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# MODERN HISTORY

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**HSC**

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## Shell shock

Nervous collapse and madness resulting from shell shock and battle fatigue were quite common. The close proximity of a shell burst, incessant gunfire or the accumulation of months of stress may have caused shell shock. With the latter the onset was often gradual. Ordinary soldiers usually received no treatment until a collapse occurred; by which time it was often too late. Base hospitals had their share of wards occupied by men who were completely insane.

Some attempts were made to deal with the most serious cases. By 1916 divisional rest stations were established behind the lines and could accommodate up to 1000 soldiers. The men stayed for about two weeks and were put on a programme of exercise. But the stations were often reserved for the use of officers who were near breakdown.

For the most part, the psychologically traumatised men were given little sympathy, often because the treatment of nervous disorders was in its early days. Many generals and medical officers regarded those affected as shirkers.

## Rain and mud

Rain and mud were two of the soldier's greatest enemies and created serious problems. Local weather patterns meant that rain could fall at any time of the year. After heavy rains it was quite common for men to stand for hours at a time, waist-deep in freezing water. Added to this, shelling created slurries of mud that drained into the trench systems. During rainy weather most trenches were knee-deep. In fact, there are many reports of mud being so deep and thick that soldiers had to lie flat and distribute their weight evenly to prevent themselves from sinking in the mire. Many soldiers (especially the wounded), actually drowned in mud-filled trenches and shell craters.

Writing home, one French soldier remarked:

'The communication trenches are no more than cesspools filled with a mixture of water and urine. The trench is nothing more than a strip of water. The sides cave in behind you, as you pass, with a soft slither. We ourselves are transformed into statues of clay, with mud even in one's very mouth.'

## Waders and capes

The British issued thigh-boots or waders as standard uniform in badly affected sections of trenches. Wilfred Owen, the British poet, wrote to his mother from the Somme at the beginning of 1917:

'The waders are of course indispensable. In two and a half miles of trench which I waded yesterday there was not one inch of dry ground. There is a mean depth of two feet. Pumps worked day and night to little effect.'

In addition waterproof groundsheets doubled as capes. The Germans issued waterproof overalls for those in the front lines.

## Personal hygiene

A typical British battalion lost about 30 men per month due to death, wounds or sickness.

### Trench foot

Feet constantly immersed in mud and water quickly succumbed to trench foot. The condition caused feet to swell, blister and turn red or blue. The French used the term *pieds gélés* to describe this condition. In severe cases the foot turned mushroom white, following which the entire sole of a man's foot would often fall away when paramedics removed boots. Thereafter, gangrene would develop and amputation followed soon after. To combat this men were encouraged to change into dry socks at least twice a day. Another preventive measure was to coat the foot with a foul-smelling grease made from whale oil.

## Sanitation

At the front sanitation was almost non-existent. Even the rain was not enough to wash away the debris of rotting corpses, excreta, urine and assorted rubbish thrown away by the soldiers.

The stench of chloride of lime, scattered to minimise the risk of infection was everywhere. This was compounded by creosol (tar-based solution sprayed in latrines to deter swarms of flies), smoke from braziers, airless dugouts, unwashed men and their rotting, stinking feet.

In the summer months breathing became almost impossible due to the putrefaction created by dead men and animals.

Two sanitary personnel responsible for the disposal of all wastes were usually assigned to each company. Nicknamed 'shit wallahs' they carried the latrine buckets. Latrine facilities were often targeted by enemy fire; it was safer to use a bucket, helmet, or boot and tip the contents over the top of the trench. It would have been impossible to maintain personal hygiene.

# C

## onflict in Europe



### 1935–1945

The war that engulfed Europe from September 1939 to May 1945 had its immediate origins in the foreign policy pursued by Hitler's Nazi régime. Indeed, the expansionist aims of Germany form one of the continuous threads linking the era of Otto von Bismarck, Wilhelm II and the Third Reich of Adolf Hitler. These themes were carefully explored during the 1960s and 1970s by the German historians Fritz Fischer and Emmanuel Geiss.

