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## 5. The Democracies Between the Wars (1919-1939)

Robert L. Bloom  
*Gettysburg College*

Basil L. Crapster  
*Gettysburg College*

Harold L. Dunkelberger  
*Gettysburg College*

*See next page for additional authors*

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## 5. The Democracies Between the Wars (1919-1939)

### Abstract

At first glance, the events of World War I seemed to be a triumphant vindication of the spirit of 1848. It was the leading democratic great powers - Britain, France, and the United States - who had emerged the victors. In the political reconstruction of Europe, republics had replaced many monarchies. West of Russia, new and apparently democratic constitutions were established in Germany, Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Yet the sad truth was that by the outbreak of World War II in 1939 the majority of the once democratic states of central and eastern Europe had been forcibly annexed by stronger neighbors, or had severely curtailed their democracy, or had lost it outright. [*excerpt*]

### Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, World War I, First World War, The Great War, WWI, Republic, Democratic State, Democratic Constitution, Democracy, Economic Stability, World War II, WWII, Nationalism, Inflation, Industrialization, Fascism, Nazism, Communism

### Disciplines

Comparative Politics | Eastern European Studies | Economic History | European History | History | International Relations | Labor History | Military History | Political History | Social History | United States History

### Comments

This is a part of [Section XVIII: The Western World in the Twentieth Century: The Historical Setting](#). The [Contemporary Civilization](#) page lists all additional sections of *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, as well as the [Table of Contents](#) for both volumes.

### More About Contemporary Civilization:

From 1947 through 1969, all first-year Gettysburg College students took a two-semester course called Contemporary Civilization. The course was developed at President Henry W.A. Hanson's request with the goal of "introducing the student to the backgrounds of contemporary social problems through the major concepts, ideals, hopes and motivations of western culture since the Middle Ages."

Gettysburg College professors from the history, philosophy, and religion departments developed a textbook for the course. The first edition, published in 1955, was called *An Introduction to Contemporary Civilization and Its Problems*. A second edition, retitled *Ideas and Institutions of Western Man*, was published in 1958 and 1960. It is this second edition that we include here. The copy we digitized is from the Gary T. Hawbaker '66 Collection and the marginalia are his.

### Authors

Robert L. Bloom, Basil L. Crapster, Harold L. Dunkelberger, Charles H. Glatfelter, Richard T. Mara, Norman E. Richardson, and W. Richard Schubart

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At first glance, the events of World War I seemed to be a triumphant vindication of the spirit of 1848. It was the leading democratic great powers -- Britain, France, and the United States -- who had emerged the victors. In the political reconstruction of Europe, republics had replaced many monarchies. West of Russia, new and apparently democratic constitutions were established in Germany, Poland, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, and Yugoslavia. Yet the sad truth was that by the outbreak of World War II in 1939 the majority of the once democratic states of central and eastern Europe had been forcibly annexed by stronger neighbors, or had severely curtailed their democracy, or had lost it outright.

After admitting that unique factors were operative in each case, one can recognize certain common weaknesses in central and eastern European democracy which help to explain its vulnerability. First, too few of these states were economically viable. That is to say, they seldom possessed the economic strength necessary to support the apparatus of modern self-government, especially when threatened by avaricious neighbors. For example, the new republic of Austria had plenty of delightful mountain scenery but not enough raw materials and industrial potential to support its capital, Vienna, once the truly imperial center of the Hapsburg Empire. The great depression of the 1930's intensified existing economic difficulties, and added new ones.

Second, from the past these states inherited a legacy which

handicapped democracy. Preceding regimes had given the inhabitants little or no experience in self-government. They had often stifled education and industrialization. Now the old ruling classes either opposed democracy outright or, bowing before the fad of the times, gave it only lip service.

Third, not the least of these subversive legacies was nationalism. Bitter memories of the recent defeat and subsequent loss of national territory were very much alive in, for example, Germany and Bulgaria. Even among the victors, virtually no nationalist found the postwar settlement completely to his liking. Again and again, when they believed they had to choose between democracy and the attainment of some nationalist goal, the people chose the latter. Apparently what had really been the victor in 1918 was national independence, of which democracy was not necessarily the concomitant.

