This final syllabus point is asking the ‘big question’:

**WHY DID WW2 BREAK OUT?**

You have already looked at the responsibility of the Fascist dictators in depth, so this guide will not repeat that material. It will instead focus on the ‘other reasons’ for the outbreak of war.

**Reasons for the outbreak of WW2**:

**1. Rise of Fascist Leaders with Expansionist Foreign Policies** *(dealt with in the other guides)*

**2. Unresolved issues after WW1 and the shortcomings of Versailles**

**3. Weakness of the League of Nations as the enforcer of a new world order based on 'collective security'**

**4. Impact of the Great Depression on International Relations**

**5. The Failure of Disarmament**

**6. Appeasement – The responsibility of Britain and France**

**7. The Failure of Diplomacy in 1939 – The Nazi-Soviet Pact**

**Exam questions are likely to either:**

a) Pick one of the above areas and ask you to consider how important it was in relation to the others as a cause of WW2 (*e.g. “The impact of the Great Depression in Europe was the main cause of WW2” To what extent do you agree?)* In this case, you would examine evidence to support this view, before challenging it with the other factors.

b) Focus entirely on one aspect – e.g. “Evaluate the British policy of Appeasement”.

**In either instance, you should be able to identify key links between these factors. An example:**

The great depression leads to increased aggression from the dictators (& arguably the creation of Hitler in the first place), while strengthening the pacifism and caution of the democracies. As a result, the League is placed under undue pressure while losing the active support of its key members, which destroys collective security. This then has to be replaced with a new approach, we get appeasement which only encourages Hitler further. Suspicion of the USSR runs throughout, culminating in the Nazi-Soviet Pact. Depending on how far you feel Hitler masterminded the war, will determine your emphasis – see historiography.

**1. Unresolved issues after WW1 and the shortcomings of Versailles**  
  
A.J.P. Taylor; "The Second World War was, in large part, a repeat performance of the first"- conveys to the extent that the problems of 1919 were left unresolved.

**a) German resentment-**

* The German population resented the terms that were imposed on them by the TOV and saw the treaty as a "dictated peace" (they had expected a treaty based upon Wilson's 14 points of self-determination.
* The treaty stripped the German Reich of 25,000 square miles, 7 million habitants- in many cases the Germans found themselves being treated differently from those that governed the settlements with other states.
* However, even though Germany was disarmed and Anschluss was strictly forbidden, she still retained the means to become a great power – despite the complaints, around 90% of her economic resources remained under her control.
* It was these circumstances that helped Hitler to rise to power in Germany and it was also the terms of the treaty that, as soon as they became public, were seen to be unfair by some in Britain as well.

**b) The disintegration of wartime allied alliances**

* By 1920, the alliances that had fought the war had disintegrated, especially Russia who was completely excluded in the deliberations of 1919.
* The Western powers saw Germany as a bulwark to Communism Russia and with Germany defeated, there would no one to prevent the Communist spread in Europe. This was one of the main reasons why the western power did not strenuously object to the remilitarization of Germany after 1934.
* After the USA drew back to diplomatic isolation, the implementation of the peace treaty of 1919 had to be undertaken by the European powers who were in the midst of their own problems (economic depression and social restraint).

**c) Keynes and the controversy over reparations**

* Economist J.M. Keynes denounced the treaty's reparation clauses by saying that such pressure upon the German economy threatened the stability of the whole European economy.
* These kinds of arguments was greatly influential in Britain and the USA and even further contributes to the policy of appeasement.
* However, E. Mantoux argues that the productivity of German industry during the 1930s, especially armament manufacture, showed that the levels of reparations set in 1921 were after all within Germany's capacity.
* Others claim that the main fault was not in the treaty itself but with the hopes that came with it and the failure to implement its terms.

