

About Postwar United States and the 1920s

The decade between World War I and the Great Depression was one of dramatic change in American social, political, and economic life. The pace of change was fastest in the cities, which were demographically transformed by mass migration and technologically transformed by the uptake of electric power and the spread of telephone networks. In some rural parts of the United States, meanwhile, daily life continued almost as it had at the turn of the century. Sometimes, as in the case of the First Red Scare and the postwar recession, the changes of this decade were tumultuous and even violent. Yet the years 1919–29 were also marked by increased opportunities for many, both within the workforce and at the ballot box.

FUNDAMENTALISM

In the 1920s, a Protestant Christian movement known as fundamentalism grew in the United States. Fundamentalists believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible and that society should be based on that interpretation. They formed communities in support of these beliefs. They resisted what, in their view, were the destructive social changes within the cities of the United States, which they often attributed to urbanization, new technologies, and, in some cases, an influx of Catholic and Jewish immigrants. In this way, the story of fundamentalism is intertwined with that of the immigration quotas and nativist movements of the 1920s.

Central to fundamentalism is the belief that the Bible is accurate not only in religious matters but also in its account of history and the natural world. This means that fundamentalists broadly opposed the theory of evolution then being taught in American classrooms. Their opposition manifested in a series of bills intended to ban the teaching of evolution in public schools. One such law, in Tennessee, became the focus of the Scopes Monkey Trial of 1925, in which schoolteacher John T. Scopes taught evolution to his high school class. Scopes's defense, led by Clarence Darrow and backed by the American Civil Liberties Union, lost the case to a prosecution led by William Jennings Bryan. Yet for many Americans who supported science and modern values, the case and the press coverage it received were a public relations victory for their cause. The case also highlighted the current national tension between science and religion.

PROHIBITION

The 1920s were a time characterized by the growing importance of leisure and entertainment as well as by changing social mores, but it was also the period of Prohibition, when the 1919 ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment had banned the sale of alcohol and drinking had been driven underground.

One result of Prohibition was the speakeasy, a form of illegal—and thus covertly operated—drinking establishment found in many American cities of the 1920s. In these bars, which often masqueraded as barbershops, cafés, or other legitimate businesses, people from all walks of life gathered to drink and socialize. Because “honest” businesspeople could not operate bars and saloons anymore, the management of speakeasies often fell to gangsters. Indeed, organized crime as a whole developed massively to fill the gap between supply and demand caused by Prohibition. Gangsters ran bootlegging operations, illegally manufacturing and selling alcohol. People also produced alcohol for home consumption; they built stills for moonshine, made bathtub gin, and bought premade grape concentrates that could “accidentally” become wine under the right conditions. The California wine industry soon pivoted to providing grapes for home use, both fresh and in the form of a fruit juice concentrate. The latter bore a warning that, if improperly stored, the concentrate could “accidentally” turn to wine. Pharmacies could also sell alcohol for medicinal purposes, prompting many people to purchase alcohol using this loophole.

Prohibition came to an end with the ratification of the Twenty-First Amendment in 1933. Momentum behind the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment gathered when it became clear that Prohibition had failed to solve

the social problems attributed to alcohol consumption. Instead, it had created black markets for alcohol and empowered the rise of criminal gangs. Even while it lasted, enforcement of Prohibition was lax, and the Great Depression increased the nation's demand for alcohol. While the Twenty-First Amendment ended Prohibition, it gave states more power to regulate the production and sale of alcohol.

Women's activism was a key force behind Prohibition. The temperance movement that arose in the 1800s was driven in part by women who viewed alcohol as a social poison that fueled domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women. Many reformers also blamed alcohol for broader social problems associated with unregulated urbanization and industrialization. Prohibition was also driven by hostility toward immigrants and Catholics, who were blamed for causing social problems and immorality, in part due to their more permissive attitudes toward alcohol.

WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND THE FLAPPER

By 1918, the tide was turning in favor of a constitutional amendment for women's suffrage. In 1917, the state of New York had adopted women's suffrage, and in 1918, President Woodrow Wilson made a speech in favor of a constitutional amendment to grant women the right to vote. In 1919, the amendment passed both houses of Congress and was sent to the states for ratification. In 1920, Tennessee voted narrowly to ratify the amendment. It was the thirty-sixth state to do so, giving the amendment the necessary three-fourths majority needed to become part of the Constitution. Still, systematic disenfranchisement meant that many women of color, especially in the South, were unable to exercise their newly won right.

Along with securing new legal rights, the women's movement of the 1920s pushed to change ideas of what was socially acceptable for women to do. Flappers, a term originally used in Britain to describe teenage girls and later applied in the United States to young, fashionable women, wore their hair and dresses short, smoked and drank like their male counterparts, and went to social events without chaperones—behaviors deemed uncouth or unladylike in their mothers' and grandmothers' day. They insisted, too, on more autonomy in their social and romantic relationships. Changes in feminine fashion became closely associated with gains in women's independence across other spheres of life.

Social changes caused by urbanization, industrialization, and the growth of new industries such as communications meant that more women were able to live independently. Perhaps the most critical of these changes was the mass entry of women into the workforce—a holdover from and expansion of wartime labor shortages. Able to support themselves with jobs in industries such as garment and textile manufacture, teaching, and secretarial work, women became much less reliant on a parent or spouse as the household's sole breadwinner. In fact, by the 1920s, a quarter of women working in cities lived on their own.

1920s POLITICS

The 1920s witnessed a thorough return to isolationism as the country began its economic, political, social, and emotional recovery from World War I. Even during the war, isolationist sentiment had run high in the United States, with Woodrow Wilson winning the 1916 election on the slogan "He kept us out of war." During the year and a half that the United States took part in the war, its high human and economic costs—ultimately including the deaths of some 116,000 U.S. military personnel—drew public outrage. Many isolationists felt vindicated in their belief that entering the war had not been in the country's best interests. When Wilson then proposed the League of Nations as a means of furthering postwar peace and stability, he encountered serious backlash from isolationists in government and among the public. Many Americans felt that the United States had been "duped" into joining the conflict. They believed that government officials and the media had exaggerated German atrocities and the threat to U.S. interests, and some critics argued that banks and arms manufacturers encouraged the war for profit.

Meanwhile, Warren G. Harding won the 1920 election on a “return to normalcy” platform that explicitly included isolationism. As students will read in the Topic 1 primary sources, Harding wanted the country to embrace “not submergence in internationality, but sustainment in triumphant nationality.” His Republican successors, Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover, largely continued Harding’s program of political isolationism combined with economic protectionism throughout the 1920s.

The First Red Scare

It was against this backdrop of a general isolation from foreign affairs that the First Red Scare played out. This crisis of the 1920s is so named because (a) the color red has long been associated with leftist radicals, and (b) there was a Second Red Scare after World War II.

The First Red Scare was a period of intense anti-communist and antiradical sentiment in the United States, fueled by fears of a Bolshevik-inspired uprising at home. Many Americans became increasingly alarmed by the rise of domestic socialist and anarchist movements, associating them with violence, subversion, and foreign intrigue. Because some immigrants joined or sympathized with radical groups, all immigrants became suspect in the eyes of many Americans. The fear of communist subversion was exacerbated by the 1919 anarchist bombings, in which radicals targeted prominent political and business figures. One series of mail bomb attacks took place around May 1, with the intended recipients including prominent businessmen and government officials deemed hostile to anarchism. Another series of bombings in June targeted the homes of federal and local officials, including Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer.

The U.S. government responded with a series of crackdowns in which little effort was made to distinguish among communists, anarchists, and other leftists deemed “radical.” The Justice Department orchestrated the Palmer Raids, arresting thousands of suspected radicals, many of whom were detained without due process and deported. The media once again played a significant role in propagating the fear, often sensationalizing the threat and linking labor strikes and civil unrest to radical conspiracies. The Red Scare eventually subsided by the early 1920s, but it left a lasting impact on American politics and society, setting the stage for subsequent periods of political repression.

THE ROARING TWENTIES

The years 1920–21 witnessed a significant economic downturn—rapid deflation, a sharp decline in industrial production, and a rise in unemployment. This recession was influenced by multiple factors, the most significant being decreased government spending and a surplus of goods, and the Federal Reserve’s decision to raise interest rates in 1919 to combat inflation further throttled consumer spending and limited businesses’ ability to hire and expand. The severity of this recession was heightened by the nation’s inadequate preparation for a shift back to a peacetime economy. Demobilized soldiers flooded the labor market, turning a shortage into a surplus, and the manufacturing industry underwent an abrupt transition from war goods to consumer products such as appliances and cars.

Unfortunately, the policy lessons drawn from 1920 were not applied in time to prevent the next, much larger economic downturn: the Great Depression. The prosperity of the 1920s was built on progressive inflation, and the collapse of the securities market in 1929 marked a shift in American economic history, emphasizing the importance of economic foresight and the potential repercussions of overtight monetary and fiscal policies during a crisis. (For more on the causes and course of the Great Depression, including the role played by economic policy, see the Unit 4, Topic 2 What Teachers Need to Know, “About The Great Depression.”)

Still, the 1920s were, for many Americans, a decade of increased economic opportunity and material comfort. Industrialization and urbanization meant that many people had more disposable income and more free time. Moreover, as mechanization continued to increase, many jobs became easier and more remunerative. For

example, blue-collar workers' average working hours decreased from almost fifty-six hours per week in 1900 to about forty-two hours by 1929, yet real wages for those workers increased by 25 percent.

