengthen French security, the German army was to number no more than 100 000 men and there were to be severe limitations on armaments (see Section 2.8(a)).
- The German Rhineland was to be demilitarized to a distance of 50 kilometres east of the river.
- France was to have the use of the area known as the Saar, for 15 years.

Britain and the USA promised to help France if Germany attacked again. Although many French people were disappointed (Foch wanted France to be given the whole of the German Rhineland west of the river, but they were only allowed to occupy it for 15 years), it looked at first as though security was guaranteed. Unfortunately French satisfaction was short-lived: the Americans were afraid that membership of the League might involve them in another war, and preferred a policy of isolation. Consequently they rejected the entire peace settlement (March 1920) and abandoned their guarantees of assistance. The British used this as an excuse to cancel their promises, and the French understandably felt betrayed.

2 *Clemenceau demanded that the Germans should pay reparations*

The figure to be paid for reparations (money to help repair damage) was fixed in 1921 at £6600 million. It was thought that the strain of paying this huge amount would keep Germany economically weak for the next 66 years – the period over which reparations were to be paid in annual instalments – and consequently another German attack on France would be less likely. However, financial troubles in Germany soon caused the government to fall behind with its payments. The French, who claimed to need the cash from reparations to balance their budget and pay their own debts to the USA, became desperate.

3 Attempts to force the Germans to pay

The next prime minister, the anti-German Raymond Poincare, decided that *drastic methods were needed to force the Germans to pay* and to weaken their powers of revival. In January 1923, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr (the important German industrial area which includes the cities of Essen and Dusseldorf). The Germans replied with passive resistance, strikes and sabotage. A number of nasty incidents between troops and civilians resulted in the deaths of over a hundred people.

Although the French managed to seize goods worth about £40 million, the whole episode caused galloping inflation and the collapse of the German mark, which by November 1923 was completely valueless. It also revealed the basic difference between the French and British attitudes towards Germany: while France adopted a hard line and wanted Germany completely crippled, Britain now saw moderation and reconciliation as the best security; she believed that an economically healthy Germany would be good for the stability of Europe (as well as for British exports). Consequently Britain strongly disapproved of the Ruhr occupation and sympathized with Germany.

(b) A network of alliances and a strong League

At the same time, *the French tried to increase their security by building up a network of alliances*, first with Poland (1921) and later with Czechoslovakia (1924), Romania (1926) and Yugoslavia (1927). This network, known as the 'Little Entente', though impressive on paper, did not amount to much because the states involved were comparatively weak. What the French needed was a renewal of the old alliance with Russia, which had served them well during the First World War; but this seemed out of the question now that Russia had become communist.

The French worked for a strong League of Nations, with the victorious powers acting as a military police force, compelling aggressive powers to behave themselves. However, in the end it was the much vaguer Wilson version of the League that was adopted. French disappointment was bitter when Britain took the lead in rejecting the Geneva Protocol, which might have strengthened the League (see Section 3.4(e)). Clearly there was no point in expecting much guarantee of security from that direction.

(c) Compromise and reconciliation

By the summer of 1924, when the failure of Poincare's Ruhr occupation was obvious, the new premier, Herriot, *was prepared to accept a compromise solution* to the reparations problem; this led to the Dawes Plan (see Section 4.1).

During the Briand era (he was Foreign Minister in 11 successive governments between 1925 and 1932), *the French approach to the German problem was one of reconciliation*. Briand persevered with great skill to build up genuinely good relations with Germany, as well as to improve relations with Britain and strengthen the League. Fortunately Stresemann, who was in charge of German foreign policy from November 1923 until 1929, believed that the best way to foster German recovery was by co-operation with Britain and France. The result was the Locarno Treaties, the Kellogg–Briand Pact, the Young Plan and the cancellation of most of the remaining reparations payments (see previous section). There is some debate among historians about how genuine this apparent reconciliation between France and Germany really was. A. J. P. Taylor suggested that though Briand and Stresemann were sincere, 'they did not carry their peoples with them'; nationalist feeling in the two countries was so strong that both men were limited in the concessions they could offer. The fact that Stresemann was secretly determined to get the frontier with Poland redrawn to Germany's advantage would have caused friction later, since Poland was France's ally. He was equally determined to work for union with Austria and a revision of the Versailles terms.

