



# The Age of Uncertainty and Disillusionment

The 1920s and 1930s



# Reactions to World War I

- As we enter the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a new generation of historians is starting to interpret the two world wars as one world war with an “intermission” in the 1920s.
- Basic themes:
  - Continuing problems with colonial domination
  - The intertwined global economy
  - The effects of WWI

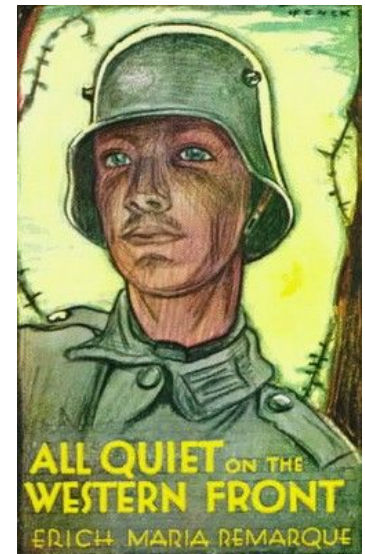
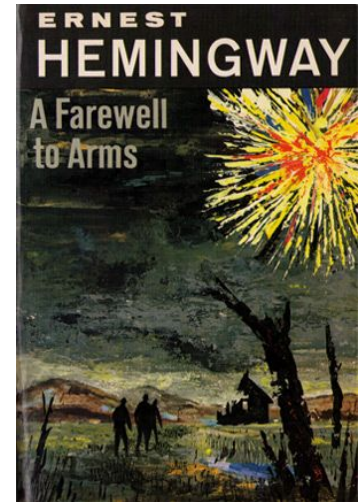
# Disillusionment

- Coming to terms with the wanton death and destruction of WWI destroyed much of the Enlightenment evaluations of the innate goodness and rationality of humanity and the inevitability of progress that had prevailed in high culture since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
- Within the elite and educated “high culture” circles, philosophy, art, and science in the 1920s and 30s systematically undermined two centuries of acquired knowledge and procedures.



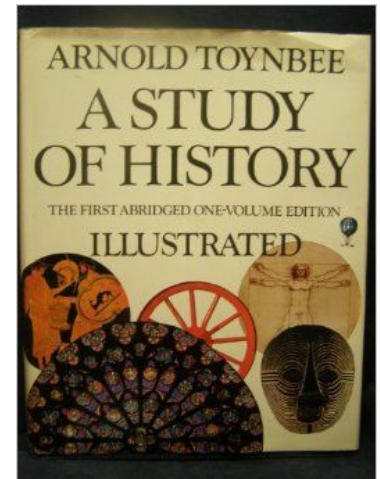
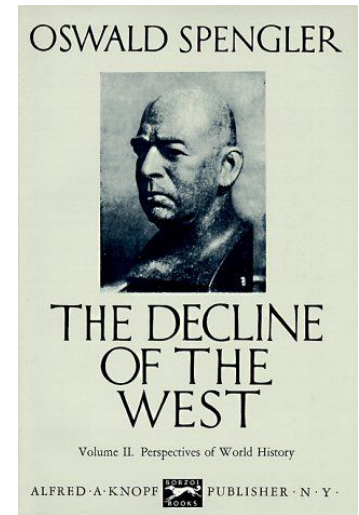
# Postwar Pessimism

- “Lost Generation” (phrase by Gertrude Stein) describes American intellectuals and writers who flocked to Paris after the war hoping to sooth their disillusionment.
- Works of literature focusing on the meaningless suffering and ceaseless death their generation experienced - Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*



# Postwar Pessimism

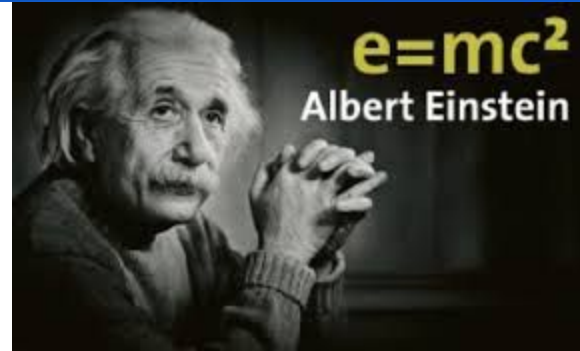
- Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* and Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History* sought to make sense from the chaos of the war years.
- Theologians like Karl Barth and Nikolai Berdiaev questioned human potential to realize God's purpose.



