

Major Themes: World War II

Economic Instability: 1928-1939

The first years after the end of the Great War were not easy- people in Central Europe suffered from a famine caused by wartime blockades, a major flu epidemic killed 50 million people across the world, and soldiers returned from war to face unemployment. As part of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany had to make huge reparation payments to Britain and France, which slowed their economic recovery. To compensate, Germany printed extra money to pay their debt, triggering hyperinflation. Great Britain and France purchased war supplies from the United States on credit, and emerged from the World War I deeply in debt while the U.S. became the world's greatest economic power. This precarious debt balance came crashing down when the U.S. Stock Market crashed, sending the world economy into the Great Depression. A depression is an economic downturn in which large numbers of business fail and workers are unemployed. People who lost money in the stock market stopped spending, American banks were forced to collect their loans from European nations who borrowed money to aid in their post-war recovery, and the depression quickly spread worldwide. Most government leaders failed to react effectively to the Great Depression- many stopped spending, tightened credit and cut off international trade, which made the depression worse. As many as 40 million people were unemployed in the United States, Germany, Japan, and other industrialized nations during the Great Depression.



Major Events:

1919- Spanish Flu Pandemic kills 50 million people worldwide

1929- U.S. Stock Market Crashes, leading to the Great Depression

1931- Credit Anstalt, a major Austrian bank, is one of the first European banks to collapse during the Great Depression

1932- Decision to suspend German reparation payments is made at Lausanne Conference

1932- Franklin D. Roosevelt is elected President of the United States

Fascism: 1919-1945



Fascism was a political ideology that was characterized by extreme feelings of nationalism. Fascists saw war as a glorious experience to prove their nation's superiority to others, often used violence to defeat their opponents, and encouraged blind obedience to a single, all-powerful leader. Fascists also believed a single political party should unite all social classes, opposed worker unions and strikes, and saw the Great War as a massive social revolution that initiated immense political change. Indeed, as empires were dissolved and old ruling families removed from power, fascism emerged as a radical form of authoritative power. In Italy, Benito Mussolini formed the party in response to increasing unrest stoked by communist riots. Mussolini, while denouncing the

Communists, actually used many of their strategies to promote his own ideology. He modelled his party's organization like the Bolsheviks and controlled a private army of party members, known as the Black Shirts for the clothing they wore, who pledged absolute allegiance to their leader. In Germany, Adolf Hitler built up the power of his Nazi party by urging Germans to abandon democracy and return Germany to glory under a strong leader. He used the Great Depression to agitate the German people in order to incite rebellion against the government, which would give him the support to establish dictatorial rule.

Major Events:

1919- *Il Manifesto dei Fasci Italiani di Combattimento* (The Fascist Manifesto) is published in Italy

1922- Benito Mussolini takes authoritative control of the government after "The March on Rome"

1933- Adolf Hitler is appointed Chief Minister of the *Reichstag*, the German legislature.

1934- Hitler appoints himself as absolute dictator, or "Führer" of Germany

1936 - 1939- The Spanish Civil War, led by Generalissimo Francisco Franco, places fascists in power until 1975

World at War: 1939-1945

World War II could be seen as resuming the previous war that ended in 1918. Hitler sought revenge from France and Great Britain for Germany's humiliating defeat. Hitler and Mussolini laid plans for expansion and built up their armaments, while Britain and France tried various appeasement tactics to avoid another conflict. Meanwhile, industrial success inspired Japan to replace European imperialism with Japanese dominance while searching for new sources of raw materials. The Japanese saw the upcoming war as an opportunity to take control of Asia, and they aligned themselves with Germany and Italy. The official start of WWII came with Hitler's invasion of Poland, followed shortly by Denmark, Belgium, France, and parts of North Africa. Hitler launched persistent attacks all over Europe, especially in London, who never surrendered to Hitler's demands. Since the war was fought predominantly in Europe and in parts of Asia, the U.S. tried to again maintain neutrality in a global conflict. However, after Japan launched a sneak attack on Americans stationed at Pearl Harbor, the United States joined the Allied Powers (Great Britain, Russia, and France) in fighting the Axis Powers (Germany and Italy, who supported Japan by also declaring war on the United States). World War II was a global conflict whose destruction was unparalleled: as many as 70 million people died, many of European and Asian governments collapsed, and the introduction of nuclear weaponry set the stage for the conflicts to come during the Cold War.



Major Events:

1938- Hitler annexes Austria and Czechoslovakia, claiming to unite the German nationals living there

1939- Hitler, promoting the need for *lebensraum* (living space) for Germans, invades Poland

1941- Japanese attack American forces at Pearl Harbor

1945- Allies declare victory in Europe, defeating Nazi Germany and the Axis powers

1945- Atomic bombs are dropped on Japanese cities Hiroshima and Nagasaki, ending the war in Japan

The Holocaust: 1941-1945



Anti-Semitism, or the hatred of Jews, was common among Europeans for centuries before the Holocaust. Jews frequently faced prejudice and persecution; their unique beliefs and customs made them easy targets in times of social unrest and economic difficulty. As Hitler came to power, he planned to enslave whole populations and exterminate others, especially the European Jews. At first, Jews were forced to wear yellow stars on their clothes, businesses and synagogues were vandalized and burned down, and they were removed from their homes and forced to live in ghettos. Hitler then began to implement "The Final Solution", a genocide of the Jews and other undesirable populations like the Romani (gypsy), Slavic ethnic groups, the elderly, and the mentally-disabled. A

genocide is the systematic effort to eliminate an entire people or nationality. Some Jews were marched for long periods until they died from exhaustion, while others were executed next to trenches they had been forced to dig themselves. Most were sent to concentration camps, where they were starved, subjected to inhumane conditions, and forced to do hard labor. Germans tattooed identification numbers on Jews' forearms- this helped them keep track of their prisoners. Many Jews that were sent to the camps did not survive- most were killed with poison gas and their bodies burned in large ovens. It is estimated that over 12 million people- 6 million of which were Jews- were killed during the Holocaust.

Major Events:

1935- The Reichstag passes the Nuremberg Laws, which curtailed or eliminated Jewish rights in Germany

1938- Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues are vandalized during Kristallnacht

1939-1942- German and Polish Jews are forced to move to ghettos

1944- Hungary begins deporting Jews to Auschwitz after Nazis occupy the country

1945- Many of the remaining concentration camps are liberated by Allied Forces