***Orthodox view of settlement***

* James Joll, "*Europe was divided by the peace conference into those who wanted the peace revised (Germany, Italy, Japan and Hungary) and those who wanted it upheld (France, Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia), and those who were not that interested (the USA and Britain)".*
* E.H. Carr, self-determination and collective security as unworkable idealistic principles, and the settlement failed to settle the 'German problem'.
* A.J.P. Taylor, Versailles as crushing, harsh and lacking in moral validity, as no Germans accepted it and all wanted to overturn it. From this perspective, the Second World War was "*a war over the settlement of Versailles; a war which had been implicit when the First World War ended because the peace-makers had not solved the German problem."*

***Revisionist view of Versailles -***

* Sees the settlement as a brave attempt to deal with huge, long-term problems, and argues the problem was not with the Treaty but with the failure to enforce its terms!
* Ruth Henig, treaty as a "*creditable achievement",* but one that failed because of economic and social problems, divisions between the Allies, and reluctance of leaders to enforce the treaty. The failure to do this meant a stronger Germany, and further indecision in the form of appeasement meant war.
* Paul Birdsall, US refusal to commit to upholding the settlement undermined both the League of Nations and the idea of a united democratic front supplying 'collective security', and thus was crucial in explaining the failure of the treaty in the longer-term
* Paul Kennedy, 1920s - the settlement worked, like the League of Nations; but 1930s - it was crushed by militarism of Italy, Japan and Germany, a collapse caused by the Great Depression and its effects.

**2. Failure of the concept of 'collective security'**

**Definition of ‘collective security’** – it was, essentially, a new concept. Instead of making ad hoc (often secret) alliances aimed at a particular threat/enemy, the idea was to have a permanent mutually supportive alliance system of as many countries as possible. They would be ready to help each other in any circumstances when one of their number was threatened by aggression. The aim was therefore to make aggression impossible – other forums would be set up to settle disputes peacefully. Primarily, this meant the…

**a) League of Nations**

* Set up by US President Woodrow Wilson as a part of the TOV and first met in Geneva in December 1920.
* Since the League was never granted an army (even though France had only supported the idea on the basis that it would have armed force) as Britain felt uneasy at the thought of having to commit military resources to an international armed force, possibly under France's control, and Wilson completely rejected the idea. Its main weapon was economic sanctions that would be imposed on nations who failed to respond to the League's terms – this, as a tool, was limited by the failure of the world’s largest economy to participate.
* The major confrontations during the inter-war period the League failed to prevent or stop as it was completely ignored by the aggressor.
* The Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and Italy's attacks on Abyssinia (1935) completely bypassed the League. Therefore, the increasingly aggressive and hostile international atmosphere of the 1930s put incredible pressure on the League from a variety of sources.
* While the USSR was allowed to join in 1934, they were viewed with suspicion by the other members (especially Britain) – this intensified as Stalin began to actively support the communists in the Spanish civil war from 1936
* Two of the main reasons for the failure was the self-centred acts of the greatest members Britain and France as, especially during the Great Depression, they were more concerned with internal than external problems. Also, it lacked the USA's presence which was a weakness for the League as its economic sanctions did not have much impact when it lacked the presence of the strongest economic power. In the 1930s, Britain and France increasingly relied on their tradition, self-serving diplomacy – e.g. Hoare-Loval Pact, London Naval Agreement, Appeasement etc), undermining the League as a credible means of providing collective security.
* The failure of the League encouraged Hitler in his expansionist moves during the 1930s. The idea of collective security as a means of preventing aggression had been fatally undermined, leading to the need for a replacement policy; appeasement.  
  *The key events of the 1930s in relation to the League of Nations are covered in more depth in Paper 1. Key examples are Manchuria and Abyssinia.*

**b) Other attempts at collective security outside the League**

Throughout the period there had been agreements made in addition to the League of Nations to try and ensure collective security on a smaller scale. For the same reasons of vested interests and the economic woes of the major powers, these tended to quickly fall apart. These included the proposed ‘Anglo-American Guarantee’ of 1922 and the Stresa Front of 1935. Arguably, the guarantee of Poland and the Little Entente from 1921 *(Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia & supported by France– collapsed in the face of German aggression 1938*) are in their own ways attempts at collective security. Generally, the failure of GB in particular to bring the USSR into close alliance made other agreements quite worthless.

