

**Chapter 25****THE BEGINNING OF THE 20TH C. CRISIS: WAR AND REVOLUTION**

On July 1, 1916, British and French infantry forces attacked German defensive lines along a 25-mile front near the Somme River in France. Each soldier carried almost 70 pounds of equipment, making it “impossible to move much quicker than a slow walk.” German machine guns soon opened fire: “We were able to see our comrades move forward in an attempt to cross No-Man’s Land, only to be mown down like meadow grass,” recalled one British soldier. “I felt sick at the sight of this carnage and remember weeping.” In one day, more than 21,000 British soldiers died. After six months of fighting, the British had advanced 5 miles; one million British, French, and German soldiers had been killed or wounded.

Philip Gibbs, an English war correspondent, described what he saw in the German trenches that the British forces overran: “Victory! ... Some of the German dead were young boys, too young to be killed for old men’s crimes, and others might have been old or young. One could not tell because they had no faces, and were just masses of raw flesh in rags of uniforms. Legs and arms lay separate without any bodies thereabout.”

World War I (1914-1918) was the defining event of the twentieth century. It devastated the prewar economic, social, and political order of Europe, and its uncertain outcome served to prepare the way for an even more destructive war. Overwhelmed by the size of its battles, the number of its casualties, and the extent of its impact on all facets of European life, contemporaries referred to it simply as the Great War.

The Great War was all the more disturbing to Europeans because it came after a period that many believed to have been an age of progress. There had been international crises before 1914, but somehow Europeans had managed to avoid serious and prolonged military

confrontations. When smaller European states had gone to war, as in the Balkans in 1912 and 1913, the great European powers had shown the ability to keep the conflict localized. Material prosperity and a fervid belief in scientific and technological progress had convinced many people that Europe stood on the verge of creating the utopia that humans had dreamed of for centuries. The historian Arnold Toynbee expressed what the pre-World War I era had meant to his generation:

[It was expected] that life throughout the World would become more rational, more humane, and more democratic and that, slowly, but surely, political democracy would produce greater social justice. We had also expected that the progress of science and technology would make mankind richer, and that this increasing wealth would gradually spread from a minority to a majority. We had expected that all this would happen peacefully. In fact we thought that mankind’s course was set for an earthly paradise.

After 1918, it was no longer possible to maintain naive illusions about the progress of Western civilization. As World War I was followed by the destructiveness of World War II and the mass murder machines of totalitarian regimes, it became all too apparent that instead of a utopia, European civilization had become a nightmare. The Great War resulted not only in great loss of life and property but also in the annihilation of one of the basic intellectual precepts on which Western civilization had seemed to have been founded—the belief in progress. A sense of hopelessness and despair soon replaced blind faith in progress. World War I and the revolutions it spawned can properly be seen as the first stage in the crisis of the twentieth century.

**Chapter 26****EUROPE BETWEEN THE WARS, 1919-1939**

Only twenty years after the Treaty of Versailles, Europeans were again at war. Yet in the 1920s, many people assumed that the world was about to enter a new era of international peace, economic growth, and political democracy. In all of these areas, the optimistic hopes of the 1920s failed to be realized. After 1919, most people wanted peace but were unsure how to maintain it. The League of Nations, conceived as a new instrument to provide for collective security, failed to work well. New treaties that renounced the use of war looked good on paper but had no means of enforcement. Then, too, virtually everyone favored disarmament, but few could agree on how to achieve it.

Europe faced serious economic and social hardships after World War I. The European economy did not begin to recover from the war until 1922, and even then it was beset by financial problems left over from the war and, most devastating of all, the severe depression that began at the end of 1929. The Great Depression brought misery to millions of people. Begging for food on the streets became widespread, especially when soup kitchens were unable to

keep up with the demand. Larger and larger numbers of people were homeless and moved from place to place looking for work and shelter. In the United States, the homeless set up shantytowns they derisively named “Hoovervilles” after the U.S. president, Herbert Hoover. Some of the destitute saw but one solution; as one unemployed person expressed it, “Today, when I am experiencing this for the first time, I think that I should prefer to do away with myself, to take gas, to jump into the river, or leap from some high place.... Would I really come to such a decision? I do not know. Animals die, plants wither, but men always go on living.” Social unrest spread rapidly, and some unemployed staged hunger marches to get attention. In democratic countries, more and more people began to listen to and vote for radical voices calling for extreme measures.