(d) A tougher attitude towards Germany

The death of Stresemann in October 1929, the world economic crisis and the growth of support in Germany for the Nazis, alarmed the French, and made them adopt a tougher attitude towards Germany. When, in 1931, the Germans proposed an Austro-German customs union to ease the economic crisis, the French insisted that the matter be referred to the International Court of Justice at the Hague, on the grounds that it was a violation of the Versailles Treaty. Though a customs union made economic sense, the court ruled against it, and the plan was dropped. At the World Disarmament Conference (1932–3) relations worsened (see Section 4.1), and when Hitler took Germany out of the Conference and the League, all Briand's work was ruined. The German problem was as far from being solved as ever.

4.3 HOW DID RELATIONS BETWEEN THE USSR AND BRITAIN, GERMANY AND FRANCE DEVELOP BETWEEN 1919 AND 1933?

For the first three years after the Bolsheviks came to power in Russia (November 1917), relations between the new government and the western countries deteriorated to the point of open war. This was mainly because the Bolsheviks tried to spread the revolution further, especially in Germany. As early as December 1917, they began to pour floods of

propaganda into Germany in an attempt to turn the masses against their capitalist masters. Lenin called together representatives from communist parties all over the world to a conference in Moscow in March 1919. It was known as the Third International, or Comintern. Its aim was to bring the world's communists under Russian leadership and show them how to organize strikes and uprisings. Karl Radek, one of the Russian Bolshevik leaders, went secretly to Berlin to plan the revolution, while other agents did the same in other countries. Zinoviev, the chairman of the Comintern, confidently predicted that 'in a year the whole of Europe will be Communist'.

This sort of activity did not endear the communists to the governments of countries like Britain, France, the USA, Czechoslovakia and Japan. These states tried rather half-heartedly to destroy the Bolsheviks by intervening in the Russian civil war to help the other side (known as the Whites) (see Section 16.3(c)). The Russians were not invited to the Versailles Conference in 1919. By the middle of 1920, however, circumstances were gradually changing: the countries which had interfered in Russia had admitted failure and withdrawn their troops; communist revolutions in Germany and Hungary had failed; and Russia was too exhausted by the civil war to think about stirring up any more revolutions for the time being. At the Third Comintern Congress, in June 1921, Lenin acknowledged that Russia needed peaceful coexistence and co-operation in the form of trade with, and investment from, the capitalist world. The way was open for communications to be re-established.

(a) The USSR and Britain

Relations blew hot and cold according to which government was in power in Britain. The two Labour governments (1924 and 1929–31) were much more sympathetic to Russia than the others.

1 After the failure to overthrow the communists, Lloyd George (British prime minister 1916–22) was prepared for reconciliation. This corresponded with Lenin's desire for improved relations with the west so that Russia could attract foreign trade and capital. The result was *an Anglo-Russian trade treaty* (March 1921), which was important for Russia, not only commercially, but also because Britain was one of the first states to acknowledge the existence of the Bolshevik government; it was to lead to similar agreements with other countries and to full political recognition.

   The new rapprochement (drawing together) was soon shaken, however, when at the Genoa conference (1922), *Lloyd George suggested that the Bolsheviks should pay war debts* incurred by the tsarist regime. The Russians were offended; they left the conference and signed the separate Treaty of Rapallo with the Germans. This alarmed Britain and France, who could see no good coming from what Lloyd George called 'this fierce friendship' between the two 'outcast' nations of Europe.

2 Relations improved briefly in 1924 when MacDonald and the new Labour government gave *full diplomatic recognition to the communists*. A new trade treaty was signed and a British loan to Russia was proposed. However, this was unpopular with British Conservatives and Liberals who soon brought MacDonald's government down.

3 *Under the Conservatives (1924–9), relations with Russia worsened.* British Conservatives had no love for the communists, and there was evidence that Russian propaganda was encouraging the Indian demands for independence. Police raided the British Communist Party headquarters in London (1925) and the premises of Arcos, a soviet trading organization based in London (1927), and claimed to have

found evidence of Russians plotting with British communists to overthrow the system. The government expelled the mission and broke off diplomatic relations with the Russians, who replied by arresting some British residents in Moscow.

4 *Matters took a turn for the better in 1929* when Labour, encouraged by the new pro-western Foreign Minister, Maxim Litvinov, resumed diplomatic relations with Russia and signed another trade agreement the following year. But the improvement was only short-lived.

5 The Conservative-dominated National government, which came to power in 1931, *cancelled the trade agreement* (1932), and in retaliation the Russians arrested four Metropolitan-Vickers engineers working in Moscow. They were tried and given sentences ranging from two to three years for 'spying and wrecking'. However, when Britain placed an embargo on imports from Russia, Stalin released them (June 1933). By this time Stalin was becoming nervous about the possible threat from Hitler, and was therefore prepared to take pains to improve relations with Britain.