**3. Impact of the Great Depression on International Relations**

Richard Overy, "*No single factor was more important in explaining the breakdown of the diplomatic system in the 1930s than the world economic crisis."*  
  
**a) The political impact of economic depression**  
  
Any spirit of international co-operation *(Locarno Honeymoon, disarmament)* that may have been emerging gave way to a desperate sense of *every man for himself,* given the large-scale withdrawal of American capital of European investment had serious implications for international relations.  
One example of the political impact of economic depression was that nation after nation abandoned the *Gold Standard*, the convention whereby the value of a state’s national currency is based upon the amount of gold held by that state. By 1931, only France, Italy and Poland of the major European states continued to base their currencies upon gold.  
The economic crisis played a direct role in the rise of the Nazi Party to power in Germany between 1930 and 1933. **Quite apart from aiding the spread of Fascism and self-interested nationalism (Manchuria, Abyssinia, Rise of Hitler), the Depression also prepared the ground for international appeasement of those forces.**

**b) The Hoover Moratorium (Suspension) and the End of Reparations**  
  
One direct casualty of the economic catastrophe was the Young Plan for reparation payments. In October 1930, German representatives approached the US President Herbert Hoover to request a suspension of reparation payments in the light of increasing economic difficulties. However, by December 1931 it was clear that Europe was not experiencing the ‘relatively short depression’ for which a suspension was signed.  
The major powers met the same month in Basel, Switzerland to consider the reparations question, where they concluded that *‘an adjustment of all inter-governmental debts is the only lasting measure which is capable of restoring economic stability and true peace.’*  
- the Lausanne Conference in June the following year agreed that reparations should be ended by a lump-sum payment of 3,000 million marks, relieving Germany of 90% of its outstanding debt.  
Ultimately, the financial clauses of the Treaty of Versailles ceased to exist and its last chance at restraining Germany.

**4. The Failure of Disarmament**

**While disarmament is not ‘collective security’ as such, it would be included in an analysis of the failure of ‘international cooperation’.**  
The principle of international disarmament was the second major casualty of the early 1930s. Not until 1926 did a ‘Preparatory Commission’ meet in Geneva and not until February 1932 did the conference finally gather there to begin deliberation. On the surface, the prospects seemed bright as the renunciation of expensive armaments made good sense at a time of economic recession. France, consistently one of the most positive members of the conference, explored three different routes to the goal.

1. Each nation should submit its major offensive weapons, planes, capital ships and heavy artillery to the control of the League of Nations, in order to provide a force to oppose aggression. Germany played its ‘triumph’ card, demanded equal treatment with the allies on the question of armaments, and withdrew from the conference.  
  
2. An agreement without Germany was so pointless that France effectively conceded the radical idea of German equality in its new ‘Constructive Plan’ of November 1932. This implied that Germany’s national defence militia would be as large as that of any other state. The principle of German equality was acknowledged within *‘a system which would comprise security for all nations.’* Consequently to the Constructive Plan, Germany returned to the conference.  
  
3. The final idea was an eight-year period, during latter half of which the continental armies would conform to the figures suggested by the British (200,000 men). With Britain, France, Italy and the USA in agreement, and **Germany in danger of becoming trapped by this positive attitude, Hitler withdrew finally from the conference in October 1933. 5 days later he quit the League of Nations**…  
  
  
**5. Rise of Fascist Leaders with Expansionist Foreign Policies**   
  
*- See the other guides in this section for detail on the impact of the foreign policies of Hitler and Mussolini.* *Needless to say, they are obviously a key cause.*  
  
**6. Appeasement – The responsibility of Britain (and France)**

**Key examples of appeasement:**  
1. Accepted re-arming of Germany (British naval agreement, 1935)    
2. No action over re-occupation of Rhineland (1936)   
3. Allowed Hitler to use German bombers in Spanish Civil War (1937–39)   
4. No action over Anschluss (1938)   
5. Gave in over Sudetenland at Munich (1938)