According to Woodrow Wilson, World War I had been fought to make the world safe for democracy, and for a while after 1919, political democracy seemed well on its way. But hope soon faded as authoritarian regimes spread into Italy and Germany and across eastern Europe.

**Chapter 27****THE DEEPENING OF THE EUROPEAN CRISIS: WORLD WAR II**

On February 3, 1933, only four days after he had been appointed chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler met secretly with Germany's leading generals. He revealed to them his desire to remove the "cancer of democracy," create a new authoritarian leadership, and forge a new domestic unity. All Germans would need to realize that "only a struggle can save us and that everything else must be subordinated to this idea." Youth especially must be trained and their wills strengthened "to fight with all means." Since Germany's living space was too small for its people, Hitler said, Germany must rearm and prepare for "the conquest of new living space in the east and its ruthless Germanization." Even before he had consolidated his power, Hitler had a clear vision of his goals, and their implementation meant another European war. World War II was clearly Hitler's war. Although other countries may have helped make the war possible by not resisting Hitler's Germany earlier, it was Nazi Germany's actions that made World War II inevitable.

World War II was more than just Hitler's war, however. This chapter will focus on the European theater of war, but both European and American armies were also involved in fighting around the world. World War II consisted of two conflicts: one provoked by the ambitions of Germany in Europe, the other by the ambitions of Japan in Asia. By 1941, with the involvement of the United States in both wars, the two had merged into one global conflict.

Although World War I has been described as a total war, World War II was even more so and was fought on a scale unknown in history. Almost everyone in the warring countries was involved in one way or another: as soldiers; as workers in wartime industries; as ordinary citizens subject to invading armies, military occupation, or bombing raids; as refugees; or as victims of mass extermination. The world had never witnessed such widespread willful death and destruction.

**Chapter 28****COLD WAR AND A NEW WESTERN WORLD, 1945-1965**

The end of World War II in Europe had been met with great joy. One visitor to Moscow reported, “I looked out of the window [at 2 A.M.], almost everywhere there were lights in the window—people were staying awake. Everyone embraced everyone else, someone sobbed aloud.” But after the victory parades and celebrations, Europeans awoke to a devastating realization: their civilization was in ruins. Some wondered if Europe would ever regain its former prosperity and importance. Winston Churchill wrote, “What is Europe now? A rubble heap, a charnel house, a breeding ground of pestilence and hate.” There was ample reason for his pessimism. Almost 40 million people (soldiers and civilians) had been killed during the preceding six years. Massive air raids and artillery bombardments had reduced many of the great cities of Europe to heaps of rubble. The Polish capital of Warsaw had been almost completely obliterated. An American general described Berlin: “Wherever we looked we saw desolation. It was like a city of the dead.”

Suffering and shock were visible in every face. Dead bodies still remained in canals and lakes and were being dug out from under bomb debris. Millions of Europeans faced starvation as grain harvests were only half of what they had been in 1939. Millions were also homeless. In the parts of the Soviet Union that had been occupied by the

Germans, almost 25 million people were without homes. The destruction of bridges, roads, and railroads had left transportation systems paralyzed. Untold millions of people had been uprooted by the war; now they became “displaced persons,” trying to find food and then their way home. Eleven million prisoners of war had to be returned to their native countries while 15 million Germans and Eastern Europeans were driven out of countries where they were no longer wanted. Yet despite the chaos, Europe was soon on the road to a remarkable recovery. Already by 1950, Europe’s industrial and agricultural output was 30 percent above prewar levels.

World War II had cost Europe more than physical destruction, however. European supremacy in world affairs had also been destroyed. After 1945, the colonial empires of the European nations disintegrated, and Europe’s place in the world changed radically. As the Cold War conflict between the world’s two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union – intensified, the European nations were divided into two armed camps dependent on one or the other of these two major powers. The United States and the Soviet Union, whose rivalry raised the specter of nuclear war, seemed to hold the survival of Europe and the world in their hands.