(b) The USSR and Germany

The USSR's relations with Germany were more consistent and more friendly than with Britain. This was because the Germans saw advantages to be gained from exploiting friendship with the USSR, and because the Bolsheviks were anxious to have stable relations with at least one capitalist power.

1 *A trade treaty was signed (May 1921)*, followed by the granting of Russian trade and mineral concessions to some German industrialists.

2 *The Rapallo Treaty, signed on Easter Sunday 1922* after both Germany and Russia had withdrawn from the Genoa conference, was an important step forward:

- Full diplomatic relations were resumed and reparations claims between the two states cancelled.
- Both could look forward to advantages from the new friendship: they could co-operate to keep Poland weak, which was in both their interests.
- The USSR had Germany as a buffer against any future attack from the west.
- The Germans were allowed to build factories in Russia for the manufacture of aeroplanes and ammunition, enabling them to get round the Versailles disarmament terms; German officers trained in Russia in the use of the new forbidden weapons.
- In return, the Russians would supply Germany with grain.

3 *The Treaty of Berlin (1926)* renewed the Rapallo agreement for a further five years; it was understood that Germany would remain neutral if Russia were to be attacked by another power, and neither would use economic sanctions against the other.

4 *About 1930, relations began to cool* as some Russians expressed concern at the growing power of Germany; the German attempt to form a customs union with Austria in 1931 was taken as an ominous sign of increasing German nationalism. Russian concern changed to alarm at the growth of the Nazi party, which was strongly anti-communist. Though Stalin and Litvinov tried to continue the friendship with Germany, they also began approaches to Poland, France and Britain. In January 1934, Hitler abruptly ended Germany's special relationship with the Soviets by signing a non-aggression pact with Poland (see Section 5.5(b)).

(c) The USSR and France

The Bolshevik takeover in 1917 was a serious blow for France, because Russia had been an important ally whom she relied on to keep Germany in check. Now her former ally was calling for revolution in all capitalist states, and the French regarded the Bolsheviks as a menace to be destroyed as soon as possible. The French sent troops to help the anti-Bolsheviks (Whites) in the civil war, and it was because of French insistence, that the Bolsheviks were not invited to Versailles. The French also intervened in the war between Russia and Poland in 1920; troops commanded by General Weygand helped to drive back a Russian advance on Warsaw (the Polish capital), and afterwards the French government claimed to have stemmed the westward spread of Bolshevism. The subsequent alliance between France and Poland (1921) seemed to be directed as much against Russia as against Germany.

Relations improved in 1924 when the moderate Herriot government resumed diplomatic relations. But the French were never very enthusiastic, especially as the French Communist Party was under orders from Moscow not to co-operate with other left-wing parties. Not until the early 1930s did the rise of the German Nazis cause a change of heart on both sides.

4.4 THE 'SUCCESSOR' STATES

One important result of the First World War in eastern Europe was the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian or Habsburg Empire, and the loss of extensive territory by Germany and Russia. A number of new national states were formed, of which the most important were Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary and Poland. They are sometimes known as the 'successor' states because they 'succeeded' or 'took the place of' the previous empires. Two of the guiding principles behind their formation were *self-determination* and *democracy*, it was hoped that they would act as a stabilizing influence in central and eastern Europe and as a buffer against potential attacks from communist Russia.

However, they all developed serious problems and weaknesses:

- There were so many different nationalities in the region that it was impossible for them all to have their own state. Consequently it was only the larger national groups which were lucky enough to have their own homeland. Smaller nationalities found themselves once again under what they considered to be 'foreign' governments, which, so they claimed, did not look after their interests – for example, Croats in Yugoslavia, Slovaks and Germans in Czechoslovakia, and Germans, White Russians and Ukrainians in Poland.
- Although each state began with a democratic constitution, Czechoslovakia was the only one in which democracy survived for a significant length of time – until the Germans moved in (March 1939).
- They all suffered economic difficulties, especially after the onset of the Great Depression in the early 1930s.
- The states were divided by rivalries and disputes over territory. Austria and Hungary had been on the losing side in the war and greatly resented the way the peace settlement had been forced on them. They wanted a complete revision of the terms. On the other hand, Czechoslovakia and Poland had declared themselves independent shortly before the war ended, while Serbia (which became Yugoslavia) had been an independent state before 1914. These three states were represented at the peace conference and were, on the whole, satisfied with the outcome.

