

Part I

Chapter 1

The Rise of the Dictators

Light reflected off the mirrored walls along which the victorious Allied heads of state sat. More than a thousand diplomats, soldiers, secretaries, and reporters filled the vast hall. It was mid-afternoon, June 28, 1919, at the Palace of Versailles, just outside of Paris. President Wilson of the United States, Prime Minister Lloyd George of Britain, and Premier Clemenceau of France waited for the German representatives to arrive.

At 2:45, Dr. Hermann Muller and Dr. Johannes Bell entered the Hall of Mirrors. Muller and Bell listened tensely to the aged Clemenceau's reminders about Germany's obligations. Then they stepped forward to sign the treaty on the small table in the center of the room. As the Allied representatives lined up to put their own signatures on the document, cannons saluted and crowds cheered. World War I, which had shaken the very foundations of Europe and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people, had finally come to an end.



Clemenceau and Wilson at Versailles

Many hoped that the Treaty of Versailles would bring a lasting peace. Yet in fewer than 15 years, the treaty's flaws contributed to the rise of militant dictators in the heart of Europe – in Russia, Italy, and Germany

The Flawed Peace

World War I, or the Great War, as it was known at the time, had begun in August 1914. Decades of territorial rivalry, militarism, national pride, and secret alliances had poisoned relations among Europe's most powerful nations. The sparks that ultimately ignited the war, ironically, originated from some of Europe's weakest nations, the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the Russian Empire. When a Serbian anarchist assassinated Archduke Francis Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, tensions heightened between Austria-Hungary and Serbia's eastern ally, Russia. A flurry of secretive diplomatic discussions ensued between these two nations and Europe's greatest powers, and within a matter of days Europe had been divided into two warring camps: the Central Powers (Germany, the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria, and Austria-Hungary) and the Allied Powers (France, Russia, and Britain); Italy and the United States would eventually enter the war to aid the Allies.

During the four years of brutal warfare in Europe, Asia, and Africa, 30 million soldiers were killed or wounded and hundreds of billions of dollars were spent. By the fall of 1918, Austria-Hungary and Germany were in a state of revolutionary disintegration. Moreover, the German army could no longer simultaneously defeat Allied attacks in the field and put down unrest in the streets. The German emperor gave up his throne; and on November 11, 1918, Germany asked the Allies for an armistice to end the war. Germans hoped that they would be given a fair peace based on the principles of President Woodrow Wilson's idealistic Fourteen Points for World Peace.

Digital History

www.digitalhistory.uh.edu

Wilson's peace program, announced in January 1918, called for universal disarmament, the impartial adjustment of colonial claims, the self-determination of national peoples, and the formation of an international organization to keep the peace. In fact, however, the treaty imposed on the new German democratic government did not reflect the principles of the Fourteen Points. Germany alone was blamed for the war and made to pay for it; Germany was disarmed, deprived of its colonies as well as 10% of its lands, and barred from joining the League of Nations.

In keeping with promises made by Wilson, separate national entities were created. An independent Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Latvia and Lithuania, emerged from World War I, partially satisfying its people's national aspirations for independent governments. In contrast, Italy was denied both significant territorial gains and colonies, despite heavy wartime losses and promises from France and Great Britain. The newly formed Soviet government was not even invited to Versailles, and like Germany, was barred from joining the League of Nations. Within fourteen years, Russia (which had become the Soviet Union), Italy and Germany, the biggest losers at Versailles, were in the hands of dictators who threatened Europe's peace.

Revolutionary Russia

The Russian Empire was the first state of the old order to be undermined by the war. Military defeat, economic hardship; and government mismanagement sowed discontent throughout Russia during the winter of 1916. Political opponents of Tsar Nicholas II took advantage of widespread strikes and mutinies. On March 12, 1917, they overthrew the monarchy. A constitution-writing assembly was to be elected in the fall to consider long-delayed reforms such as land redistribution. Meanwhile, the Provisional Government, led by prime minister Alexander Kerensky, held the reins of power in the Russian capital at Petrograd. The first democratically selected leader of the Russian Empire, Kerensky made the fatal mistake of resisting pressure to take Russia out of the World War I.