One group that generally did not experience increased prosperity in the 1920s was farmers. The production of crops had risen to support wartime demands and, after the war, to supply European countries whose local food systems had been disrupted by the war. When foreign demand contracted, farmers were trapped in a situation of overproduction in which they could not always sell what they had grown, and prices and income fell. Protectionist trade policies also had an adverse impact on farmers, who could not raise their crop prices to compensate for the higher prices they paid for manufactured goods. Many farmers resorted to borrowing money from banks. Often, they could not repay debts and ended up losing their farms. About a quarter of farms were sold to pay off debts in the 1920s. By 1928, half of all farmers were living in poverty.

The Rise of the American Film Industry

Often, increased wages and leisure time were spent at the movies. Feature-length films displaced short films as the main attraction at theaters, many of which became more ornate “movie palaces” with plush seating and richly decorated interiors. The 1920s also established two other features of the modern film industry: the movie studio and the movie star. While film companies had existed since the early days of cinema, the 1920s saw the rise of major studios such as MGM and Paramount. These studios created high-budget productions with their stable of actors on exclusive contracts. The best-known of these actors could draw large audiences and demand large salaries. Dramatic leads such as Gloria Swanson and Clara Bow conveyed a sense of Hollywood glamour, modeling styles that were soon emulated by many young women. Comedians such as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton—equally beloved by audiences, if perhaps not quite as glamorous—amused moviegoers with their antics. Chaplin’s “Tramp” persona, with bowler hat and moustache, remains among the most recognizable figures in film history.

The Great Migration

As students learned in Unit 3, in the early twentieth century, the United States experienced the start of a significant demographic change now known as the Great Migration. Between 1915 and 1970, more than six million African Americans moved from the American South to the North, Midwest, and West. This mass migration changed the concentration of the African American population. At the start of the 1900s, 90 percent of African Americans lived in the South. By 1970, around 50 percent lived in the North, Midwest, and West.

The country’s African American population, once predominantly rural, gradually concentrated in urban centers throughout the Northeast and Midwest. Black neighborhoods with their own churches, businesses, and other social institutions sprang into existence or grew dramatically during this time. Harlem, in New York City, is the example par excellence; prior to the Great Migration, its residents were primarily Jewish and Italian, but the migration of some 175,000 African Americans turned the neighborhood into a center of Black culture. In Chicago, a collection of South Side neighborhoods, now collectively known as Bronzeville, underwent a similar transformation.

Beginning with the 1921 Emergency Quota Act, increasingly strict immigration laws limited the labor supply, and some African Americans were inspired to move north to fill jobs that might have otherwise been filled by immigrants. Black newspapers, such as the *Chicago Defender*, carried reports of good wages and better living conditions. Nationally distributed in places where Black newspapers were sold, the *Defender* was also brought by Pullman porters into Southern towns where white vendors refused to carry it. Its reporting ultimately reached hundreds of thousands of African Americans and did a great deal to convince many to move north. The promise of the North seemed even brighter given the conditions African Americans faced in the South: the oppression of Jim Crow laws, the hardships of sharecropping, farm failures, and crop damage caused by boll weevils—parasitic insects that feed on cotton plants and had become widespread across U.S. cotton-growing regions by the 1920s.

Life in the North was not as ideal as may have been imagined, however. African Americans encountered racism in the form of redlining, sundown towns, and sporadic but devastating acts of vigilante violence. In areas such as New York City's Harlem and Chicago's South Side, African Americans lived under segregation at least as stark and oppressive as they had experienced in the Jim Crow South. The Great Migration contributed to major social and cultural changes in the North and Midwest, particularly in urban areas.

The Harlem Renaissance

One result of the Great Migration was the Harlem Renaissance, an artistic and intellectual movement that helped introduce African American culture to the world. Communities of African American writers, poets, painters, sculptors, dancers, and musicians arose in cities around the country, but particularly in Harlem. Many Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Langston Hughes, sought to depict the real lives and experiences of African Americans in their work. Writer Zora Neale Hurston was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, and much of her work focused on the lives, folklore, and speech of rural African Americans. One of her plays, *Color Struck* (1926), explores tensions within the African American community, including discrimination based on skin tone, a phenomenon known as colorism. Hurston also studied and documented Hoodoo, a set of African American folk spiritual practices related to Vodou (often called Voodoo) that blend African traditions with Christianity and local customs. As part of this work, she spent time in Louisiana conducting field research on African American folklore and spiritual traditions.

Many Harlem Renaissance artists championed racial consciousness, celebrated African American culture, and looked to their African roots for inspiration. Countee Cullen, a leading poet of the movement, had a different view, believing that art transcends race. He urged African American writers to see themselves as part of the Euro-American literary tradition. Philosopher Alain Locke, meanwhile, stressed a concept of "race pride" in his analysis of the achievements of the Harlem Renaissance.

Jazz music was another major part of the Harlem Renaissance. Harlem's Cotton Club became renowned as the performance home of jazz greats such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, and Lena Horne. However, while it ran on African American talent, the Cotton Club was owned by white gangsters who only allowed white patrons inside. They also discriminated against dark-skinned African Americans by, for instance, only hiring light-skinned women as dancers. Furthermore, some of the club's decorations included images reminiscent of Southern plantations. Thus, while the club created opportunities for African American artists, its legacy is mixed.

Many of the African American-owned businesses that fed the Harlem Renaissance failed after the stock market crash of 1929. However, many of the movement's artists had decades-long careers. Hughes's poem "Harlem," published in 1951, is often read as reflecting and encouraging the perspectives of the burgeoning Civil Rights Movement.

The Lost Generation

"The Lost Generation" refers to Americans and Europeans who came of age during World War I, and particularly to a group of American writers who lived as expatriates in Paris in the aftermath of the war. Having witnessed the horrors of World War I, they felt forced to reject the traditional values that had led to it and had no desire to return to "normalcy." Painfully aware of the changes that modernity was bringing, they were left feeling adrift and alienated. They criticized mainstream American culture as provincial, restrictive, materialistic, and emotionally closed. Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald remain the best known of the Lost Generation writers, a group that also includes Gertrude Stein, E. E. Cummings, and John Dos Passos. Hemingway attributed the phrase "lost generation" to Stein, whose home in Paris was a hub for writers and artists.

Hemingway began his writing career as a newspaper reporter and went overseas to drive an ambulance in World War I. These experiences influenced his early fiction, including *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and the semi-autobiographical *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). His writing style is celebrated as simple but painstakingly crafted,

communicating complex situations and emotions with sparse words. His short stories of the 1920s frequently featured another autobiographical character, Nick Adams, who struggles to readjust to the rhythms of home life after his wartime experiences abroad. These were collected posthumously in 1972 as *The Nick Adams Stories*.

Fitzgerald coined the term “Jazz Age” to refer to the 1920s. His fiction portrays the era as decadent and colorful, and his characters often struggle through emotional turbulence. While Fitzgerald at times appears to question the rigid racial barriers of the time, scholars have noted that his work relies on racial stereotyping. His best-known work, *The Great Gatsby*, was published in 1925.

The 1920s Consumer Economy

The 1920s also saw the rise of a consumer culture, a way of life in which people increasingly defined comfort, success, and enjoyment through the purchase of goods rather than only meeting basic needs. More products were available, and people with greater incomes were spending a smaller portion of their budget on necessities and more on products they wanted, particularly new items such as appliances and ready-to-wear clothes. These consumer products also transformed the lives of women who might otherwise have spent much of their day laundering clothes and ironing fabrics that easily wrinkled. In part, industrialization and mass production made products cheaper. However, changing business practices also played a role. More stores and companies began to offer credit, allowing consumers to pay over time in installments. Banks also began offering mortgages, or loans used to buy a house with the house itself acting as collateral.

These changes allowed and encouraged Americans to consume more, but they also meant that people carried more debt—and, just as importantly, that they became habituated to carrying significant debt. This boosted parts of the economy even as it set the stage for the dramatic crash of 1929.

About The Great Depression

Historians often trace the beginning of the Great Depression to the Wall Street crash of October 1929, but the economic crisis had multiple causes. These included overproduction in both agriculture and manufacturing, European war debt combined with U.S. protectionism in the form of high tariffs, the failure of banks on which many households and businesses relied, and the Federal Reserve's ill-timed shift from a loose to a tight monetary policy. Moreover, these different causes were closely interrelated.

CAUSES OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

During the 1920s, loose monetary policy—meaning that interest rates were kept low and credit was easy to obtain—enabled the consumer economy and encouraged borrowing and spending. This easy access to credit helped drive production beyond demand for many goods.

As students read in Topic 1, the stock market boomed during the 1920s, leading even more people to speculate, or invest with the hope of later selling at a profit. Drawn by the allure of high returns, people used up their savings and frequently borrowed money to buy shares of stocks whose prices were on the rise. Buying stocks on margin—paying only a small percentage of the stock price and essentially borrowing against the amount of profit expected from the stock—also became more prevalent.

The widespread buying of stocks on margin by people and organizations that could not afford the risk made the stock market crash a systemic catastrophe. While the market was booming, buying on margin amplified investors' gains, but when the market crashed, these same investors suffered heavy losses and deep debt. Commercial banks had also sought their share of the stock market profits and invested depositors' money to attain it. Because of the role this practice played in promoting instability within the financial system, it would be effectively outlawed by the Glass–Steagall Act (1933), one of the earliest New Deal laws to address banking and finance.

Overproduction

Henry Ford's innovative use of moving assembly lines in his auto plants was soon copied by other industries, enabling mass production of goods and helping create the economic boom and mass consumption of the 1920s.

The manufacture, maintenance, and use of automobiles also created new demand within a host of other industries, some of which owed their very existence to the popularity of motor travel. The industries that produced the various materials for automaking—steel, rubber, and glass, among others—all grew in response to the newly widespread technology. So did consumer-facing industries that provided fuel, food, and accommodations as car camping gradually gave way to motel stays. Consumer reliance on credit was especially conspicuous when it came to cars; more than half of American households that owned a car in the 1920s had financed it rather than paying cash. Retailers encouraged these new spending habits by offering installment and credit plans for many major purchases.

