

## CHAPTER 7

# 1914–1945: The Most Disastrous Years in History



The three decades between the beginning of World War I and the end of World War II were the most turbulent and disastrous in all of recorded history.

*Economically*—Almost all countries buckled under their deepest depressions, and the global economy cracked up.

*Politically*—All European nations underwent the most severe conflicts in their history, resulting in revolution (in Russia) and counterrevolutions in what became several fascist countries.

The developments were complex in themselves and in the ways they related to each other. In what follows, only the few most powerful nations will get a close look: Britain, Germany, and the USA. Along the way there will be separate discussions of fascism and the Soviet revolution. We begin with the economy.

### BRITAIN: NO FAILURE LIKE SUCCESS

As noted in the preceding chapter, Britain was well on its way to economic troubles as early as the 1890s. At first glance, Germany might easily be seen as at the center of Britain's problems. But if Germany had never existed, Britain was headed toward serious economic difficulties by 1910—the kind that fit the old saying, “There's no failure like success.”

Britain created the first world economy. It took in great profits from its trade and loans to its (always more swiftly) growing set of competitors—competitors for markets in which to sell, for lands from which to take resources, and for power.

In that race the British had long been riding high. What had enabled them to be that comfortable and the strongest militarily was the envy of all of the European nations—and a basis for dangerous rivalries. Both Britain's well-being and its strength were due in large part to its ability to be first in the mad race to put together an empire from which it could provide *all* of the resources required for industrialism and still have the military strength to keep others out. In the world

of the nineteenth century and of The Big Four, that meant that (whether for offense or defense) *all* the nations of Europe needed to go and do likewise.

But because Britain had gotten there first, the others could never match its empire—except for the USA, which lived *inside* the most valuable part of its empire in North America.

The fact that the sun never set on the British flag meant that any nation seeking to gain control over any desirable land outside of Europe had only one way to get there—by sea, which meant fighting the British navy. And *losing*, for the British Navy was in a league all by itself. That left only a few areas both desirable and possible, for the Germans, the French, the Italians, and the Russians. (Among others—which, in this case, does not mean the USA. Nobody could touch what we had.)

So, the Europeans were in a never-ending contest for the leavings—with each other and with the British—a struggle that could not be won, not even in the war it produced in 1914.

By the beginning of World War I, a good percentage of the British population had risen from a meager to a comfortable existence. Now they had come to take their life of plenty for granted—just as it was about to blow apart.

In 1919, in a comment that could also well describe the outlook in recent years of *most of the people in the USA*, J. M. Keynes, Britain’s leading economist, noted just how wrong that attitude could be:

What an extraordinary episode in the economic progress of man that age was which came to an end in August 1914!...[T]he people of England regarded this state of affairs as normal, certain, and permanent, and any deviation from it as aberrant, scandalous, and avoidable. The projects and politics of militarism and imperialism, of racial and social rivalries, of monopolies, restrictions, and exclusion, which were to play the serpent to this paradise were little more than the amusements of [their] daily newspaper, and appeared to exercise almost no influence at all on the ordinary course of social and economic life, the internationalization of which was nearly complete in practice. (*Economic Consequences of the Peace*)

## PEACE — ON PAPER

World War I ended in 1918 with an armistice—technically, a cease-fire—followed by the 1919 Treaty of Versailles. The vengeful nature of this so-called “peace treaty” was at least partially responsible for the years of chaos, conflict, and convulsions that paved the way for a *second* world war.

The Treaty of Versailles was put together by representatives of the victorious nations: Britain, France, Italy, and the United States. Sitting at the ugly center of the negotiations was the matter of reparations. It came down to this: In what ways and in what amounts should Germany be punished?

The answer to that question was, “The sky’s the limit.” It was motivated in large part by greed and revenge; but also involved was the need of the victors to pay for and recover from the war.

That war — up to then — was not only the most costly ever in lives, but also in terms of the direct and indirect costs of its weaponry (and the costs of reconstruction and postponed repairs). As a result, the economies of the European Allies were all seriously rundown after the years of World War I.

When the war ended, only Britain and the USA were in a better financial position than they had been before the war. Between them, they had lent close to \$19 billion to France, Italy, Russia, and others (which, in today’s dollars, would come to more than 20 times that amount).

Also, it is worth noting, except for its dead and wounded, for the USA the war came as a blessing, for the U.S. economy was strengthened in several ways. Plus, in the realms of physics and chemistry, and transportation, the USA had taken a giant technological step ahead of all others for the postwar years. The other economic beneficiary of the war was Japan, but to a much lesser degree than the USA.

