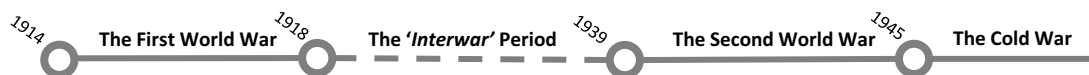


# The “Long Shadow” of the First World War, 1918-39



The year 1918-39 is often called the “**Interwar**” period, but it is worth noting that the term ‘interwar’ is in many ways a misconception. As highlighted by Robert Gerwarth’s work, conflict barely came to an end in 1918 and war was almost a constant feature of the world in the years up to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Conflicts ranged across the globe in Russia, Ireland, Spain, China and the Middle East. The period was certainly not ‘in-between wars’

By the time the armistice ended the **Great War** in 1918, the period of destruction and hatred had left 40 million people dead or injured, millions homeless and battle scarred lands across the globe. Therefore when the Paris Peace Conference started in 1919 to officially end the war, there were sincere hopes for reconciliation and recovery. Political leaders and ordinary people alike, determined that the Great War should ever happen again.

The Paris Peace conference led to the **Treaty of Versailles**, a peace treaty decided by Britain, France and America. Germany were given no say in the discussions and were forced to accept the terms, or risk destruction, despite their howls of protest.

The Treaty of Versailles stated that Germany must accept all responsibility for the First World War and must pay £6.6 billion for the war damages. Alongside this, 13% of German land was taken (Britain gained her colonies) and the German military was taken away. This left Germans angry and humiliated. During the years 1919-23, the country faced one crisis after another, such as Hyperinflation and attempted revolution, each time the Treaty was blamed.



In a bid to reduce the mistakes of the past, the **League of Nations** was also set up. It was a 42 country organisation led by Britain and France, aimed at stopping future wars by encouraging cooperation, disarmament and solving any problems peacefully.



During the 1920s the League played a role in solving many disputes and problems, from solving an economic crisis in Austria, preventing war between Greece and Bulgaria to ensuring 400,000 prisoners of war returned home after the Great War. By 1929, the world was more peaceful and stable than it had been for many years.

The decade after the war was a period of contrasts. The legacy of war led to the transformation of the entire political systems; there had been a **Revolution** in Russia in 1917, the exile of the **Kaiser** in Germany and reestablishment of Poland as a country. Whilst, in the established nations, many leaders promised a fairer society and ‘homes for heroes’.

# The “Long Shadow” of the First World War, 1918-39

Western countries like America, Britain and eventually Germany, experienced a Golden Age, also known as the *Roaring Twenties* throughout the 1920s, as economic prosperity combined with dramatic social, political and cultural changes. In America, the economic ‘boom’ that continued from the First World War, helped cement the country as the wealthiest nation, and allowed Americans to own cars, radios and telephones for the first time ever.

Across the Western World, women experienced new freedoms and rights never seen before. Women were given the vote in Britain, France and Germany for the first time, making it the most advanced democracy in the world. Social independence continued to improve, with young modern women known as ‘flappers’ allowed to drink, smoke and party unlike before.

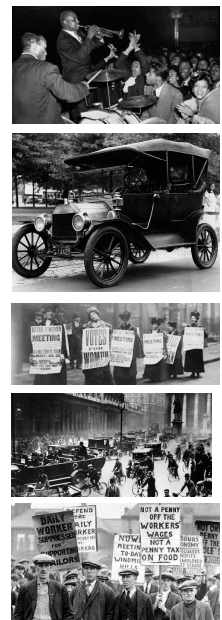
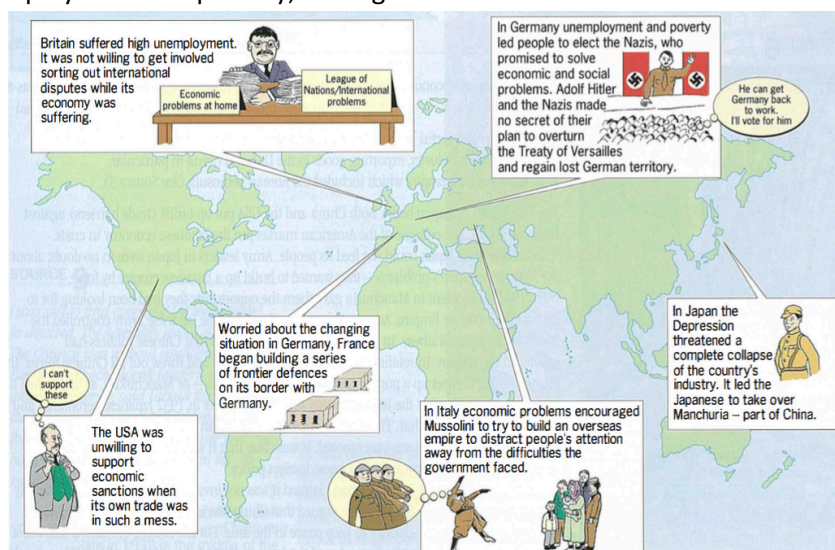
Despite a brief boom after the Armistice, the costs of war and competitive global economy were soon felt in Britain, and by 1926 the economy was in decline and the government faced a General Strike against wage reductions.

