

The World Between the World Wars: A Summary

Notable trends:

- 1) challenges to most political, social and economic orders
- 2) discrediting of liberalism (democracy and capitalism)
- 3) strengthening of nationalisms and anti-colonial movements
- 4) the growing role of government in economic and social organization

North America

Made incredible wealth during WWI, but experienced unemployment problems soon afterwards when soldiers returned home looking for jobs. During the Great Depression, the US practiced economic nationalism, placing high tariffs on imports to protect home industries. This only exacerbated the problems. Americans became paranoid of foreigners; the KKK grew to its largest membership.

The New Deal was initiated, seemed to follow ideas of John Maynard Keynes: more government spending to increase demand. With the New Deal, the government got more involved than ever before in the economic and social lives of Americans.

Out of necessity, women gained economic and social advancements when the men went off the war. After the war, the expectation was that they return to traditional roles. Because the role of women in the war effort could not be ignored, women were given the right to vote as consolation.

Western Europe

As in the US, governments had to respond to massive unemployment and social unrest. Governments threw up protective tariffs and government spending dropped to compensate for falling revenues. This worsened their conditions. Radical policies seemed more appealing to people. (In Scandinavia, nations increased government spending.) Parliamentary government either became paralyzed and ineffective, as in France, or was abandoned altogether, as in Germany, Italy, and Spain where fascism emerged.

As the Austrian-Hungarian empire was dismembered, new nations were formed and divided roughly along ethnic lines (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Hungary). Poland was reformed and part of Germany was ceded to Czechoslovakia.

Latin America

Latin America was cut off from its export markets during WWI, so they experienced import substitution industrialization. This is where they quickly learn to produce what they formerly imported from industrial nations. However, gains were short-lived as real wages and the standard of living for the urban worker declined. As labor unrest became more pronounced, the traditional elites forged an alliance with the rising middle class (compare to similar alliance in Europe before 1848 revolutions). To make matters worse, Latin American economies crashed during the Great Depression as world-wide demand for coffee, minerals and sugar declined sharply. As a result of these pressures, new regimes were established across much of Latin America. In Brazil, a strong centralized government, modeled on Mussolini's Italy, came to power. In Argentina, the nationalistic, fascist sympathizing Juan Peron came to power. Mexico had a long revolutionary process and established a liberal constitution.

East Asia

The Great Depression hit Japan hard as this nation was heavily dependent upon trade with western nations. The Depression gave impetus to the return of Japanese nationalism as a counterforce to westernization. The moderately western style government drew skepticism and distrust, especially from the military. The Depression motivated Japan to become economically independent of the West by building an Asian economic empire. In 1931 the Japanese military invaded the Chinese province of Manchuria on their own initiative, without the support of the Japanese government. As this war went on, the split between the military and civilian leadership continued to widen until the military became the dominant force. The militarization of Japan was complete by the end of the 1930s.

In China, frustration over the pro-Japanese nature of the Treaty of Versailles led to massive protests called the May Fourth Movement which succeeded in forcing the new Republic not to sign the Treaty. Two responses to the post-war situation were Chinese nationalism, led by Sun Yatsen, and the rise of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921. With aid from Stalin (the Chinese were impressed with his anti-imperial stance) these two forces came together in the Northern Expedition, a military march to reign in the portions of China racked by tribal warlords. After its success, the nationalists turned on the communist party in a brutal attempt to eliminate them. Under the leadership of Mao Zedong, they escaped to the northern region during the Long March where they established their headquarters. Mao's version of Marxism, called Maoism, held that peasants rather than the urban proletariat would carry out the communist revolution.

In China, the communist party (which spurned foot-binding and tradition) was attractive to young women suffering under the Confucian patriarchy.

South Asia

In India the Indian National Congress party pioneered the path to independence. (INC). It became a contact point for western-educated elites increasingly worried about English racism and colonial policies. At Congress meetings, Indians could assemble and express their grievances in a new common language: English. Indians were particularly distressed that their participation in the Great War did not earn them any measure of independence (they had been promised this by the British beforehand).

To make matters worse, the Rowlatt Act severely limited Indian's civil liberties, such as freedom of the press and fueled protests throughout India. Mohandas Gandhi consolidated the local protests across India into a mass movement. His combination of a western education (London) and his persona as a Hindu holy man allowed him to appeal to most aspects of Indian society. He advocated peaceful boycotts, satyagraha (truth force).

Russia

The Russian Revolution and Civil War devastated the Russian economy. Soldiers returning from war flooded the labor market and massive unemployment followed. Lenin sought to help Russia recover by temporarily suspending socialism and allowing a small measure of capitalism. This was called the NEP (New Economic Program.) It got Russia on the road to economic recovery. It also created a small class of peasants known as the kulaks. Lenin, as opposed to Marx, believed the communist revolution would be led by a revolutionary elite (there was hardly a proletariat or bourgeoisie in Russia).

Stalin advocated socialism in one country, which held that communism could be started in Russia alone without the world-wide proletarian revolution envisioned by Marx. The anti-imperialism of this position was attractive to colonized people severely disillusioned by Wilson's failure to implement self-determination for people under the yoke of imperialism (Ho Chi Min) at Versailles.

Stalin centralized agriculture (collectivization, in which the kulaks were eliminated as alleged exploiters) and industry (the Five Year Program). The dissent created by these programs was ruthlessly suppressed in the great purges.

Middle East

The Ottoman Empire, which had joined Germany in the Great War, was dismembered by the victors. The French and the British divided up parts of the Middle East (Palestine), which they ruled under the Mandate system. Middle easterners wondered why parts of Austria-Hungary became independent nations while they were imperialized by Britain and France. Nationalist resentment grew strong, especially as the British withdrew their promises of independence to those peoples who sent troops to aid in WWI. Instead of granting independence, Britain allowed thousands of Jews to resettle in their ancestral homelands that were currently occupied by Palestinian Muslims.

Mustapha Kemal, better known as Ataturk, was the architect of modern Turkey. Well known because of his victory at the Battle of Gallipoli in the Great War, Ataturk created a modern democratic Muslim nation in the Middle East. He abolished the caliphate in the 1920s.