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Europe’s Impoverished Era

The interwar era engulfed the time following the end of the Great War and the beginning of the World War II; it was a period in which people were recovering from the devastating physical and emotional effects of battle. During this time, the citizens of Ukraine were experiencing famine and Russians were facing political oppression under the harsh rule of Joseph Stalin. Meanwhile, Germans were suffering from the detrimental effects of inflation and other complications brought on by the reparations Germany was left with following the Great War. These particular hardships are outlined in the following source documents: *The Economic Consequences of Peace* by J. M. Keynes, *Woman and a Changing Civilization* by Winifred Holtby, and *Khrushchev’s Secret Speech* by Nikita Khrushchev. The interwar period was portrayed as a very negative time in history for Europe because of the extremely evident economic instability caused by inflation in Germany which Keynes sheds light on, the social confusion in regards to gender roles that is made obvious by Holtby, and the political turmoil inflicted by the reign of Stalin in Russia that is highlighted with the words of Khrushchev.

Following World War I, Germany attempted to repay their debts by excessively printing money, which resulted in inflation and a consequential unstable economy for all of Europe. In J. M. Keynes’ work, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace*, he details his observations of the detriments of starvation that Europe faced due to combined issues of high inflation and Europe’s very strong dependence on imports from other continents. J. M. Keynes states, “For starvation, which brings to some lethargy and helpless despair, drives others to the nervous instability of hysteria and to a mad despair.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This quote by J. M. Keynes shows that people were deprived of basic life necessities and were very upset by the economic state in which the war left them in because in it, one can see that the lack of financial stability left them in a state of famine, obviously emotionally distressed, and clearly physically exhausted. The collapsing economy left Europe in a period of decline and contributed to the impossibility of a positive interwar era.

The forfeiting economy of Europe during the interwar era left the citizens with very strained motivations to succeed. The inflation got so out of control that currency became essentially worthless and the value of a dollar no longer enticed people to work. In J. M. Keynes’ work *The Economic Consequences of the* Peace, he explains that the citizens lost control of their finances and this had very adverse effects on the once cooperative economy. J. M. Keynes writes, “By a continuing process of inflation, governments can confiscate, secretly and unobserved, an important part of the wealth of their citizens.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This quote by J. M. Keynes shows that the peoples’ financial successes were out of their control following World War I because in it, one can see, that no matter how much they earned, the government obtained the power to redistribute their wealth, much to a hard-working citizen’s dismay. The deteriorating economy post World War I left citizens with very negative emotions towards the financial state of Europe due to their lack of self-determination.

 Immediately following The Great War, social confusion amongst the sexes led to even greater struggles for the interwar society in Europe. The women were driven out of the workforce, both willingly and unwillingly, by the demands of men who did not approve of working with or being replaced by a woman. In Winifred Holtby’s work *Women and a Changing Civilization*, she explains not only the questioning of gender roles, but also the arousal of tension and opposition between men and women that arguably still exists today. Winifred Holtby says, “Jobs became not duties which war-time propaganda taught girls that it was patriotic to perform, but privileges to be reserved for potential bread-winners and father of families.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This quote by Winifred Holtby shows that both genders of the post-war society were confused and discontent with their roles in society; because in it, one can see that women were once instilled with the idea that being independent also showed loyalty for one’s country, but the end of the war sparked a conflicted attitude and resulted in confusion and opposition regarding woman in the workplace. The interwar era was negatively associated with social instability, which was marked by the birth of a mutual resentment between the sexes.

Also amidst the interwar era, the citizens of the Soviet Union were faced with devastating political oppression under the rule of Joseph Stalin, who used terror and violence as primary means of control. In Nikita Khrushchev’s *Khrushchev’s Secret Speech*, he illuminates the horrors of life under the reign of Stalin following World War I, specifically regarding his arbitrary method of convicting citizens of treason. “This concept, “enemy of the people”, actually eliminated the possibility of any kind of ideological fight or the making’s of one’s views known on this or that issue.”[[4]](#footnote-4) This quote by Nikita Khrushchev proves that citizens of the Soviet Union were politically and intellectually restricted under the harsh rule of Stalin during the interwar period because in it, one can see that people were deprived of the freedom to express their political opinion’s by a threatening fear for their lives. The terror that was instilled within people under the rule of Stalin contributed to the negative time of despair that existed between World War I and World War II, in which people lived under constant scrutiny and submission from absolutist governments.

 The interwar era was a negative time marked by gender confusion and economic turmoil, which consequently brought feelings of resentment, anger and despair. The financial crisis in Europe, due to inflation, left people without enough food or materials for survival, which caused the citizens to panic. Socially, men and women were conflicted in the workplace in regards to job competition following the return of soldiers, and this led to the challenges of gender equality, and resulted in a mutual anger from both sides of the argument. These factors led to the adoption of highly absolutist government systems such as the one led by the communistic rule of Joseph Stalin, in which a harsh and violent political leadership was the only source of stability of the time. Peoples’ lives were undoubtedly in ruins both socially and economically and they were desperate for any form of stability, even if meant mass bloodshed and the infliction of terror by political leaders.

1. J. M. Keynes, “The Economic Consequences of the Peace,” page 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Keynes, page 262. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Winifred Holtby, “Women and a Changing Civilization,” page 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Nikita Khrushchev, “Khrushchev’s Secret Speech,” page 127. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)