Unit 7 Brief Summary – Part 7 – Roaring Twenties, Great Depression, and WWII

WWI ended on November 11, 1918. The Treaty of Versailles imposed a harsh peace on the defeated Germans. They were forced to pay war reparations which ruined their economy, and allowed Hitler to rise to power as a savior. The terms of the treaty laid the seeds for World War II. The farthest reaching peace provision was the League of Nations. This organization, the brainchild of President Woodrow Wilson’s fourteen points for peace, was the forerunner of the United Nations. Unfortunately, the isolationist minded Senators opposed it. The fight between the Senate reservationists and President Wilson killed any United States involvement in the League of Nations. At the end of the war, Russia became a communist country. This caused a worldwide fear of communism called the Red Scare. Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer led the Palmer Raids on suspected communist organizations after a series of mail bombings terrified the country.

The 1920 election was a “return to normalcy” as stated by the new president, Warren Harding. This meant that Americans were turning away from the tumultuous Progressivism and involvement in international affairs toward a calmer, more isolationist time. Americans also had tired of the teeming refuse (immigrant hordes) from foreign shores. The congress passed strict anti-immigration laws. The trial of immigrant anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti highlighted to the world just how nativist and anti-immigrant that America had become. The pair were executed in a highly biased court case (the judge had made racial slurs in front of the jury). The new Ku Klux Klan was revived in 1915. This new incarnation of the Klan added immigrants, Jews, and Catholics to its hate list in addition to African Americans. It gained strength in the North and Midwest by espousing “traditional values”. In a show of extreme arrogance, Klansmen and women marched from the Capital to the White House in Washington D.C. It all fell apart for the Klan when top members were caught embezzling (stealing) millions. By the end of the decade the Klan was a mere shell of its former strength.

Socially, the last two achievements of the Progressive Era occurred with the passage of the 18th and 19th amendments. The 18th amendment, prohibition, was passed in 1920 and made alcohol illegal in the United States. It was later repealed with the 21st amendment in 1933. The 19th amendment passed in 1920 gave women the right to vote. The 1920’s were also a time period of sharp contrasts and a struggle between new and old ideas. More people lived in cities rather than the country side for the first time in the 1920 census. Technology, new consumer goods, and the new freedom possessed by young adults caused an intense reaction by some to return to the good old days as demonstrated by fundamentalism, immigration restriction, and prohibition.

African Americans in New York City, specifically the borough of Harlem, began a literary, artistic, and musical movement that was dubbed the Harlem Renaissance. Langston Hughes, Duke Ellington, and Louie Armstrong led the surge in the black artistic movement. Many white people came to Harlem to hear the new music of jazz. The movies were very popular, having begun at the turn of the century. They were silent until the movie The Jazz Singer debuted in 1927 as the first talking picture. Radio was king for the decade though, with at least 90% of homes having at least one radio. People listened to the radio approximately four hours a day. The automobile dominated the decade, with one out of every eight workers employed by an automobile related industry. Most people had a car due to the assembly line, which produced large numbers of cars which lowered the price. This made the car affordable for the middle class. Young people enjoyed new social freedoms on dates away from parental chaperones. They engaged in a naughty practice known as petting which quite naturally led to pre-marital sex. Modern young women who wore short hair, short skirts, smoked, caroused with men, and challenged social mores were known as flappers. Prohibition gave rise to bootlegging alcohol. Everyday people began breaking the law by smuggling and making booze. The mob or gangsters took over bootlegging making millions in the illicit trade. It also increased violence with Al Capone’s gang gunning down any rivals. Charles Lindbergh, who visited Thomas Edison in Fort Myers, was the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Air travel had begun in 1903 with the Wright Brothers flying the first airplane in Kitty Hawk North Carolina, but it was not a safe, practical machine until the 1920’s. The Scopes “monkey” Trial put Darwin’s theory of evolution on trial. It was a dramatic demonstration of old beliefs and new ideas that were struggling for dominance. . . The new Darwin vs. the old fundamentalist belief in the Bible. New modern conveniences such as refrigerators, washing machines, vacuum, ovens, radios, and automobiles were advertised very heavily. People loved how the new conveniences made life easier and bought as many items as they could in a practice known as consumerism. Buying on an installment plan or credit made it seem affordable (”only a dollar down and a dollar forever”). There were writers and critics named the Lost Generation of this new consumerism and conformity, most prominent among them were F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sinclair Lewis, John Steinbeck, Gertrude Stein, and Earnest Hemingway.