*You can review the details of these events in the Hitler FP guide.*  
  
**Definition and background to the policy**  
The policy of trying to solve international conflicts through compromise and negotiation, followed chiefly by the British in the 1930s. The French followed the British in this policy as well. While it now often seen as ‘Chamberlain’s policy’, this is somewhat misleading as he only came into office in 1937, after the British and French had already allowed remilitarisation and the Rhineland. However, Neville Chamberlain was the strongest advocate of the policy once in office, and believed that appeasement could help to bring order and lasting peace to international relations. He believed that Germany had some fairly legitimate grievances about territory and economic resources (Treaty of Versailles), and that resolving these through peaceful negotiation could prevent war with Hitler.

**a) Why appeasement?**  
**1. Chamberlain / leading politicians feared another war**. Most of the leading politicians of the day had experienced the horrors of the trenches in WW1 and were genuinely horrified at the idea of being drawn into another war over small issue on the other side of the continent – did Czechoslovakia not seem like Bosnia in 1914? *“Quarrel in a far off country… of who we know nothing”* People wanted peace so not enough public support to go to war. Only one newspaper in the whole of Great Britain opposed the Munich Agreement in 1938, Chamberlain’s ‘Peace in our time’ declaration was met with huge popular enthusiasm – critics of the policy of Appeasement were few – politicians like Churchill were very rare and unlikely to get public support (Churchill himself was nearly forced out of his constituency in the 1930s). **The Depression had caused huge** unemployment and social problems in Britain – the Labour Party, under Attlee, argued for military cuts throughout to fund social programmes which put pressure on the government not to increase spending dramatically. France, suffering from similar problems, was also very aware that it had not been able to afford to complete its defensive **‘Maginot Line’** along its German border.

**2. Treaty of Versailles was considered** unfair so many British people sympathised with Hitler's demands. The failure to uphold the principle of self-determinism in the Treaty (i.e. Germans being placed in other countries) and the size of the reparations made some in Britain sympathetic to Hitler’s *stated* aims of treaty revision – including leading figures such as Keynes and Chamberlain. In a sense, appeasement can been seen to have been British foreign policy right back into the 1920s – for example, Britain had put pressure on France to end the Ruhr occupation and had exerted pressure to renegotiate reparations on Germany’s behalf in the run up to Locarno.

**3. Britain too weak for war in 1938**, needed time to re-arm so appeasement bought Britain a year to re-arm. The British military made it very clear that the navy and military, despite appearances to the contrary, were far too stretched. Commitments in Asia (new base at Singapore) and India in response to Japanese aggression, as well as possible internal rebellion, had stretched the British forces. Production had also been much lower than Germany from 1936-38 as a result of appeasement – for example, Germany produced over twice the number of aircraft (15,000 in just two years!).

**4. The Spanish Civil War –** The bombing of Guernica had shown that in the event of war British cities would be extremely vulnerable to mass bombing raids – therefore there would be massive casualties. **The civil war additionally affected French attitudes** as the left-wing French government from 1936-38 (the Popular Front) was a left-wing party who was ideologically opposed to fascism. However, it was very aware of how divided France was, with a strong and increasingly aggressive right-wing unhappy with what they feared was becoming a communist government. Fearing that the Spanish civil war would therefore be able to spill over into France, they were reluctant to take too aggressive a foreign policy stance that would lead to further division / weakness.

**5. Chamberlain misjudged Hitler** so he trusted Hitler's promises that Sudetenland was the last thing he wanted. He was an ideologically driven politician who therefore tended to see others in the same light. He was also a genuine, in his own words, “man of peace”.

**6. Fear of Communism –** a significant political opinion in Britain advocated letting Hitler grow strong because they thought a strong Germany could stop Russia. A common phrase among right wing British politicians at the time was “Better Hitlerism than Stalinism” – an attitude reflected in British dithering over securing an alliance with Stalin in 1939.