By the end of the 1920s, however, production of all sorts of consumer goods had exceeded demand, and the market for certain products had been saturated. Many Americans had been spending beyond their means, using credit to finance the purchase of not only cars but also other new goods such as radios and refrigerators. After the stock market crash, demand suffered as consumers lost access to credit and, at the same time, were still responsible for repaying debts they had accumulated, often with fewer job opportunities or sources of income available to them. As demand fell, factories in turn began laying off workers, leading to unemployment and further reducing consumer spending.

Agricultural overproduction, too, was a problem. Because prices were low, American farmers needed to sell more to earn enough income, but they were producing more food than people could consume, and the glut of food crops caused prices to decrease even more. The partial recovery of European economies from World War I exacerbated the issue by decreasing demand for American agricultural exports, which had been a lifeline for war-torn Europe in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Like manufacturers, farmers had gone into debt buying productive machinery during the boom, but unlike manufacturers, farmers' options for retooling production were limited by the soil, climate, and length of the growing season. Farmers could not simply replant an already-planted field; they sold their crops at a loss and were unable to repay their debts.

Substantial shifts in demand for foodstuffs also impacted farmers negatively. City dwellers in blue- and white-collar industries alike changed their diets as they earned more money. They began to include more produce and dairy in their meals and decreased their use of staple crops. This left farmers who raised commodity crops, such as hogs and wheat, with even more of a product they already had too much of.

War Debt and Tariff Policy

After World War I ended, many European nations were deeply in debt. France and Great Britain, America's allies in wartime, were heavily in debt to the United States in particular. In addition, Germany was required by the terms of the Versailles Treaty to pay billions of dollars in war reparations to the Allies, primarily France, Belgium, and Great Britain. France and Belgium in particular had suffered invasion and widespread destruction during the war, which shaped the demands placed on Germany. The fragile German economy was simply unable to make these payments, so the Germans resorted to printing vast amounts of money, which resulted in hyperinflation. The German mark became practically worthless. American lenders stopped offering loans to Germany while also demanding repayment on already-existing loans. As explained in Topic 1, the Dawes Plan tried to get Germany's reparations back on track, but this brought about only a brief and partial recovery by the time the Great Depression spread to Europe.

Even before the start of the Great Depression, the 1922 Fordney–McCumber Tariff Act raised U.S. tariffs to historically high levels—an average of 40 percent—to protect emerging American industries, such as the manufacture of chemicals and dyestuffs. However, the main effect of the tariff was to make it difficult for European nations to export goods to the United States, thus preventing them from earning the dollars they needed to repay their war debts. In addition, many nations retaliated with their own tariffs on American-made goods. During the boom years of the 1920s, the U.S. economy was vigorous enough to absorb the loss, and American manufacturers found a ready market at home for many of their goods. During the 1930s, however, protectionist policies on both sides only exacerbated the economic depression.

Monetary Policy and Bank Failures

Congress established the Federal Reserve Bank, also known as the Fed, in 1913 in response not only to repeated bank failures but also to a long pattern of economic instability in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, marked by cycles of rapid growth followed by financial panics and severe downturns that had made it difficult for consumers and businesses to obtain credit. The Fed acts as the central bank for the United States. Its main functions are to maintain an effective and reliable payment system, supervise and regulate individual banks, and establish monetary policy. Monetary policy involves strategies to control the country's money supply and promote economic growth. Students briefly examined this concept when they read about the Free Silver Movement in Unit 2. Understanding how monetary policy works helps explain how decisions made by the Federal Reserve contributed to the economic collapse of the 1930s.

The primary tool of the Fed's monetary policy is the federal funds rate—the interest rate that banks charge when lending to one another overnight. When the Fed raises the federal funds rate, money becomes more expensive, discouraging investment and slowing the economy. A change in the federal funds rate normally

affects, and is accompanied by, changes in other interest rates and financial conditions. Raising the federal funds rate is the main way the Fed fights inflation. Up until 2020, the Fed also used reserve requirements—rules on how much of its deposits a bank has to keep on hand in cash—as a further means of regulating the money supply and preventing banks from taking too much risk. Though the Fed effectively eliminated such requirements in March 2020, it retains the legal authority to reestablish reserve requirements. The Fed is designed to be independent, primarily to insulate it from political pressure and short-term economic goals.

During much of the 1920s, the Fed exercised a relatively *loose* monetary policy—that is, it kept interest rates low to facilitate the borrowing and lending that drive economic activity. Then, in response to the crash, it embraced what is now deemed an overly *tight* money supply: a policy of raising interest rates, making it more expensive to take out a loan. This discourages lenders from lending and borrowers from borrowing. These policies are typically used when a central bank feels inflation (the rate of overall price increases) is too high.

Low interest rates encouraged the economic expansion of the 1920s while contributing to industrial overproduction. After the crash, the Fed raised interest rates in the hope of discouraging the buying of stocks on margin. Unfortunately, the main effect of this Fed policy was to decrease the money supply, causing deflation and lowering corporate profits. That, plus the higher interest rates themselves, made it almost impossible for businesses to invest or expand. The Fed also allowed weaker banks to fail, theorizing that the American banking system would become stronger after struggling banks were eliminated (a policy called *liquidationism*). As it turned out, the primary effect of this policy was to decrease confidence in the American banking system and contribute to, rather than resolve or ameliorate, the American banking crisis.

More recent leaders of the Federal Reserve have acknowledged the institution's role in the Great Depression and have sought to implement the lessons learned since that time, especially in preventing deflation. In 2002, Ben Bernanke, then a member of the Fed's board of governors and later its chairman, delivered a speech on bank failures in which he put the matter quite bluntly: "Regarding the Great Depression: . . . We did it. We're very sorry. . . . We won't do it again."

THE DUST BOWL

The Dust Bowl deepened the economic problems of farmers. The term *Dust Bowl* refers to two things: the area of the Great Plains impacted by severe drought and wind erosion and the period from 1930 to 1936 in which the extreme drought occurred. Winds turned the parched soil into devastating dust storms that wiped out entire farms. Those exposed to the dust suffered from a variety of respiratory ailments, including an increase in cases of pneumonia. Like the classical pneumonia that is often caused by infections, dust-associated pneumonia causes weakness, shortness of breath, and chest pain.

Farming practices of the day laid the groundwork for the Dust Bowl to be much worse than it otherwise would have been. To meet the high wartime and postwar demand for food, farmers of the late 1910s and early 1920s tilled and planted marginal lands that normally would have been left as grassland. They did not use soil conservation practices, such as planting cover crops, which were deemed too costly or inefficient, and they burned the stubble left over from harvesting rather than leaving it in place. Thus, when the storms of the Dust Bowl came, much of the region's soil had been stripped of native grasses without an effective replacement to prevent erosion.

As farms failed across the Great Plains and agricultural employment collapsed, many out-of-work farmworkers left the region and sought work in California, attracted by the state's milder climate and encouraged by flyers advertising a need for farm labor. California also attracted farm owners, many of whom simply abandoned their useless land to start fresh somewhere else. Another factor driving people to California was the new federal road, Route 66, built in the 1920s as automobiles became part of U.S. culture. This highway, which connected Chicago and Los Angeles, became the main route for the migration of desperate people to California.

Other Challenges of Depression-Era Employment

One of the early effects of the Great Depression was a sharp increase in discrimination within the labor market. During World War I and for some time thereafter, women, African Americans, and Mexican Americans had made inroads into steadier, higher-paying jobs. Although the return of millions of troops after the war displaced many of these workers, the economic expansion of the 1920s and restrictive immigration laws meant that demand for labor still created opportunities for African American and Mexican American workers. When the Great Depression began, however, women and members of other disadvantaged groups were often the first to be laid off.

During the Depression, women's job opportunities were limited by widespread gender discrimination. "Women's work" was often confined to roles in teaching, clerical work, nursing, and civil service and generally excluded higher-paying or traditionally male-dominated industries. Yet the demand for teachers, nurses, and other positions remained steady during the Great Depression and was not as dependent on the country's overall economic health. As a result, white women's employment rebounded more quickly than men's, whose typically broader job prospects had shrunk dramatically in the depressed economy. Traditionally "male" jobs in mining, oil drilling, and manufacturing were among the very hardest hit by the Great Depression and among the slowest to recover. African American women were often confined to domestic service, and many Mexican and Mexican American women—many of whom had worked in agriculture—faced widespread job loss. In response to the latter, some families chose to return or relocate to Mexico, while others were forced out through repatriation programs carried out by local and federal authorities. Often, large farms preferred to hire Dust Bowl migrants over Mexican or Mexican American laborers, many of whom now faced increased discrimination, wage cuts, and even deportation. Farm wages eventually fell due to desperate competition from those left unemployed by the Dust Bowl.

HERBERT HOOVER

Born in Iowa in 1874, Herbert Hoover lost both his parents at an early age and moved to Oregon to live with his uncle. He attended Stanford University in California, where he majored in geology, graduating in 1895. A grueling stint as a California gold-mine laborer ended when he gained his first assignment as a mining engineer, a job that took him to Australia and then China before he opened his own consultancy.

To those considering him as a presidential candidate in 1928, however, Hoover was best known for his humanitarian actions during and after World War I. He unofficially organized the evacuation of stranded American travelers from Europe and founded a relief organization that used private funds to provide food and medicine to the people of Belgium. He accepted his first federal role in 1917 when Woodrow Wilson appointed him to head the U.S. Food Administration. In this capacity, too, he distinguished himself: More than a decade before his name became a sarcastic byword for poverty, *Hooverize* meant to ration or economize. In 1918, he became head of the European Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, where he won appreciation for leading an effective international aid program.

