

European History/Europe: 1918 to 1945

The end of World War I saw the European combatant nations exhausted, an entire generation of young men dead on the battlefield, and political conditions vastly changed from those before the war. The German, Austrian and Russian monarchies had been driven from power and replaced with democratic or revolutionary governments, and many European ethnic groups which had been subject to these three states seized the chance to obtain independence. It was against this background that the victorious powers attempted to bring permanent peace to Europe. The victors of the war were quick to blame Germany for starting the war and resolved to punish her, and this is exactly what took place at the Treaty of Versailles in 1919. The treaty was so harsh on Germany mostly because France and Italy were angry with them.

The Treaty of Versailles of 1918

At the Peace of Paris or Treaty of Versailles, the "Big Four" convened to discuss what the result of the end of the war should be. The big four consisted of the United States, represented by President Woodrow Wilson; Britain, represented by Prime Minister Lloyd-George; France, represented by Clemenceau, who wanted most of all to get revenge against Germany; and Orlando of Italy. Germany and Russia were not invited, as Germany was defeated, and Russia had made a separate peace with Germany in 1917, and was feared because of the rise of the revolutionary Bolsheviks there.

File:WilsonVersailles.jpg
Woodrow Wilson and the American peace commissioners during the negotiations on the Treaty of Versailles.

At the discussions, many taking part looked to President Wilson for leadership, as the United States was the least damaged and seemingly the most neutral victor, and because the members saw Wilson's 14 Points plan provide an idealistic road map to a new future.

Wilson's Fourteen Points

Wilson's Fourteen Points were democratic, liberal, enlightened, and progressive - a new type of treaty designed to make peace forever secure. The key aspects of his propositions were to disallow secret treaties in the future, allow freedom of the seas, provide for arms reduction, allow the self-determination of nations, and to establish the League of Nations, which Wilson saw as a key instrument to prevent future war.

The Treaty's Treatment of Germany

In contrast to Wilson's idealism, the Treaty of Versailles was harsh, brutal, punitive, and retributive, especially because France still had lingering anger over the Franco-Prussian war. The aspects of the Treaty were designed to attempt to prevent Germany's ability to wage war in the future. It ordered that France would control the Saar valley, rich in coal and iron, for 15 years, and that France would have Alsace-Lorraine returned. The Rhineland between France and Germany would be demilitarized as a buffer zone between the two nations. Germany's colonies were divided between France and Britain, and Germany itself lost all together 13.5% of land and 12.5% of her population. The German navy was confiscated and the German army was limited to 100,000 members, and no submarines, planes, or artillery were permitted. Germany was forced to pay brutal war reparations in the amount of 132 billion gold marks. Finally, Article 231, or the War Guilt Clause, was a strictly retributive measure, ordering Germany and her allies to bear full responsibility for the war.

Problems of Germany After World War I

Germany's new democratic government, the so-called Weimar Republic, faced serious problems following the Treaty of Versailles. Though Kaiser Wilhelm II had abdicated and the wartime military leadership had lost its authority, Germans widely refused to admit that their army had lost the war. A significant number believed that Germany could have continued to fight and eventually gotten the upper hand, and that surrender was a "stab in the back" of an army capable of winning the war.

While this severely undermined the credibility of the new republic, the notion that the German army could have continued the war and eventually won is rejected by most historians, due to the introduction of fresh U.S. forces and Germany's weakness after four years of battle. In fact, in late 1918 the German High Command, facing a powerful Allied offensive toward German soil and exhaustion of their own troops, turned in desperation to Germany's democratic politicians and asked them to form a government which the Allies would find acceptable for negotiations.

Immediately after the war, the Weimar Republic encountered severe economic problems. Millions of demobilized soldiers arrived home to find little or no work. Hunger was widespread. In addition, France and Britain owed war debts to the United States, and in order to pay them demanded reparation from Germany. Germany was unable to pay, so France seized the industrial towns of the Ruhr valley. The German response was to print money to pay the unemployed workers of the Ruhr, which resulted in massive hyperinflation in Germany.

Politically, there was near-chaos for several years, as fringe political groups on both the left and the right openly and violently battled each other and the central government. The Spartacists, or communists, staged uprisings in Berlin and other cities and briefly seized power in Bavaria. The Freikorps, various bands of demobilized soldiers who did not want to lay down their arms, crushed the Bavarian coup d'état. However, the Freikorps also sought to overthrow the Weimar Republic's government with a coup of their own in 1920, which failed when German workers responded with a general strike.

This was the atmosphere in 1919 when a small right-wing party in Munich took in a new member, an army corporal named Adolf Hitler. A skilled orator and politician, Hitler rapidly rose to head the National Socialist German Worker's Party, known as the Nazis.