In 1871 the Chancellor of Prussia, Otto von Bismarck, removed the last obstacle to the German unification by defeating France in the Franco-Prussian war. From 1890 Emperor Wilhelm II tried to gain a 'place in the sun' for Germany through an ambitious policy of colonial acquisition in Africa and the South Pacific. Expansionism was also evident in the growing influence of the Pan-German movement that desired the political and geographical unity of Germans in a greater Germany. It was intended the new Germany would dominate Europe by its size, economic capacity and military power.

During World War I, expansionist plans could be found in the aims of the German High Command which have been well-documented by historians, among them Paul Kennedy. After the war, territorial losses imposed by the Treaty of Versailles brought widespread demands for a revision of the Treaty, and renewed calls for the restoration of German power. In this period most political parties adopted the 'revisionist' program, condemned by Hitler as traitorous. Once in power, Hitler intended not only to overturn the Treaty, but also to expand at the expense of neighbouring countries. If necessary this policy would be achieved by force.

At first glance, the foreign policy goals pursued by Chancellor Gustav Stresemann before 1929 appear remarkably similar to those of Adolf Hitler: rearmament, regaining the Rhineland, restoring the eastern frontiers and forming a political union with Austria. The difference between the two leaders was that Hitler pursued these goals more ruthlessly and from a position of greater strength.

With the coming of war, the speed of the initial German victories was truly astounding. Yet the advantage gained by Hitler and his generals was squandered during the Russian campaign. Perhaps more than any other single factor, it was the refusal of Hitler to accept tactical withdrawals in the face of Soviet counter-attacks that lost Germany its earlier advantage. Left to his Generals, the attack on Russia may well have succeeded.

## Part IV

### International Studies in Peace and Conflict

#### Option B

## What is dictatorship?

Dictatorship is a form of government in which one person or a small group has absolute power over the state. Dictators usually resort to force or fraud to gain political power, which they maintain through intimidation, terror and the withdrawal of basic civil rights. Dictators may also use propaganda in order to maintain the support of the masses. Nazi Germany under Adolf Hitler was one example of a modern totalitarian dictatorship.

Important elements associated with Fascist dictatorship include:

- the association of the state with a single party
- the association of the party with its charismatic leader
- the use of an official ideology to justify and maintain the régime
- the use of terror and propaganda to reduce opposition
- the use of modern science and technology to control the economy and individual behaviour.

## Germany under Hitler

Adolf Hitler (1889–1945) stood against Hindenburg in the presidential election of 1932 and achieved 36.8 per cent of the votes on the second ballot. Despite the decline in Nazi Party's share of the votes in November 1932, Hitler insisted that the Chancellorship was the only position he would accept, and this only by legal and constitutional means, rather than through a revolution. In January 1933 he finally achieved what he had been waiting for when Hindenburg invited him to be the German Chancellor.

Once in power, Hitler set about establishing an absolute dictatorship. Yet he was also a shrewd politician, aware of the weaknesses of his own position; he understood more quickly than anyone else how a situation could be turned to his own advantage. Within weeks Hitler had secured President Hindenburg's approval for new elections on the grounds that it would deliver him a majority in the Reichstag.

On the night of 27 February 1933, the Reichstag mysteriously burned down, providing the excuse he needed to enact decrees overriding people's freedom. When Hindenburg died on 2 August 1934, Hitler merged the office of Chancellor and President.

Economic recovery and a drop in the number of unemployed due to world recovery and work schemes made the régime more acceptable, endearing Hitler to many Germans who began to see him as the country's saviour.

## Italy under Mussolini

Benito Mussolini became the youngest Prime Minister in Italian history on 31 October 1922. He also became the first of Europe's Fascist dictators in the twentieth century. Anxious to demonstrate that he was not merely the leader of Fascism but also the head of a united Italy, Mussolini presented to the king a list of ministries, although the majority were not members of his party. He made it clear that he intended to govern authoritatively and obtained full dictatorial powers for a year. During that time he pushed through a law that enabled the Fascists to secure a majority in the chamber. The elections in 1924, though fraudulent, secured his personal power.

The Italian people welcomed Mussolini's brand of authority. Tired of strikes and riots, they wanted a strong leader who would bring stability to the nation and restore economic progress. Mussolini seemed to them the one man capable of bringing order out of chaos. In due course, the conditions of the workers began to improve, and ambitious programs of public works started.