That all of the human and nonhuman costs of World War I were as great or greater for Germany was of no concern to the victors. It is perhaps understandable, but no less dangerous, that driven by the combination of greed, need, and hatred, they would wish to squeeze all they could out of defeated Germany. But the ways in which Germany was made to pay were not just cruel; by 1939, when the next war began, they had come to be suicidal for all concerned.

Keynes, quoted above, was certain that the treaty would raise the probabilities of yet another world war. He knew what he was talking about. As Britain’s Chancellor of the Exchequer (that is, the Treasury Secretary), he was present for — and seriously objected to — its main provisions, especially regarding reparations. They were of two kinds: financial (which were never paid) and nonfinancial, which were, and which crippled the German economy.

Here is a listing of what may be called the “spoils of war.” It was a very long list:

The Treaty of Versailles deprived Germany of 13 percent of her [European]

territory, 13 percent of her population, and 14.3 percent of her arable land. In terms of her 1913 production, Germany surrendered 19 percent of her coke, 74.5 percent of her iron ore, 26.6 percent of her blast furnaces, 19.2 percent of her raw iron and steel, 15.8 percent of her rolling mills, 68.5 percent of her zinc foundries, 12 percent of her livestock, her entire ocean-going merchant marine, 5,000 locomotives, 40,000 boxcars, and other miscellaneous equipment. [In addition,] in 1921 the new League of Nations split wide open two of the three major industrial centers of Germany (granting them in one way or another to France, Belgium, and Luxembourg...) [and so on] (Brady, 1933)

As will be seen in the discussion of fascism below, the German fury over those harsh treaty reparations contributed significantly to the triumph of Hitler and his Nazi movement.

### POST-WAR DEPRESSION

More than any other nation, Britain had created and profited from the world economy over which it presided after the 1850s. But, as suggested earlier, by the end of the century it was presiding over what had become a pack of wolves. The hungriest of that pack were Germany and Japan; the most powerful was the USA. All three of them by 1900 were industrially stronger than Britain had been in 1850—mostly because as they moved ahead technologically, Britain let itself lag behind, rested on its oars.

On the surface, Britain seemed to be thriving, as it reaped the profits from its colonial resources and the huge interest payments on its loans to—among others—Germany and the USA. But soon after the war's end, Britain's economy sank into a mild depression, which, over the decade, became always more serious.

Throughout the 1920s, Britain's average unemployment rate was 10 percent. And, of course, it worsened in the 1930s when the global depression began in 1929. (The Depression hit the USA and Germany hardest.)

But why did Britain sink into depression so early? It was the war. The world economy so essential to Britain's prosperity had its back broken by the war. All of the European economies became dominated by war production. World trade *collapsed*. The normal gains flowing from European colonies were either interrupted or diminished, as virtually all of those colonies produced increasingly strong *resistance movements* opposing British exploitation.

Thus, with the partial exception of the USA and Japan, the 1920s were years of serious recession, economic slack, and withdrawal from international trade. By

1929 the breakdown of the global economy had finally taken both the USA and Japan into hard times.

Among the most terrible accompaniments of those times was the emergence of *fascism* over much of Europe and in Japan. And then came World War II.

That war was called *the war against fascism*. The defeat of fascist Italy, Germany, and Japan did not by any means spell its death knell. Not only did fascism *not* end with the Allied victory in World War II, it continued to flourish in Spain and Portugal *for another quarter century*. And it was born anew in, among other places, South Korea (after 1953) and Pinochet’s Chile (in 1973)—*both with the vital and enthusiastic assistance of the USA*.

Unfortunately, there is reason today to fear that fascism—although not with that name—could appear in new forms in, for example, Russia and Austria. Also, and most importantly for this book’s purposes, it could also take hold in the USA: as *friendly fascism*. (See the book of that name by Gross.)

So it is important to understand the phenomenon of fascism and its still-beating pulse.

## FASCISM DEFINED

Fascism’s horrifying nature and consequences provide good reason to take a long look at what it has been, how it came to be, and why we need be concerned about its rebirth. The word itself didn’t exist until 1922, when Italy became the first fascist society. Like many big-concept words, fascism has come to be used in so many different ways that confusion concerning it is inevitable.