Many Russians believed that social and political reform should be enacted right away. The national council of worker and soldier organizations (the Petrograd Soviet) thought that the Provisional Government ought to end the war immediately. A veteran revolutionary, Vladimir Illych Lenin, returned to Russia in April 1917. His program, known as the April Thesis, sought to capitalize on impatience with the Provisional Government. He advocated ending the war with Germany and giving land to the peasants, control of factories to the workers councils, and independence to the nationalities. Lenin headed the Bolshevik Party, a dedicated group of professional revolutionaries. The Bolsheviks exploited the general discontent to undermine the authority of the Provisional Government, and on November 6, 1917, Lenin's supporters managed to seize control in a near-bloodless coup.

Lenin immediately went to work to consolidate Bolshevik control of Russia, which he renamed the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. He issued decrees that nationalized land, banks, and factories, and on March 15, 1918, his government signed a treaty with Germany. According to the harsh terms of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, and Finland (one-fifth of Russia) became independent states. Supported by the Allied Powers, enemies of the Bolshevik (later called the Communist) Party began a long civil war to unseat Lenin. The Communist government struck back by suppressing all other parties, murdering the Tsar Nicholas and his family, and founding a secret police force to terrorize opponents. Lenin also set up the Communist International (Comintern), a worldwide organization of parties that worked for socialist revolution.

Joseph Stalin, one of Lenin's lieutenants, was born Joseph Dzhughashvili in 1879 in Caucasian Georgia. Through ruthless determination, he had risen to the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party by the time of Lenin's death in 1924. Lenin never named a successor to head the USSR, and Stalin

lost no time in using his party influence to advance his cause. By 1929, he had succeeded in expelling most of the old Bolshevik leaders from the Communist Party. As sponsor of the Comintern, Stalin helped promote his supporters within the international communist movement. Through state-controlled media, Stalin reinforced his authority with propaganda that glorified both his character and personal achievements. The party, the army, the government, and ordinary citizens were subject to purges: literally millions were arrested for offenses against the state, tried with little fairness, and executed or deported to labor camps.

Stalin justified his methods by claiming that the Soviet Union had only a limited time to prepare for invasion by hostile capitalist nations. Beginning in 1928, he launched a series of five-year plans. These were nationally organized efforts to modernize agriculture and develop heavy industry. New dams, canals, coal mines, steel mills, and factories were established throughout the USSR to provide for the national defense. Peasants were forced to join collective farms that used mechanization in order to increase production. In the meantime, the Soviets fashioned defensive alliances for the USSR. National communist parties actively supported this Soviet foreign policy by seeking to form political coalitions with democratic parties. Mistrusting communist motives, however, many Western politicians were reluctant to cooperate.

Italy Under Mussolini

World War I had a contradictory effect on Italy. Although Italy had fought on the victors' side, Italians felt defeated by the Treaty of Versailles. Despite Italy's heavy casualties, the Allies had failed to deliver on agreements made earlier. Italy was denied promised territory on the coast of Yugoslavia. Consequently many nationalist Italians became disillusioned with their wartime democratic political leadership.

In 1919, demobilization of Italy's army and the sudden collapse of military purchasing contributed to an economic downturn. With prices and unemployment at unprecedented heights, the situation of the average worker was desperate. Inspired by the success of the Bolshevik Revolution, employees staged sit-down strikes in factories, and peasants seized many great landed estates. Fearing social revolution, employers backed anti-socialist squads composed of ex-soldiers, nationalists, and property owners. These squads suppressed the unrest by attacking union meetings, burning radical newspapers' presses, and threatening dissident workers and their supporters. They called themselves *Fasci di Combattimento* (Combat Groups). This name came from the Latin word *fascio*, the bundle of sticks with an ax blade that had been a Roman symbol of authority.