Fourth, in all of these states the middle class, traditionally the stronghold of liberal ideas, either had never been strong or was sadly buffeted by war, revolution, and inflation. It is no coincidence that the most successful democracy in eastern Europe was Czechoslovakia, which possessed a fairly balanced economy and a middle class of some size.

Fifth, in each of these states the regime faced problems of loyalty. Nowhere was there a universal feeling that, come what might, democracy must be made to work. Some citizens longed for a restoration of the Hapsburgs, the Hohenzollerns, or some other prewar regime. National minorities looked beyond the frontier to their fellow nationals. The relations of peasants and landlords were often embittered, as in Rumania, by ethnic differences. Some idealists and opportunists sought to ally themselves with one of the new totalitarian systems -- Fascism, Nazism, or Communism -- which claimed to represent "the wave of the future." Where the loyalties of one's fellow citizens are perennially open to question, democracy has tough going indeed.

Finally, the smaller states soon found themselves more or less willing pawns in the great powers' struggle. In the last analysis, it was this which overthrew many of them. Indeed, after admitting the weaknesses of democracy in central and eastern Europe, one might well marvel that it worked as well as it did.

In the United States, Scandinavia, Switzerland, the Low Countries, Britain, and France democracy did survive. In the 1920's there were frequent attempts to get back to politics as usual, the politics of pre-1914 with the same parties, the same issues, and, in all too many cases, the same old faces. But the pressure of domestic and international events was not to be denied, especially when the pall of economic depression descended in the 1930's.

The crisis of the depression years produced a serious

challenge to the very existence of democratic institutions only in Belgium and France, and even there the threat of the advocates of the new authoritarianism of Left and Right seemed under control. In none of these states were the hard-won political institutions of democracy seriously curtailed. The label of the political party to which the voters in these countries gave support varied widely. In the United States, the voters turned in 1932 to the Democratic party, Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945) and the New Deal. In France, the victors were governments of the Center or, for a time, a Popular Front coalition of leftist parties supporting the republic. In Britain, it was the Conservatives, masquerading as a multiparty National government, which directed the country's affairs from 1931. What is more striking than the differences in label is the essential similarities of program in these democracies. Socialists were becoming more reformist, less revolutionary, and often it was difficult to distinguish them from liberal proponents of the welfare state. Conservatives were fairly pliable. Most of them, whatever their party label, now advocated the laissez-faire liberalism favored by many radicals a century earlier; others found it possible to reconcile elements of the welfare state with conservatism.

In general, following the precedent of that previous emergency, World War I, the democracies had recourse to planning. Few were willing to await the working of any self-regulating feature in the economy. A world-famous example of the new planning techniques was the American Tennessee Valley Authority, a government agency established to generate and sell electric power, control floods, facilitate the navigation of rivers, and combat poverty by mechanizing this backward region in the South.

In line with certain contemporary economic doctrines, such planning generally involved increased government spending to prime the economic pump. In France, public expenditure rose by one-half in the decade after 1929. Businesses in difficulty, like American farming, were salvaged by government subsidies. Public works and other programs attempted to stimulate purchasing power. Social security schemes, like that enacted in the United States in 1935, and labor legislation, like the forty-hour week in France, were introduced.

Attempts to carry economic planning into the international sphere were not nearly so successful. Rather, the tendency was for each state to attempt to steal prosperity from its neighbors by such neomercantilistic devices as currency devaluation and import quotas. Britain, the traditional free-trade state, finally adopted protective tariffs during the Great Depression.

It could hardly be expected that such a crisis, and so far-reaching a legislative program, would create an era of political good feeling. Tempers ran high because the stakes were high. Many lost confidence in the automatic superiority of all democratic institutions under all conditions. Legislatures and voters temporarily abdicated many of their powers by granting

the executive a limited right to govern by decree. Nevertheless, none of these states, the most prosperous and the most accustomed to democracy, strayed far from what was for them the traditional form of government.