### *The Elements of Fascism*

Contributing to the confusion is the fact that the main elements of a fascist society have partially existed (and do, still) in many *nonfascist* societies. Those necessary elements are

1. Severe political repression
2. Authoritarian or totalitarian government
3. Fervid militarism
4. Punitive racism (using ethnic or religious grounds)
5. Suppression, imprisonment, or execution of specified political and “racial” groups

### *Capitalism with the Gloves Off*

In history, one can locate one or more of those elements in many *nonfascist*

societies, some even in the pre-modern world. Thus, for example, Venice, a strong medieval city-state republic, had early traces of capitalism and democracy and racism *and* was also somewhat authoritarian, militaristic, and repressive. It had some of the elements, but it was not fascist.

The term *fascism* should be applied only to societies combining a matured combination of capitalism, industrialism, and democracy. The British historian-philosopher Harold Laski defined fascism as “capitalism with the gloves off.” The gloves are those of political democracy.

Robert A. Brady, in his *Business as a System of Power* (1943), went beyond the epigram to provide extensive socioeconomic and political analysis showing what fascism is and how it came to power. Brady showed that fascism was an outcome of *severe capitalist crisis*, the kind and depth of the crisis provided by the interactions of capitalism, imperialism, and nationalism that had produced the two world wars and global depression.

He studied the six leading capitalist nations of the period between the two world wars—Italy, Germany, Japan, Vichy France, Britain, and the USA. Four—Italy, Germany, Japan, and Vichy France—became fascist. The other two—Britain and the USA—did not, although both had fascist movements.

Here we examine fascism’s birth and its nature in some detail, starting with a summary statement for the first major fascist nations.

## THE FIRST MAJOR FASCIST NATIONS: SUMMARY STATEMENT

### *Italy*

Italy was the least industrialized of the first fascist powers. However, for centuries Italy’s “free” agricultural workers in the North had labored *as though* in factories—and had become organized. (If you can, find the video for *Bitter Rice*.) By 1918, Italy had a longstanding and well-organized agricultural and industrial working class that was socialist-oriented.

### *Japan*

Japan had a strong military tradition and an advanced industrial economy, but inadequate natural resources and, in the 1920s, only the beginnings of political democracy. In the 1920s it was confronted with an emerging strong and left-leaning working class and as the 1920s were ending, a slowing economy. By 1928, it was effectively fascist.

## *Germany*

Germany, along with the USA, was the most advanced industrial society, but with inadequate industrial resources. It had a highly organized socialist-communist working class both before and after World War I and by 1929–1930 it was in a deep depression.

## CLOSE UP: ITALY

### *The Fall of Italian Democracy*

For 2 or 3 years after World War I, organized workers occupied *thousands* of factories and fields in the industrial triangle of the North—the first sit-ins. (See the 1996 film, *The Organizer*, with Marcello Mastroianni.)

Though the working class was strongly organized, it did not have a political majority. The Italians who were neither agricultural nor industrial wage-workers were appealed to—effectively—by industrialists, bankers, and large farm owners, the military (especially the bitter war veterans), the ruling royalty, and, importantly, by the Church. (Salvemini)

The *autocratic democracy* of Italy fell all too easily into the hands of Benito Mussolini in 1922. Mussolini, *Il Duce*, was a macho braggart, bully, and what we would call a “blowhard.” He was also a bone-deep militarist exuding nostalgia for Imperial Rome.

Italy had suffered enormous casualties from the war and, to make matters worse, its fellow victors at Versailles had seen to it that co-winner Italy would get *only the crumbs* of reparations. There were thus ample grounds for bitterness. Mussolini and his *black shirts* (the color probably lifted from earlier Spanish occupiers of Italy; the Nazis’ shirts would be brown) were able to transform rage into political fervor and violence—breaking up union meetings and threatening, beating up, or simply murdering journalists and decent politicians.

*Item* In Italy, one favored fascist practice (short of murder) was to *break the jaw* of an opponent. The result was a long and painful recovery—with the victim forced to take nourishment through a straw. Cruelty, *Italian* fascist style.

As would also occur in Germany, all of the thuggery in Italy transpired to the complete indifference—or even with the active cooperation—of the powers at the top. The result was the poisoning of Italian culture, the ruination of its economy, the death of its emerging democracy, and a lengthy, devastating war. (See Schmidt; also see the heart-wrenching novel of Silone, *Fontamara*.)

### *An Alliance with Hitler*

In 1938, with World War II approaching, the more experienced Mussolini (older and in power since 1922) joined forces with Adolph Hitler (in power since 1933). Mussolini came on board in every way, now to include the deportation of Jews to death camps—which had not been done in Italy before the alliance. Mussolini's Italy was Germany's first ally in World War II, followed by German-occupied Vichy France and then Japan.