## Chapter 29

**PROTEST AND STAGNATION: THE WESTERN WORLD, 1965-1985**

BETWEEN 1945 AND 1965, Europe not only overcame the devastating effects of World War II but actually experienced an economic recovery that seemed nothing less than miraculous to many people. Economic growth and virtually full employment continued so long that the first post-World War II recession in 1973 came as a shock to Western Europe.

In 1968, Europe had experienced a different kind of shock. May 1968 is now remembered as a historic month because of events in Paris. A student revolt erupted at the University of Nanterre outside Paris but soon spread to the Sorbonne, the main campus of the University of Paris, where about five hundred students gathered for demonstrations and demanded a greater voice in the administration of the university. The authorities decided to react with force and arrested a number of demonstrators, although as one police officer said, “To tell the truth, we were not enthusiastic about it if we could avoid it, knowing too well, from experience, that our interventions created more problems than they solved.” Indeed, the students fought back, prying up paving stones from the streets to use as weapons. On May 3, eighty policemen and about three hundred students were hurt; almost six hundred students were arrested. Demonstrations then spread to other universities, which served to embolden the students in Paris. On the night of May 10, barricades, formed by

overturned cars, went up in the streets of Paris. When police moved in to tear down the barricades, violence ensued. One eyewitness recounted: “A young girl came rushing out into the street practically naked and was manhandled from one cop to another; then beaten like the other wounded students.” Students expanded the scale of their protests by inviting workers to support them. Half of the French workforce went on strike in May 1968. After de Gaulle’s government instituted a hefty wage hike, the workers returned to work, and the police repressed the remaining student protesters.

The year 1968 saw widespread student protests around the world, and for a brief moment, students and radicals everywhere believed the time had come for a complete renovation of society and government. But the moment passed, and the Western world was left with the new order created in the twenty years after World War II. In Eastern Europe, the crushing of Czechoslovakia in 1968 by Soviet troops left Eastern Europeans with little choice but to remain as Soviet satellites. In Western Europe, democracies continued to evolve. But everywhere, resignation and stagnation seemed to prevail as the new order established in the Western world during the twenty years after World War II appeared to have become permanent: a prosperous, capitalistic West and an impoverished Communist East.

**Chapter 30****AFTER THE FALL: WESTERN WORLD IN A GLOBAL AGE, SINCE 1985**

By 1985, after four decades of the Cold War, Westerners had become accustomed to a new division of Europe between West and East that seemed to be permanent. A prosperous Western Europe allied with the United States stood opposed to a still-struggling Eastern Europe that remained largely subject to the Soviet Union. The division of Germany symbolized the new order, which seemed so well established. Yet within a few years, a revolutionary upheaval in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe brought an end to the Cold War and to the division of postwar Europe. Even the Soviet Union ceased to exist as a nation.

On August 19, 1991, a group of Soviet leaders opposed to reform arrested Mikhail Gorbachev, the president of the Soviet Union, and tried to seize control of the government. Hundreds of thousands of Russians, led by Boris Yeltsin, poured into the streets of Moscow and Leningrad to resist the attempted coup. Some army units, sent out to enforce the wishes of the rebels, defected to Yeltsin's side, and within days, the rebels were forced to surrender. This failed attempt to seize power had unexpected results as Russia and many of the other Soviet republics declared their independence. By the end of 1991, the Soviet Union—one

of the largest empires in world history—had come to an end, and a new era of cooperation between the successor states in the old Soviet Union and the nations of the West had begun.

As the world adjusted to the transformation from Cold War to post-Cold War sensibilities, other changes shaped the Western outlook. The demographic face of European countries changed as massive numbers of immigrants created more ethnically diverse populations. New artistic and intellectual currents, the continued advance of science and technology, the emergence of a Digital Age, the surge of the women's liberation movement—all spoke of a vibrant, ever-changing world. At the same time, a devastating terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon outside Washington, D.C., in 2001 made the Western world vividly aware of its vulnerability to international terrorism. Moreover, a financial collapse in 2008 threatened the economic security of the Western world as well as the entire global economy. But most important of all, Western nations, like all nations on the planet, have become aware of the political and economic interdependence of the world's nations and the global nature of our twenty-first-century problems.