German Prosperity Returns

In the late 1920s, prosperity returned to Germany, primarily as a result of U.S. efforts through the Dawes Plan of 1924 and the Young Plan of 1929. These plans provided loans to the Weimar Republic and gave the Republic a realistic plan for reparation payments, helping to restore economic stability.

This prosperity had a diminishing effect on the radical groups of the right and left. The appeal of these groups was reduced as a result of a prosperous Germany.

The Rise of Pacifism and Isolation in the 1920s

During the 1920s, the prevailing attitudes of most citizens and nations was that of pacifism and isolation. After seeing the horrors and atrocities of war during World War I, nations desired to avoid such a situation again in the future. Thus, Europe took a number of steps to ensure peace during the 1920s.

At the Washington Naval Conference in 1921, the United States, Great Britain, France, Japan, and Italy agreed to build no new battleships for ten years and to reduce the current size of their navies.

During the Locarno Treaties of 1925, Germany unconditionally guaranteed the borders of France and Belgium and pledged to never violate the borders of Czechoslovakia and Poland.

In 1926, Germany joined the League of Nations. The League was one of the major means that Europeans ensured peace during the time.

In 1928, 65 nations signed the Kellogg Briand Pact, rejecting war as a means of policy. In 1934, Russia joined the League of Nations.

Democracies in Europe from 1919 through 1939

While fascism rose in Europe, the liberal democracies in the Britain and France were encountering isolationism and pacifism, as explained above, as well as problems with unemployment and colonial struggles. As a result of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the concept that government is responsible for meeting the social needs of its citizens became increasingly popular.

Britain

Before WW1 The Old-Age Pensions Act 1908 of the United Kingdom, passed in 1908 is often regarded as one of the foundations of modern social welfare in the United Kingdom and forms part of the wider social welfare reforms of the Liberal Government of 1906-1914.

The Act provided for a non-contributory old age pension for persons over the age of 70. It was enacted in January 1909 and paid a weekly pension of 5s a week (7s 6d for married couples) to half a million who were eligible. The level of benefit was deliberately set low to encourage workers to also make their own provision for retirement. In order to be eligible, they had to be earning less than £31. 10s. per year, and had to pass a 'character test'; only those with a 'good character' could receive the pensions. You also had to have been a UK resident for at least 20 years to be eligible and people who hadn't worked their whole life were also not eligible.

Also excluded were those in receipt of poor relief, 'lunatics' in asylums, persons sentenced to prison for ten years after their release, persons convicted of drunkenness (at the discretion of the court), and any person who was guilty of 'habitual failure to work' according to one's ability.

After World War I, Britain faced a number of problems. One of the most serious was unemployment, with approximately 2 million people on the "dole," or Britain's welfare system. This resulted in the rise of the Labour party. ~~The Labour party created a modern welfare state in Britain, creating an old age pension,~~ medical care, public housing, and unemployment relief.

The British industries, now antiquated and falling behind, were selling less as the United States stepped up to the industrial plate.

Members of British colonies, such as Ireland, Egypt, India, and Palestine, were finding the ideals of the Enlightenment appealing and were beginning to resist British rule.

Finally, the Great Depression caused massive problems in Britain.

Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, a member of the Labour Party, enacted a policy of "retrenchment," which cut social spending, disallowed employment for women, and installed 100% tariffs on foreign goods. He enacted the ideas of Keynesian Economics, authored by J.M. Keynes, which advocated increased government spending during a depression in order to put money into the economy.

France

The Third Republic of France was the governing body from 1870 until 1940. Although it was widely disliked for its political instability and corruption, it did manage to deliver a golden age, what became known as the *belle époque*, for Paris. The city acquired many distinctive new monuments and public buildings, foremost among them the Eiffel Tower, constructed for the World Exhibition of 1889. It was renowned as a

centre for the arts, with the Impressionists taking their inspiration from its new vistas. At the same time, Paris acquired a less savoury reputation as the "sin capital of Europe", with hundreds of brothels, revues and risqué cabarets such as the famous Moulin Rouge. The city also acquired its metro system, opened in 1900.

In 1877, President MacMahon tried to dissolve parliament out of disgust with the premier and to seize more power. However, the French people elected the same deputies to Parliament. The French people clearly wanted to prevent another dictator from taking power.

In 1886-1889, General Boulanger came close to overthrowing the government. He gained large support among monarchists, aristocrats, and workers, pleading to fight Germany. However, he lost his courage at the moment of the coup, and he fled to Belgium and committed suicide.

