



THE 20TH CENTURY: THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The Edwardian period. In 1901, when Queen Victoria died, Britain was the most prominent nation in the world. She owed her undisputed power to her industrial and technological leadership, to a stable political system at home, and to an immense empire which covered a quarter of the earth's surface. But two World Wars were to transform Britain's position in the world, and by the time Elizabeth II came to the throne in 1952, Britain was no longer a major world power.

During the last years of Victoria's Reign, in spite of the general prosperity, social problems still persisted. The discontent of the working class and the spreading of socialist ideas gave rise to labour organizations and Trade Unions. Among these, the Social Democratic Federation (1884) and the Fabian Society (1884) played an important role in creating, in 1900, a committee to support the election of Labour members to Parliament; this committee was to grow into the Labour Party.

After the death of Queen Victoria, her son Edward VII (1901-1910) ascended to the throne of England. The «Edwardian period» inherited the prosperity and the power of the Victorian Age, but not the respectability and the seriousness that Queen Victoria had symbolized. The new king loved the good things in life, including enormous cigars, racehorses and pretty women, and set the tone for this period; but the life that the rich lived contrasted sharply with the terrible poverty in which one third of the nation lived.

The first years of Edward's reign did not bring about any relevant change and the general principles of policy of the previous age were maintained. The situation changed when the progressive Liberal Party won the General Election (1906), and the new men in power started a period of reforms which were to reduce the gap between rich and poor and lay the foundations of the Welfare State.

The constitutional monarch never tried to rule alone. Indeed monarchy had long ceased to be discussed as an issue; rather it had become a unifying symbol of nationhood. The political life of the country was entrusted to the elected Parliament, led by the Prime Minister and a Cabinet chosen from among the winning party.

At the beginning of the century the two great parties were the Conservatives and the Liberals. The new rapidly increasing Labour Party created from, and in collaboration with, the Trade Unions, appeared on the political scene in 1906. The government of the day, during the office of Herbert Henry Asquith as Prime Minister and David Lloyd George as Chancellor of the Exchequer, was still very active in home policy: Education Acts (1902) brought in elementary education and set up secondary schools, supervised by Local Education Authorities. Many social Acts were passed – the right to strike for workers (1906), old age pensions (1906), medical service in schools (1907), the reduction of the working day to eight hours and national insurance (1911) – but the War broke out leaving the question of Home Rule for Ireland still unresolved.

In 1909, in drawing up a new budget, Lloyd George introduced higher income taxes which provoked the reaction of the Conservative Party and a long struggle, which ended in 1911 with the passing of the Parliament Act that reduced the veto of the Lords and removed their control over financial bills.

In foreign policy, the increasing power of Germany and competition in trade alarmed Britain and a pact of alliance, known as Entente Cordiale, was made with France in 1904. In 1907, Russia joined Britain and France, and the former alliance transformed into the Triple Entente, the counterpart to the Triple Alliance (1882) formed by Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy.

When Edward VII died in 1910, a sense of security seemed to die with him, and his son George V (1910-1936) came to the throne. Abroad, the menace of war grew stronger; in 1914 Europe was a powder-keg which needed only a spark to set it on fire.

The First World War. The tension among European countries reached its climax on June 28th 1914, and the spark to the war came with the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, and his wife at Sarajevo. Austria-Hungary went to war with Serbia, Russia mobilized on Serbia's side and Germany mobilized against Russia. It was inevitable that France and also Britain should prepare to support their ally, Russia.

Britain entered the First World War on August 4th 1914, after Germany's violation of Belgium's neutrality: the agreement with France, defence strategies and the deep rooted fear of German naval power impelled the nation to avoid isolation.

Germany began the war very well prepared: the Schlieffen Plan should secure her a speedy victory in the west and avoid her a long war on two fronts, but in the early battles fought in Northern France, French and British forces succeeded in arresting German offensive.



The war, fought in three continents and also in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, was a slow and bloody affair. In the course of the war, Italy, by the secret Treaty of London (April 1915), undertook a declaration of war to her former allies, Germany and Austria-Hungary. In 1917 also the United States, resentful of the methods employed by the Germans in submarine warfare, joined Britain and her allies.

The final German offensive was stopped at the Battle of the Somme and the Battle of the Marne in 1918, and the Germans sued for an armistice.

At the Paris Conference in 1919, Germany was obliged to the disarmament and to the payment of war reparations. Peace returned bringing England a further extension of her colonial empire, but a severe economic recession and massive unemployment were what soldiers were confronted with, instead of «a land fit for heroes to live in», as David Lloyd George had promised.

The Irish question. A coalition government was formed to face the emergency: led by Lloyd George, it steered the country through those tragic years, with a nationalist Revolt in Ireland on Easter Day (1916), the Russian Revolution of 1917 shattering certainties, Imperial and Colonial forces joining the British army, the crude reality of the trenches displacing – in young soldiers and in everybody – all sense of permanence and stability.

In 1913 Asquith had passed the Home Rule Bill, but it had proved unsatisfactory to the majority of the population both in Ireland and Northern Ireland, as it granted less autonomy than that enjoyed by other Dominions. During the war, in 1916 the so-called Easter Rising broke out in Dublin; the rising was crushed and its leaders were arrested or executed.