From 1921 to 1929, Hoover served as the secretary of commerce in the administrations of Warren G. Harding and his successor, Calvin Coolidge. Often described as a technocrat, or an expert who is one of a group of similar people who have political power as well as technical knowledge, Hoover sought to make the U.S. economy more efficient by collecting and using statistical data. Though his work at the Department of Commerce was not as publicized as his wartime accomplishments, his efforts to relieve those harmed by Mississippi River flooding in 1927 bolstered his reputation in the eyes of his fellow Americans.

Hoover became president in 1929, inheriting a booming economy that crashed six months later. Hoover believed the crash to be like the Panic of 1893, from which the country had recovered without strong government intervention. He prioritized protecting the country's capitalist system, which he felt could be damaged by government action. For Hoover, as he made clear in a 1928 campaign speech (in the Land of Liberty DBQ Workbook), "rugged individualism" was key to American success and a principle that the country

abandoned at its peril. As times got harder, more and more displaced people occupied shacks and tents in makeshift camps that came to be called Hoovervilles, reflecting the growing sense that Hoover was to blame for the Depression or had not done enough to ease peoples' suffering.

FDR AND THE NEW DEAL

Hoover did not completely ignore the Depression or its effects. In 1931, his administration proposed the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC) to provide low-interest loans to banks and other institutions, including state and local governments. At Hoover's behest, and with the support of the Fed and the broader banking community, Congress swiftly enacted the legislation to create the RFC, which was up and running by January 1932. But Americans needed more, and Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) introduced the New Deal to fill this need. Part of this was an overhaul of the banking system to restore consumer confidence by insuring deposits and separating commercial and investment banks. This latter provision kept commercial banks from speculating with depositors' money, a behavior that had played a part in the onset of the Great Depression.

Another part of the New Deal was the creation of numerous "alphabet agencies" that provided work relief, offered loans and price supports to farmers, regulated labor-management relations, and generally aimed to prevent poverty and limit unemployment. To operate these agencies, the federal government workforce doubled in size to nearly one million—a figure itself soon dwarfed by the surge in federal employment during World War II.

Because they focused on building physical infrastructure and creating artwork, some New Deal agencies left a tangible legacy throughout the country, including in Louisiana. The Public Works Administration (PWA), Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), and Works Progress Administration (WPA) all built or improved numerous Louisiana sites, including government buildings, roads and bridges, and parks and state forests. Examples include the Audubon Zoo in New Orleans (expanded by the WPA), Fontainebleau State Park in Mandeville (CCC), and the Louisiana State Exhibit Museum in Shreveport (PWA). Multiple New Deal agencies added to and improved the Louisiana State University campus in Baton Rouge during the mid- to late 1930s.

Historians recognize two main phases of the New Deal. The First New Deal focused on stabilizing the banking system and providing relief for people in need: farmers and the unemployed. In 1935, seeing that despite the extensive reforms of the New Deal, the U.S. economy was barely improving, FDR proposed a Second New Deal to focus on more fundamental issues and longer-term solutions. Products of the Second New Deal include the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB). Instead of just providing jobs, the NLRB would protect labor unions and oversee fair negotiations between them and businesses. Another Second New Deal agency, the Social Security Administration, set up a retirement insurance program that would protect current and future generations of retirees.

Keynesian Economics

The U.S. government has been regulating business, trade, and other economic matters since its inception. During the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which students read about in Unit 2, the government took up the challenge of antitrust regulation and wielded the commerce clause to achieve a variety of goals in workers' rights and consumer health and safety. Yet these policies were often treated as exceptions to a general laissez-faire principle, which students encountered in Unit 1 in the context of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*.

By the early 1930s, however, the unprecedented scale and duration of the Great Depression had exposed the limits of existing economic theory. Classical laissez-faire ideas could neither adequately explain why the economy had collapsed so severely nor offer practical solutions for recovery. A different sort of economic theory, championed by John Maynard Keynes, emerged in response to this failure of orthodox economics and

informed the fiscal policies of the New Deal. Keynes believed markets were rarely, if ever, as free and efficient as the proponents of laissez-faire maintained.

Central to Keynes's thinking was the concept of aggregate demand, or the total amount of spending by consumers, businesses, and the government across the economy. Keynes believed that demand and supply were often mismatched, sometimes grossly so, and that these mismatches drove recessions (when supply exceeded demand) and high inflation (when demand exceeded supply). When aggregate demand collapsed, as it did during the Great Depression, businesses cut production, laid off workers, and reduced investment, which further reduced demand in a destructive cycle. Because the market as a whole would often be inefficient in one of these two ways, Keynes claimed that the government could and should actively intervene through monetary and fiscal policy.

To Keynes, a crisis such as the Great Depression called for government to spend heavily to stimulate the economy and create demand, even running a deficit in order to do so. He argued that what mattered most was not the specific form of spending but its ability to put money into people's hands, create jobs, and restart economic activity.

Keynes's ideas helped explain both why the economy had stalled and how government action might revive it at a moment when earlier economic assumptions had broken down. New Deal programs that expanded public works, relief spending, and government investment reflected this emphasis on boosting aggregate demand. During the 1937 recession, Roosevelt and his advisers drew on Keynesian reasoning to justify deficit spending as a necessary tool to counteract renewed economic contraction.

Critics of the New Deal

Not all Americans supported President Roosevelt's New Deal programs. Conservatives thought his policies were "socialism in disguise." These critics believed that too much government regulation threatened to undermine America's free-market economy. They claimed that an activist government would destroy Americans' self-reliance and that people would come to depend on or expect handouts from the government rather than seek or accept available jobs. They also retained a suspicion of organized labor and the political and industrial radicalism they associated with it.

Some populist critics, on the other hand, did not think Roosevelt's policies went far enough. These included Huey Long (discussed below), whose Share Our Wealth plan included a much more extensive program of wealth redistribution and an overhaul of the tax system. Another was Father Coughlin, a Catholic priest and radio broadcaster who blamed the economic downturn on greedy bankers and urged Roosevelt to nationalize America's banks and inflate the currency by promoting the free coinage of silver. Coughlin's message mixed populist rhetoric with anti-Semitic and anti-communist conspiracy theories. Over time, Coughlin's anti-Semitic ideas became the heart of his broadcasts. Dr. Francis Townsend, a physician from California, was another who argued that Roosevelt's policies did not go far enough and offered his own wealth redistribution plan as the solution. To end the Depression, Townsend proposed that the federal government provide a monthly pension of \$200 (equivalent to about \$4,700 in 2025) to all Americans aged sixty and over; in return, recipients would be required to retire to open up jobs for younger people and spend the money each month to spur the economy. Other critics further to the left, including the Communist Party of the United States, claimed that Roosevelt was displaying fascist tendencies and doing too little for workers' rights with the establishment of the National Recovery Administration.

Huey Long

Louisiana governor Huey Long had plenty of problems to address during his term of office (1928–32). A Democrat, Long initially supported Franklin Roosevelt but later became one of the New Deal's most prominent critics from within the Democratic Party, emerging as a national political figure during the Great Depression.

Like Hoover, during his time as governor, Long was philosophically opposed to cash aid from the government and believed that private charities should lead the charge in fighting poverty. He did, however, spend massively on infrastructure and education during his term of office, which kept Louisianans gainfully employed while improving the state's roads, schools, and other public goods. This state-level policy, in effect a work relief program, blunted the impact of the Great Depression's early years, providing a bridge of sorts between the 1929 crash and the beginnings of federal relief. Long also expanded access to public education by providing free textbooks to students across Louisiana, a policy that particularly benefited children from low-income families. These policies helped build Long's reputation as a champion of the poor, even as his governing style grew increasingly authoritarian.

A controversial and corrupt figure, Huey Long won him movie-star levels of popularity nationwide with his commitment to poverty relief, and by the early 1930s, he was widely viewed as a potential challenger to Roosevelt's leadership and policies. Critics accused him of building an authoritarian political machine in Baton Rouge and the rest of the state. Supporters of Longism, as his brand of radical populism came to be called, were awarded the vast majority of government contracts, and his critics and opponents were threatened or silenced. In some instances, Long deployed the National Guard and placed cities under martial law to suppress dissent from local officials. He also pressured state employees in Louisiana to contribute a portion of their salaries to a political fund known as the "deduct box." Supposedly voluntary but effectively mandatory, these contributions served to finance Long's political machine, consolidating his control over Louisiana's state government.

During the Great Depression, Long's rise fueled broader national anxiety about the stability of democratic institutions in a time of economic crisis. At times, there was nationwide concern about Long's demagoguery. Nobel Prize-winning novelist Sinclair Lewis wrote a 1935 novel entitled *It Can't Happen Here* that showed how an authoritarian leader could appeal to populist ideas and establish himself as a dictator. The leader in that book, Buzz Windrip, was closely modeled on Long.

Roosevelt's Court-Packing Strategy

Several of the nine Supreme Court justices were also critical of Roosevelt's New Deal programs; specifically, they were skeptical that these programs actually aligned with the powers constitutionally granted to the president and Congress. The four justices who most consistently struck down Roosevelt's programs came to be known as the "Four Horsemen": Willis Van Devanter, James Clark McReynolds, George Sutherland, and Pierce Butler. Three justices more amenable to Roosevelt's plans were known as the "Three Musketeers": Louis Brandeis, Benjamin N. Cardozo, and Harlan Fiske Stone. The two remaining justices, Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes and Owen J. Roberts, were viewed as swing voters. Notably, none of the nine was a Roosevelt nominee.

