Europe between the Wars

The era between The Great War and WWII was a period of uncertainty. Total war had a dramatic impact, with the high numbers of casualties contributing to what Ernest Hemmingway wrote about as a “lost generation.” Europe’s economy was devastated by the war as well, and the peace settlement ending the war only further divided the nations involved.

One of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points was the call for the creation of a League of Nations that would serve a peace keeping role. However, the United States refused to join the League, and for a variety of reasons the League of Nations was unsuccessful in preventing nations from engaging in conflict.

The French followed a policy of coercion from 1919 to 1924 in an attempt to ensure that Germany pay the reparations required by the Treaty of Versailles. This attempt at strict enforcement the Treaty of Versailles further alienated Germany, contributing to a desire by some Germans to repay what they believed was unfair treatment.

Hemingway writes about the “lost generation” in this novel - The phrase is credited to Gertrude Stein.
German territorial losses at the end of WWI

The Allied Reparations Commission determined on April 1921 that Germany must pay $33 billion to France, Great Britain and other nations. This money was supposed to be paid in annual installments of a billion gold marks. Germany was unable to pay in 1922 and in response the French occupied the Ruhr Valley, an industrial heartland of Germany. The German economy went into a tailspin, with runaway inflation. As a result, the German mark fell to 4.2 trillion to $1 by the end of November, 1923.

Although tensions between France and Germany continued, the latter part of the 1920s saw improvement. In 1924 the Dawes Plan was put in place. This plan established a more reasonable payment schedule for German reparations.

The Treaty of Locarno was signed in 1925, confirming Germany’s western borders but leaving open for change the eastern borders. German discontent over the end of WWI and over the loss of territory, as well as the economic struggles of the early 1920s, contributed to an unstable political situation in Germany.

In 1923 the Nazis attempt to take advantage of the situation and seize power in the German province of Bavaria. As a result of the Munich Beer Hall Putsch, of November, 1923 Adolf Hitler and several of his followers were imprisoned. While in prison Hitler penned his autobiography, or Mein Kampf, (My Struggle).
Following the failures of Munich, Hitler began the process of reorganization of the Nazi party, and developed new strategies to follow in the pursuit of power. The Nazi party enjoyed some electoral success, and became the largest party in the Reichstag after 1932 election. With support from right-wing elites, Hitler became the chancellor of Germany in January 30, 1933. Following the Reichstag fire, February 27, 1933 and successes in 1933 election, Hitler and the Nazis were able to establish one party, dictatorial power in Germany. Hitler instituted Gleichschaltung, or coordination of all institutions under Nazi control and when President Paul von Hindenburg died in 1934 Hitler assumed the title of president. He was finally in a position to fully implement his Nazi ideology.

The Nazi state Hitler implemented from 1933 to 1939 was a success in many ways. The Weimar parliamentary republic was dismantled and replaced by a totalitarian system.

Hitler organized mass demonstrations and spectacles to create collective fellowship among the German population. Nazi economic policies led to a rapid drop in unemployment, earning Hitler and the Nazi party admiration and support by the masses of the German people.

In Mein Kampf Hitler outlined his future plans

Heinrich Himmler and the SS ensured that any enemies of the state both perceived and real were eliminated. Churches, schools, and universities were brought under Nazi control and youth leagues were created to ensure the support of future generations.
Hitler also began to implement policies to create the Aryan Racial State. The Nuremberg laws were established in September 1935, depriving German Jews of basic rights.

Many Jews immigrated, but many were also loyal Germans who decided to stay, hoping that things would improve over time. The Nazi attacks on Jews culminated in the prewar year’s in 1938, in an event known as Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass.

In the early 1920s the new Soviet state struggled to survive. Following the successful conclusion of the civil war, the Soviet leaders adopted the New Economic Policy; a modified capitalist system they hoped would help the Soviet economy recover. The Union of Socialist Republics was formally established, in 1922. The NEP policies helped the economy revive, however in 1923 Lenin suffered a series of strokes, and died in 1924.
A power struggle that lasted several years ensued between Leon Trotsky, Joseph Stalin and several other Bolshevik leaders. Stalin was able to use his position as General Party Secretary to place supporters in strategic positions within the party bureaucracy, allowing him to win the struggle for leadership of the Communist Party.

The Stalinist era began in 1929. Even before taking complete control, Stalin was able to implement the first Five Year Plan in 1928. Stalin's plans placed great emphasis on industrialization. In order to finance his industrial projects Stalin also began the implementation of a policy of agricultural collectivization.