### *The Italian Resistance*

For Italy and the Italians, World War II was entirely negative and self-destructive—with one exception: the admirable activities of its Left. These numerous and courageous resisters (*partigiani*) showed that Italy had not entirely lost its admirable virtues, as they fought against *both the German army and the Italian fascists*. After the war the widely popular left of center forces began to regenerate the estimable *Italian* qualities not yet extinguished by fascism.

### *The USA Subverts Democracy*

But what was a promise for Italy was already in 1943 seen as a threat to the USA and its desire to control the Mediterranean—among other regions. So the USA acted to undermine the emerging Left in post-fascist Italy. The USA financed the Christian Democratic Party and much of the Italian media. Numerous U.S. airbases, naval and troop installations helped keep a lid on things. The CIA did its job, carrying out black bag, false flag, and psychological operations. Just in case that was not enough, for the 1968 election, which everyone expected would bring the left to power:

The US planned military intervention if the election could not be controlled by other means. A combination of force, threats, control over desperately needed food, and other measures succeeded in overcoming the threat of a free election. Substantial US efforts to subvert Italian democracy continued at least to the mid-1970s. (Chomsky)

For several decades after 1943, Italy remained effectively under the covert direction and guarded control of the USA and its CIA. The airbases, naval and troop installations *remain to this day* (as also in Spain, Turkey, Britain, Germany, and Japan).

### *Welcome to Bribe City*

Italy had long been known for its easy relationships with corruption. But what was brought to be by the carrots and sticks of the USA became all-pervasive, a society-wide infection, spreading poisons like an abscessed tooth and continuing through the decades to do harm. As the 1990s began, the pustules of corruption were bursting sufficiently to bring about the revelations that came to be called *Tangentopoli* (“bribe city”).

*City* was putting it mildly, for virtually the *entire government*, the linked business world, and good parts of Italy’s political parties were—and still are—involved in the game that always takes two or more to play.

*Item* February 2003: Scandal involves many of Italy’s pharmaceutical companies, long noted as a main team player. In the 1990s, the government official in charge of the relevant policies for pharmaceutical companies is arrested and found to have suitcases hidden under his sofa containing millions of dollars (billions of lira) worth of currency—even gold. He goes free.

### *Andreotti and the Eight Thousand Pages*

To neglect Giulio Andreotti in the realm of Italian corruption would be almost an insult to him. He was Prime Minister *seven* times, as the leader of the in-the-U.S.-pocket Christian Democratic Party. In the heyday of *Tangentopoli*, he was indicted for a broad range of crimes—in an indictment of some 8,000 pages.

One of the charges had to do with his (shall we say) *alleged* Mafia connections. Included in the evidence was a photograph of him with the then-leader of the Mafia, kissin’ cheeks in the Italian style. “Don’t know the guy,” Andreotti claimed—*smiling* (as always).

His trials have dragged on and on. In 2002 he was found guilty and sentenced to 24 years’ imprisonment, and he could hardly conceal his contempt, smiling through it all. (One can well imagine during the trial an old joke being played and replayed in Andreotti’s mind. Judge: “Are you trying to show *contempt* for this court?” Andreotti: “No—I’m trying to hide it.”)

And who wouldn’t be scornful—Andreotti’s party had made him a *Senator for Life*, giving him lifelong immunity from prosecution. On top of that, his conviction was later overturned on appeal. Plus, the statute of limitations had run on the charge of his Mafia connections; so it was thrown out, too, by another court. A charmed life, Giulio?

### *Berlusconi, The Blemished Billionaire*

Consider Silvio Berlusconi, defeated not too long ago as prime minister. He once lost another election, in 1996, after being indicted for bribery. His party had won the 1994 election. Berlusconi lasted only 7 months as prime minister. Miffed over his lack of influence, neofascist kingmaker Umberto Bossi of the Northern League jumped ship on him and the ruling coalition fell apart. (Bossi has suggested that the Italian navy sink incoming ships with immigrants on them.) The third partner in this charming coalition was the neofascist Gianfranco Fini of the National Alliance. (Fini has referred to Mussolini as the greatest statesman of the twentieth century.)

Berlusconi is *still* under indictment for several charges of bribery. But the Parliament he controlled until Spring 2006 changed judicial law so as to give his trial(s) a change of venue to the locality where he fully owns the judges.

