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Overview: Britain, 1918 - 1945

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Last updated 2011-02-17



Just over two decades after the 'war to end all wars', Britain was embroiled in the most devastating conflict in history. What were the events that led from one world war to another?

End of empire

The expense of World War One destroyed British global pre-eminence. Territorially the British empire was larger than ever.

In the Middle East, Britain and France had divided most of the former Ottoman Empire between them. But the underlying reality was that Britain could no longer afford to build the bases or ships to defend its empire as it had before 1914.

It was the United States' overwhelming industrial might that had swung the balance against Germany during the war, and it was the American president whose ideas defined the peace.

By 1927 Britain had universal suffrage for the first time in history.

The years between the world wars were Britain's last hurrah as the great imperial power it had been for the previous 200 years.

The country was £900 million in debt to the US for war loans, which were to be repaid immediately. Britain's enviable worldwide investments were wiped out, its coal and cotton export markets had collapsed.

This was a period of retraction abroad (by the late 1920s the white 'dominions' determined their own foreign policies) and social reform at home.

A limited number of women were allowed to vote in 1918, but by 1927 all women over the age of 21 could vote and Britain had universal suffrage for the first time in history.

The electorate trebled, bringing in the first government under the Labour party to represent the views of the working class.

League of Nations

The writer HG Wells had called the 1914 - 1918 war the 'war to end all wars', and the peace conference which met at Versailles in 1919 was determined that such a cataclysm should never happen again.

US President Woodrow Wilson intended for imperialism to wither away, for it had been the source of many tensions before the war.

No peace conference began with more idealistic aims than the one of 1919.

Many countries like Canada and other dominions who were representing themselves for the first time came to Paris enthusiastically. They were inspired by Wilson's vision of the peace being based on a League of Nations that would outlaw war and protect the rights of small nations.

The League was to be an international body to regulate the world. Every nation was invited to join and send members to its international assembly.

Former German and Ottoman colonies were to be called 'mandates' and to be governed in the interests of their inhabitants until they were ready to be admitted to the League.

A worldwide reduction of armaments to the lowest point consistent with national safety - making the world 'safe for democracy' as Wilson put it - offered a chance to escape the blind destruction of the past.

No peace conference began with more idealistic aims than the one of 1919. And yet 20 years later, another war would begin all over again, one that would kill 55 million people.

Germany rearms



Adolf Hitler, chancellor of Germany, is welcomed at Nuremberg, 1933 ©

The impediment to a lasting peace was Germany's treatment at Versailles. France insisted that vindictive and punitive terms be inflicted upon its neighbour to satisfy its need for security.

The Versailles Treaty removed four million of Germany's inhabitants in territorial transfers, most of its industrial wealth, and destabilised the entire structure of German society.

Adolf Hitler came to power on a programme to reverse the Versailles Treaty.

Before 1914, Germany had been the dynamo of the European economy. Economic misery and despair over her reduced status as a pariah nation paved the way in the post-war period for a desperate people to seek desperate solutions.

Adolf Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933, on a programme to reverse the Versailles Treaty. He withdrew from the disarmament conference and left the League of Nations.

The concepts of disarmament as a universal panacea and collective security to be enforced by the League of Nations were dead.

They had already been exposed as hollow when the isolationist American congress prevented the United States from joining the League, and after the League failed to take action against Japan for seizing Manchuria in 1931.

Disappointed by her gains at the peace conference, Italy invaded Ethiopia in 1935, while Germany created the air force Versailles had forbidden, began rearming and invaded the Rhineland up to the French border in 1936.

Britain escaped the extremist totalitarian movements that gained a stranglehold on much of the continent in the 1920s and 1930s. Few Britons, for example, joined Sir Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists.

Its members became notorious for their attempts to intimidate Jewish people, whom Mosley was convinced were behind the 'communist threat' Bolshevik Russia was strongly thought to pose in the inter-war years.

Britain's long traditions of consultation and belief in parliamentary democracy helped it to weather the storms of post-war life, though it was dogged by slumps and strikes.

Depression

Two of the questions that bedevilled British politics before 1914 - women's suffrage and Irish home rule - were no longer at issue.



Women got the vote without difficulty in 1918 after four years of doing the civilian work of three million men who had been away fighting in the army - in munitions factories, on the land and as nurses on the Western Front.

Meanwhile Prime Minister Lloyd George had decided Britain could not win southern Ireland's war of independence, begun in 1919 by the revolutionary Irish party Sinn Fein. The period saw southern Ireland become a independent republic in all but name.

The Wall Street Crash of 1929 brought worldwide economic collapse.

The real concern was the economy. The European economic system had still not properly recovered 11 years after the war had ended. This problem had been masked by America's generous willingness to bail Europe out.

But in 1929, a financial meltdown in New York, known as the Wall Street Crash, began a worldwide economic depression. America had to withdraw her massive loans to Europe.

Germany's tottering economy completely collapsed, which in turn brought Hitler to power.

If the period before 1929 was in many ways a period of hope, in that the world seemed to be recovering from the trauma of war, the Depression put paid to it.