(a) Yugoslavia

With a population of around 14 million, the new state consisted of the original kingdom of Serbia, plus Montenegro, Croatia, Slovenia and Dalmatia; it was known as the Kingdom of the Serbs, Croats and Slovenes until 1929, when it took the name Yugoslavia (Southern Slavs). The new constitution provided for an elected parliament, which was dominated by the Serbs, the largest national group. The Croats and the other national groups formed a permanent opposition, constantly protesting that they were being discriminated against by the Serbs. In 1928 the Croats announced their withdrawal from parliament and set up their own government in Zagreb; there was talk of proclaiming a separate Republic of Croatia. The king, Alexander (a Serb), responded by proclaiming himself a dictator and banning political parties; it was at this time that the country was renamed Yugoslavia (June 1929).

Soon afterwards, *Yugoslavia was badly hit by the depression.* Largely agricultural, the economy had been reasonably prosperous during the 1920s; but in the early 1930s world agricultural prices collapsed, causing widespread hardship among farmers and workers. In 1934, King Alexander was assassinated in Marseilles as he was arriving for a state visit to France. The murderer was a Macedonian who was connected with a group of Croat revolutionaries living in Hungary. For a time, tensions were high, and there seemed to be danger of war with Hungary. However, the new king, Peter II, was only 11 years old, and Alexander's cousin Paul, who was acting as regent, believed it was time to compromise. In 1935 he allowed political parties again, and in August 1939 he introduced a semi-federal system which enabled six Croats to join the government.

In foreign affairs the government tried to stay on good terms with other states, signing treaties of friendship with Czechoslovakia (1920) and Romania (1921) – a grouping known as the 'Little Entente'. Further treaties of friendship were signed with Italy (1924 – to last for five years), Poland (1926), France (1927) and Greece (1929). In spite of the treaty with Italy, the Yugoslavs were deeply suspicious of Mussolini. He was encouraging the Croat rebels and was tightening his grip on Albania to the south, threatening to encircle Yugoslavia.

Disappointed with the economic help they had received from France, and nervous of Mussolini's intentions, *Prince Paul, the regent, began to look towards Nazi Germany for trade and protection.* In 1936 a trade treaty was signed with Germany; this led to a significant increase in trade, so that by 1938, Germany was taking over 40 per cent of Yugoslavia's exports. Friendship with Germany reduced the threat from Mussolini, who had signed the Rome–Berlin Axis agreement with Hitler in 1936. In 1937 therefore, Italy signed a treaty with Yugoslavia. As the international situation deteriorated during 1939, Yugoslavia found itself uncomfortably aligned with the Axis powers.

(b) Czechoslovakia

Like Yugoslavia, *Czechoslovakia was a multinational state*, consisting of some 6.5 million Czechs, 2.5 million Slovaks, 3 million Germans, 700 000 Hungarians, 500 000 Ruthenians, 100 000 Poles and smaller numbers of Romanians and Jews. Although this might look like a recipe for instability, the new state worked well, being based on a solid partnership between Czechs and Slovaks. There was an elected parliament of two houses, and an elected president who had the power to choose and dismiss government ministers. Tomas Masaryk, president from 1918 until his retirement in 1935, was half Czech and half Slovak. It was the only example in eastern Europe of a successful western-style liberal democracy. On the whole, relations between the different nationalities were good, although there was some resentment among the German-speaking population who lived in

Bohemia and Moravia and along the frontiers with Germany and Austria (an area known as the Sudetenland). They had previously been citizens of the Habsburg Empire and complained at being forced to live in a 'Slav' state where they were discriminated against, or so they claimed.

Czechoslovakia was fortunate that it contained about three-quarters of the industries of the old Habsburg Empire. *There were successful textile and glass factories, valuable mineral resources and rich agricultural lands.* The 1920s was a period of great prosperity as production expanded and Czechoslovakia became a major exporting country. *Unfortunately the depression of the early 1930s brought with it an economic crisis.* The surrounding states of central and eastern Europe reacted to the depression by increasing import duties and reducing imports, demand for Czech manufactures fell, and there was severe unemployment, especially in the industrial areas where the Sudeten Germans lived. Now they really had something to complain about, and both they and the Slovaks blamed the Czechs for their problems.