Berlusconi is a large-scale financier. He owns three TV stations (and even as prime minister controlled the three *public* TV stations), also newspapers, a soccer club, and a political party *Forza Italia!* (the cheer for his soccer club). With a net worth of \$11 billion, Berlusconi, now 70 years old, is the richest person in Italy and appears to be the thirty-seventh richest person in the world.

Italy's corruption, cynicism, and economic problems after World War II made for relatively easy pickings, but the U.S. hand in it was so extensive, deep, and continuous that it is difficult to find more than a nook here, a cranny there, where there is a clean hand. And Berlusconi certainly isn't it.

Did I mention that Berlusconi, along with Blair, jumped into Bush's pocket for the invasion of Iraq?

### **CLOSE UP: GERMANY**

Hitler was *given* the Chancellorship of Germany after the election of 1933, in which his party had received but one-third of the vote. The office was handed to him by President General Hindenburg, Germany's "hero" of World War I. It was much like the process in which Bush II was handed the presidency by the U.S. Supreme Court.

Although there was a small minority in the USA worried about Hitler and his doings in and outside of Germany, the people at large and the U.S. government were concerned with other matters. Indeed, business and government generally approved of Hitler—and some (such as U.S. oil and car companies) profited from dealings with him.

Subsequent events would show how very dangerous our indifference had been. Current tendencies suggest that we should do all we can to understand how and why such a reprehensible social system came to be in, of all places, Germany. To which most people in the USA would respond, why “of all places”? What more could one expect from such a barbaric nation? But there are some things we should understand.

### *The Flower of Civilization*

Far from being barbaric, before Hitler and the Nazis, Germany was throughout most of its history seen as a leading—or even *the* leading—cultural and scientific center of the West, and a land *politically more democratic* than most countries. During the teens and 1920s, many even saw German as the pinnacle of Western civilization. And with reason.

In addition to its many great contributions to art, literature, music, philosophy, and science, Germany probably possessed the best educational system in the world after the seventeenth century. By the early twentieth century it was accurately viewed as the world’s engineering and technological leader. By the 1920s it had become a veritable magnet: Cultural, scientific, and technological whizzes came to Germany from all around the world.

Even more relevant, at least as regards fascism, is that once Germany had effectively recovered from both World War I and the worst inflation in history (1918–1923), it not only regained its prewar economic strength and enjoyed prosperity until 1929, but did so within the democratic political system of the Weimar Republic—while at the same time, the vigorous prewar left of center movements came back to life. (Brady, 1937)

### *Trouble Ahead*

Those same years produced NSDAP, the National Socialist German Workers Party—the Nazis. That is, the Nazis began in the period immediately following World War I. Times were terrible in Germany then. There was bitterness, disillusionment, and material desperation, worsened by the vindictive spirit and greedy practices of the Versailles reparations and the resultant crippling of the German economy (noted earlier).

The post-inflation revival and prosperity of the late 1920s were aided by the intervention of the U.S. Dawes Plan. Too late to undo the damage done by Germany’s economic losses, that plan extended loans and effectively cancelled punitive financial reparations. The Allies did this for reasons of self-interest,

realizing “that every conceivable kind of reparations must inevitably compete with domestic production [in England and France].” (Brady, 1943)

So if the good times were finally rolling in Germany, why didn’t fascism simply wither away? Brady was in Germany during the time of ferment and subsequently wrote, in *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism*:

[What] most forcibly struck the observer of the German scene in 1930...was that underneath all [these *good times*] one sensed a certain lurking fear, a certain undefinable and not-to-be-forgotten dread. Deeply rooted as were the traditions out of which the resurgence came, the tone and mood seemed nervous and somehow unreal. Much of it had a note of artificiality and make-believe about it; much of it seemed sickeningly combative; all of it seemed to be conducted in a mood compounded of desire to forget and a haste to enjoy before some new and nameless horror should sweep away what little there was left. (Brady, 1937)

While Brady was doing his investigations for *The Rationalization Movement in German Industry* (1933), the English poet Christopher Isherwood was eyeing the culture. His *Berlin Stories* were set there in 1930 (and were the source first for the play *I Am a Camera*—and later for its film version, the simultaneously funny and horrifying *Cabaret*—easy to find and definitely worth a look).

What shocked both of those very different observers (and other observers, too) was seeing the end of the road for *laissez-faire* capitalism.