On the other hand, the brutality unleashed by the Great War continued across European societies after the war, with political violence overwhelming Germany between 1918-23 and the armed takeover of Italy by fascist leader Mussolini in 1922. Russia was also engulfed in civil war until 1923, with the victory of Lenin’s Communists causing huge social and economic crises in the newly named Soviet Union. Led by Josef Stalin from 1928, the country was keen to spread communism around the globe, causing suspicion and fear in like Britain and America.



By the late 1920s, world trade was booming, led by the USA, the richest country in the world. Many countries borrowed money from US banks, for example, Germany borrowed billions in the 1920s which helped their businesses grow. As a result of the world economic growth, international tension reduced and co-operation improved. The outlook looked bright.

This period of prosperity came to a sudden end in October 1929. The US stock market (known as Wall Street) crashed, causing the collapse of US banks and businesses. The **Wall Street Crash** caused the **Great Depression**, a long period of economic crisis, which spread around the world bringing unemployment and poverty, and significant international crises in the 1930s.



# The “Long Shadow” of the First World War, 1918-39

The historian Piers Brendon has called the 1930s the ‘**Dark Valley**’, because it was a period of tension and mistrust which paved the way for the devastation of the Second World War. As a result of the Depression, Britain and France turned away from internationalism and the League, and began to adopt more selfish policies, whilst America decided to continue its policy of **isolationism**, staying out of international politics and protecting its own interests.

Whilst the depression provided the opportunity for **dictatorships** to rise to power in countries like Germany, Japan and Italy, with each taking more aggressive actions to achieve their aims. Each time, the League of Nations led by Britain and France failed to stop them.

In 1931, Japan invaded Manchuria, China. The League ordered Japan to leave, which it refused to do, and as Britain and France were unwilling to get involved, nothing happened. Japan kept Manchuria, which encouraged others to act aggressively.



Then, in 1935, Mussolini invaded Abyssinia in North East Africa. The League objected, but Italy ignored it and Britain and France secretly agreed to give Abyssinia to Italy!

This killed the League of Nations, it had completely failed in its aim to stop war and stop aggressive nations.



When Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in January 1933, he promised to destroy the Treaty of Versailles, conquer new lands and make Germany great once again.

Hitler wasted no time in turning his words into actions. Between 1935-1938, he broke the Treaty of Versailles consistently; by rearming Germany’s military, resending soldiers into the Rhineland (the German/French border) and uniting Germany with Austria.

Throughout this time, Britain and France used a policy called ‘**appeasement**’.

This policy, led by British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain, involved giving Hitler what he wanted, hoping that he would stop and it would prevent another First World War. This failed, simply making Hitler stronger and more confident, whilst encouraging him to take more gambles.



In 1939, after Germany took over Czechoslovakia, Hitler openly set its sights on Poland which had nothing to do with the Treaty of Versailles. At this point, Chamberlain finally ended appeasement, promising to declare war on Germany if they attacked Poland. Germany felt strong enough and that Britain would do nothing, so they invaded on 1<sup>st</sup> September 1939. Two days later Britain and France declared war on Germany, sparking the **Second World War**.