Beginning in the mid-1930s, the court struck down several important pieces of New Deal legislation for either going beyond Congress's constitutionally defined powers or granting the executive powers beyond those constitutionally defined. To prevent the court from declaring other parts of the New Deal unconstitutional, Roosevelt proposed adding as many as six new justices to the court—whom the president would appoint. This proposal, called the Judicial Procedures Reform Bill, would have allowed the president to appoint a new justice for each member of the court then more than seventy years old. Publicly, Roosevelt claimed this was to help the justices keep up with their demanding caseload as they aged. He attempted to build popular support for the measure in a March 1937 fireside chat.

Many, including the justices themselves, quickly saw through Roosevelt's alleged concern for the court's older members, and the court-packing scheme was widely criticized as an overreach of the chief executive's power. However, after Justice Owen J. Roberts unexpectedly began voting to uphold much New Deal legislation (which became known as "the switch in time that saved nine"), Roosevelt no longer had the congressional votes he needed to pass his court-reform proposal. Whether Roberts's switch was an attempt to undermine the Judicial Procedures Reform Bill has been the subject of much debate; his contemporaries and successors on the bench generally dismissed such allegations as unfounded. With the switch, however, the era of general hostility to business regulations came to an end.

The bill Roosevelt had promoted, meanwhile, never left the Senate Judiciary Committee to receive a full vote. Ultimately, however, it was turnover in the court's membership, rather than restructuring of the court or changes of political outlook among sitting justices, that reduced judicial opposition to the president's policies. Van Devanter retired in 1937, and Roosevelt appointed Hugo Black to take his place. Sutherland likewise retired in 1938 and was replaced by Stanley Reed. Unsurprisingly, given that Roosevelt chose them both, the two new justices ruled favorably on New Deal legislation.

THE GROWTH OF UNIONS

As the Great Depression changed many Americans' views of labor unions, the New Deal changed the way the government treated labor unions. Several major items of New Deal legislation promoted the cause of organized labor. The National Industrial Recovery Act legalized collective bargaining. The National Labor Relations Act (also known as the Wagner Act after New York senator Robert F. Wagner, who sponsored it) required companies to bargain with any union supported by most employees and created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to enforce rules prohibiting anti-union practices. The NLRB also took on the jobs of arbitrating disputes between labor and management when they reached an impasse and overseeing union elections to ensure they were fair and representative. As students read in this and other units of the course, congressional support for organized labor has fluctuated throughout the country's history. In this case, high unemployment, depressed wages, and ongoing labor disputes all gave Congress a favorable view of labor rights legislation.

Another labor statute of note was the 1932 Norris–LaGuardia Act. This limited the ability of federal courts to stop strikes and forbade so-called yellow-dog contracts—those in which an employer requires the employee to agree not to join a union as a condition of employment. Such developments were a boon for the American labor movement and resulted in a large increase in union membership. In 1932, fewer than three million Americans belonged to a labor union. By 1939, America had more than eight million union members.

ROOSEVELT AND FOREIGN POLICY

In the early 1930s, the United States began relinquishing much of its long-term military presence in parts of Latin America, culminating in President Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1934 announcement of the "Good Neighbor" foreign policy. This approach emphasized cooperation and trade over direct military intervention as a way to improve relations with Latin American nations. That same year, the United States withdrew troops from Haiti and nullified the Platt Amendment, formally ending its right to unilaterally intervene in Cuba.

The Good Neighbor Policy marked a shift toward greater respect for national sovereignty in the Western Hemisphere, at least in principle. In practice, the United States continued to exert influence through economic pressure and covert operations, including efforts to undermine or remove governments perceived as unfriendly to U.S. interests. Such tactics would become more prominent during the Cold War.

About World War II

The outbreak of World War II is often dated as September 1, 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland against the warnings of Britain and France. However, the war had many causes, some of them stretching back decades, and involved political developments in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere.

THE RISE OF TOTALITARIAN REGIMES

The totalitarian regimes that took hold in Germany, Italy, and Japan during the first half of the twentieth century had much in common in terms of both their ideology and their political goals. Leaders in Germany and Japan promulgated a belief in racial supremacy, dictating that the superior group—“Aryans” in Germany, the Yamato people in Japan—had a right and even a duty to conquer surrounding peoples in their sphere of influence. Italian Fascism did not depend on a story of racial purity or superiority, but it did claim an unbroken connection to an ancient or mythical past: Fascist Italy claimed to be a reincarnation of the Roman Empire. Similarly, Japanese imperial propaganda traced the nation’s origins to the mythical, semidivine emperors who supposedly founded it. Finally, each of the three countries embraced expansionism: Germany and Italy contended that they were reclaiming originally and rightfully German and Italian territory, and Japan claimed a mandate to unify much of East and Southeast Asia into a Japanese-led “Co-Prosperity Sphere.”

The Soviet Union, which had a nonaggression pact with Germany at the war’s start, also had pronounced totalitarian characteristics under dictator Joseph Stalin. It joined the Allies after Hitler violated this pact in a 1941 invasion, but tensions between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (U.S.S.R., or Soviet Union) and the West flared up again as the war neared its end. Students will read about the deteriorating relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States in Unit 5.

Nazi Germany

World War I left Europe physically, financially, and psychologically exhausted and eager to avoid further conflict. In some countries, this opened the door for the rise of strong, nationalist, totalitarian leaders who would eventually lead the world back into war.

One such leader was Adolf Hitler. Austrian by birth, Hitler served in the German army during World War I. In 1919, he joined a small political party called the German Workers’ Party, and a year later, he was put in charge of the party’s propaganda campaigns. In 1921, he maneuvered himself into position as the party’s sole leader. Using propaganda and his own charisma, he capitalized on continuing German resentment over both the defeat in World War I and the terms of the Versailles Treaty to build support for himself and the party, now renamed the National Socialist German Worker’s Party, or Nazi Party (from the shortening of the German *nationalsozialist*). Despite the word *socialist* in its name, Nazism was totally opposed to the Bolshevik Revolution, demanding revenge against those people—especially Jews—who it claimed had betrayed Germany during World War I. At this point, the party remained comparatively small, and its influence was localized to the area of Munich.

In 1923, Hitler and several colleagues launched a *putsch*, or revolt, in Munich in hopes of sparking a revolution that would overthrow Germany’s democratic Weimar government. The putsch failed, and Hitler was sent to prison, where he dictated an account of his political beliefs and personal history. Chief among these beliefs was the myth of a superior race he called Aryan, from which he alleged that the German people descended. Hand in hand with the Aryan myth went a hatred for people of other, supposedly non-Aryan ethnic groups, with Jews in particular blamed for Germany’s political and economic woes. Hitler’s account was published as a book titled *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*).

Using his propaganda skills and capitalizing on the government's failure to address an ongoing economic depression, Hitler garnered national support for the Nazi Party. In the 1932 elections, the Nazis won a plurality in Germany's parliament. Despite lacking a majority, Hitler and the Nazis refused to cooperate with other parties. Hitler demanded to be appointed German chancellor, or head of government. At first, German president Paul von Hindenburg resisted, but in January 1933, recognizing the popularity of the Nazis and the need for a functioning government, he appointed Hitler as chancellor. Soon after, the Enabling Act of March 1933 gave Hitler dictatorial authority, allowing him to bypass the constitution and legislate by decree.

From that point, Hitler began to consolidate his power. After a mysterious fire in the Reichstag (parliament) building that he pointed to as evidence of a communist plot to overthrow the government, Hitler convinced President von Hindenburg to suspend civil liberties. In June 1934, in what has become known as the Night of the Long Knives, Hitler purged the Nazi leadership of his rivals. Then, after President von Hindenburg died in August, Hitler declared himself *führer*, or dictator.

Under Hitler's leadership, the Nazi Party continued to garner public support through massive public works projects that reduced widespread unemployment in the country and propaganda campaigns that fed German nationalism while fanning anti-Semitism. Loyalty to the Nazi government was enforced by police organizations such as the *Schutzstaffel*, or SS, a paramilitary organization that had started as an elite group of Hitler's bodyguards.

An infamous incident that became known as *Kristallnacht*, or the Night of the Broken Glass, occurred in November 1938. Mobs murdered more than ninety Jewish people, engaged in the mass arrest of thirty thousand Jewish men, and burned and desecrated more than 250 synagogues. Finally, they shattered the windows of several thousand Jewish-owned shops and looted or destroyed them.

Kristallnacht is significant for several reasons. It was organized by Nazi Party officials and Hitler Youth who later tried to disguise the event as a popular uprising against the Jewish people. It was also the first time Nazi officials arrested Jews for being Jews, without any other cause for their arrest.

Fascist Italy

Moving into the early twentieth century, Italian socialists, like those in other European countries, began to organize. During the Biennio Rosso (Two Red Years) from 1919 to 1920, Italy experienced widespread social unrest, with strikes, factory occupations, and land seizures led by socialist and anarchist groups. These actions were often met with violent repression by the authorities and right-wing paramilitary groups, contributing to the chaotic environment that eventually facilitated the rise of Fascism.

In 1919, Italian journalist Benito Mussolini formed the *fasci di combattimento*—anti-socialist “fighting leagues” whose members became known as Fascists. The Fascists attacked socialist newspapers and used violence to break up labor unions, farmers' collectives, and local governments. While both groups believed that economic and political power in Italy must be redistributed, Fascists were ultranationalists who championed the consolidation of that power under a single supreme leader: Mussolini, whom they called *Il Duce* (the leader). The socialists, in contrast, called for international cooperation among workers to bring about collective ownership of the means of production. Unable to stop the violence, the national government lost public support.

In 1921, the *fasci di combattimento* officially became the Fascist Party and won a bloc of seats in parliamentary elections. Mussolini manipulated the situation to increase his power and influence and that of his Blackshirts, so named for the Fascist uniforms. In 1922, Mussolini and the Blackshirts marched on Rome and seized key locations in the capital city. To avoid civil war, Italian king Victor Emmanuel III asked Mussolini to form a new Italian government.