### *The Nadir of Human History*

The political situation in Germany from 1918 on had been one simultaneously of always more concentrated economic power. There was an always greater polarization between left and right. Soon the attraction of the poles, both left and right, became strong enough to vacate the middle ground, ending business as usual in both politics and business. (Gerschenkron)

That the Nazis won out in that struggle occurred despite the fact that, by 1933, the left of center groups taken together constituted a clear majority. As all too often happens, however, they fought *against each other*—more than against their mutual enemy.

Whenever left anticapitalist forces gain strength, the wielders of the capitalist status quo find it all too easy to abandon whatever principles of democracy they might once have held. Such was the case in Germany. Hitler’s brutes were allowed to take over the courts, the police, and the streets. Cruel beatings, book

burnings, harassment, and murders were not even reported in the news or to the police. Prosecutions were rare.

The ferocity of German fascism may be seen as *proportionate to the threat of socialism*. The “gloves of political democracy” were thick in Germany in the 1920s, but its concentrated economic power proved to be even stronger. (Brady, 1937) Germany’s industrialism was the world’s most advanced, but so, too, was the political cynicism and the sophistication of its business leaders in industry and finance. (Brady, 1933)

All of that—class struggle, a highly concentrated economy, hardheaded business politics, and a population bleary with disillusionment—made for a dangerously unstable society. This roiling stew was a perfect set-up for the fire-eating ravings of Adolf Hitler.

In the interwar period, several other nations plunged into fascist-style authoritarianism: Spain, Portugal, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, and Turkey. These were not industrial capitalist countries reacting self-destructively to capitalist crisis, as were Italy, Germany, and Japan. Rather, they were largely traditional autocratic countries reacting to chaos and political crisis.

Among the lessons to be learned from Germany’s experience with fascism, most important today is that the admirable qualities of democracy and freedom of a country—ours now, as much as those of Germany then—can be extinguished, and quickly. Germany, hailed as the center of western civilization in 1928, became its foul pit—and by 1933, had descended to *the nadir of human history*.

## ANTIFASCISM VS. ANTICOMMUNISM

As fascism spread and deepened in those years, Sinclair Lewis, one of our country’s most respected novelists, wrote a book ironically titled *It Can’t Happen Here*—but in which it *did*. And in its own way, has. For example:

*Story Brady’s Spirit and Structure of German Fascism* was published in 1937. It remains the most informative book on that subject. In 1938, he was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)—a continuation of the 1920s Red Scare and a link to the McCarthyism of the 1950s (and *its* Un-American committee). HUAC didn’t ask Brady any questions about his book, but they did ask questions about his political beliefs. He told them to go to hell. In the next day’s papers, Brady was described by the Committee as being “prematurely anti-fascist.” A few years later one fascist country (Japan) bombed

Pearl Harbor and, the next day, another (Germany) declared war on us, followed by a third, Italy. If anything, Brady was not premature enough.

As was noted above, a main element in the growth and spread of fascism was what became the politicized fear of communism in the major capitalist nations. That fear was translated not only into support of fascism in their own and other countries, but also various kinds of interventions around the globe to suppress the real or imagined rise of communism.

Because of the importance of anticommunism and its beginnings with the Russian revolution of 1917, there will be a lengthy comment here on that revolution, and its consequences in Russia and in the capitalist world, especially in the USA.

## THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION

### *Setting the Stage*

The Russian Revolution broke out while World War I was still underway. The Russians had been fighting on the Eastern front on the Allied side, and in the process had already lost at least 1 million soldiers. Russia was then ruled over by the Czar—that is, by a hereditary dictator. It is hard these days even to imagine what kind of society the Russian Empire was. By any sensible measure, it was in no way modern—economically, politically, culturally, or militarily.

The Czar's court was a model of old-fashioned corruption. The economy, mostly agricultural, was dominated by essentially feudal landowners. The rest of Russia's economy was effectively colonized by a combination of British, German, and French capital.

Its transportation system was tedious, mostly rivers going in the wrong directions. That is, if coal was found *here*, at least some of it might need to be shipped *there*—which could mean a haul of as much as a thousand miles *upstream*. The overwhelmingly rural population was also overwhelmingly illiterate (80 percent!). The Russian Army was great on flags and swords and Cossacks.

Marx had wrongly expected revolutions to take place in the advanced industrial capitalist societies: first, Britain, then Holland, then the USA. Instead, they took place in two economically backward countries: first Russia and then China. Both countries faced substantial foreign opposition from powerful capitalist nations. Not exactly the events Marx had in mind. Nor did Russia get anything close to the socialism he had in mind.

