

The End of Optimism? The Great Depression in Europe

Historical Context: Teachers' Lecture Outline (based on [Context](#) section of Module)

Introduction: The coming of the Depression

1. Disruption in world trade caused by Wall Street Crash and subsequent collapse of American financial system
2. Depression in Europe was part of global breakdown of economic system, but conditions in Europe shaped the political responses and subsequent outcomes
3. Common patterns: decreased trade, cutbacks in production and consumption of goods, increased unemployment, widespread deprivation, and radical political agitation

Economic patterns and policy responses: Compare and Contrast

1. In Germany , the economy was weakened by post-World War I settlement, inflation of 1920s, extensive borrowing by central bank, and political instability of Weimar government. German government responded to economic depression caused by the Wall Street Crash and recall of loans by American banks by cutting public services and the use of emergency powers to maintain order.
2. In Britain , persistent economic problems in the 1920s were worsened, as mainstays of the economy, such as shipping and banking, were weakened by the collapse in world trade. The British government responded by protecting industries, which further decreased international trade, and resisting calls for more extensive spending on public services.
3. In France , the modernization of the French economy in the 1920s provided some initial protection against the Depression, as production and employment continued into the early 1930s. As world trade continued to fall, French production and consumption also began to fall, bringing high unemployment, economic suffering, and demands for political action.

Unemployment

The most visible sign of the spreading effects of the Depression in Europe was unemployment, which became visible in photographs of out-of-work men collecting food relief to avert starvation, in statistic evidence of rising unemployment, and in the demands of radical political activists for immediate action to alleviate spreading despair.

Demonstration, Strikes, and Protests

1. Primary sources such as newspaper and diplomatic reports as well as cartoons and photographs can be used to assess how economic conditions provoked collective action in the form of demonstrations, strikes, and protests, which in turn led to policy responses and political transformation.
2. In Britain , a wave of strikes and protests by unemployed workers focused public attention on the plight of the jobless, while the severity of the government response, including arresting protestors and prosecuting organizers, demonstrated the depth of the economic and political crisis generated by the Great Depression.
3. In Germany, parties on the extreme right (Hitler's National Socialist (Nazi) Party) and the extreme left (the Communist Party) mobilized protests intended to challenge the legitimacy of the Weimar coalition of moderate right (Conservative), liberal democratic, and moderate left (Socialist) politicians, whose failure to maintain order contributed to the public disillusionment with the existing government and demands for radical change.
4. In France , similar waves of demonstrations and protests culminated in a mass protest involving both extreme left and right parties in February 1934 at the seat of government in Paris , which many perceived as a failed attempt to overthrow the government by force.

Elections and Political Transformations

1. Elections provided another measure of growing political dissatisfaction and the search for some viable alternative to end the crisis of the Depression.
2. In Britain , the formation of a so-called National Government with a coalition of parties was intended to reassure the public that remedial actions were underway. While the intensity of political protests diminished in response to this action, the economic crisis continued, as this government refused to engage in massive public relief efforts.
3. In Germany, a series of elections from 1930 through late 1932 brought increasing support for the radical left (Communist) and right (Nazis) while weakening support of the moderate governing coalition (Socialists, Democrats, and Conservatives), leading to the decision in early 1933 to appoint Hitler as head of a National Socialist government, with the promise to restore order, bring economic recovery, and reassert German power.
4. In France, the shock of the attempted government overthrow in 1934 prompted the formation of a Popular Front government, which united liberal, socialist, and communist political representatives in a common effort to bring economic recovery while avoiding the danger of radical right-wing activists seeking modeled on the German Nazis.