Big Business ruled in the 1920’s. The official policy of the government was to assist business, not to regulate it. President Coolidge even said that a man who works in a factory worships in a temple. The business owners got rich, but the workers didn’t fair as well. The gap between rich and poor widened. The stock market was unregulated which led everyday people to speculate in the red hot market. People could buy on the margin, which is to place a small amount of money as a down payment. People also invested in Florida real estate (largely unseen swamp land). Florida had experienced a land boom in the 1920’s until two hurricanes put the breaks on. Small farmers were also hit hard in the 1920’s; they owed a tremendous amount of money that they borrowed to buy on the margin, on the margin, on the margin. Some farmers were so bad that World War I veterans went to Washington D.C. to ask for their bonus ten years early. They were called the bonus army and they lived in shacks for weeks around Washington. Hoover had General Douglas MacArthur remove them. MacArthur went overboard and viciously attacked the veterans. Some veterans ended up in the Florida Keys to build the overseas highway. Unfortunately, many of them were killed by the hurricane of 1935. People roamed from town to town looking for work. Men who traveled illegally by train were called hobos. The dust bowl, a dry region that blew away farms in the plains states, further added to the nation’s misery as many of the so called Arkies or Okies moved to California. People who were evicted from their homes lived in shacks made from scrap materials called “Hoovervilles”. Not surprisingly, Hoover was beaten in a landslide by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, or FDR, in the election of 1932.

Roosevelt came from a wealthy family, but unbeknownst to the public was paralyzed from the waist down due to polio. As a result of his struggles to walk he had affection for the common man, whom he referred to as the forgotten man. He utilized the radio to get his message across to the American public. He gave popular fireside chats on the radio to assure the public that “there is nothing to fear, but fear itself”. FDR’s first order of business was to fix the banks that were collapsing. Thousands of people were losing their life savings to banks going out of business. He had legislation passed called Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation, FDIC, which would insure bank deposits.

Summary adapted by Rebecca Richardson from John Braithwaite’s “A Brief History” using 2015 AMSCO United States History Preparing for the Advanced Placement Exam and the 2012 College Board Framework for A.P.U.S.H.
FDR pushed a plethora of major legislation through congress in the first 100 days of his term in office. Critics called his plans alphabet soup because each law and agency that was created went by initials. The New Deal included relief or immediate assistance, recovery to get businesses and people back to work, and reform to fix the system so a depression would never occur again. Some of the most popular New Deal programs were: Agriculture Adjustment Act (AAA) to help struggling farmers, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to put young men to work on public works projects, the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), to provide flood control and energy for seven states, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to put people to work on public projects, the Social Security Act to help the elderly, disabled and unemployed and the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) to regulate the stock market. The New Deal didn’t get America out of the Great Depression; it would take World War II to accomplish that. However, the New Deal gave people hope. Some of the societal and economic changes are still impacting America today. It is little wonder that FDR was elected as president a record four times.

From the depths of the Great Depression, some countries turned toward dictators for hope and salvation. These sinister leaders skillfully exploited their people to pursue dreams of world domination. The rise of dictators in Japan, Italy, and Germany would change the world. Japan, who had begun industrializing in the mid 1800’s, wanted to enlarge its empire. They lived on a small island that was devoid of natural resources. The military took control of Japan and began to conquer its neighbors beginning with Manchuria in 1931. In Italy, a dictator named Benito Mussolini took power. He wanted to acquire colonies in Africa and conquered Ethiopia in 1935. He also made a pact with fellow dictator Hitler. Adolph Hitler came to power in Germany in 1933. Once in power he made his Nazi party the only political party. He wanted living space for his people and began taking land (Rhineland and Austria). He wanted the Sudetenland, a part of Czechoslovakia, and the weak leaders of England and France made a deal with Hitler to “give” it to him in return for the promise that it was the last piece of land that he would take. This policy, known as appeasement, was an absolute failure. Hitler grabbed all of all of Czechoslovakia and set his sights on Poland.

The United States was deeply isolationist in the 1930’s. This was due to the Great Depression, but also to the lingering feelings of resentment over its involvement in World War I. An official senate report, called the Nye Report, blamed our entry into World War I on the greedy weapons manufacturers so they could earn a profit. The congress passed a series of strict Neutrality Laws, which hampered our effort to assist other countries. The Spanish Civil War was a dress rehearsal for World War II. Hitler and Mussolini supported fellow dictator Francisco Franco. Russia was on the opposite side. The major powers of England, France, and the United States sat out. This would embolden Hitler into making other aggressive moves in Europe.