Mussolini used his new role as prime minister to rule Italy with dictatorial power. Only the Roman Catholic Church remained officially outside his control—although the Vatican did support him at first. Under Mussolini's rule, Italy became a one-party state, and free speech was abolished. The Fascists launched a series of expensive and ambitious public works projects and won support from many Italians who believed Mussolini was restoring Italy's dignity and economic stability.

The Empire of Japan

The Japanese empire had begun expanding through military aggression in 1910 with the annexation of Korea. During the 1920s, Japan lacked a unified government, but by the 1930s, the military was acting almost unilaterally abroad and with increasing authority at home, and expansionist moves increased in scope and intensity. The military saw territorial expansion as a way for Japan to gain economic independence and end its reliance on imports, especially of gas and oil. In 1931, Japanese military forces occupied Manchuria, a northeastern region of China. The next year, they renamed Manchuria "Manchukuo" and established a puppet government. The League of Nations condemned Japanese involvement in Manchuria; Japan responded by withdrawing from the league.

In 1936, Japan established alliances with Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, forming what would become the Axis powers of World War II. Formally begun as an anti-communist pact, the Axis used these mutual defense treaties to deter other countries from interfering with its members' conquest and colonization in their respective spheres of influence. The next year, Japan invaded China. The first battle of that conflict—the Marco Polo Bridge Incident—is considered by many historians to be the first battle of World War II.

Stalin and the Soviet Union

An ethnic Georgian born Ioseb Dzhughashvili in 1878, Joseph Stalin joined the militant communist Bolsheviks in the first years of the 1900s. (He began using the surname Stalin, often translated as man of steel, around 1912.) He was repeatedly imprisoned and exiled by the czarist government for his revolutionary activity. After the Bolsheviks seized power and during Russia's civil war, Stalin served in the Bolshevik government. In 1922, he was named secretary-general of the Communist Party, a position that put him in charge of the party's day-to-day operations, including control over party membership and appointments.

After Vladimir Lenin, the founder of the Bolsheviks and first leader of the Soviet Union, died in 1924, Stalin built a cult around himself and used his positions as secretary-general and member of the *politburo* (policymaking committee) to set himself up as dictator. Among his first acts were the dismissal, expulsion, and execution of his rivals. The victims of this purge included the better-known Bolshevik leader Leon Trotsky, who went into exile in Mexico and was assassinated there in 1940.

In 1928, Stalin launched ambitious programs to fulfill communist ideals by industrializing the Soviet Union and collectivizing agriculture into massive state-owned farms. The collectivization program disrupted the normal food production cycle and launched the country into an extended famine that resulted in an estimated three to five million deaths. Farmers who resisted collectivization were rounded up and sent to Siberian labor camps, or *gulags*, where millions more died. Ukraine, then a region within the Soviet Union, was hit particularly hard by these changes; the Ukrainian plight is known today as the *Holodomor*, which means death or killing by hunger.

It is estimated that around ten million people died as a result of Stalin's policies. Stalin's industrialization plans were not as destructive, and they did eventually succeed. Still, the industrialization policies had their own failures, which led to the imprisonment or execution of numerous industrial managers.

The 1930s in the Stalinist U.S.S.R. were characterized by the Great Purge, an extended campaign of political terror in which Stalin eliminated rivals and dissenters from the Communist Party through a series of show trials, forced confessions, and an estimated seven hundred thousand executions. Internationally, the Soviet Union sought nonaggression pacts with other European powers, though it faced hostility from the United States and

the United Kingdom, whose populations largely considered communists to be seditious radicals and often considered them a potential threat to stability. The Soviet Union lent some credence to fears that it would undermine other countries through its use of the Communist International, or Comintern, as a de facto foreign policy arm.

EUROPE MOVES TOWARD WAR

In the mid-1930s, as the future Axis powers sought to aggrandize their territory, the global community largely limited its response to censures, protests, and ineffectual sanctions.

Italy's Invasion of Ethiopia

Mussolini sought to expand Italy's power (and distract Italians from growing economic problems) by building a colonial empire. He set his sights on Ethiopia, which had defeated an Italian invasion in 1896. In October 1935, Italian forces attacked Ethiopia. Haile Selassie, Ethiopia's ruler, sought help from the League of Nations, the international organization created after World War I, famously stating, "It is us today. It will be you tomorrow." The league was slow to respond, and when it did, it did so ineffectively by issuing sanctions that had little effect on Italy. As a result, Mussolini's forces successfully conquered Ethiopia, which they combined with existing colonies in Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia (Italian Somaliland) to create an Italian East African empire.

Growing German Aggression and Expansion

The Treaty of Versailles had placed severe restrictions on Germany's military. That agreement, along with the Locarno Treaties (1925) that reinforced and expanded it (and involved participation from Germany during negotiations), also placed limits on Germany's territory. Starting in the mid-1930s, Hitler began to violate these limits, gradually taking steps to rearm and expand the military and then to seize territory. These actions were driven in part by Hitler's belief that Germany needed *Lebensraum*, or living space, especially in eastern Europe, to grow and thrive as a nation. Britain and France protested but did not take retaliatory action.

In 1937, Germany, Italy, and Japan formalized an alliance, and Hitler planned further German expansion in Europe. Leaders from Great Britain, France, Italy, and Germany met in Munich and agreed to Hitler's demand for the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia in exchange for an assurance that he would not seek any more territory. Czechoslovakia was not involved in the negotiations. British prime minister Neville Chamberlain declared that this policy of appeasement had brought "peace for our time," but six months later, Hitler violated the Munich Agreement and occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. By the summer of 1939, it was clear that Hitler intended to conquer the non-German populations of Europe, a goal closely tied to his vision of *Lebensraum*, beginning with Poland. Finally realizing that Hitler could not be trusted, Britain and France guaranteed they would protect Poland's independence.

Hitler, meanwhile, wanted to ensure that his invasion of Poland would not result in a two-front war against Britain and France in the west and the Soviet Union in the east. He and Stalin entered into a nonaggression pact in which they agreed to not fight each other and to divide eastern Europe into German and Soviet spheres of influence.

THE WORLD AT WAR, 1937–41

Now united as the Axis, Japan, Germany, and Italy ramped up their conquest of surrounding territories. For a time, the United States continued to hold itself aloof from the conflict, providing material aid to Britain and imposing sanctions on Japan but stopping short of actual warfare. Domestic opposition to further U.S. involvement was widespread well into late 1941, when the Pearl Harbor attack abruptly silenced isolationists and unified the country behind President Roosevelt's declaration of war.

Asia and the Pacific

The Marco Polo Bridge Incident, in July 1937, had given rise to weeks of fighting in which Japanese forces ultimately captured Beijing. Shortly thereafter, Japan marched on Shanghai, which was taken in November 1937 following months of artillery bombardment and urban warfare. The siege of Nanjing and the Nanjing Massacre played out from December 1937 to March 1938.

The conquest of China was the beginning of Japan's creation of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (GEACPS), essentially an Asian empire controlled by Japan. The GEACPS would provide the resources that Japan needed to end its dependence on the West. From China, Japan expanded its empire into French Indochina (today the countries of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos). Seeking to prevent more Japanese invasions, the United States placed an embargo on the nation, cutting off its supply of American scrap steel and oil, and froze its American financial assets.

Japan's military, now in charge of the country's government, made plans for a retaliatory attack that would disable the United States' Pacific fleet. In the early morning hours of December 7, 1941, it put those plans into action and attacked the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The Japanese plan relied on the fact that a sizable proportion of the U.S. fleet was based there, but on the day of the attack, all three of the U.S. carriers—the largest, most critical naval ships—were out at sea. Japanese fighters, bombers, and submarines killed more than 2,400 Americans and destroyed almost two hundred U.S. aircraft, but most of the ships damaged in the attack were eventually repaired. What was meant to be the end of American interference in Japan's conquests became instead a provocation, a setback, and a rallying cry for the ensuing U.S. war effort.

Europe

As expected, on September 1, 1939, Hitler invaded Poland. Within days, Great Britain and France declared war on Germany. Using a strategy called *Blitzkrieg*, or lightning war, Hitler's forces continued their march across Europe, conquering Belgium, Holland, and France. The German army pinned British forces in northern France on the beaches at Dunkirk, but the British managed a historic retreat to safety across the English Channel. The plan, codenamed Operation Dynamo, involved a hastily organized fleet of naval ships and civilian boats—including fishing vessels and ferries—that crossed the English Channel to rescue and bring to Britain a total of 338,000 Allied troops. Without this evacuation, these forces almost certainly would have been captured or killed by advancing German troops. Now they could regroup to defend Britain before eventually returning to mainland Europe to continue fighting.

The *Blitzkrieg* did not inspire the United States to enter the war. In total, there were twenty-seven months between the invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the U.S. declaration of war in December 1941. Beginning in the mid-1930s, Congress had passed a series of Neutrality Acts meant to keep the nation out of future conflicts. Despite the name of this legislation, the United States made it clear that it sided with Great Britain and France. After France fell, Congress approved the Lend-Lease Act, which made it easier for the United States to provide aid to Britain and, later, China and the Soviet Union. In August 1941, with U.S. entry into the war still months away, President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill met in secret off the coast of Canada to outline their policy goals for the end of the war, including the rudiments of what became the United Nations.

In July 1940, Hitler began a prolonged air attack on the United Kingdom. Known as the Battle of Britain, it became one of Hitler's few defeats to that point due to German strategic mistakes and the Royal Air Force's combat superiority. A combination of bad weather and the failure to defeat Britain's air force meant an invasion of Britain by sea was too risky, so the planned attack on the British Isles was postponed. That did not stop him, however, from conquering other countries. His forces moved into Denmark, Norway, the Balkans, and North Africa.

