Chapter 34

An Age of Anxiety

THE CHAPTER IN PERSPECTIVE

The end of World War I did not mean the end of upheaval for Europe, India, China, and the new Soviet Union. Europe was shaken to its core by the carnage of the war. An entire generation of Europeans, even those lucky enough to have survived the fighting, were disillusioned by their experience. Scientific discoveries and cultural innovations only added to the anxiety by challenging the accepted order. The stock market crash and Great Depression displayed the disadvantage of the world’s interdependence by bringing suffering to untold millions. Adolf Hitler in Germany and Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union, although starting from opposite ends of the political spectrum, created totalitarian dictatorships that fed off a fear of chaos. Nationalist movements in India and China took shape and grew stronger.

OVERVIEW

Probing Cultural Frontiers

The sense of disillusionment and estrangement that characterized Europe after World War I is summed up in the words “the lost generation.” Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* brought the horror and folly of the war home to millions of readers. In *The Decline of the West*, Oswald Spengler proposed that European society had entered its final days. Karl Barth’s *Epistle to the Romans* attacked liberal Christian theology and the ideal of progress. Along with progress, other nineteenth-century staples such as science, technology, and democracy were attacked. John Maynard Keynes discussed the end of laissez-faire capitalism. Discoveries in science, most notably physics and psychology, also shattered older worldviews. Albert Einstein’s discoveries suggested that there were no simple chronological or spatial guidelines to the universe. The notion that everything in the universe was relative to each observer seemed to remove all certainty. The words *uncertainty principle* were added to the popular lexicon by Werner Heisenberg. Basic questions of truth as well as cause and effect were now called into question. The work of Sigmund Freud in the new field of psychoanalysis proposed that humans were driven far less by rational considerations than by darker, less logical forces. Art reflected this intellectual upheaval as well. Photography drove painters in various schools to attempt to create reality rather than merely copy it. Painters such as Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin and Pablo Picasso strove to “abolish the sovereignty of appearance” and destroy all accepted standards of good and bad. Walter Gropius and Ludwig Mies von der Rohe rebelled against architectural constraints.

Global Depression

The crash of the U.S. stock market on Black Thursday, 24 October 1929, brought an end to the economic recovery that had marked much of the 1920s. However, profound economic problems had existed beneath the surface for years leading up to the crash. Agriculture suffered from overproduction and falling prices. Many nations were industrially underdeveloped and produced only one type of raw material, which left them highly susceptible to the boom and bust cycles of the industrial powers. The United States, Germany, and the former Allies played a dangerous balancing act involving loans, investments, and reparations payments. When the dangerously high prices on the stock market collapsed, the entire house of cards collapsed. With the exception of the Soviet Union, most of the rest of the world was dragged into the Great Depression. A rise in unemployment and a dramatic decrease in industrial production and trade caused very real human suffering on a global scale. Most nations practiced economic nationalism and passed tariffs such as the U.S. Smoot-Hawley Tariff, which in turn only led to more tariffs and even less
trade. Only the United States, Germany, and Japan found ways of jump-starting their economies and thus began the process of fighting out of the Great Depression.

Challenges to the Liberal Order

A bloody civil war, Red versus White, broke out in the Soviet Union after Lenin’s victory in the Revolution. Over two hundred thousand counterrevolutionaries, including Nicholas II and his family, were eliminated by Lenin’s secret police. The demands of the civil war led to war communism and a radical restructuring of Russian social and economic life. The “dictatorship of the proletariat” began to take on the form of a true dictatorship. Industrial production dropped 90 percent during the civil war. Lenin, displaying the pragmatism that was so much a part of his nature, implemented free market reforms as part of his New Economic Policy in 1921. Unfortunately there is no way to determine what path Lenin’s reforms might have taken in the long term because, after a prolonged period of illness, he died in 1924. Joseph Stalin came out on top in the power struggle after Lenin’s death and decided that the Soviet Union needed a second revolution, in this case an industrial one. Five-Year Plans and collectivization brought Russian industry and agriculture firmly under Stalin’s control. Russia did industrialize, but at a very steep price. In 1934 Stalin turned against his real and perceived enemies in the Great Purge. Millions of Soviet citizens died either directly or indirectly from Stalinist terror.

The great rival to communism during the interwar years proved to be fascism, an authoritarian political movement that stressed the transcendence of the state over the individual. Although the term was first coined by Benito Mussolini, fascism would reach its peak in structure and significance under Adolf Hitler in Germany. Hitler viewed communists and Jews as twin threats to world order. Liberalism and democracy were also frequent targets as he rose to leadership of the National Socialist German Workers’ Party. Hitler’s philosophy mirrored the political and social chaos and discontent of the 1920s and 1930s in Germany. What set Hitler apart from other malcontents of the period was his virulent racial ideology and hatred of the Jews. Even his ill-fated attempt to overthrow the widely unpopular Weimar Republic in the 1923 only worked to strengthen his appeal for many Germans. His ascension to the position of chancellor in 1933 was less of a surprise than the brief amount of time it took him to turn Germany into a one-party dictatorship. The Nuremberg Laws on 1935, which deprived Jews of German citizenship, and the Kristallnacht of 1938 were harbingers of far darker times to come.

Struggles for National Identity in Asia

The Great War, both through the weakening of colonial European powers and the spread of ideas such as self-determination, hastened the transformation of Asia. In India an educated elite understood all too clearly the contradiction between European ideals of freedom and democracy and the realities of imperialism. The Indian National Congress and the Muslim League increasingly called for a reappraisal of India’s role as a British colony. Unlike many nationalist movements that would slip into bloodshed, Mohandas Gandhi stressed nonviolent change through passive resistance. During his years in South Africa Gandhi perfected his philosophy of satyagraha (“truth and firmness”). Through a complex mixture of political, economic, and spiritual ideas and actions Gandhi attempted to convert, rather than terrorize, India’s oppressors. Unfortunately, on many occasions the British and Gandhi’s own followers resorted to violence. By 1937 the Government of India Act provided India with the institutions of a self-governing state. The future remained murky, however, with leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah calling for the creation of Pakistan for India’s Islamic population.

The collapse of the Qing dynasty in 1911 allowed Sun Yat-sen to declare a republic, but it did not ensure political stability for China. Political fragmentation and warlord military might pushed the Three Principles of the People into the background. Frustrations caused by the European and American recognition of Japanese control in China led to the May Fourth Movement and a turbulent period of self-examination. Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party were among the chief beneficiaries of this process. The Guomindang, under the leadership of Sun Yat-sen and eventually Jiang Jieshi, were Mao’s main internal rivals for power. External threats such as the Japanese further complicated the situation. The Guomindang and the Chinese Communists, the very definition of strange bedfellows, worked to reduce Japanese influence when they weren’t actively trying to eliminate each other. Jiang Jieshi almost captured
Mao in 1934, but the resulting Long March only worked to solidify Mao’s reputation. In the end Mao veered away from Marxist thought even more dramatically than Lenin had done earlier. Instead of merely making room for the peasants in the political process, Mao made the peasants the single most important feature of his revolutionary philosophy.