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10. Notes on the Postwar Political Scene

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10. Notes on the Postwar Political Scene

Abstract

The legacy of World War II was a heavy load for statesmen to bear. The collapse of Germany, Italy, Japan, and their lesser allies left a power vacuum, temporarily filled by the armies of occupation. Military losses were half again as high as in World War I. Even greater was the different in civilian losses. For every civilian who died a war death in 1914-1918, at least a score (a total of some 20,000,000) perished in 1939-1945. Material losses in housing and productive capacity were staggering. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Contemporary Civilization, World War II, Second World War, WWII, Democracy, United Nations

Disciplines

European History | History | International Relations | Military History | Political History | Political Science | 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.

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The legacy of World War II was a heavy load for statesmen to bear. The collapse of Germany, Italy, Japan, and their lesser allies left a power vacuum, temporarily filled by the armies of occupation. Military losses were half again as high as in World War I. Even greater was the difference in civilian losses. For every civilian who died a war death in 1914-1918, at least a score (a total of some 20,000,000) perished in 1939-1945. Material losses in housing and productive capacity were staggering.

Given the magnitude of the task, the success of physical reconstruction, particularly in Japan, Russia, and Western Europe, was striking. In Europe prewar production was equaled by 1949. Both there and in the United States per capita real income reached new heights. Less encouraging was the continued relative decline of Western European economy. For example, Europe's share of world export trade fell from about fifty per cent on the eve of World War I to thirty-five per cent for 1948-1950. Russia and Britain are examples of countries whose technique for reconstruction was to continue into the postwar world.

wartime restrictions on consumption of soft goods until capital goods were replaced. Conversely, western Germany, temporarily freed from the costly responsibility for her own defense, relied more on the self-adjusting mechanism of free enterprise. This too was the line followed in the United States, whose extensive grants for relief and reconstruction were absolutely essential for speedy recovery of the world's economy.

Awareness of the magnitude of postwar problems encouraged international cooperation in their solution to a greater extent than after World War I. To replace the League of Nations, a war casualty, a United Nations Organization was established in 1945 to facilitate diplomatic, economic, medical, and cultural cooperation. The success of the relief work of such organizations as the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, and the growing awareness that the narrowly national approach was inadequate, led to a remarkably spawning of supra-national bodies with long-range programs for international economic cooperation. For example, the European Coal and Steel Community, founded in 1952, assumed some of the characteristics of a superstate in its limited but important field in western Europe. The European Common Market, which went into effect in 1959, was only one of the number of efforts to reduce tariff barriers, something on the order of the Zollverein. Such developments led some to hope that nationalism might eventually be subordinated to a larger European community.

Political reconstruction in Europe was less revolutionary, except in Germany and Italy. Democratic republics established in West Germany and Italy survived the difficult years of their infancy. In France the Third Republic had fallen with its armies in 1940, only to reappear (as the Fourth Republic) after the war with her old virtues and vices intact. A Fifth Republic, proclaimed in 1958 by the war hero, General Charles de Gaulle (1890-) promised a stronger executive without loss of civil liberties. Elsewhere in the West, prewar regimes either continued or were restored. Nowhere did Nazism or Fascism threaten democracy as overt and organized movements. In their prewar forms, at least, they failed to outlive their leaders. This left Communism as the principal totalitarian competitor of democracy. Italy, for example, possessed the largest Communist party of any non-Communist European country.

The prewar growth of the concept of the welfare state continued in the postwar world. Sometimes the active agent was one of the Socialist parties, by now generally reformist and anti-Communist, which were particularly strong in the years immediately after the war. Thus, in Britain a Labor government (1945-1951) nationalized many industries and introduced a non-contributory health scheme. In other cases, the vehicle was one of the new, non-Marxist, democratic, and usually Catholic, Christian Democratic parties, as was the case in West Germany. The prewar tendency of otherwise conservative parties to adopt portions of the welfare state concept also continued.

In eastern Europe, politics pursued quite a different pattern. With the Red Army at their elbows, local Communists established "peoples democracies" patterned more or less closely on the Soviet Union. Only in one state did the Soviet forces suffer a serious setback. This was Yugoslavia, where the local Communist party revolted against dictation from Moscow and introduced its own brand of "national communism."

Soviet policy in eastern Europe, often in violation of international agreements, caused a deterioration in Russia's relations with her wartime allies. This was the "cold war." In self-protection they and other Western powers drew together in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (1949). There was a corresponding intensification in economic cooperation, as described earlier.

From the first, the cold war was connected with the contemporary upsurge of anticolonial sentiment in Africa and the Near and Far East. Prewar colonial ties and Western prestige had been irrevocably shattered in World War II. Gone too was much of the West's self-confidence in its mission to guide other peoples. Within a decade after the war, Russia's was the only colonial empire extant in eastern Asia. In many places nationalists allied themselves with Communists, sometimes because they shared a common enmity toward the West, sometimes because the Soviet experiment promised a shortcut to industrialization and the other attributes of greatness. Throughout the world, observers followed closely the Chinese Communists who in 1949, after chaotic civil strife, gained control of their vast and populous homeland from nationalist opponents. Beyond their frontiers they supported fellow Communists in North Korea in a war against the United Nations (1950-1953) which ended in a stalemate and a renewal of the earlier division of Korea (a former Japanese colony) into Communist and non-Communist states. A similar division occurred in French Indo-China in 1955 when France withdrew after a bloody but vain attempt to reassert her prewar control in the face of nationalist and Communist opposition. Some pundits felt that the fate of the Orient for generations might be decided in India which, granted independence by Britain in 1947, was experimenting with ways to combine Western democracy with a variety of non-Communist economic systems. Meanwhile, the tide of anticolonialism was running strong in Africa, adding Tunisia, Morocco, Ghana, and others to the list of independent states. Once again, as so often before, citizens of the world found themselves living in a time that tries men's souls.