In 1894, a French Jewish army officer named Alfred Dreyfus was falsely accused of treason in what became known as the "Dreyfus Affair," showing that anti-Semitism was still strong in France, especially in the army and the Catholic Church. Émile Zola wrote the famous letter "J'Accuse!" which helped raise support for Dreyfus, who was eventually pardoned and restored to rank. Thus, in 1905 France enacted the separation of church and state.

After World War I, France encountered a number of problems. They had difficulty with the cost and burden of rebuilding the nation, and they lost all of their investments in Russia as a result of the Russian Revolution. The reparations were not paid by Germany as expected. Additionally, tax evasion was common in France at the time.

By the late 1920s, prosperity had been restored. However, the Great Depression of the 1930s triggered political unrest and social turmoil. In 1934, the socialists and communists fought the fascists in the Chamber of Deputies, one of the houses of parliament, and threw ink at each other. As a result of the unrest, the people elected a "Popular Front," a coalition of socialists, liberals, and communists, to govern. The leader of the Popular Front was Leon Blum, who during his tenure enacted family subsidies, welfare benefits, two weeks of vacation, a forty hour work week, and collective bargaining. Leon Blum was replaced in 1938 by Eduard Daladier.

Challenges to Democracy in the 1930s

As a result of the Great Depression, fringe groups such as fascists and communists became more appealing to the general populace of Europe.

Causes of the Great Depression

The Great Depression occurred because of a number of reasons. Low wages at the time resulted in less purchasing power. An agricultural depression and falling prices resulted in increased agricultural output but decreased demand. Overproduction in the factories, and overexpansion of credit, as well as the U.S. stock market crash of 1929 also contributed greatly. Actions pursued when the Great Depression was still in its infancy involved the Fed's untimely raise in interest rates (in hopes to lure foreign investment), and later on, the Smoot-Hawley Tariff created immediate tariff backlash across the world and collapsed a great majority of world trade.

Effects on the Colonies

These changes in Europe resulted in more calls for autonomy in the colonies, and the influence of Woodrow Wilson's proposed "self-determination" of nations grew.

In 1931, the Statute of Westminster created the "Commonwealth of Nations" consisting of Canada, New Zealand, Australia, the Irish Free State, and South Africa. These nations were given autonomy but were linked to Britain through trade.

In the 1930s, India began yearning for autonomy. The Muslim League and the Indian National Congress called for a greater role of Indians in their government. Gandhi's "civil disobedience" led to an end to British rule, and in 1935 the Government of India Act provided India with an internal self-government. In 1947 India gained its independence and split with Pakistan.

In 1908, "Young Turks" overthrew Abdul Hamid II of Turkey and ruled the nation until 1918. After World War I, Kemal Atatürk took the leadership of Turkey. In 1923 he moved the capital from Istanbul to Ankara, beginning the Republic of Turkey. Atatürk established western dress, the Latin alphabet, and banned polygamy from Turkey. In 1936, women were given suffrage and were allowed to serve in parliament.

Fascism in Germany and Italy

Italy experienced a turn to fascism after World War I, and Benito Mussolini took control as dictator of the nation. Soon afterward, Germany under Hitler took the same turn. Fascism was a new form of government, initiated by Mussolini, that promoted extreme nationalism and national unity; an emphasis on masculinity, youth, aggression, and violence; racial superiority; one supreme leader with superhuman abilities; the rejection of individual rights; the use of secret police, censorship, and propaganda; a militaristic and aggressive foreign policy; strict central control of the economy; and the holding of the individual as subordinate to the needs of society as a whole.

The Italian Fascist Regime

The liberal establishment of Italy, fearing a socialist revolution inspired by the ideas of the Russian Revolution, endorsed the small National Fascist Party, led by Benito Mussolini. After several years of struggle, in October 1922 the fascists attempted a coup (the "Marcia su Roma", i.e. March on Rome); the fascist forces were largely inferior, but the king ordered the army not to intervene, formed an alliance with Mussolini, and convinced the liberal party to endorse a fascist-led government. Over the next few years, Mussolini (who became known as "Il

Duce", the leader) eliminated all political parties (including the liberals) and curtailed personal liberties under the pretext of preventing revolution.

The Rise of Fascism and Hitler in Germany



Benito
Mussolini

At the beginning of the 1930s, Germany was not far from a civil war. Paramilitary troops, which were set up by several parties, intimidated voters and seeded violence and anger among the public, who suffered from high unemployment and poverty. Meanwhile, elitists in influential positions, alarmed by the rise of anti-governmental parties, fought amongst themselves and exploited the emergency authority provided in the Weimar Constitution to rule undemocratically by presidential decree.