In the General Election held immediately after the war, the Liberal Party obtained the majority and Lloyd George, as Prime Minister, tried to solve the Irish question. The Sinn Féin representative refused to sit in the Westminster Parliament; they formed a separate Parliament and declared Ireland to be an independent Republic.

After a long struggle between the two countries and a civil war in Ireland, the Irish Free State was constituted in 1921. In 1922 the Irish Free State Act gave Home Rule to Southern Ireland, later to become Eire, while Ulster, or Northern Ireland, chose to remain with Britain. The Irish Free State proclaimed itself Republic of Ireland in 1949.

The Post-First World War. The Great War of 1914-1918 saw the destruction of the Empires of Russia, Austria and Germany, as well as the rise to international power of the United States. Fighting went on outside Europe as well; the whole world had to take sides with one or the other of the conflicting powers. The «waste land» of post-war Europe was defined by the poet T. S. Eliot as «a heap of broken images», «a handful of dust».

In Britain, at the end of the war, the government had to face dramatic problems such as strikes, mass unemployment and discontent. Suffragettes claimed the vote for women, which was granted in 1918 for women over thirty, and ten years later for women over twenty-one; in 1969 the age was lowered to eighteen for everybody. Lloyd George's unsuccessful attempts to face unemployment deprived him of the support of the working class and he resigned in 1922.

In the following election the Conservative Party regained the power and held the office till 1929, the year when the Labour Party came back to power, obtaining an absolute majority.

Left-wing pressure groups began to cause political unrest and tension. The 1929 slump in the United States affected the economy of the rest of the world. Misery, want and frustrations created the conditions for dictatorships in Germany (Hitler), Italy (Mussolini) and Spain (Franco), where later the Spanish Civil War broke out.

The British Empire was transformed into a Commonwealth of Nations in 1926, and the Statute of Westminster in 1931 regulated political and economic relationships among members of the Commonwealth. A National Government was formed with the concurrence of Conservative and Liberal ministers, in order to tackle the economic crisis caused by the Great Depression.

Ramsey MacDonald, leader of the Labour Party, held the office of Prime Minister till 1935, when he was replaced by Stanley Baldwin. The new Prime Minister succeeded in solving the most serious economic problems, but in 1936 he was confronted with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in foreign affairs, which he faced by adopting a policy of non-intervention, and the crisis of abdication at home.

In 1936 George V died; Edward VIII, who had succeeded his father, shortly after his accession to the throne resolved to abdicate to marry a twice divorced American lady, Wallis Simpson. Baldwin's tact in handling the question saved the prestige of the monarchy and Edward's brother, the Duke of York, became the new king of England as George VI (1936-1952).



Baldwin was replaced by the Conservative Neville Chamberlain in 1937, who continued the policy of appeasement of his predecessors, especially towards Germany where Nazism was growing, and he also revolved to abandon sanctions against Italy after her invasion of Ethiopia. He is best known, in particular, for his signing of the Munich Agreement (1938), conceding the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia to Nazi German.

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS

1901-1910 Reign of Edward VII: 1901 → Queen Victoria's death; Edward VII succeeds his mother; 1902 → End of the Second Boers' War; Education Act; 1904 → Entente Cordiale; 1906 → The Labour Party wins the General Election and enters the House of Commons for the first time; Right to strike for workers; Old Age Pensions Act; 1907 → Triple Entente; Medical Service in schools; 1910 → Edward VII's death.

1910-1936 Reign of George V: 1910 → George V ascends the throne; 1911 → Reduction of the working day to eight hours; National Insurance Act; Parliament Act; 1913 → Irish Home Rule Bill is passed; 1914 → Outbreak of the First World War; 1915 → Treaty of London; 1916 → Easter Rising in Dublin; The Sinn Féin representative declares Ireland to be an independent Republic; 1917 → American President Wilson joins the war; Russian Revolution; 1918 → The I.R.A. is formed; Battle of the Somme and Battle of the Marne; Right to vote for women over thirty; 1919 → Paris Conference; End of the War with the Treaty of Versailles; 1921 → Ireland is recognized as a «free State»; 1922 → Irish Free State Act; Resignation of the Prime Minister Lloyd George; The Conservative Party regains the power; 1926 → The British Empire turns into the Commonwealth of Nations; The Imperial Conference recognizes the independence and equality of the great dominions; 1928 → The right to vote extended to women over twenty-one; 1929 → The Labour Party comes back to power obtaining an absolute majority; The Great Depression; Roosevelt's New Deal; Wall Street Crash in New York; 1931 → The Statute of Westminster regulates political and economic relationships among members of the Commonwealth; 1935 → MacDonald, leader of the Labour Party, is replaced by Baldwin; India wants the independence from U.K.; Mahatma Ghandi starts his «non-violent protest»; 1936 → Outbreak of the Spanish Civil War; George V's death; Edward VIII, who is succeeded his father, abdicates to marry an American divorcee; Edward's son George VI is the new king.

1937 Baldwin is replaced by the Conservative Chamberlain, who continues the policy of appeasement of his predecessors, especially towards Germany and Italy.