# Postwar Pessimism

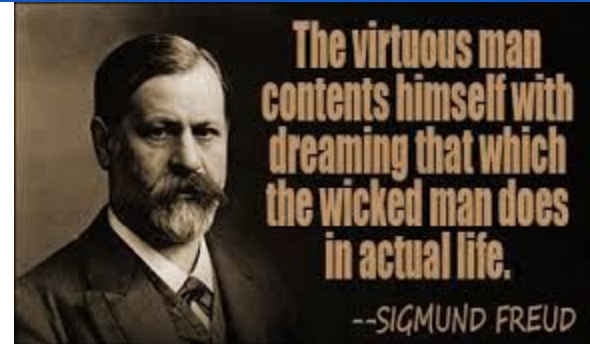
- The very concept of progress was challenged by thinkers who could see little benefit from democracy even as the last vestiges of property and educational restrictions on the right to vote were removed in most European nations.
- Intellectuals felt these opportunities would lead to tyranny by the average person and saw democracy as a product of decay, warning against the “rule of inferiors”

# Revolutions in Physics



- Led by Albert Einstein whose theory of special relativity showed there was no single spatial and chronological framework to the universe and thus it no longer made sense to speak of time and space as absolutes.
  - To the layperson, such knowledge meant that a commonsense universe had disappeared and so now reality or truth simply was a set of agreed-upon mental constructs
  - Werner Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" further undermined accepted notions of cause and effect and brought all notions of truth into question.

# Revolutions in Psychology



- Sigmund Freud and other philosophers emphasized the irrationality of the masses.
- His theory of psychoanalysis, was based on the study of mental illness and dreams as manifestations of the repressed consciousness, usually tied to unresolved sexual issues from childhood.
- Freud's ideas became common themes in art and literature throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.



# Experimentation in Art

- The disdain for realism and concern for freedom of expression first manifested in the paintings of late-19<sup>th</sup> century French avant-garde artists also reached revolutionary proportions in the postwar era.
- The purpose was to create reality, not to reflect it.
- A whole range of new schools emerged to “abolish the sovereignty of appearance”

# Experimentation in Art

- Les Fauves (“The Wild Beasts”)
- Expressionists
- Cubists
- Abstractionists
- Dadaists
- Surrealists
- Painters in these schools were influenced by Pacific, Asian, and African traditions as well.
- Influential artists include Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, and Pablo Picasso

**Define these  
on your own**

# Experimentation in Architecture

- Modernist trends in architecture can be seen in the development of the Bauhaus, an institution which brought together architects, designers, and painters from several countries to focus on functional design – a marriage of engineering and art – uniquely suited to the urban and industrial 20<sup>th</sup>-century landscape.



# Experimentation in Architecture

- The resulting aesthetic known as international style was well-suited to large apartment houses and office complexes, though the public never really warmed to its cold, impersonal style.

# Changing Migration Patterns

- Black migrations from the U.S. south to the northern industrial cities.
- Mexicans into the U.S. during and after the war.
- Black U.S. artists migrated to Europe (particularly Paris).
- Socialists migrated to Lenin's Soviet Union.

# The Great Depression

- A greater source of upheaval than the intellectual movements among the elite.
- Because U.S. capitalist and government institutions had bankrolled European reconstruction, when a disruption of the New York Stock Exchange turned in to a *bona fide* national crisis, every country with economic connections to the U.S. suffered accordingly.