After a succession of unsuccessful cabinets, on January 29, 1933, President von Hindenburg, seeing little alternative and pushed by advisors, appointed Adolf Hitler Chancellor of Germany.

On 27 February, the Reichstag was set on fire. Basic rights were abrogated under an emergency decree. An Enabling Act gave Hitler's government full legislative power. A centralised totalitarian state was established, no longer based on the rule of democratic law, a policy that Hitler had outlined in his biography 'Mein Kampf.' The new regime made Germany a one-party state by outlawing all oppositional parties and repressing the different-minded parts of the public with the party's own organisations SA and SS, as well as the newly founded state security police Gestapo.



Adolf Hitler

Industry was closely regulated with quotas and requirements in order to shift the economy towards a war production base. Massive public work projects and extensive deficit spending by the state helped to significantly lower the high unemployment rate. This and large welfare programmes are said to be the main factors that kept support of the public even late in the war.

In 1936, German troops entered the demilitarised Rhineland in an attempt to rebuild national self-esteem. Emboldened, Hitler followed from 1938 onwards a policy of expansionism to establish Greater Germany, that is, one German nation state, starting with the unification with Austria (called "Anschluss") and the annexation of the Sudetes region in Bohemia from Czechoslovakia. The British Prime Minister realized that his policies of appeasement towards Germany were being taken advantage of. To avoid a two-front war, Hitler concluded the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, a treaty of non-aggression, with the Soviet Union.

The Spanish Civil War 1936-1939

In 1923, a coup led by General Miguel Primo de Rivera formed a new government in alliance with King Alfonso XIII Bourbon. In 1930, opposition to Primo de Rivera's right wing government led to his resignation. Out of a desire for democracy and socialism by the populace of Spain, Alfonso was overthrown in 1931 and a republic declared. In 1936, a Popular Front of leftists forces was elected to Parliament and took control of the government. Anticlerical actions of leftists and their direct attacks on Catholic churches and monasteries angered all conservative Spaniards. Left and right-wing political militants clashed on the streets. In July 1936, rebellion broke out among a big part of army units. It was supported by conservative forces of all kinds of social background and the fighting began.

The nation broke into two factions. The Republicans, or "Loyalists," consisted of communists, socialists, anarchists, and liberals, and received some international support as well as big military and financial aid from Stalin. The "Nationalists" consisted of monarchists, angered Catholic believers, landowners, the army, members of the "Falange" party, traditionalists and received a great deal of direct aid from Italy and Germany.

In 1936, Great Britain, France, and the United States signed a non-intervention pact regarding the civil war. In 1937, the town of Guernica, a civilian town, was attacked and bombed by the German airforce. In 1939, nationalists took Barcelona and Madrid, and General Francisco Franco announced the end of the Civil War. From 1939 until 1975 Franco would rule as dictator in Spain.

Again to War, the Outbreak of World War II

The Treaty of Versailles produced so-called "revisionist" powers. Germany, who was the loser of the war, had harsh reparations imposed against them. Italy got nothing out of the Peace of Paris. Hungary lost two thirds of her territory and each third ethnic Hungarian was placed under foreign rule. Japan didn't receive the racial equality clause they desired, even after defeating the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War. The Soviet Union was snubbed at the Peace of Paris as well, as it was not invited to attend.

Aggressive Actions by the Axis Powers and Western Response

In 1933, Germany left the League of Nations. In 1934, Germany attempted to annex Austria. In 1935, Italy invaded Ethiopia while Germany reoccupied the Saar valley and began conscription and open rearmament. In 1936, Germany remilitarized the Rhineland. In 1938, Germany annexed Austria and the Sudetenland.

The prevalence of pacificism in the 1920s in Europe meant that European nations were reluctant to interfere in the actions of the revisionist powers. In addition, the nations of the Treaty of Versailles began to feel guilt for their treatment of Germany, and believed that they had wronged Germany. Moreover, the areas that Germany initially invaded were all of German heritage, and the leaders of the nations wondered if perhaps Germany should be allowed to take those territories. The leaders met at the Munich Conference in 1938, and Hitler promised to take no more aggressive actions.

In 1939, however, Germany seized the rest of Czechoslovakia, showing that war was inevitable and that appeasement had failed. Poland and Hungary also participated, taking sections of Czech and Slovak territory adjacent to their borders. During the same year, Italy and Germany signed the "Pact of Steel" alliance.

British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain responded to the occupation of Czechoslovakia by giving a guarantee to Poland that Britain would go to war against Germany if Germany attacked Poland. The Polish government had not requested this alliance. Many historians have seen the guarantee as Chamberlain opening his eyes to Hitler's aggressive plans, but some others hold that it foolishly made war much more likely, by encouraging Poland to defy Germany in any negotiations over the Polish Corridor and the city of Danzig.

