

## An Uncertain Peace



**FOCUS QUESTION:** What was the impact of World War I, and what problems did European countries face in the 1920s?

Four years of devastating war had left many Europeans with a profound sense of despair and disillusionment. The Great War indicated to many people that something was dreadfully wrong with Western values. In *The Decline of the West*, the German writer Oswald Spengler (1880–1936) reflected this disillusionment when he emphasized the decadence of Western civilization and posited its collapse (see the box on p. 798).

## The Impact of World War I

The enormous suffering and the deaths of almost 10 million people shook traditional society to its foundations and undermined the whole idea of progress. New propaganda techniques had manipulated entire populations into maintaining their involvement in a senseless slaughter. How did Europeans deal with such losses? In France, for example, probably two-thirds of the population was in mourning over the deaths of these young people.

An immediate response was the erection of war memorials accompanied by ceremonies to honor the dead. Battlefields also became significant commemorative sites with memorial parks, large monuments, and massive cemeteries, including ossuaries or vaults where the bones of thousands of unidentified soldiers were interred. Virtually all belligerent countries adopted national ceremonies for the burial of an Unknown Soldier, a telling reminder of the brutality of World War I.

Businesses, schools, universities, and other corporate bodies all set up their own war memorials.

It is impossible to calculate the social impact of the mourning for the lost soldiers. One French mother explained, “No matter how proud as Frenchwomen we poor mothers may be of our sons, we nevertheless carry wounds in our hearts that nothing can heal. It is strongly contrary to nature for our children to depart before us.” Another Frenchman wrote, “Why should the old people remain alive, when the children who might have initiated the most beautiful era in French history march off to the sacrifice?”<sup>1</sup>

World War I created a lost generation of war veterans who had become accustomed to violence. In the course of the war, extreme violence and brutality became a way of life and a social reality. As one Frenchman recounted: “Not only did war make us dead, impotent or blind. In the midst of beautiful actions, of sacrifice and self-abnegation, it also awoke in us, . . . ancient instincts of cruelty and barbarity. At times, I, who have never punched anyone, who loathes disorder and brutality, took pleasure in killing.”<sup>2</sup> After the war, some veterans became pacifists, but for many veterans, the violence of the war seemed to justify the use of violence in the new political movements of the 1920s and 1930s (see “The Authoritarian and Totalitarian States” later in this chapter). These men were fiercely nationalistic and eager to restore the national interests they felt had been betrayed in the peace treaties.

## The Search for Security

The peace treaties at the end of World War I had tried to fulfill the nineteenth-century dream of nationalism by redrawing boundaries and creating new states. Nevertheless, this peace settlement had left many nations unhappy. Conflicts over disputed border regions poisoned mutual relations in eastern Europe for years, and many Germans viewed the Peace of Versailles as a dictated peace and vowed to seek its revision.

The U.S. president Woodrow Wilson had recognized that the peace treaties contained unwise provisions that could serve as new causes for conflicts and had put many of his hopes for the future in the League of Nations. Although it had some success in guaranteeing protection for the rights of the many ethnic and religious minorities that remained in some of the newly formed states, the League was not particularly effective at maintaining the peace. The failure of the United States to join the League and the subsequent American determination to be less involved in European affairs undermined the League’s effectiveness from the beginning. Moreover, the League’s sole weapon for halting aggression was the imposition of economic sanctions such as trade embargoes that often failed to prevent League members from engaging in military action. Efforts to promote disarmament were also ineffective, despite provisions in both the League’s covenant and the Treaty of Versailles.

The weakness of the League of Nations and the failure of the United States to honor its promise to form a defensive military alliance with France left the French feeling embittered and alone. Fear of German aggression led them to reject the possibility of disarmament. Before World War I, France’s alliance with Russia had served to threaten Germany with the possibility of a two-front war. But Communist Russia was now a hostile power. To compensate, France built a network of alliances in eastern Europe with Poland and the members of the so-called Little Entente (Czechoslovakia, Romania, Yugoslavia). Although these alliances looked good on paper as a way to contain Germany and maintain the new status quo, they overlooked the fundamental military weaknesses of those nations. Poland and the Little Entente states were not substitutes for Russia.

**THE FRENCH POLICY OF COERCION (1919–1924)** Unable to secure military support through the League of Nations, France sought security between 1919 and 1924 by relying primarily on a strict enforcement of the Treaty of Versailles. This tough policy



The Little Entente

toward Germany began with the issue of reparations, the payments that the Germans were supposed to make to compensate for the "damage done to the civilian population of the Allied and Associated Powers and to their property," as the treaty asserted.

In April 1921, the Allied Reparations Commission settled on a sum of 132 billion marks (\$33 billion) for German reparations, payable in annual installments of 2.5 billion (gold) marks. Confronted with Allied threats to occupy the Ruhr valley, Germany's chief industrial and mining center, the new German republic accepted the reparations settlement and made its first payment in 1921. The following year, however, facing financial problems, the German government announced that it was unable to pay any more. Outraged by what it considered Germany's violation of the peace settlement, the French government sent troops to occupy

the Ruhr valley. If the Germans would not pay reparations, the French would collect reparations in kind by operating and using the Ruhr mines and factories.

Both Germany and France suffered from the French occupation of the Ruhr. The German government adopted a policy of passive resistance that was largely financed by printing more paper money, but this only intensified the inflationary pressures that had already appeared in Germany by the end of the war. The German mark soon became worthless. In 1914, a dollar was worth 4.2 marks; by November 1, 1923, the rate had reached 130 billion marks to the dollar, and by the end of November, it had snowballed to an incredible 4.2 trillion marks to the dollar. Economic disaster fueled political upheavals as Communists staged uprisings in October 1923, and Adolf Hitler's band of Nazis attempted to seize power in Munich in November (see "Hitler and Nazi Germany" later in this chapter). But the French were hardly victorious. Their gains from the occupation were not enough to offset the costs. Meanwhile, pressure from the United States and Great Britain forced the French to agree to a new conference of experts to reassess the reparations problem. By the time the conference did its work in 1924, both France and Germany were willing to pursue a more conciliatory approach toward each other.