This coincided with the rise of Hitler, who inspired imitation movements in many countries; in Czechoslovakia the Sudeten Germans formed their own party. After Hitler came to power in Germany, the party, under the leadership of Konrad Henlein, became bolder, organizing rallies and protest demonstrations. In the 1935 elections they won 44 seats, making them the second largest party in the lower house of parliament. The following year, Henlein began to demand self-government for the German-speaking areas. But Hitler was determined on more: by 1938 he had decided that the Sudetenland must become part of Germany, and that the state of Czechoslovakia itself must be destroyed.

Meanwhile the Czech Foreign Minister, Edvard Benes, had taken great trouble to build up a system of protective alliances for his new state. He was the instigator of the 'Little Entente' with Yugoslavia and Romania (1920–1) and he signed treaties with Italy and France in 1924. Benes was involved in the Locarno agreements of 1925, in which France promised to guarantee Czechoslovakia's frontiers and Germany promised that any frontier disputes would be settled by arbitration. The growing success of Henlein and his party rang alarm bells; Benes looked desperately around for further protection and an agreement was signed with the USSR (1935). The two states promised to help each other if attacked. But there was one vital proviso: help would be given only if France assisted the country under attack. Tragically, neither France nor Britain was prepared to give military support when the crisis came in 1938 (see Section 5.5(a)).

(c) Poland

Poland had previously existed as an independent state until the late eighteenth century, when it was taken over and divided up between Russia, Austria and Prussia. By 1795 it had lost its independent status. The Poles spent the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries struggling for liberation and independence; the Versailles settlement gave them almost everything they wanted. The acquisition of West Prussia from Germany gave them access to the sea, and although they were disappointed that Danzig, the area's main port, was to be a 'free city' under League of Nations control, they soon built another modern port nearby at Gdynia. However, there was the usual nationalities problem: out of a population of 27 million, only 18 million were Poles. The rest included 4 million Ukrainians, a million White Russians, a million Germans and almost 3 million Jews.

A democratic constitution was introduced in March 1921, which provided for a president and an elected parliament of two houses. Since there were no fewer than 14 political parties, the only way to form a government was by a coalition of several groups. Between 1919 and 1926 there were 13 different cabinets, which lasted on average just a few

months. It was impossible to get a strong, decisive government. By 1926 many people felt that the democratic experiment had been a failure; Marshal Jozef Pilsudski, founder of the Polish Socialist Party and the man who had declared Polish independence at the end of the war, led a military coup. In May 1926 he overthrew the government and became prime minister and minister for war. He acted as a virtual dictator in a right-wing, authoritarian and nationalist regime until his death in 1935. The same system then continued with Ignatz Moscicky as president and Jozef Beck as foreign minister. However, no effective measures had been taken to deal with the economic crisis and high unemployment, and the government became increasingly unpopular:

The Poles were involved in several frontier disputes with neighbouring states:

- Both Poland and Germany claimed Upper Silesia, an important industrial area.
- Poland and Czechoslovakia both wanted Teschen.
- The Poles demanded that their frontier with Russia should be much further eastwards instead of along the Curzon Line (see Map 2.5).
- The Poles wanted the city of Vilna and its surrounding area, which was also claimed by Lithuania.

The government wasted no time: taking advantage of the civil war in Russia (see section 16.3(c)), they sent Polish troops into Russia and quickly occupied Ukraine, capturing Kiev, the capital (7 May 1920). Their aims were to liberate Ukraine from Russian control and to take over White Russia. The invasion caused outrage among the Russians and rallied support for the Communist government. The Red Army counter-attacked, drove the Poles out of Kiev and chased them back into Poland all the way to Warsaw, which they prepared to attack. At this point France sent military help, and together with the Poles, they drove the Russians out of Poland again. In October 1920 an armistice was agreed, and in March 1921 the Treaty of Riga was signed; this gave Poland a bloc of territory all the way along her eastern frontier roughly a hundred miles wide. During the fighting, Polish troops also occupied Vilna; they refused to withdraw and in 1923 the League of Nations recognized it as belonging to Poland. However, these activities soured Poland's relations with Russia and Lithuania, leaving her with two bitterly hostile neighbours.

The other two frontier disputes were settled less controversially. In July 1920 the Conference of Ambassadors (see Section 3.4(d)) divided Teschen between Poland and Czechoslovakia. In March 1921 a plebiscite was held to decide the future of Upper Silesia, in which 60 per cent of the population voted to be part of Germany. However, there was no clear dividing line between the Germans and the Poles. Eventually it was decided to divide it between the two states: Germany received about three-quarters of the territory, but Poland's share contained the vast majority of the province's coal mines.