In 1941, Hitler broke his nonaggression pact with Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union while continuing his attacks against Britain. The Nazi invasion caught Soviet forces by surprise, but the Soviets recovered quickly and fought with a determination the Germans had not expected. As a result, German forces were caught in Soviet territory in winter, unprepared for the severity of Russian winters.

North Africa

In each theater, the Axis and Allied powers had distinct strategic goals. North Africa was strategically important due to its proximity to oil-rich regions in the Middle East and its role in controlling key supply routes.

Petroleum was needed to operate tanks, planes, ships, personnel carriers, and anything else that facilitated the movement of matériel and troops. Egypt was also the site of the Suez Canal, the main waterway between the Mediterranean Sea and Asia; students will learn more about this key water route in Unit 5.

The fight over North Africa began in September 1940, when Italian forces following Mussolini's orders invaded Egypt from the Italian colony of Libya. This invasion was swiftly repelled by British forces stationed in Egypt, but Hitler soon sent reinforcements under General Erwin Rommel. Known as the Desert Fox, Rommel was a bold tactician who pushed the British back into Egypt in the spring of 1941. The Libyan port city of Tobruk, occupied by Australian Allied forces, remained under siege by Rommel's forces until November of that year. After multiple attempts to lift the siege, the Allies succeeded in December with Operation Crusader. In June 1942, Rommel recaptured Tobruk after a prolonged siege and advanced into northern Egypt. For months thereafter, a prolonged stalemate followed as both sides regrouped and fortified their positions.

THE UNITED STATES JOINS THE WAR, 1941–45

After Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States declared war on Japan. Germany and Italy then responded by declaring war on the United States. The Allies agreed that U.S. forces should first concentrate on defeating Hitler in Europe and then take on Japan in Asia. The Nazis' expansionism was seen as the more urgent threat, and Europe's industrial resources were deemed crucial to the effort to eventually defeat all the Axis powers. In addition, the British and the Soviets—both critical allies—feared defeat if Germany were allowed to continue its air and sea attacks (against Britain) and its Eastern Front campaign (in the Soviet Union) for much longer.

Europe

In 1942 and 1943, the German army suffered defeat at Stalingrad in the Soviet Union, a turning point that began the German retreat out of the Soviet Union. The first U.S. troops arrived in Europe in 1942 but did not see action until 1943. That year, Allied forces invaded North Africa in Operation Torch, and then Italy, causing Italy to surrender. Germany now stood alone in Europe.

By 1944, the Germans were fighting the Allies on two fronts: Italy and eastern Europe. Allied leadership decided the time was right to open a third front, in northern Europe. That June, the Allies launched Operation Overlord: the Allied invasion of Normandy, France. Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had gained command of U.S. forces in Europe on the strength of his strategic knowledge and organizational ability, was fresh from the successes of Operation Torch in North Africa when General George C. Marshall appointed him supreme Allied commander in

December 1943. Despite strategic and personal disagreements with British field marshal Bernard Montgomery, Eisenhower was generally admired and respected by the British, Canadian, and other Allied soldiers whom he commanded.

The amphibious landing on the beaches of Normandy in northern France on June 6, 1944—D-Day—was the largest in history. From there, British, American, and Canadian forces swiftly drove German forces out of France, Belgium, and the Netherlands throughout the rest of the year. The German army's last offensive in western Europe occurred in the Ardennes Forest in Belgium in December at the Battle of the Bulge, so named because the German attack pushed deeply into the Allied lines, creating a noticeable “bulge” on military maps. Churchill called it “the greatest American battle of the war” because of the enormous commitment of U.S. forces—more than six hundred thousand in all—and their decisive role in repelling the final German advance. After defeating this last German offensive in the west, and with German forces in full retreat in the east, an Allied victory was assured. In April 1945, Soviet forces moving from the east met American forces moving from the west. Together, they marched toward Germany's capital, Berlin. On April 30, Hitler committed suicide. Roughly a week later, Germany surrendered. The war in Europe was over.

Asia

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces continued their conquest of Asia, occupying the Philippines, the Dutch East Indies (present-day Indonesia), Burma (present-day Myanmar), and Malaya (present-day Singapore and Malaysia). Meanwhile, the United States rebuilt its navy, and although it had agreed to focus first on defeating Hitler, it also engaged against Japan in the Pacific. An air unit called the Flying Tigers went into action in China and Burma. In June 1942, after a victory in the Battle of Midway, the U.S. Navy began a strategy of island-hopping—advancing toward Japan by avoiding heavily defended islands, focusing on places that would be easy to capture and could be used as bases from which to mount the next step. By 1944, U.S. forces were within bombing distance of Japan. Some of the fiercest, bloodiest fighting of the island-hopping campaign occurred on Iwo Jima and Okinawa in early 1945.

In July 1945, the United States completed its development of a new weapon, the atomic bomb. In August, after Japan refused a U.S. call for surrender, the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Between those bombings, Soviet forces invaded Japanese-held Manchuria. A week later, Japan surrendered and was placed under U.S. military rule. The formal surrender papers were signed on September 2, 1945.

Japanese Prisoners

Like Germany and the Soviet Union, Japan also mistreated prisoners of war (POWs). The Geneva Conventions, a set of humanitarian treaties developed and ratified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, should have protected the rights of captured soldiers. However, these conventions may as well have not existed in Japan. Many POWs were killed early on in their captivity; ultimately, only about half of American prisoners in Japan returned home. Other POWs in Japan suffered malnutrition and even starvation as well as torture and slave labor, also in violation of the Geneva Conventions.

One particularly brutal example is the Bataan Death March of 1942, in which seventy-six thousand American and Filipino prisoners of war were forced to march sixty-six miles (106 km) in tropical heat, humidity, and rain. They were beaten, shot, and bayoneted. Only about fifty thousand POWs survived the march. Thousands more died afterward from starvation and diseases contracted during the journey. The incident did not become public knowledge in the United States until 1944, at which point it became a rallying point for renewed American fighting in the Pacific.

THE AMERICAN HOME FRONT

After Congress declared war on December 8, 1941, Americans from all walks of life mobilized for war. Millions of American men joined the military. American factories ramped up to become an “arsenal for democracy,” in the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Rosie the Riveter became an iconic symbol of the millions of women who joined the workforce in support of the war effort. Other women provided direct military support through the WAACs (Army), WAVEs (Navy), and WASPs (Air Force) and as army nurses.

Despite playing an important role in World War II, African Americans continued to experience significant discrimination, including in the defense industry and the military. African American leaders demanded that President Roosevelt issue an executive order to end workplace discrimination in wartime industries and threatened to march on the White House. Roosevelt acquiesced on June 25, 1941, and issued Executive Order 8802. The order stated, “There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.” Military units were also segregated, with many enlisted African Americans serving in noncombatant support roles. African Americans serving in the military dealt with the hypocrisy of fighting for the freedom of others while their own was curtailed. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, the nation’s largest African American newspaper, called out this incongruity and published a letter introducing the idea of a “double V for victory,” symbolizing victories abroad and on the home front. The *Courier* called for an end to domestic racism and an end to segregation in the military. Three years after the end of World War II, in 1948, President Harry S. Truman issued Executive Order 9981, which ordered the full integration of all military branches.

To ensure sufficient resources for the war effort, the government instituted a system of rationing. Americans were given coupon books that determined how much sugar, coffee, meat, canned food, and other groceries each family could buy. As during World War I, families were also encouraged to grow their own fresh produce in personal gardens. Price controls were instituted so that the limited quantities of goods would not lead to inflation.

The Bracero Program

The wartime labor shortage led the U.S. government to develop a program, in agreement with the Mexican government, that granted work permits to hundreds of thousands of Mexican men. Formally known as the Mexican Farm Labor Program, it is usually known as the Bracero Program. (*Brazo* means arm in Spanish; a *bracero* is one who performs manual labor—literally, one who uses their arms.) From 1942 until long after the war had ended, more than five million agricultural and railway workers migrated north to participate in the United States’ largest-ever guest worker program.

Mexico became an ally of the United States when it entered the war in May 1942. The country had initially declared neutrality, but when a German submarine torpedoed a Mexican oil tanker on May 13 and Germany refused to offer reparations, the Mexican government pledged to “adopt the measures required by national honor.” Another sinking, on May 20, led to a declaration of war two days later. Though relatively few Mexican units saw combat, Mexico remained an important economic and diplomatic ally throughout the war.

Louisiana During World War II

Just prior to and during World War II, Louisiana became a training ground for the U.S. military. The Great Louisiana Maneuvers took place on more than 3,400 square miles (8,800 sq km) of rural land in north and west central Louisiana. A large section of east Texas was also used. The exercises were held between 1940 and 1944 and included more than four hundred thousand soldiers. The goal of the maneuvers was to work out all possible mistakes during training so that they did not happen during battle in Europe. While these exercises went on, soldiers camped in the woods or sometimes in the barns of nearby citizens. Important takeaways from the

Louisiana Maneuvers included confirmation of the need for tanks as well as infantry, the need for a combined arms force, and the effectiveness of anti-tank guns against armored vehicles.

Another important contribution to the war effort by Louisiana was the landing craft known as the Higgins boat. Andrew Higgins originally designed the boats to look for oil and gas in the Louisiana bayous, but they came to play a crucial role in the Allies' success during amphibious landings. These vehicles were designed to operate in shallow waters, and they allowed troops and equipment to quickly disembark directly onto beaches without the need to first capture a harbor. Higgins boats were used in important invasions in both the European and Pacific theaters. World War II general and eventual American president Dwight D. Eisenhower referred to Higgins as "the man who won the war for us."

