**The Great Depression**

Beginning on New York’s Wall Street on October 29, 1929, what would come to be known as ‘Black Tuesday’, the Great Depression was the most intense and protracted global economic crisis of the twentieth century, ending with the outbreak of World War II in 1939. In the United States, ‘Black Tuesday’ saw the sale of sixteen million shares, as catastrophic losses shook confidence in the *laissez-faire* capitalist system. In 1930 the effects of the American market crash spread worldwide; by 1932 there were thirty million unemployed in the industrial world, plunging millions into abject poverty. As the material and ideological conditions of economic depression manifested themselves socially, politically and environmentally, nations struggled to respond. In response to the crisis, the policies of Cambridge economist John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) gained prominence, exerting a profound international influence by suggesting an alternative to *laissez-faire* economics through public investment, resulting in an increase in domestic spending and long-term investment.

In 1933 Franklin D. Roosevelt was elected the president of the United States of America after bolstering citizens’ hopes with the promise of a ‘New Deal’, which would set millions back to work building schools, hospitals, roads and dams to irrigate the ‘dustbowl’ of drought-ridden farm land in middle America. In 1935 the Social Security Act introduced widespread benefits to Americans such as pensions and unemployment insurance. Also in that year, the American government funded the arts for the first time through the Works Progress Administration (WPA), coinciding with a proliferation in American arts and culture, as the government employed visual artists and writers to produce murals and photographs to construct American culture. The Museum of Modern Art, under the directorship of Alfred H. Barr, Jr. (1902-1981), opened its doors in New York only nine days after the crash, operating under a mandate to become a premier modern institution through the exhibition of expressly modernist art (http://bit.ly/2jC8Ja). American author John Steinbeck wrote some of the most iconic American literature of the period, including *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), focusing especially on the conditions of dispossessed migrant workers, while jazz, riding the heels of the Harlem Renaissance in New York, continued to flourish with the advent of Swing in the 1930s.

In Europe, soaring unemployment and hyperinflation weakened Germany’s Weimar Republic, whose fragile economy had been supported with loans through the 1924 Dawes Plan and the 1929 Young Plan, which were called in after ‘Black Tuesday’, causing an immediate crisis. The ensuing bankruptcies that affected each region and almost every family in Germany facilitated the spread of a rhetoric of extremism that polarized the political system and ushered the National Socialist (Nazi) party to power in 1933. The Nazi party responded to the depression through public programs as well as rearmament, thereby violating the terms of the Treaty of Versailles signed in 1919 between Germany and the Allied nations. Weimar’s formerly thriving growth of cultural and creative expressions, as evidenced in the development of *Bauhaus*, *Neue Sachlichkeit* (new objectivity), as well as film and theatre, was brought to a sudden halt by the Nazis. Nazi book burnings in 1933 consumed nearly 20,000 works for their ‘subversive’, ‘degenerate’ nature (including works by Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Thomas Mann and Marcel Proust). The relationship between politics and aesthetics became the focus of important artistic debates during the era, including, most famously, those between intellectuals and artists fleeing Nazi Germany and those among Surrealists in France.

During the interwar period in Europe and North America, the Great Depression figured as a prelude to the resurgence of world war. Policies of economic protectionism sought to insulate national interests from threats of growing economic instability. Divisions between totalitarian states and liberal democracies emerged amidst extreme nationalism and xenophobia. Responding to these crises, Popular Front governments were elected in France and Spain as non-aggression pacts and alliances were signed throughout Europe. In Spain, a *coup d’état* against the democratically elected government was waged by Francisco Franco’s forces and supported by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. Volunteers formed International Brigades to resist the establishment of another totalitarian government in Europe. George Orwell’s autobiographical *Homage to Catalonia* (1938)and Ernest Hemingway’s *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) record the diverse struggles of the ensuing Spanish Civil War (1936-1939)*.* On April 26, 1937, as an experiment in aerial bombing, German and Italian planes bombed the town of Guernica on market day, killing innocent civilians. Picasso’s *Guernica*, one of the most iconic paintings of the twentieth century, was commissioned to hang in the Spanish pavilion at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition (<http://bit.ly/HrbssX>).

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**References and further reading**

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