The forced rapid collectivization of agriculture had devastating results. Kulak farmers were deprived of their lands, crops and animals and many who resisted were either shot, or sent to Siberia. As a result of the collectivization policies and the famine of 1932-1933, at least 10 million peasants died. Despite the terrible consequences of Stalin's policies, his industrial projects did proceed and the Soviet state was much more heavily industrialized by the end of the 1930s.

Stalin also implemented political controls to ensure his own personal power. His dictatorship was established in 1929, but Stalin was never completely secure in his position. He believed that he had enemies, and proceeded to systematically eliminate anyone who he perceived as a threat.

Stalin's political purges of 1936-1938 led to 8 million arrests. Many of those arrested were executed. Stalin also purged the upper echelons of the military of any officers that were perceived as not totally loyal to him. As a result of these purges the Soviet military was not as well prepared as it could have been when WWII began.
Authoritarian government, primarily Fascist in nature, spread across Eastern Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Conservative authoritarian governments were gradually established in Austria, Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary and Bulgaria. Only Czechoslovakia was able to retain a parliamentary democracy. Ethnic conflicts also continued to divide the nations of Eastern Europe.

Authoritarian dictatorship also spread to the Iberian Peninsula. Portuguese democracy failed in the 1920s and the Spanish Civil War led to the downfall of democratically elected government in Spain in the mid-1930s. The 1920s and 1930s also experienced the expansion of Mass Culture and Mass Leisure. The Roaring Twenties was an exciting period in Berlin and Paris. Berlin became the entertainment center of Europe.
Josephine Baker was one of many American artists who played a role in bringing the Jazz Age to life in Europe. Meanwhile, radio and movies were the main forms of mass communication and entertainment. These new technologies were also used effectively by the authoritarian governments of Europe in their efforts to control their respective populations.
Marlene Dietrich (movie star) in Germany, 1933

The Italian Fascists were the first to attempt to control social leisure, establishing the *Dopolavoro* in Italy.

Poster for the state controlled leisure organization in Nazi Germany
Learning from the Italian example, the Nazis established the Kraft *durch Freude* in Germany.

The interwar years were also a period of dramatic cultural and intellectual trends. Avant-garde culture becomes acceptable in an era of political, economic and social insecurity.

Abstract paintings demonstrated a growing fascination with the absurd. New styles included German Expressionism, Dadaism, and Surrealism.
There were also important developments in the academic arena. In the field of psychology Sigmund Freud continued to have a dramatic impact and Carl Jung (1856-1961) established the field of analytic psychiatry.

This era is also known as the “Heroic Age of Physics.” Ernest Rutherford (1871-1937) theorized that the atom could be split and Heisenberg developed his “uncertainty principle.”

The 1930s was an era known as the Great Depression in the United States. Although not all European states suffered economically at the same level as America, it was still a challenging era for all.

Problems in domestic economies, along with an international financial crisis, contributed to the crash of the American stock market, October 1929.

The American crash effected European markets, contributing to a rise in unemployment with dramatic social repercussions. Governments appeared to be powerless to solve the challenges presented. In the democratic states of Europe governments failed and were replaced, while the totalitarian states seemed to weather the storm a little more successfully. Economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) proposed the idea that governments engage in deficit spending to create jobs, believing that more employment would drive an increase in consumer demand, and result in an economic recovery. Keynes ideas were not really tried in the 1930s, but would become common practice in the decades to follow.
In the United States Herbert Hoover was president. Hoover rejected deficit spending and believed that the economy would recover naturally from this latest recessionary cycle. However, the recovery did not occur and the Depression only deepened as banks continued to fail in 1931 and 1932.

Franklin D. Roosevelt, (1933-1945) replaced Hoover as the U.S. president and began the implementation of the New Deal. The New Deal included a variety of programs, including the creation of the SEC regulate and protect the American financial system and the FDIC to revive the American banking system and protect consumer’s deposits. Programs like the Civilian Conservation Corps and the WPA also attempted to put people back to work.

Grand Coulee Dam, one of the many large public works projects built during the Great Depression

Although the New Deal helped put many people back to work, the worst of the Depression did not end until industrial production geared up to meet the demands of World War II. The economic challenges of the 1930s, along with the political rivalries and disagreements, were contributing factors in the development of a new world war in Europe. However, the desires and dreams of authoritarian dictators such as Adolf Hitler also played a vital role in the outbreak of this devastating conflict.