**7. The failure of the League –** it is important to stress this as an overriding cause. Fallowing the Abyssinia crisis in 1935, it was clear that collective security as a means of stopping aggression was dead. This meant that GB and France had no choice but to meet the increasing demands of Hitler through a new policy – Appeasement was their choice.

**b) Munich Agreement**

The classic example of this policy in action is the Munich conference, September 1938, over Hitler’s claims over the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. Under Mussolini’s supervision, this agreement saw Britain and France giving in to Hitler’s demands and handing him the Sudetenland without even consulting Benes, the Czech prime minister. Hitler then showed, in March 1939, how little respect he had for the agreement, and his earlier promise that he only wished for the Sudetenland, by invading and annexing the rest of the country. This brought Europe still closer to war, as though Britain and France did not respond in this instance (as it was not technically an invasion – the Czech leader ‘voluntarily’ gave up his nation – the ultimate in appeasement excuse making by Chamberlain) they pledged to defend Polish independence, the next likely target of Hitler’s aggression. The appeasement policy also alienated Stalin from the allies as he thought Britain and France pursued it to allow for German expansion in the east to prevent a general European war. Thus, Stalin went to Hitler to secure the position of the USSR and signed the Nazi-Soviet pact, which in its own way contributed to the WW2.

**Just Britain & France?** While appeasement is largely associated with Britain, you could also argue that the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939 was Stalin following appeasement in an essay that focuses on this area. It is also important to note that France largely followed the British lead in this policy – partly for the same reasons, partly as she was often politically divided and lacked confidence to act without British support.

**c) Historiography of Appeasement**  
*Appeasement has been a hugely controversial issue among historians as a possible cause of war since Chamberlain’s policies in the 1930s. The* ***‘orthodox’****view developed directly after the war blamed Chamberlain for failing to challenge Hitler earlier, and argued that he thus played an important role in bringing about war. A striking version of this view was given by A.J.P. Taylor in 1961, when he argued that Hitler was an opportunistic statesman rather than a ‘clear planner’ in foreign policy, which meant that appeasing him simply encouraged him to be bolder in seizing new opportunities to expand.*

***Revisionist:*** *However, the release of British government documents more recently has allowed a more sympathetic view of appeasement to emerge. Chamberlain’s policy is now seen as having been shaped by a complex range of domestic, national and international considerations, as ‘hoping for the best while preparing for the worst’ in that it allowed Britain the time to re-arm until in a position to be able to challenge Hitler militarily.*  
  
**7. The Failure of Diplomacy & the Nazi-Soviet Pact 1939**

The **1935 London Naval Agreement** could also be used as evidence of a general failure of diplomacy as it alienated Britain’s allies in the **Stresa Front**. By the same token, the Hoare –Laval Pact, which undermined the League’s reputation in the Abyssinian Crisis, can be viewed in the same category.

**a) Why did GB and France fail to secure an alliance with the USSR against Germany? [SCAB]**   
  
**Suspicion** – Chamberlain didn’t trust Stalin – Communist & dictator. Stalin didn’t trust the British [thought they wanted to trick him into war with Germany]. Poland didn’t trust USSR.

**Choice** – If Stalin allied with Britain, he would end up fighting in Poland on Britain’s behalf, while Hitler was promising half of Poland for doing nothing.

**Appeasement** – Stalin did not think Britain would honour its promise to Poland. He thought he would be left fighting Hitler alone.

**Britain delayed**, Aug 1939 – Britain sent an official to USSR by boat - too slow. When he arrived, it emerged that had had not been given the proper authority to actually sign an agreement. Stalin interpreted this as being part of a deliberate British policy to waste time until Hitler declared war on the USSR (thereby hoping one would destroy the other). While there is probably a grain of truth in this, a fairer interpretation would be that there was reluctance to rush into an agreement with Stalin (whom they did not trust) without time for full consideration.  
  
