

HALF-CENTURY OF CRISIS (1900–1945)

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World War I

The “isms” of the 1800s and early 1900s—nationalism, imperialism, and industrialism—helped to create conflict among Europeans. Nations tried to gain power and influence at their neighbor’s expense. No single nation, however, felt powerful enough to stand alone. So most nations formed military alliances. If one member of an alliance was attacked, the other members would come to its aid. One such alliance was made up of Britain, France, and Russia. Another alliance was made up of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey).

Then, on June 28, 1914, a single act sparked a world war. A nationalist from Serbia shot and killed the Austrian archduke and his wife in Sarajevo, Bosnia, as the couple drove through the streets. Austria, backed by Germany, declared war on Serbia, which was supported by Russia. The alliances clicked into gear and World War I began. On one side were the Central Powers—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey, and Bulgaria. On the other side were the Allied—Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and several other countries. The United States joined the Allies in 1917 after German submarines attacked American ships.

In the beginning most people thought the war would be brief and glorious. Instead, it lasted for four long bloody years. On the Western Front, both sides dug trenches and fought to a stalemate. Neither side could gain the upper hand—until the arrival of fresh American troops tipped the balance in favor of the Allies.

World War I ended in 1918 when a new German government asked for an armistice, or temporary peace agreement. The actual fighting ended at 11 A.M. on the 11th day of the 11th month of the year. By then more than 8 million soldiers on both sides had died.

World War I changed the map of Europe. The old monarchies in Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary disappeared. New nations such as Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania emerged. In addition, Germany was forced to sign the harsh Treaty of Versailles. To prevent a repetition of World War I, the Allies created the League of Nations. The hopes of this world peace-keeping body were crushed, however, when the United States refused to join.

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The Rise of Communism

Although Russia was allied with the winning side in World War I, it had a lot of problems during and after the war. The old Russian Government under Czar (Tsar) Nicholas II was overthrown during the war. In 1917 Nicholas was forced to abdicate, or give up, his throne. (He and his family were arrested and later executed by the communists.) A new government under Vladimir Lenin took over. In March of 1918, Lenin signed a treaty ending the war with Germany.

The Russian Revolution completely changed Russian society. The old nobility was crushed and a small group of dedicated communists took over the reigns of government. Under the communist philosophy, these rulers would stay in power until the people were ready to rule themselves.

Despite the peace with Germany, Lenin still had a war on his hands—a civil war. Many Russians did not want to be governed by the communists. Neither did many non-Russian nationals, such as the Finns, Poles, and Ukrainians. This civil war between the Reds (communists) and the Whites (their opponents) was a bloody affair. Millions of Russians were killed in the fighting or died as a result of famine or disease. In the end, the communists prevailed.

In 1922 Russia became the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or the U.S.S.R. The country, most often called simply the Soviet Union, had 15 republics, one for each major national group. The communists, now in total control, began to reorganize society. One step was to get rid of private farms. In their place, the communists organized “collectives,” or farms run by the peasants collectively. All the peasants farmed the land together and sold their crops to the government.

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Fascism vs. Democracy

Many Europeans craved strong leadership in the uncertain world of the 1920s and 1930s. They wanted someone who could get results and who could restore national pride. In Russia, the people got more than they bargained for in Joseph Stalin. He took over after the death of Lenin in 1924. Stalin ruled with an iron fist, never flinching to eliminate anyone who opposed him. He was, however, just one of the dictators who emerged out of the ashes of World War I.

The Weimar Republic ruled Germany immediately after World War I. It was a democratic form of government with constitutional guarantees for freedom of speech and religion. Its leaders, however, had great difficulties dealing with the economy and the war debts left over from World War I. A new party arose in the 1920s with different answers. It was called the Nazi Party, and its leader was Adolf Hitler. Hitler hated democracy and he hated the Jews. He tried unsuccessfully to seize power in 1923. Hitler was arrested and sent to prison. There he wrote *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), which outlined his plans for Germany.

Once out of prison, Hitler resumed his political activity. Many Germans were drawn to his program. Then in 1933 they voted him chancellor, or prime minister, of Germany. Before long, he gained total control over the country. He did revive the economy through large-scale building programs, but his followers also burned books. They attacked Jewish businesses and synagogues, and they began forcing the Jews to wear a yellow star on their clothing. Despite such actions, Hitler enjoyed popularity with most Germans during the 1930s.

In Italy, another dictator came to power. He was Benito Mussolini, the head of the Fascist Party. Mussolini shared many of Hitler's beliefs. He believed in dictatorship with a single party and a single leader. The Fascists wanted Italy to be a strong and powerful country again. Like Hitler in Germany, Mussolini turned his country into a totalitarian state.

The Nazis and the Fascists, however, wanted more. They soon built strong armies to threaten their neighbors. Hitler took over German-speaking territories on Germany's border. Italy invaded Ethiopia in Africa. Meanwhile, the democracies—principally Britain and France—did nothing to stop them. In 1938 the British and the French, wanting to avoid war at all costs, gave in to Hitler at a meeting in Munich, Germany. Hitler had demanded the right to take over the non-German nation of Czechoslovakia.

World War II

At the Munich meeting, Hitler had promised he would make no more territorial demands after Czechoslovakia. He lied. Hitler had much greater ambitions for his government, which was known as the Third Reich. But first he had to deal with the Soviet Union. Although both countries were ruled by dictators, the communists hated the Nazis and vice versa. Yet they agreed on one thing. They did not want to fight each other—at least, not yet. So in 1939, the two enemies signed a nonaggression pact. Freed from his worry about a war with the Soviet Union, Hitler attacked Poland on September 1, 1939. Two days later Britain and France finally declared war on Germany. The war that the democracies had tried so hard to avoid had now begun.

After crushing Poland, Hitler turned west and attacked France, which fell in June of 1940. There was now only one free nation left standing in Western Europe—the United Kingdom. Hitler tried to bomb England into surrender with a *blitzkrieg*, or lightning war. But somehow England held out. After ten months of an air war in the skies over England, Hitler quit. He had lost the Battle of Britain.

Then, in June of 1941, Hitler broke his nonaggression pact with Stalin by attacking the Soviet Union. The move caught Stalin by surprise. The Germans pushed deep into Russian territory. But Russia wasn't a pushover like Belgium or France had been. It proved to be too vast, its winters too cold, and its people too stubborn. Eventually Hitler was forced to retreat after suffering massive losses.

Meanwhile on December 7, 1941, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, and the United States declared war on Japan. Germany, an ally of Japan, then declared war on the United States. The United States and Britain agreed it was more important to defeat Germany first. But the Allies were too weak and Germany was still too strong to attack Europe directly. So they attacked German forces in North Africa first and then defeated Germany's other ally, Italy. Finally, on June 6, 1944, a day known as D-Day, the Allies landed in France. Meanwhile, the Russians were pushing back the Germans in the East. Soon victory was in sight.

At last, in May, the Germans surrendered. Hitler committed suicide in his bunker in Berlin. It was only then that the Allies discovered the full extent of the horrors that had occurred during the war. The Germans had set up concentration camps, where they sent Jews and other groups of people they did not like. More than 6 million people died in these camps.

In the Pacific, American forces began to close in on Japan by moving from one island to another. Then, in August of 1945, the United States used a new and horrible weapon on Japan. Americans dropped atomic bombs on two Japanese cities—Hiroshima and Nagasaki—killing a couple of hundred thousand people. On August 14, Japan surrendered, and World War II was over.