France was Poland's main ally – the Poles were grateful to the French for their help in the war with Russia – and the two signed a treaty of friendship in February 1921. Hardly had one threat been neutralized when an even more frightening one appeared – Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933. But to the surprise of the Poles, Hitler was in a friendly mood – in January 1934 Germany signed a trade agreement and a ten-year non-aggression pact with Poland. Hitler's idea was apparently to bind Poland to Germany against the USSR. Foreign Minister Beck took advantage of the new 'friendship' with Hitler at the time of the 1938 Munich Conference to demand and receive a share of the spoils – the rest of Teschen (which had been divided between Poland and Czechoslovakia in July 1920) – from the doomed Czechoslovakia. Within four months he was to find that Hitler's attitude had changed dramatically (see Section 5.5(b)).

(d) Austria

Set up by the Treaty of St Germain in 1919 (see Section 2.9), the republic of Austria soon found itself faced by *almost every conceivable problem except that of nationalities* – the vast majority of people were German-speaking:

- It was a small country with a small population of only 6.5 million, of which about a third lived in the capital – the huge city of Vienna, which, it was said, was now 'like a head without a body'.
- Almost all its industrial wealth had been lost to Czechoslovakia and Poland; although there were some industries in Vienna, the rest of the country was mainly agricultural. There were immediate economic problems of inflation and financial crises and Austria had to be helped out by foreign loans arranged by the League of Nations.
- Most Austrians felt that the natural solution to the problems was union (*Anschluss*) with Germany; the Constituent Assembly, which first met in February 1919, actually voted to join Germany, but the Treaty of St Germain, signed in September, vetoed the union. The price exacted by the League in return for the foreign loans was that the Austrians had to promise not to unite with Germany for at least 20 years. Austria was forced to struggle on alone.

Under the new democratic constitution there was to be a parliament elected by proportional representation, a president, and a federal system which allowed the separate provinces control over their internal affairs. There were two main parties: the left-wing Social Democrats and the right-wing Christian Socials. For much of the time between 1922 and 1929 Ignaz Seipel, a Christian Social, was Chancellor, though Vienna itself was controlled by the Social Democrats. There was a striking contrast between the work of the Social Democrats in Vienna, who set up welfare and housing projects for the workers, and the Christian Socials in the rest of the country, who tried to bring economic stability by reducing expenditure and sacking thousands of government officials.

When the economic situation did not improve, *the conflict between right and left became violent*. Both sides formed private armies: the right had the 'Heimwehr', the left the 'Schutzband'. There were frequent demonstrations and clashes, and the right accused the left of plotting to set up a communist dictatorship. Encouraged and supported by Mussolini, the Heimwehr announced an anti-democratic fascist programme (1930). The world depression affected Austria badly: unemployment rose alarmingly and the standard of living fell. In March 1931 the government announced that it was preparing to enter a customs union with Germany in the hope of easing the flow of trade and therefore the economic crisis. However, France and the other western states took fright at this, suspecting that it would lead to a full political union. In retaliation, France withdrew all its funds from the leading Austrian bank, the Kreditanstalt, which teetered on the verge of collapse; in May 1931 it declared itself insolvent and was taken over by the government. Only when Austria agreed to drop its plans for a customs union did the French relent and make more cash available (July 1932). Clearly Austria was scarcely a viable state economically or politically, and it seemed as though the country was descending into anarchy as ineffective governments came and went. A further complication was that there was now an Austrian Nazi party, which was campaigning for union with Germany.

In May 1932 Engelbert Dollfuss, a Christian Social, became chancellor; he made a determined effort to bring the country to order: he dissolved parliament and announced that he would run the country by decree until a new constitution had been prepared. The Schutzband was declared illegal and the Heimwehr was to be replaced by a new

paramilitary organization – the Fatherland Front. The Austrian Nazi party was banned and dissolved. *Unfortunately these policies had catastrophic results.*