In Russia, in March 1917, the Czarist regime was kicked out at last and replaced by a Provisional Government; led by the *Mensheviks* (something like today's liberals). There had been a significant revolution much earlier, the French Revolution of 1798. But Russia's cataclysm was unique: It was the first revolution of the modern era, and it took place during a war. Its governance was chaotic and inept.

### *Bolshevik Power, Lenin, and Enmity from Without*

In the midst of the chaos, the second (Bolshevik) revolution took place in November, masterminded by V. I. Lenin. (The drama of that revolution was well described in a short book, *The Ten Days That Shook the World*, written by the American journalist John Reed, who was present during those explosive days.)

Lenin was a superb tactician, without doubt. But no matter how brilliant, with armed resistance from outside and an essentially unorganized working class and large peasant population at home, what was bound to be a steep slope to climb also became a very slippery one. That the Bolshevik revolution succeeded at all was due to the sheer political muddle within the czar's circle and the wobbly leadership of the Provisional Government.

From the first moment, what soon was called the Soviet Union faced relentless enmity from the major European powers and the USA. One source of that enmity, but not its most important, was that in March 1918—the war still on—Lenin *withdrew all Russian troops*. That meant that if the Allies were not to give the Eastern Front to Germany, they would have to replace a million or more withdrawn Russian soldiers with their own.

The larger reason for European and U.S. antagonism, which propelled the many and massive anti-Soviet efforts from 1918 up to 1989, was that the Soviet Union *had opted out of the capitalist world* (while also taking over French, German, and British assets).

Lenin died in at age 53 in 1924. His death was followed by a prolonged and fierce power struggle between Trotsky and Stalin. It was won by Stalin in 1927—10 years after the revolution.

The path followed by the Soviet Union changed greatly in the few years following 1917, changed again from 1921 to 1924, again after Stalin's accession to power in 1927, and still more before Stalin's death in 1953.

Stalin gained and used his power ruthlessly, with an airtight dictatorship. Those in a position to succeed him (which is to say they were allowed to *live*)

were—necessarily—agreeable to him, thus assuring that Stalinism would persist for years after his death.

There is no knowing what might have become of the Soviet Union had Lenin not died when he did. Lenin was no Boy Scout. But the policies enacted while he lived had more of a practical than an ideological quality to them. (See Dobb.)

It is reasonable to believe that even given the external pressures, Lenin's policies would have been considerably more productive and less harsh than Stalin's. Stalin had gained power brutally. (Lenin, nearing death, wrote that he did not want Stalin to be his successor because of his *lack of restraint*). Stalin used his power brutally until his death, especially against those he deemed to be his main competitors for power, those who might get in his way. Almost always, those he persecuted had been mostly motivated by their hopes for a society of equality and decency.

Lenin, too, was a severe leader, but of a different kind. He first put in place what was called *war communism*. It was system of constraints made all the more essential as the foreign-equipped White Army warred against the Red Army.

The war was won by the Red Army. When the French, British, and U.S. forces went home, there was something like breathing space. In 1921, under less desperate peacetime conditions, Lenin created the NEP (New Economic Policy).

NEP provided a good deal of flexibility in terms of ownership, decentralization, and decision making—all in sharp contrast with both war communism and with Stalin's policies after 1928. The aim of the NEP was to have the Soviet Union take some steps toward a modern economy and *then* to become, in effect—finally—a modern *socialist* society. But Lenin's strategies were abruptly turned around or ended by Stalin in 1928. (See Dobb.)

Still, Stalin's 5-year plans must not be seen only as a consequence of Stalin's ruthless nature. They were at least as much as a reasonable response to the rise and threats of fascism and the endless economic— even military—interventions from the West attempting to undo the revolution. In short, it was necessary for the nonindustrial and quarantined society that was the USSR to become industrially strong in a hurry—if only to be able to fight a *defensive* war against one or more of the western powers.

By 1928, Mussolini was in power in Italy, the Nazis in Germany would soon take power and, relevantly, the Red Scare was off and running in the USA. So it is probable that by 1928 Lenin also would have been inclined to adopt 5-year plans—and just as probably, he would *not* have used or allowed Stalin's brutal repression at home.

### *Keynes: Give Russia a Chance*

Before proceeding further with the emergence and nature of Stalin's Soviet Union, it is worth recalling the view of Keynes in 1925 (that is, after Lenin's death and before Stalin took power).