The boats were manufactured by Higgins Industries in New Orleans, Louisiana. In 1943, the company's seven plants were staffed by more than twenty-five thousand employees. Notably, the staff was racially integrated, spanned a wide age range, and included people with disabilities. Each employee received pay parity with others who held the same job title, a practice far ahead of its time.

Internment of Japanese Americans

In December 1941, around 120,000 Japanese Americans lived in the United States, mainly in western states. Most were American-born citizens. In the wake of the Pearl Harbor attack, these Americans faced virulent racism. Following the attack on Pearl Harbor, they were subjected to widespread prejudice and discrimination, including being forcibly relocated to internment camps set up by the government throughout the western United States.

In February 1942, two months after Pearl Harbor, fueled by unfounded fears of sabotage and espionage, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the U.S. military to evacuate all Japanese Americans in the West to "relocation centers" away from the coast. By August 1942, approximately 112,000 Japanese Americans of all ages had been stripped of their property and most of their possessions and sent to internment camps in remote locations in California, Utah, Idaho, Arizona, and Arkansas. Once in these camps, inmates lived under military supervision in multifamily barracks with shared restrooms. Food and other necessities were rationed, and schools were set up for the youth in the camps.

In 1943 and 1944, young men from the camps were recruited to serve in the U.S. Army in Europe. Their unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, became the war's most decorated unit.

When the war ended, the camps were disbanded, but few Japanese Americans returned to their previous hometowns. Their lives had been disrupted forever. In 1988, Congress and the president publicly acknowledged the injustice of Japanese American internment and paid reparations to the surviving internees.

Effect of the War on American Life

The war catapulted the United States into a position of international economic and military leadership. During the ensuing Cold War, the United States, and by extension its presidents, would come to be known as the "leader of the free world."

Meanwhile, deployment of U.S. troops abroad, along with social and industrial changes at home, led to significant demographic changes within the country. For one, millions of Americans moved to industrial centers, where jobs connected with the war effort rapidly became plentiful. Urbanization, already trending upward at that time, surged dramatically, with the proportion of urban residents rising from 46 percent to 53 percent; for the first time in history, most Americans lived in cities. During the 1920s and 1930s, as students learned earlier in Unit 4, women made gains in workforce participation, but it was much more common for single women to work than for their married counterparts. This disparity narrowed and then disappeared during the Second World War.

The U.S. population itself grew slowly during the war, at a rate of about 1 percent per year. This was not so much because of the casualties—though these were substantial, with more than four hundred thousand military and more than ten thousand civilian deaths—but because of restrictions on immigration and the simple fact that many American households of childbearing age were impacted by deployment. Population growth would accelerate after the war during the so-called baby boom.

AFTER THE WAR

The end of World War II brought major changes in global geopolitics, including the establishment of the United Nations and the rise of the United States and the Soviet Union as the two postwar superpowers. The mass murders of the Holocaust and other wartime atrocities showed the need for an international system of criminal justice and convinced many that human rights could best be safeguarded through international cooperation.

The major Allied powers held a series of conferences to determine how the war would be concluded and its aftermath dealt with. This included the Tehran Conference in late 1943, which brought Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and Joseph Stalin together in person for the first time. In Tehran, Iran, the “Big Three” agreed that it was time to open a Western Front—something the Allies had not felt prepared to do upon U.S. entry into the war. U.S. and British forces would plan an upcoming Allied invasion of occupied France, while Stalin would continue to keep German forces occupied on the Eastern Front. Stalin also insisted that the Soviet Union continue to have control—or the possibility of control—of lands involved in the nonaggression pact he had signed with Hitler in 1939, as well as access to other regions bordering the Soviet Union that were of territorial interest to him. A year and a half later, at the Yalta Conference (held in Yalta, Crimea, in February 1945), the Allies agreed to divide Germany (including Berlin) into four occupation zones and set the basic framework for the United Nations, and the Soviet Union agreed to enter the then-ongoing war against Japan. By the end of the Potsdam Conference (held July–August 1945 in Potsdam, Germany), much of the Allied leadership had changed. Harry S. Truman had succeeded Roosevelt as president after the latter’s death on April 12, 1945, and Clement Attlee had succeeded Churchill as prime minister after the Labour Party won the U.K. general election on July 5, 1945. Stalin remained the leader of the Soviet Union, a post he would hold until his death in 1953. This conference detailed the partition plan for Germany and resolved disagreements about how and when Germany would pay war reparations. It was at Potsdam, as well, that Truman shared with the other leaders the news of the successful atomic bomb test of July 1945.

The Holocaust

As Allied forces moved into and across eastern Europe, they encountered the unimaginable horrors of what has become known as the Holocaust. As early as the 1930s, Hitler and the Nazis had launched anti-Jewish campaigns in Germany and other Nazi-controlled territory. They stripped Jewish citizens of their rights and then forced Jewish people into crowded, walled-in ghettos. In November 1938, the Nazis carried out the Kristallnacht attacks, a wave of violent assaults on Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues that signaled a sharp escalation of persecution. During World War II, Nazi leaders instituted what they called the “Final Solution to the Jewish Question”: the genocide of Europe’s Jewish population through extermination camps and death squads across eastern Europe. As this process unfolded, the American public learned through news reports that the Nazis were persecuting Jews, with Kristallnacht in particular making international headlines before the war began. Yet the widespread disapproval of the Nazis’ activities did not translate to a similarly widespread desire to admit more Jewish refugees.

The U.S. government first learned about the “Final Solution” in November 1942, with the American public gradually gaining a sense of the scale of the atrocities by 1943. Within Europe, both Jews and non-Jews organized resistance to the Nazis’ program of mass murder. The risks of defying the Nazis were extreme; members of the Munich-based White Rose resistance group were arrested and guillotined in 1943

for the “crime” of distributing protest leaflets. In Poland, the Bielski brothers led a group of Jewish partisans who fought back against the Nazis from a hideout in the Naliboki forest, now part of Belarus. By 1944, when the Soviet Union captured the region from the Nazis, the brothers and their followers had rescued more than a thousand refugees. Meanwhile, despite calls for a specific plan to rescue European Jews from the concentration camps, the U.S. government maintained the position that its priority was to defeat the Nazis militarily—and then liberate the camps.

That process of liberation began in the spring of 1945, as the Allies finally pushed Nazi forces back to Germany. By that time, six million of Europe’s nine and a half million Jews had been killed. In addition to targeting and killing Jewish people, the Nazis killed five million other people they considered inferior, such as Slavs (Poles and Soviet citizens), Roma, political dissidents, people with disabilities, and people of certain sexual orientations.

Postwar Tribunals: Nuremberg and Tokyo

When the war ended, those who were responsible for the Holocaust, from government ministers to camp guards, were put on trial for crimes against humanity. The trials were held in Nuremberg, Germany, where Hitler had first declared the laws that robbed German Jews of their citizenship.

The impetus for the International Military Tribunal (IMT), the body conducting the trials, came from the “Big Four” Allied nations: the United States, France, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. However, many other nations soon approved the formation of the IMT.

The IMT charged Nazi leaders with four major crimes: crimes against peace (planning and waging aggressive war), war crimes (violations of the laws of war), crimes against humanity (including murder, enslavement, and deportation of civilians), and conspiracy to commit these crimes. These charges were significant because they established that individuals, not just states, could be held legally responsible under international law for actions committed during wartime.

A series of thirteen trials, known as the Nuremberg trials, were held in 1945 and 1946; Robert H. Jackson, a Supreme Court justice, served as the chief U.S. prosecutor. Today, the Nuremberg trials serve as an example of post–World War II international law that punished individuals, not just entire nations or governments.

The Pacific theater was not free of atrocities either. As it conquered Asia, the Japanese military committed war crimes such as the use of civilians for bayonet practice, rape and sexual enslavement of women, and abuse of prisoners of war, including forced labor and death marches. From 1946 to 1948, Japanese leaders, including former prime minister Hideki Tojo, were put on trial for war crimes, crimes against peace, and crimes against humanity.

Veterans Return Home

The U.S. government passed the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, commonly known as the G.I. Bill, in 1944, prior to the end of the war. The act reflected lessons learned following the conclusion of World War I, when returning veterans had faced high unemployment, limited educational opportunities, and little government support to reintegrate into civilian life. It remains in effect today. In part, the bill was conceived to avoid a major economic depression upon the demobilization of millions of jobless veterans. It included provisions for education, medical care, and low-cost mortgages. The positive effects of the G.I. Bill were seen throughout the booming postwar economy.

African American veterans returning home were eligible for G.I. Bill benefits, but many faced systemic barriers. Banks often practiced redlining, limiting access to home loans in predominantly Black neighborhoods. Attempts to use loans to purchase homes in rapidly expanding suburban areas were frequently met with discriminatory practices.

The United Nations

In 1943, while the war was still ongoing, Allied leaders agreed to establish an organization for international cooperation after the war. In 1945, the plans for that organization were finalized, and the United Nations (UN) was born. Eleanor Roosevelt, whom students encountered in her capacity as First Lady during Topic 2 of this unit, continued her humanitarian work as the chair of the UN Commission on Human Rights. This body produced the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a document that aims to set the standards for human rights across countries and cultures. Many of the points in the declaration are reminiscent of the constitutions of modern democratic societies, including “the right to life, liberty and security of person” (Article 3) and a ban on “slavery and the slave trade” (Article 4).

The UN is made up of a General Assembly with representatives from every member nation, an eleven-member Security Council, an International Court of Justice, and various social, cultural, and economic councils and committees. While its primary goal is to settle disputes between nations peacefully—and it does have provisions for military intervention as a peacekeeping force in some situations—the UN has been more productive as a forum for international cooperation on issues of human rights, global health, child welfare, historic preservation, and environmental protection.