Possibly in response to Chamberlain's action, Germany and the Soviet Union shocked the Western powers by signing a non-aggression pact. This pact showed that war was imminent because two systems mutually pledged for the other's destruction came to agreement.

On September 1, 1939, Germany invaded Poland with its new war machine using what was called lightning warfare or Blitzkrieg. As a result, on September 3, 1939, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. On September 17, 1939, the U.S.S.R. invaded Poland. In 1940, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the Tripartite Treaty, forming the Axis powers.

The Second World War

After the invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, between the fall of 1939 and the spring of 1940 the Allies did not directly attack Germany in the west, but rather they engaged in harassing operations which had become known as the "phony war." This allowed Germany to finish the mobilization of its forces. In April 1940, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway. The next month Belgium, the Netherlands, and France were attacked. Within six weeks, France had surrendered.

Winston Churchill became Prime Minister of Britain in May 1940. Churchill was dedicated to the destruction of Hitler, whatever the cost and using any means necessary. Churchill opened a new era in warfare by launching an unprecedented bombing campaign against civilian targets in Germany. The Germans retaliated, and the heroic British defense became what is known as the Battle of Britain. London and many other cities in England were hard-hit with large civilian casualties.

In 1941, Germany invaded Russia in an attempt to destroy communism, enslave the Russians, and get oil that was desperately needed to power the German war machine. However, the invasion failed, and winter hit Russia, causing massive death and destruction among Germany's army.

In 1942, Germany attempted to siege the Russian city of Stalingrad, but the attack ultimately ended in Soviet victory and the defeat of the Germans. Also during 1942, the British and the United States defeated German forces in North Africa.

By 1943, the Allies had landed in Italy and were beating back Mussolini's forces. During 1943, the Battle of Kursk, the largest armored engagement of all time, also took place on the Eastern Front. Again, the Soviets were highly victorious against German forces. On September 8, 1943, Italy surrendered to the allies.

By 1943, an immense bombing campaign by the U.S. and Britain was under way to break Germany's will to fight by destroying her cities and making her population homeless. Almost every major city was devastated with huge loss of life, but postwar studies showed that the bombing had little effect on industrial production, and may have strengthened Germans' will to fight.

On June 6, 1944, Allied forces landed on the beaches of Normandy on what has become known as D-Day. The offensive was successful for the Allies, and the Allies suffered far fewer casualties than expected. This marked the beginning of the end of the war. In December 1944, the Battle of the Bulge, the German's last major offensive in Western Europe, took place in Belgium. The result of this battle was a victory for the Allies and the crushing of much of the remainder of Germany's forces. On May 8, 1945, Victory in Europe Day occurred as the Russians took Berlin.

Conclusion of the War

As the war neared the end, two major conferences took place to discuss how to most effectively terminate the war.

The Yalta Conference

The Yalta Conference began on February 11, 1945. In attendance were U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, and the Soviet leader Joseph Stalin. Yalta resulted in a number of essential provisions.

The first was the establishment of the United Nations, an international organization that describes itself as a "global association of governments facilitating cooperation in international law, international security, economic development, and social equity." The United Nations replaced the League of Nations, and was given the capacity to enforce itself militarily.

Yalta called for a four part dismemberment of Germany, with a portion going to each the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and Russia. This was based upon the fact that while Germany was not unified it did not present nearly the threat that it did as a unified nation.

War criminals were tried at Nuremberg, marking the first time that members of an army were held to international standards.

Poland was reconstituted, albeit with large territorial changes and placement in the Soviet sphere of influence. Reparations were enforced against Germany, and it was agreed that Russia would enter the war against Japan after the defeat with Germany.

Finally, the parties agreed to the Declaration of Liberated Europe. This provided that liberated countries would be given the right to hold free elections and choose their own government. This was an attempt to keep Stalin from annexing eastern Europe, but this attempt obviously failed.

The Potsdam Conference

The Potsdam Conference took place from July to August 1945. In attendance were President Harry S. Truman, replacing President Roosevelt as a result of Roosevelt's death, British Prime Minister Attlee of the Labour party, who represented Britain after Churchill's Conservative Party's defeat in Britain, and Joseph Stalin. The Conference provided for German disarmament, demilitarization, and denazification. Poland was shifted to the west to reward the Soviet Union and to punish Germany, and as a result there was a massive post-war migration.

Finally, Japan was threatened with destruction by a "powerful new weapon" which turned out to be the atomic bomb.

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