

The Age of Uncertainty
AP World History
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The horrors of World War I shattered the Enlightenment belief that progress would continue and reason would prevail. New ideas and patterns of life developed in the 1920s that changed the way people looked at the world.

Literature in an Age of Doubt

The brutality of World War I caused philosophers and writers to question accepted ideas about reason and progress. Disillusioned by the war, many people also feared the future and expressed doubts about traditional religious beliefs. Some artists and writers expressed their anxieties by creating unsettling visions of the present and the future. In 1922, T. S. Eliot, an American poet living in England, wrote that Western society had lost its spiritual values. He described the postwar world as a barren “waste land,” drained of hope and faith.

Thinkers React to Uncertainties

In their search for meaning in an uncertain world, some thinkers turned to the philosophy known as existentialism. Leaders of this movement included the philosophers Jean Paul Sartre (SAHR•truh) of France and Karl Jaspers of Germany. Existentialists believed that there is no universal meaning to life. Each person gives his or her own meaning to life through choices made and actions taken. The existentialists would have their greatest influence after World War II. The existentialists had been influenced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (NEE•chuh). In the 1880s, Nietzsche wrote that Western society had put too much stress on such ideas as reason, democracy, and progress. This stifled actions based on emotion and instinct. As a result, individuality and creativity suffered. Nietzsche urged a return to the ancient heroic values of pride, assertiveness, and strength. He wrote that through willpower and courage, some humans could become supermen. They could rise above and control the common herd. His ideas attracted growing attention in the 20th century and had a great impact on politics in Italy and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s.

Uncertainty in Art

Art in the early twentieth century also reflected the uncertainty of the times. Two popular art styles, surrealism and cubism, were nothing like other art forms before them. Surrealism is an art form in which an artist or writer combines unrelated images or events in a very strange and dreamlike way. In Cubist artwork, objects are analyzed, broken up and reassembled in an abstracted form. Instead of depicting objects from one viewpoint, the artist depicts the subject from a multitude of viewpoints to represent the subject in a greater context.

The Automobile Alters Society

The automobile benefited from a host of wartime innovations and improvements—electric starters, air-filled tires, and more powerful engines. Cars no longer looked like boxes on wheels. In prewar Britain, autos were owned exclusively by the rich. British factories produced 34,000 autos in 1913. After the war, prices dropped, and the middle class could afford cars. In 1923 the number of autos built in Britain had almost tripled. By 1937, the British were producing 511,000 autos a year. Increased auto use by the average family led to lifestyle changes. More people traveled for pleasure. The auto also affected where people lived and worked. People moved to suburbs and commuted to work.

Airplanes Transform Travel

The war also brought spectacular improvements in aircraft. By 1918, planes could fly hundreds of miles. In the postwar era, daring fliers carried the first airmail letters. International air travel became an objective after the war. Most of the world's major passenger airlines were established during the 1920s.

Radio Reaches Millions

Guglielmo Marconi conducted his first successful experiments with radio in 1895. However, the real push for radio development came during World War I. The advantages of wireless communication in battle were so great that all countries gave radio research a high priority. Armies developed a wide range of radio equipment that would also have uses in peacetime. In 1920, the world's first commercial radio station—KDKA in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania—began broadcasting. Almost overnight, radio mania swept the United States. Soon every major city had stations broadcasting news, plays, and even live sporting events. Soon most families owned a radio.

The advances in transportation and communication that followed the war had brought the world in closer touch. Geographic distance was a thing of the past. Countries had become more interdependent economically. Global prosperity came to depend on the economic well-being of all major nations, especially the United States.

Historical Impacts of Uncertainty

Uncertainty in the time period led to several political, economic, and intellectual changes. Many lost faith in the institution of democracy, leading some to pursue fascism and other forms of totalitarian government. The contributions of capitalism to the world war led many to reject the idea and adopt other forms of economic structure. Intellectually, the period from 1918-1939 was horrible for organized religion. People lost faith in all of their institutions that had failed during the war years, including faith in organized religion. Challenges to organized religion actually began in the earlier periods of Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment. The earlier challenges to religion were embraced mainly by intellectuals. The period between 1918 and 1939 saw much more widespread acceptance of atheism and rejection of organized religion.