In Britain in the 1930s, unemployment soared to levels the country had never experienced before. In 1931, proposed benefit cuts saw most ministers resigning from the Labour government.

Ramsay Macdonald was left as prime minister of what was known as the National Government, for it was a cross-party coalition containing members of the Conservative and Liberal parties.

Going off the 'gold standard' in September 1931 made the pound cheap and British goods cheaper, and the export trade began to revive. But Macdonald was despised as a 'class traitor' by many Labour voters.

In November 1935 he was replaced as prime minister by the Conservative leader Stanley Baldwin, for the National Government now had a majority of Conservative MPs.

Appeasement

The late 1930s saw crisis follow crisis for Britain. In 1936, the new king Edward VIII, who wished to marry his American mistress Mrs Wallis Simpson, was persuaded to abdicate in favour of his brother the duke of York, who took the throne as George VI.



Portrait of Edward VIII ©

In India, 100,000 people were imprisoned for taking part in the Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi's civil disobedience campaigns for Indian independence. Nevertheless, Britain was reluctant to lose the centre of her imperial trade.

It took World War Two and the Japanese take-over of Burma to extract Britain's assurance of post-war independence, failing which India threatened to welcome in Japanese troops to 'liberate' them.

Britain found any excuse not to fight a war, though it had reluctantly begun to re-arm.

A major problem was also brewing in the Mandate of Palestine, which Britain administered as part of the post-World War One peace.

The 1917 Balfour Declaration that Palestine should become a Jewish homeland had to be reconciled with the rights of the indigenous Arab peoples, for the country had become a magnet for German Jews escaping Nazi persecution.

But the greatest cloud on the horizon was Nazi Germany, which in 1938 seized Austria and Czechoslovakia. The late 1930s are often known as the 'age of appeasement', for Britain found any excuse not to fight a war, though it had reluctantly begun to re-arm.

It was not until 3 September 1939 that Britain and France went to war with Germany in response to its invasion of Poland two days earlier. The rest of Europe remained neutral.

World War Two



Spitfires on patrol during the Battle of Britain, May 1941 ©

The horror of trench warfare 20 years earlier convinced British forces chiefs that the war had to be won in the air. But the air battle did not take place until August 1940, after Belgium, Holland and France had all fallen to a concerted Nazi invasion begun on 10 May.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill rejected a separate peace in Europe, and Britain stood alone against 2,000 miles of hostile coastline.

The Battle of Britain, fought between Allied and German pilots in British skies during the summer of 1940, was the first significant defeat Nazi Germany suffered since the war had begun a year earlier.

The British Empire was a shadow of its former self.

But even if Britain was not to be invaded (and by early 1941 Hitler had instead set his sights on the Soviet Union) it could still be greatly damaged. The bombing of London and other cities, known as the Blitz, continued.

For Britain, with its empire, the war was always going to be worldwide, since British troops were needed in the Middle East to defend interests there, as well as the route to India.

But Germany's ally Japan had her eye on the French and British Far Eastern colonies. On 7 December 1941, Japan attacked American ships at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii and what had basically been a European conflict became truly global.

The combination of Germany's war against Russia from June 1941, and the Americans' entry into the war later that year, meant that the Axis powers' time was limited.

The Allies were victorious in North Africa in May 1943 and invaded Italy in July of the same year. In June 1944 a massive Allied force landed on the Normandy coast in France, and Paris was liberated in August 1944.

At the end of April 1945, Hitler committed suicide in Berlin as the city was besieged by Soviet troops. The Japanese only surrendered in August 1945 after atom bombs were dropped on the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in preference to fighting a long land war.

Meanwhile the British Empire was a shadow of its former self. Anti-colonial feeling and independence was in the air among British possessions in Africa and Asia.

After 1945, the Pacific Rim countries made treaties with America to protect them, for it was American troops who had saved Australia from invasion by the Japanese.

Find out more

Books

Hubris 1889-1936 and Nemesis 1936-45 a two volume biography of Hitler by Ian Kershaw (Penguin 1998 and 2001)

Britain's Moment in the Middle East 1914-1956 by Elizabeth Monroe (John Hopkins University Press, 1981)

Peacemakers: The Paris Peace Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War by Margaret MacMillan (John Murray 2003)

Modern Ireland 1600-1972 by Roy Foster (Penguin Press 1988)

People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution 1891-1924 by Orlando Figes (Penguin 1998)

Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990 by Peter Clarke (Penguin 1996)

English History 1914-45 by AJP Taylor (Oxford University Press, 1965)

Churchill: A Life by Sir Martin Gilbert (Pimlico 2000)

The Second World War by Winston S Churchill (Cassells, 1948)

The Spanish Civil War by Hugh Thomas (Penguin, 1977)

Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope by Judith M Brown (Yale, 1991)

About the author

Rebecca Fraser is a writer and broadcaster. Her books include *A People's History of Britain* (Pimlico, 2004) and the biography *Charlotte Bronte* (Vintage, 2003). She is working on a book about the Mayflower and early settlement in colonial New England.