Benito Mussolini founded the Fascist movement. Born in 1883 to a socialist blacksmith, Mussolini grew up supporting socialism. Before his thirtieth birthday, Mussolini became the editor of *Avanti*, the main newspaper of Italian socialism, until his backing of Italian intervention in the war on the Allied side brought about his ouster from his socialist party posts in 1914.

Ever resourceful, Mussolini turned to nationalists and Allied agents for money to finance a new pro-intervention newspaper. Claiming that Fascism was the way of the 20th century, Mussolini became a spokesman for anti-revolutionary Italian nationalism in 1919. He lashed out against Allied false promises concerning territories long desired by Italy and offered a nationalist alternative to Soviet-inspired communist revolution. After years of street warfare against socialists and democrats alike, Mussolini led a march on Rome. In November 1922, he was granted dictatorial power to "restore order" in his native Italy.



Mussolini and Hitler

Although Mussolini promised Italians the best of governments, only the wealthy, the connected, and the military thrived under fascist rule. To retain power, however, Mussolini had to offer some hope to the poor as well as a goal for fascist activists. In an effort to do so, he demanded a 'place in the sun' for his country." Italy's problems of overpopulation and underdevelopment would be solved, he claimed, when the Italian military conquered a new Roman Empire. After establishing dictatorial control of Italy in the 1920s, Mussolini began his attempt at restoring Italy to a position of greatness on the European

political landscape. December 1934 saw the beginning of the Italian campaign to annex Ethiopia. In 1936, Italy sent troops to help military and conservative forces overthrow the Spanish Republic. In 1937, Mussolini visited the Italian colony of Libya to encourage Moslems to take up arms in French and British-dominated Arab countries. In order to maintain the momentum of fascism and to gain access to colonial markets and resources, Mussolini seemed bent on wars of empire.

Germany and National Socialism

Germany had been the biggest loser in World War I. The German armed forces had suffered almost 6 million casualties, and the country was on the verge of starvation as a result of the Allied blockade. By 1919, workers were revolting in Berlin and Munich. Furthermore, Germans were infuriated with and humiliated by the Versailles Treaty. By signing this treaty, Germany lost its air force, surrendered most of its navy and merchant marine to Britain, and agreed to maintain only a tiny army. In addition Germany was forced to give up land to Poland and to France. Britain and Japan claimed its colonies in Africa and Asia. The Saar basin was to be occupied by France, and the Rhineland would be demilitarized for 15 years. The Versailles Treaty severely weakened Germany militarily by stripping the country of its air force, forcing it to surrender most of its navy and merchant marine to Britain, and vastly reducing the size of its army. The Treaty also cut back on Germany's territorial holdings, giving some of Germany's land to Poland and France, permitting Britain and Japan to claim its colonies in Africa and Asia, allowing France to occupy the Saar Basin, and demilitarizing the Rhineland. Perhaps most embarrassingly, Germany had to accept sole responsibility for starting the war and pay 33 billion dollars to the Allies.

Ironically, World War I had been a time of great opportunity for Adolf Hitler. Born in Linz, Austria, into the family of a customs official, Hitler failed to realize his youthful ambition to enter art school. Alternately beaten by his domineering father and fussed over by his sentimental mother, Hitler blamed others for his problems. In his early adulthood, he lived a directionless life working as a day laborer in Vienna. When World War I was declared, Hitler's fortunes changed. He joined the German Army and served as an infantry corporal in the trenches in France where he won an Iron Cross. At war's end, Hitler worked with German army intelligence in Munich. In that capacity, he was sent to investigate a meeting of the National Socialist (Nazi) German Worker Party. Instead, he became a Nazi party member and discovered his ability to tap into an audience's fears and hopes through dramatic oratory.

To many Germans, Hitler had a compelling message. He told veterans that they had not lost the war; rather, they had been stabbed in the back by the "November criminals" who overthrew the Emperor

and established the German Republic. He informed middle-class people, worried about financial instability, that Jewish bankers and businessmen were responsible for their economic woes and ought to be expelled from Germany. He assured factory owners there would be an end to their labor problems by violent Nazi suppression of "Communist-inspired" unionists. He promised German patriots not only repossession of all "lost territory," but also the conquest of "living space" in the east. Hitler always hit upon his main theme – that all of Germany's problems were attributable to an international Jewish conspiracy. Only Hitler and the Nazis could save the Fatherland.