- The ban on the Austrian Nazi party caused outrage in Germany, where Hitler was now in power. The Germans launched a vicious propaganda campaign against Dollfuss and in October 1933, Austrian Nazis tried to assassinate him. He survived, but tensions remained high between Germany and Austria. The problem for many Austrians was that although they wanted union with Germany, they were appalled at the idea of becoming part of a Germany run by Hitler and the Nazis.
- His attacks on the socialists backfired on Dollfuss. The Schutzband defied the ban: in February 1934 there were anti-government demonstrations in Vienna and Linz and three days of running battles between demonstrators and police. Order was restored, but only after some 300 people had been killed. Many socialists were arrested and the Social Democrat party was declared illegal. This was a serious mistake by Dollfuss – with careful handling, the socialists might well have been strong allies in his attempt to defend the republic against the Nazis. In the event, many of them now joined the Austrian Nazis as the best way of opposing the government.
- Dollfuss relied for support on Italy, where Mussolini was still nervous about Hitler's intentions. Mussolini had made it clear that he backed Dollfuss and an independent Austria. In March 1934 they signed the 'Rome protocols' – these included agreements on economic co-operation and a declaration of respect for each other's independence. Even Hitler at this point had promised to respect Austrian independence – he was afraid of alienating Italy and was prepared to wait.
- Impatient at the delay, the Austrian Nazis launched an attempted coup (25 July 1934). Dollfuss was shot and killed, but the affair was badly organized and was soon suppressed by government forces. Hitler's role in all this is still not clear; what is certain is that the local Nazis took the initiative, and although Hitler probably knew something about their plans, he was not himself prepared to help them in any way. When Mussolini moved Italian troops up to the frontier with Austria, that was the end of the matter. Clearly the Austrian Nazis were not strong enough to bring about a union with Germany without some outside support; so long as Italy supported the Austrians, their independence was assured.

Kurt Schuschnigg, the next Chancellor, worked hard to preserve the alliance with Italy, and even signed an agreement with Germany in which Hitler recognized Austrian independence and Schuschnigg promised that Austria would follow policies in line with her nature as a German state (July 1936). One such policy allowed the Austrian Nazi party to operate again, and two Nazis were taken into the cabinet. But time was running out for Austria, as Mussolini began to draw closer to Hitler. After his signing of the Rome–Berlin Axis (1936) and the Anti-Comintern Pact with Germany and Japan (1937), Mussolini was less interested in backing Austrian independence. Once again it was the Austrian Nazis who took the initiative, early in March 1938 (see Section 5.3(b)).

(e) Hungary

When the war ended in November 1918, the republic of Hungary was declared, with Michael Karolyi as the first president. Neighbouring states took advantage of the general chaos to seize territory which the Hungarians thought should rightly belong to them – Czech, Romanian and Yugoslav troops occupied large swathes of territory. In March 1919, Karolyi was replaced by a left-wing government of communists and socialists led

by Bela Kun, who had recently founded the Hungarian Communist Party. Kun looked for help to Vladimir Lenin, the new Russian communist leader; but the Russians, having themselves suffered defeat at the hands of the Germans, were in no state to provide military support. The government's attempts to introduce nationalization and other socialist measures were bitterly opposed by the wealthy Magyar landowners. When Romanian troops captured Budapest (August 1919), Kun and his government were forced to flee for their lives.

After a confused period, the initiative was seized by Admiral Horthy, commander of the Austro-Hungarian fleet in 1918; he organized troops, order was restored and elections held in January 1920 were won by the right. The situation improved when the Romanians, under pressure from the Allies, agreed to withdraw. A stable government was formed in March 1920. It was decided that Hungary should be a monarchy with Admiral Horthy acting as Regent until it was decided who should be king. However, the country was deeply divided over the issue; when the most likely candidate, the last Habsburg emperor Karl, died in 1922, no further attempts at restoration were made. However, Horthy continued to be Regent, a title he held until Hungary was occupied by the Germans in 1944.

The new government soon suffered a stunning blow when it was forced to sign the Treaty of Trianon (June 1920), agreeing to massive losses of territory containing about three-quarters of Hungary's population – to Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia (see Section 2.9(b)). From then on, Hungarian foreign policy centred on one major aim: to get a revision of the treaty. The 'Little Entente' members (Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia), which had taken advantage of her weakness, were seen as the major enemy; Hungary was prepared to co-operate with any state that would back them. Treaties of friendship were signed with Italy (1927) and Austria (1933), and after Hitler came to power, a trade treaty was signed with Germany (1934).

During the 1920s and 1930s all the governments were right-wing, either conservative or nationalist. Admiral Horthy presided over an authoritarian regime in which the secret police were always active and critics and opponents were liable to be arrested. In 1935, Prime Minister Gombos announced that he wanted to co-operate more closely with Germany. Restrictions on the activities of Jews were introduced. At the time of the Munich crisis (September 1938) Hungary took advantage of the destruction of Czechoslovakia to demand and receive a sizeable strip of South Slovakia from Czechoslovakia, to be followed in March 1939 by Ruthenia. The following month Hungary signed the anti-Comintern Pact and withdrew from the League of Nations. She was now well and truly tied up with Hitler and Mussolini. In fact, in the words of historian D. C. Watt, 'it is difficult to write about the regime in command of Hungary at this time with anything but contempt'.