Josef Stalin became the leader of the Soviet Union in the 1920’s. He began a series of purges, in which he killed millions of his own people who opposed him (his total maybe as high as 20 million). He began to industrialize his giant, backward nation. He didn’t trust Hitler and the feeling was mutual. Nevertheless, they signed a secret non-aggression pact, to not attack each other and divide Poland among them. Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain and France declared war on Germany. World War II had begun. The war went badly for England and France. Hitler invaded France with a new tactic called blitzkrieg, or lighting war. He captured France in a month. All that was left in Europe was Britain. The Battle of Britain began in 1940. It was an aerial war. Hitler wanted to bomb Britain with air planes to soften them up prior to landing his troops in Operation Sea Lion. The invention of radar helped keep Hitler’s plans for conquest on the shelf. Eventually Hitler was distracted with his second front... attacked his old “ally,” Stalin in Operation Barbarossa.

FDR desperately wanted to help Britain. But the American public and Congress clung to neutrality. He eventually got the Lease-Lend Act passed which allowed the British to have American weapons. When Hitler tuned on Stalin, the Lend-Lease Act was extended to the Soviets. The United States became the great Arsenal of Democracy, making weapons for countries that fought Hitler. In 1937, the Japanese invaded China. The United States opposed the action and cut off vital supplies of oil and steel. The Japanese decided to knock the US out, so they could conquer Asia. On December 7, 1941 they attacked the naval base Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. They killed 2,960 Americans and sank 18 navy warships one which was battleship Arizona. The next day the United States entered the war.

Stalin wanted the United States and England to invade France and take pressure off of the Soviets. However the first campaign the United States took part in was the invasion of North Africa. Next, the US invaded Italy. The turning point in Europe was at Stalingrad, where the Soviets defeated the Germans and began an offensive toward Germany. The second front was finally opened on June 6, 1944. It was called D-day, which was an invasion of Normandy with the ultimate goal of retaking Europe from Hitler. France was recaptured and Germany was pushed back. Hitler had one final gasp and attacked with all of his remaining reserves in the unsuccessful Battle of the Bulge. Hitler killed himself and Germany Surrendered in May 1945, this was called V-E day for victory in Europe. The horror of the Holocaust was revealed to the world. It was Hitler’s final solution to getting rid of the Jews. This genocide took the lives of 11 million people, six million of which were Jews. Of the atrocities of WW2, this Holocaust has been judged as the worst. However, Stalin actually murdered many more people than Hitler did.

In the Pacific, the United States fought Japan virtually alone. The turning point of the war came early in the Battle of Midway, where the U.S. sank four Japanese aircraft carriers. The United States had broken the Japanese code which assisted them in defeating the Japanese. The U.S. used a strategy called island hopping to defeat the Japanese. Eventually, they fought for control of the islands near the Japanese homeland. The Battle of Iwo Jima included the iconic flag raising, but the war wasn’t over. The military estimated that one million Americans would be casualties in the invasion of Japan. The United States had secretly been working on the Manhattan Project, which was the development of the atomic bombs. After FDR’s death in April of 1945, Harry Truman became president. He was not afraid to make difficult decisions such as dropping the atomic bomb. The first bomb made from Uranium was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6th 1945. It was called Little Boy and was dropped from the plane the Enola Gay. The Japanese refused to surrender, so after three days the second bomb was dropped on Nagasaki. It was nicknamed Fat Man and was a plutonium bomb dropped from a plane called Boczar. This was known as V-J Day, for victory over Japan, the war was over.

Efforts on the Home front during war were impressive. Rationing, Victory Gardens, patriotic propaganda (Voice of America; OWI), War Bonds rallied the effort. Navajo Code Talkers, WACS, and the Tuskegee Airmen made priceless contributions. The United States was able to outpace the enemy. We simply were able to make more weapons than any other country. The economy recovered from the Great Depression as the nation went back to work to win the war. Women went to work in the factories while the men went to war. Rosie the Riveter embodied this move. The United States emerged as an economic and military super power.

Before the end of the war, the big three, FDR, Winston Churchill (England), and Josef Stalin (Soviet Union), met at Yalta to discuss what the post war world would look like. The three weighty issues to be decided were: the occupation of Germany, the creation of the United Nations, and the status of Eastern Europe. The Soviets wanted a sphere of influence in Eastern Europe to prevent a third major German attack. The U.S. and England wanted democratic elections to take place. A number of compromises were reached. The United Nations would be created, free and fair elections would be held in Poland, and Germany would be divided among the allies. The rest of Eastern Europe would be under the total control of the Soviets... after Stalin refused to follow through earlier plans to allow elections and insisted on having his buffer zone. Some historians postulate that had American not appeased Stalin with Eastern Europe, the Cold War may not have been so cold. Others propose the nation would have gone right back to war.