**b) Why a Nazi – Soviet Pact? [THUG]**   
  
In August 1939 the USSR signed an agreement with Germany.

**Time** to prepare for war – It gave Russia 18 months to make military preparations.

**Hope to gain** – Stalin hoped Germany, Britain and France would wear themselves out in a long war.

**Unhappy** **with Britain** – Stalin turned to Germany when Britain was too slow.

**Germany's Motives** – Hitler thought it would make Britain back down over Poland.

**The Nazi-Soviet Pact**Following the failure of Britain’s half-hearted attempts to make an agreement with Stalin, Germany and the USSR signed the Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact in August 1939. The pact saw the two great ideological enemies pledge not to attack each other, but they also secretly agreed to split Poland between them and identified ‘spheres of influence’ in Eastern Europe and the Baltics. Stalin wanted to try and avoid war with Nazi Germany as long as possible, but was fully aware of Hitler’s intentions to invade (although still managed to be surprised when he actually did!). He saw the agreement as a way of ‘buying time’ to prepare for this future war. He also hoped that Germany and the West would exhaust each other in the war, leaving the USSR as the strongest nation.

**How did the pact contribute to the outbreak of the war?**  
Hitler made the agreement to avoid war on two fronts, and hoped that it would scare Britain and France from acting to honour their pledge to Poland. He saw it as a short-term measure, to allow him to deal with the West first - he still planned to invade the USSR in the future. Having made this agreement, Hitler could go ahead and invade Poland on 1st September. On 3rd September Britain and France kept their word to Poland, and declared war on Germany. The Nazi-Soviet Pact served to make war inevitable. It was yet another example of Hitler’s opportunism and willingness to be flexible in order to achieve his foreign policy aims, and the alliance with Russia meant that he was free to pursue his goal of annexing Poland. Hitler might have been expecting Britain and France to back down again and appease him, but in this case he was wrong and his invasion led to the start of World War II in Europe, when Britain and France finally decided to challenge him.

**Overall Historiography – Who’s to blame?**  
  
**Lewis Namier (1946):** German desire to dominate Europe as the single most important cause of ***both*** World Wars! – **Germany’s fault!**

**Hugh Trevor-Roper (1960),** stressed that Hitler was a *planner* who deliberately sought and started the war for deeply-held ideological reasons. He argued that Hitler had a clear, step-by-step plan to realise his goal of creating a racially pure German empire in Eastern Europe. Trevor-Roper uses *Mein Kampf*, written while Hitler was in prison in 1926, and the Hossbach Moemorandum, to support his view that Hitler's foreign policy was based on clear objectives that were consistently and coherently followed once he came to power: Lebensraum in the East, and the 'final solution' to exterminate the European Jews. *"To the end, Hitler maintained the purity of his war aims." –* **Hitler’s fault!**

**A.J.P. Taylor (1961),** argued that Hitler was from being a planner in foreign policy, and in fact was an *opportunist* taking advantage of the situations presented to him. This view of Hitler therefore reduces the extent of Hitler's responsibility for causing the war, and implies that Britain and France encouraged Hitler's opportunism through their policy of appeasement. Taylor also shocked his readers by arguing that Hitler was not a radically different German leader, but rather he was simply an 'ordinary statesman' following in traditional German foreign policy concerns - i.e. Treaty of Brest-Litovsk as proof that earlier German statesmen had ambitions in the East. *"Far from wanting a war, a general war was the last thing Hitler wanted." –* **Britain and France’s fault!**

**Alan Bullock (1964),** and something of a *synthesis* of the above two positions: yes, Hitler was a strategist with clear aims and objectives, but he pursued these using clearly opportunistic techniques. So Hitler was both a planner and an opportunist! Therefore, Hitler must be blamed as deliberately initiating the war – however, his methods could only have worked because of the almost ridiculous number of opportunities that were presented to him by appeasement and the failure of collective security. – **Everything & everyone!**