4.5 UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY, 1919–33

The USA had been deeply involved in the First World War, and when hostilities ceased, she seemed likely to play an important role in world affairs. President Woodrow Wilson, a Democrat, was a crucial figure at the peace conference; his great dream was the League of Nations, through which the USA would maintain world peace. He embarked on a gruelling speaking tour to rally support for his ideas. However, the American people were tired of war and suspicious of Europe: after all, the American population was made up of people who had moved there to get away from Europe. The Republican Party in particular was strongly against any further involvement in European affairs. To Wilson's bitter disappointment the US Senate voted to reject both the Versailles peace settlement and the League of Nations. From 1921 until early 1933 the USA was ruled by Republican governments which believed in a policy of *isolation*: she never joined the League and she tried to avoid

political disputes with other states and the signing of treaties – for example, no American representative attended the Locarno Conference. Some historians still blame the failure of the League on the absence of the USA. And yet in spite of their desire for isolation, the Americans found it impossible to avoid some involvement in world affairs, because of overseas trade, investment and the thorny problem of European war debts and reparations. American isolationism was probably more concerned with keeping clear of political problems in Europe than with simply cutting themselves off from the world in general.

1 During the prosperous years of the 1920s, Americans tried to *increase trade and profits by investment abroad*, in Europe, Canada, and in Central and South America. It was inevitable therefore, that the USA should take an interest in what was happening in these areas. There was, for example, a serious dispute with Mexico, which was threatening to seize American-owned oil wells; a compromise solution was eventually reached.

2 *The Washington Conferences (1921–2)* were called by President Harding because of concern at Japanese power in the Far East (see Section 4.1(b)).

3 *Allied war debts to the USA caused much ill-feeling*. During the war the American government had organized loans to Britain and her allies amounting to almost 12 billion dollars at 5 per cent interest. The Europeans hoped that the Americans would cancel the debts, since the USA had done well out of the war (by taking over former European markets), but both Harding and Coolidge insisted that repayments be made in full. The Allies claimed that their ability to pay depended on whether Germany paid her reparations to them, but the Americans would not admit that there was any connection between the two. Eventually Britain was the first to agree to pay the full amount, over 62 years at the reduced interest rate of 3.3 per cent. Other states followed, the USA allowing much lower interest rates depending on the poverty of the country concerned; Italy got away with 0.4 per cent, but this predictably caused strong objections from Britain.

4 *Faced with the German financial crisis of 1923, the Americans had to change their attitude* and admit the connection between reparations and war debts. They agreed to take part in the Dawes and Young Plans (1924 and 1929), which enabled the Germans to pay reparations. However, this caused the ludicrous situation in which America lent money to Germany so that she could pay reparations to France, Britain and Belgium, and they in turn could pay their war debts to the USA. The whole set-up, together with American insistence on keeping high tariffs, was a contributory cause of the world economic crisis (see Section 22.6), with all its far-reaching consequences.

5 *The Kellogg–Briand Pact (1928)* was another notable, though useless, American foray into world affairs (see Section 4.1(f)).

6 *Relations with Britain were uneasy*, not only because of war debts, but because the Conservatives resented the limitations on British naval expansion imposed by the earlier Washington agreement. MacDonald, anxious to improve relations, organized a conference in London in 1930. It was attended also by the Japanese, and the three states reaffirmed the 5:5:3 ratio in cruisers, destroyers and submarines agreed at Washington. This was successful in re-establishing friendship between Britain and the USA, but the Japanese soon exceeded their limits.

7 *The USA returned to a policy of strict isolation* when the Japanese invaded Manchuria in 1931. Although President Hoover condemned the Japanese action, he refused to join in economic sanctions or to make any move which might lead to war with Japan. Consequently Britain and France felt unable to act and the League was shown to be helpless. Throughout the 1930s, though acts of aggression increased, the Americans remained determined not to be drawn into a conflict.

FURTHER READING

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QUESTIONS

1 Assess the reasons why there were no major wars during the 1920s.

2 How far can it be said that the USA followed a policy of strict isolation in foreign affairs during the 1920s and early 1930s, and what effects did this policy have on international relations?

3 How did the fact that Russia was a Communist state affect international relations between 1920 and 1939?

There is a document question about German foreign policy and international relations, 1920–32 on the website.