The Interwar Period 1919-1939

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After the Great World, most of the mankind hoped that that conflagration “would be the war that ended all wars”. This hope was thwarted.

Before the war ended, Russia witnessed the first communist revolution in history. After a cruel civil war, the Bolsheviks established a dictatorship that, although tried to create a fairer society, gave birth to one of the most terrible tyrannies in history: the dictatorship of Stalin.

After a short period of apparent economic recovery, “the Roaring Twenties”, a dramatic economic crisis started in the USA and quickly spread over the other main capitalist powers in Europe. The result was poverty and despair for millions of workers.

This situation helped Hitler to establish its national-socialist ("nazi") dictatorship in Germany. Based upon racist ideas, Hitler was inspired in the fascist dictatorship established by Mussolini in Italy. In 1936 a civil war broke out in Spain. Franco, a dictator who tried to follow the example of Mussolini and Hitler, imposed a dictatorship which would last almost forty years. Democracy went through tough times in Europe.

1. The Russian Revolution

Before we start studying this topic: What do you know about communism? Share your ideas in the classroom

The Tsarist Russia. The causes of the revolution
At the dawn of the 20th century, Russia was an **autocratic regime** very different from the western European countries.

The Tsar (Nicholas II of the Romanov dynasty) led with an iron hand an absolute monarchy. Russian citizens had no political rights.

Russia also was an **economically and socially backward and unfair** country. There were important economic differences between the wealthy few and the rest of the population.

The growing discontent exploded in **1905**. A revolution made tumble the Tsarist regime. However, although some slight changes were introduced, the autocracy was maintained.

**The revolutions of 1917**

The military failures in the war, the enormous number of casualties and the suffering of the civil population sparked a series of revolutions in 1917.

- The **February revolution** deposed Tsar Nicholas II and established a republic. A **liberal bourgeois provisional government** continued the war and promised reforms, the redistribution of the land was the most longed by the millions of Russian peasants. However, the discontent grew and allowed the Bolsheviks or Communists (radical Marxists) to lead a new revolution.
- The **October revolution** overthrew the liberal bourgeois government and replaced it with a Communist executive power. **Lenin**, the Communist leader, took radical measures:
  - Redistribution of the land among the peasants
  - Control of the factories by the workers
- The Communist state took control of the banks, the transport system and most of the economy.
- The political power passed over to the Soviets (councils of workers and peasants). At the beginning Soviets were freely elected, but very soon they were controlled by the Communists.

A civil war broke out in 1918. The White Army (tsarists, liberals and all sorts of anti-communists) was defeated by the communist Red Army. By 1921 the communist dictatorship was firmly established in Russia.

**Lenin’s government (1921-1924)**

Under his leadership, the USSR (Union of Socialist Soviet Republics) or Soviet Union was formed. The former Tsarist Empire was substituted by a federal country made up by several European and Asian republics. Actually, all the power was concentrated in the hands of the Communist Party.

Lenin died in 1924, he had been shot in a terrorist attack some years before, and a fight for the control of the Communist Party started among the Bolshevik leadership.
2. World economy over the interwar period: prosperity and depression

Before we start studying this topic: How does an economic crisis affect a country? Share your ideas in the classroom

The Roaring Twenties

After the war a period of economic prosperity took place. The USA became the most prosperous country and the first economic power.

This economic growth was based upon three factors:

- The industrial development due to the chain production and mass production
- An increase in consumption fostered by advertising, credit and hire purchase or payment in installments.
- Investment in stocks (the capital raised by a company through the issue of shares) and shares.

The crash of 1929

On 24 October 1929 (the “Black Thursday”), the New York Stock Exchange plummeted as the investors panicked and try to sell their stocks. The “Wall Street” collapse triggered the economic crisis of the 1930s.
The causes of the crash were complex: the high price of the stocks did not correspond with its real value.

Overproduction was a main feature of the US industry in that time. After the recovery of the European industry after the war, the American industries produced more goods than what they could sell in the market. Supply exceeded demand.

This problematic situation had no reflection on the stock exchange which continued to rise without real economic reasons. At the end, this false rise ended and was followed by a period of fear in which investors tried to sell their stocks. As a consequence, the stock prices fell and fell.

The Great Depression

The stock exchange crash was immediately followed by a general crisis in the US economy:

- Many banks went bankrupt. They had invested in buying stocks and gave loans to people who bought stocks and could not pay off their credits.
- Industries shut down because of the lack of credit and demand. Industrial prices went down.
- Farmers could not sell their crops. Agriculture prices collapsed.
- Foreign trade diminished dramatically.
The crisis quickly extended from the US to Europe. Unemployment and social inequality increased and despair spread over the people. The social and economic crisis triggered a deep political crisis.

After the war, the number of democratic countries had increased in Europe. The crisis caused a growing criticism towards liberal capitalism and democracy. Communism was more popular among the working classes, meanwhile upper and middle classes tended to support authoritarian regimes (fascism, nazism, Francoism...)

**Solutions to the crisis**

The economist John Maynard Keynes’ ideas became popular as the best method to solve the economic problems in the 1930s.