On November 8, 1923, Hitler attempted to overthrow the Bavarian state government in Munich. His coup failed when police opened fire on his followers, and Hitler was caught, put on trial, and imprisoned. Hitler emerged from less than a year in prison with a startlingly frank book, *Mein Kampf* (My Struggle), in which he laid out his philosophy and plan of action. He also had resolved not to repeat his mistake of attempting a premature rebellion. Instead, he would destroy democracy by democratic means, winning over voters in order to install a Nazi government.

During the relatively prosperous years of 1924-1929, Hitler was unable to obtain his objective. Once the Great Depression hit Germany in 1930, however, many Germans were drawn to National Socialism. Still, the Nazis never won a majority in any national election. Conservative politicians, nonetheless, supported Hitler's elevation to the office of chancellor (prime minister) on January 30th, 1933, thinking they could control him. They were sorely mistaken.

In short order, Hitler and the Nazis consolidated their power. In February 1933, Nazi agents secretly set fire to the Reichstag, Germany's Congress) building and blamed German communists for the deed. Constitutional rights then were suspended, and Hitler was granted the authority to make laws by the Enabling Act. By 1934, the Nazi revolution was complete. All German state governments were abolished. The civil service was nearly purged of all anti-Nazis. The National Socialist Party was declared the only legal political party in Germany. Independent unions were forced to join the Nazi Labor Front, and concentration camps were built for Hitler's opponents. In 1935, the Nuremberg Laws persecuted and isolated German Jews. Jews were deprived of their right to vote, forbidden to marry non-Jews, and forced to wear stars. Soon, they would lose their right to engage in law, medicine, and business in general.

In 1935, Hitler denounced the Versailles arms limits and Germany accelerated a campaign to rebuild its military forces. German factories mass-produced planes, tanks, and ships. Hitler started to draft young men for military service, a campaign which began to pay off when German troops reoccupied the Rhineland in deliberate and calculated defiance of the Versailles Treaty. In 1936, the new German air force was dispatched as "volunteers" to Spain to back conservatives in that country's Civil War. Two years later, Hitler marched his armies into Austria and supervised a plebiscite that united the two countries. By 1938, Hitler held absolute power in Germany, controlled Austria, commanded the most powerful military in the world, and seemed poised for further confrontations.

Dilemma for the Western Democracies

The rise of Mussolini, Stalin, and Hitler created serious problems for the leaders of the Western democracies. That these dictators were preparing to challenge the status quo in Europe became increasingly evident. Would it be wise to be conciliatory and yield to those claims of the dictators that seemed just, or would compromise only whet their appetites for conquest and disruption? Should the democracies instead band together and respond aggressively to every challenge, or would this policy serve only to force the democracies into senseless wars in defense of distant lands and undeserving populations? Such were the questions" that faced British, French, and American politicians in 1937.

Suggested Student Exercises:

1. Identify or define and tell the importance to this chapter of each of the following:

- | | | |
|---------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|
| a. Hall of Mirrors | g. five-year plan | m. Versailles Treaty |
| b. Francis Ferdinand | h. comintern | n. regarding Germany |
| c. Fourteen Points | i. Fascidi Combattimento | o. <i>Mien Kampf</i> |
| d. Vladimir Lenin | j. "place in the sun" | p. Jewish conspiracy |
| e. Provisional Government | k. Fascism's appeal to Italians | q. Enabling Act |
| e. Brest-Litovsk | l. Ethiopia | r. Nuremberg Laws |
| f. Joseph Stalin | | s. Rhineland |

2. Compare and contrast two of the three dictators discussed in the chapter in terms of background, philosophy, goals, and tactics.

3. Imagine that it is 1937 and you are a British, French, or American leader. What should you do about the rise of the Communist USSR, Fascist Italy, and National Socialist Germany in 1937? Advocate a strategy and give reasons why yours is the best course.