Keynes's wife was Russian (and a well-known ballerina). In 1925, Keynes went to the USSR on an official visit for Britain. Putting together what he knew with both what he saw and what the western powers (including Britain and the USA) were doing, upon his return to Britain he wrote this (Keynes [1931]):

So, now the deeds are done and there is no going back, I should like to give Russia her chance. For how much rather, even after allowing for everything, if I were a Russian, would I contribute my activity to Soviet Russia than to Tsarist Russia! I could not subscribe to the new official faith any more than to the old. I should detest the actions of the new tyrants no less than those of the old. But I should feel that my eyes were turned towards, and no longer away from, the possibilities of things; that out of the cruelty and stupidity of Old Russia nothing ever could emerge, but beneath the cruelty and stupidity of New Russia some speck of the ideal may lie hid.

Underlying Keynes's desire to "give Russia her chance" were the possibilities of a decent society for the peoples of the Soviet Union. There is no reason whatsoever to believe that such was ever the concern of the major European powers or of the USA, either in the interwar period or the decades of Cold War. (Oglesby)

### *The Russian Front and Stalingrad*

Now, we suspend speculation and report on what happened in 1941. Here I quote from the invaluable *Encyclopedia of World History*, by William Langer.

June 22, 1941: German Armies Invade Russia, opening hostilities on a front of 2,000 miles, from the White to the Black Sea. The German invaders, with their allies, Italians, Romanians, Hungarians, and Finns, were estimated at over 2,000,000 men. The Russians were credited with 2,000,000 men under arms and an indefinite reserve. Prime Minister Churchill promised that Great Britain would extend all possible aid to the Russians.

The USA made the same promise—sometime after Pearl Harbor. By then, the Soviet Union had given itself time enough to hold back the German invasion of in 1941, and by 1943 had also broken the back of the German army (in the frigid, prolonged, and ultimately door-to-door Battle of Stalingrad).

Later, the U.S. Commanders-in-Chief of both the European and Pacific wars

(Marshall and MacArthur) agreed that the Nazi defeat in World War II *had been made certain* by their huge losses at Stalingrad (where also a million Russian civilians and soldiers died).

### *Nationhood and Necessary Militarization*

What has been said above about the Soviet Union (and some of what will be said in the next chapter) requires some clarification. Is it being suggested that the Soviet Union was destined to be a sweet and harmless nation if it had been left to itself? Not at all, and for a couple of reasons:

1. Before there was a Soviet Union, Russia had not been harmless. After all, it was an *empire*, and an empire doesn't just fall into another nation's lap.
2. *All* nations, almost by definition, tend to expand their territories, given half a chance; and if they are able to, they *create* that chance.

*But!* What I have tried to say earlier and will now repeat is this: From its birth in revolution, the Soviet Union was under military or economic attack from many powerful nations (including ours). *It had to militarize.*

When that militarization is done, there are serious political and social effects. Strong leadership is required. In the case of the USSR, from the first moment of the revolution in 1917 and for every year up to and including World War II, it was either faced with or enduring overt or covert military action from other countries.

When Stalin took over, he took advantage of the ongoing external hostility to justify his many harsh domestic and foreign policies. Domestically, he imprisoned, tortured, and murdered many of those who had *created* the revolution.

On the international scene, there was Stalin's successful—and violent—attempt to implant a pro-Soviet government in nearby Czechoslovakia, which had been the first industrial society to be *both democratic and socialist*. Stalin used U.S. actions as a justification for his deeds.

One of those acts was a decision by the USA in its Marshall Plan of 1948. For several years after the war, the USA in effect subsidized the reconstruction and modernization of European economies. When the Marshall Plan was first announced, it was understood to include all of Europe. Among other countries, Czechoslovakia sought to join, as did the USSR. The USSR was turned down—*even though the fascist countries were included*. The explanation for that is revealing.

After the Marshall Plan was announced, the USA put forth another plan: the

North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). To be eligible for Marshall Plan aid it was necessary to be a member of NATO. But NATO was unmistakably an anti-Soviet military organization. The USSR had applied for Marshall Plan aid before NATO. Because it could not be part of NATO, the USSR could not be part of the Marshall Plan, either. (All of those in one were also in the other.) So no aid. No help was to be forthcoming, in spite of the fact that the USSR—our former ally, whose sacrifices had assured victory for our side—was now in need of reconstruction and modernization *more than any other nation*. Stalin got the point. (See Wittner; Zinn.)

The Soviet Union never got the chance Keynes had hoped for. Instead, on the defensive, its back to the wall, it *had* to become a militarized society. And so it did. The only alternative was to say, “OK, fine—you win, we lose.”

So World War II ended and the Cold War began.