Mussolini was regarded as a genius by public figures across Europe and in the United States. His achievements were regarded with awe for he had united his divided country and carried out much-needed social reforms and public works without losing the support of the industrialists and landowners. Mussolini had even succeeded in coming to terms with the Church and the papacy.

## Significance of dictatorships

The appeal of dictators such as Hitler and Mussolini was undeniable. For the most part their peacetime economic policies were beneficial in that they sought to create employment and restore prosperity. Many citizens gained from such policies, which cannot be lightly dismissed. In the early years of Fascist rule, both Germany and Italy were considered to be success stories.

The real issue, however, was the true nature of dictatorship, and this was only revealed through the

passage of time. In 1933 few people in Germany outside the inner circles of the Nazi Party could have imagined that Hitler's anti-Semitism would lead to the Holocaust, or that his desire to avenge German losses at Versailles would plunge Europe into another war.

Thus, the foreign policies of Hitler and Mussolini were opportunistic, aggressive and dangerous, thereby helping to exacerbate tensions between the older established European powers as well as the newly independent states created at Versailles in 1919.

## **The League of Nations and the end of collective security**

*Failure of Collective Security — Italy Invades Abyssinia — Spanish Civil War — Significance of Events*

### **Failure of collective security**

The purpose of the League of Nations, as a body, was to find ways to prevent disputes from leading to war. The member states — both small states and major powers — were supposed to find security through justice.

Woodrow Wilson's original intention was that the League would monitor and make periodic adjustments to the various treaties signed during 1919 and 1920. Instead, it was used to enforce the provisions upon Germany, while German politicians worked to change what they regarded as oppressive terms.

The intentions of Woodrow Wilson and the Allied victors in framing the charter of the League during the Versailles Conference in 1919 were laudable, but within ten years of its founding collective security had fallen by the wayside.

### **Why the League of Nations failed**

The failure of the League was caused by a number of factors.

#### **► Refusal to admit Germany**

The defeated Germany was refused admission until the Treaty of Lucarno in 1926. In the meantime, it was judged by the victors to have been the cause of war and therefore denied entry into the post-war family of nations.

#### **► Fear of Communist Russia**

The Bolshevik seizure of power in October 1917 and the consolidation of the Soviet state by 1921 put paid to any hope that Russia would be welcome in the League of Nations. The existence of a Communist state in Russia substantially altered the balance of power, and encouraged Allied attempts to isolate the regime. Like Germany, Soviet Russia became an international outcast for the next decade.

#### **► Poor support for new nation states**

The League provided little support to the newly independent countries of Eastern Europe, many of

which fell victim to conservative groups (such as landowners and the Roman Catholic Church) which asserted control over government.

#### **► Failure to address ethnic rivalries**

The new nations that were established after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918 were subject to some intense ethnic rivalry, provoking violence and oppression. Ethnic Germans in Poland and Czechoslovakia felt that they had been denied national self-determination. Poland included one million Germans, six million White Russians and three million Jews. The League could offer little to these minorities.

#### **► Failure to extend disarmament**

The League's plan for disarming all nations was revealed as a sham and a one-sided affair. Signatories to the League Covenant had agreed upon disarmament, but in practice, Germany was the only nation to be disarmed and this was against its will. Britain and the United States made some concessions towards disarmament. The German General Staff made secret preparations for rearmament and training. The Treaty of Rapallo, concluded with Russia in 1924, allowed German pilots to train with Soviet forces.

#### **► Failure of the US to join the League**

US President Wilson was disillusioned even before his departure from the Versailles Conference, frustrated with the atmosphere of implacable hostility towards Germany, and still clinging to the belief that the League was the solution to all international problems.

Branded an idealist and a wishful thinker by detractors, his vision for a new world order found little support either at home or abroad. Congressional opposition within the USA to both the League and the Treaty of Versailles was intense. Despite an extensive public speaking tour in the United States, Wilson was out of step with his compatriots and failed to rally support. He suffered a collapse in health and completed his term of office as a broken man. He died in 1924. The Senate refused to ratify the Treaty and the US withdrew from its European commitment.