# The Great Depression

- 1920s Stock Markets and Banks
  - Very few people had any investments in stocks (compared to approximately 50% today) or had money in banks.
  - The problems of a small group of wealthy American men, combined with laissez-faire economic theory, was enough to bring down the global capitalist economy.

# The Great Depression

- The Great Depression was triggered by out-of-control stock trading on the American stock market. Investors experienced so much unrestrained growth throughout the roaring 1920s that they felt the stock market could never fail and invested relentlessly in the markets. Stock prices rose so high that some people began to fear that they were actually too high and were inflated beyond reason, which triggered a panic and the massive sell-off known as **Black Friday**.
- Fortunes were wiped out overnight. Banks throughout the country lost all their money, which meant that so did all the people who had their savings in there.



# The Great Depression

- The depths of the depression were truly staggering.
- The U.S. and Germany were hit hardest (1/3 of the workforce became unemployed)

# The Great Depression

- Countries unaffected by the Depression
  - China
  - U.S.S.R.
  - Japan

# The Great Depression

- Countries benefiting from the Depression
  - Some Latin American countries that were not dominated by the U.S.

# Looking for new solutions

- Capitalism was self-destructing
- Enlightenment ideas were a myth
- The competitive nation-state and imperial economies had caused World War I
  - The new ideologies of the 1920s and 30s sought to replace a perceived failure (manifested in the Great War and the Great Depression) of a failed political, economic, or social system

# New Ideologies

- **Socialism**

- Definition: Marxist economic and political theory advocating collective or governmental ownership and administration of the means of production and distribution of goods; no private property

# New Ideologies

- **Communism**

- Definition:

- a doctrine based on revolutionary Marxian socialism and Marxism-Leninism that was the official ideology of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
    - a totalitarian system of government in which a single authoritarian party controls state-owned means of production
    - a final stage of society in Marxist theory in which the state has withered away and economic goods are distributed equitably

# New Ideologies

- **Fascism**

- Definition: a political philosophy, movement, or regime that exalts nation and often race above the individual and that stands for a centralized autocratic government headed by a dictatorial leader, severe economic and social regimentation, and forcible suppression of opposition
- Nationalistic, socially conservative,  
**corporatist**/anti-capitalist, racist, religious, and militaristic
  - the organization of a society into industrial and professional corporations serving as organs of political representation and exercising control over persons and activities within their jurisdiction

# Comparison of Totalitarian Regimes

- Communism in Russia
- Fascism in Italy
- Socialism (Nazism) in Germany



# Elsewhere in the World

- European weaknesses and instability gave courage to nationalist movements in Asia and Africa seeking independence only.
- Elite leaders in India and China worked to find ideologies and methods that would secure their political independence and economic stability.

# Africa

- Africa sees the beginning of nationalist movements as the war had demystified the Europeans and their single-crop economies suffered in the wake of Depression-era collapse of their European masters.
- A new “elite” of European-educated, sometimes non-indigenous, leaders emerge
- ***Colonial Economies (notes)***

# Asia

- Comparison of India, China, and Japan

# Latin America

- Not directly involved in WWI so these countries do not face the same issues as many others
- Latin American countries were already independent, but not industrialized.
  - They traded raw materials for industrially produced goods, which gave enormous power to landowners as well as military leaders.
  - Their economies were so tightly controlled by the U.S. and other European industrialized countries that their status is considered semi-autonomous (“neo-colonialism”).

# Latin America

- Governments were notoriously unstable and corrupt, while the masses of peasant farmers toiled for others, wanting land redistribution and other forms of social justice.
- As in Europe, socialism, communism, and fascism had great appeal since nationalism and capitalism seemed to fail to bring peace and prosperity.
- ***Chart – Impact of the War and the Depression, the Evolution of Economic Imperialism, and Conflicts of a “Good Neighbor”***