Keynes proposed state intervention in the economy to stimulate investment, employment and consumption.

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**Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal**

The US president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, implemented these ideas after taking over the presidency in 1933. His economic policy was known as the “New Deal”. New measures, quite different from the classic liberalism, were put in place:

- Banks were forced to offer low interest rates
- Subsidies to farmers and industries were given to reduce production and put an end to overproduction
- Working hours were reduced
- Minimum wage were established
- Unemployment benefits were created
- Public investment in infrastructure increase to reduce unemployment.

Other countries adopted similar measures either in a democratic regime, such as Britain or France, or a dictatorship, such as Italy or Germany.

The world economy started to overcome the crisis in slow motion...
3. Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism and Nazism

*Before starting this point: Do you have any oral information about Franco’s dictatorship? If it is the case, what is your opinion about that political regime?*

Due to the economical, political and ideological crisis of the interwar period some European states were governed by totalitarian right-wing dictatorships: *fascism* in Italy (1922), *nazism* in Germany (1933) and *Francoism* in Spain (Civil War 1936-1939).

**Characteristics of totalitarianism**

- **Authoritarian political system**: the state and the government was controlled by **one single political party** with a **charismatic leader** who was believed to be infallible (“Il Duce sempre ha ragione”) and had **unlimited power**. Il Duce Mussolini or the Fuhrer Hitler are the main examples.
  - There was no freedom and the system was controlled by a single political party (Partito Nazionale Fascista, Nacional-Socialist German Worker Party NSDAP) which eliminated any sort of opposition through **harsh repression** executed by paramilitary forces (Fasci, SA, SS) and political police (Gestapo).
• **Economic and social control:** These regimes maintained the capitalist economic system but the state **strictly controlled the different economic sectors.** Society was systematically manipulated by **propaganda** and **censorship.** Youth was taught to believe in the system and worship the leader.

![When Jews laugh... tying to dehumanize Jews](image)

• **An ideology based upon inequality and fanaticism:** Fascism and Nazism **did not believe in equality,** some people (a race in the case of Nazism) are considered superior to others. Some other people (Jews in the case of Nazism) are thought to have no rights. These ideologies promoted **irrationalism:** symbols, uniforms, parades, songs and slogans were used to brainwash the population.

• **Nationalism and militarism:** Most of the fascists or nazis fought in WW1 where they lived in an atmosphere of **exacerbated nationalism.** They believe in the right of their nations to **territorial expansion** (Italy was frustrated after the Peace Treaties of 1919; Germany was looking for revenge after the diktat of Versailles). This led to a great investment in **rearmament.**
After the First World War, a former socialist journalist, Benito Mussolini, founded the Fascist National Party in 1921. This party organised paramilitary groups (the Camicie Nere, also known as the “Black Shirts”) that attacked violently workers and left-wing organisations.

The Fascist Party was supported by landowners, factory owners, middle classes, the Catholic Church and the King Victor Manuel III. The frustration after the results of the war encouraged a growing nationalism that considered the workers revolution as the worst enemy (fear of a communist revolution spread over Europe).

After fighting against a general strike in 1922, Mussolini organised the March into Rome. Thousands of “black shirts” converged in Rome and
claim power for Mussolini. The king supported this coup and Mussolini imposed a fascist dictatorship which lasted more than twenty years (1922-1943).

Mussolini established a **single party** regime and banned trade unions and political parties. **Censorhip, propaganda and the labour of the OVRA (political police)** make sure the control of the Italian population.

**German Nazism: Adolf Hitler**

**Hitler**, a former soldier in WW1, founded the **National Socialist Party (NSDAP)** in 1920. Following Mussolini’s example, **paramilitary units (SA)** were created from the beginning. This violent organisation attacked left-wing parties, trade unions and Jews. Over the **1929 crisis**, the **NSDAP gained supporters** by putting the blame of the crisis on Jews, communists and democrats.

In 1932, Hitler won the elections and with the support of conservative parties was appointed **Chancellor of Germany in 1933**. Once in power, the Nazis quickly **destroyed the Weimar Republic** (a democratic regime set up after WW1) and proclaimed the **Third Reich**. The new regime was a cruel **single party dictatorship** in which all the power was concentrated in the **Führer**.

The **SA, SS and Gestapo** crashed all sort of opposition. So many citizens were arrested, that camps of concentration were needed to “host” all the detainees.
Hitler’s ideology was based on racism. The German nation was formed by the superior race, the Aryans, that had to prevail over the inferior races. Jews, alongside with Gypsies and Slav peoples (Poles, Russians...) were considered as Untermenschen (Sub men, Under men).

The Nazi totalitarian state controlled society, education, culture through propaganda (Goebbels), censorship and repression.

Obsessed with the revenge against the Versailles Treaty, Hitler opted for an expansionist military policy. The German people needed their lebenraum (living space) which had to be obtained by invading inferior peoples’ lands (mainly Eastern Europe). Its aggressive policy provoked the outbreak of the Second World War.