

# Historical Background

## The Modern Age (1914–1945)

The years immediately before World War I were marked by practical optimism. Americans believed they had grown up and looked at themselves realistically. Technological know-how made the future look bright. Social problems could be solved. However, World War I shattered American and European values. The war not only remade governments and borders, it made people all over the world rethink what it meant to be a human being.

**The Great War** World War I was one of the bloodiest and most tragic conflicts ever to occur. The Allies (primarily Britain, France, and Russia) halted the German advances, but both sides dug trenches and brought the war to a standstill. Machine guns made it impossible to overrun the opponent. Almost an entire generation of European men wasted away.

President Woodrow Wilson tried to remain neutral, but that proved impossible. Eventually, unrelenting German submarine attacks swayed public opinion, and in 1917 the United States joined the Allies. American confidence passed quickly. The horrors of combat were unspeakable, intensified by new technology put to wartime use. This was the dark side of the Modern Age: Europeans and Americans had turned the world into a wasteland. As one soldier/poet put it, "I Have a Rendezvous with Death."

**The Roaring Twenties** The war ended in 1918, but people's minds and hearts were not at peace. Throughout the Twenties, the nation seemed to go on a binge. The economy boomed, and skyscrapers rose. Prohibition made the sale of liquor illegal, leading to bootlegging and the rise of organized crime. Radio arrived, and so did jazz. Movies became big business, and fads abounded: raccoon coats, flagpole sitting, a dance called the Charleston. People let go as prewar values and attitudes were thrown to the winds. The "roar" of the Roaring Twenties tried to drown out the remembered sound of exploding bombs and the horror of death.

### TIMELINE

1914

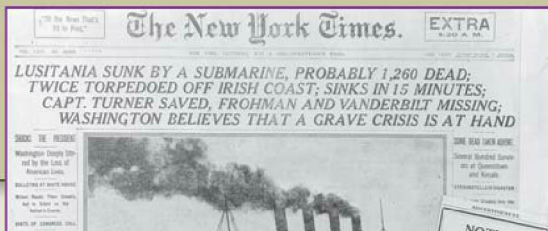
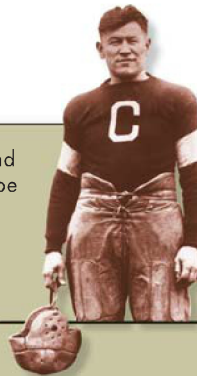
1914: World War I begins.

1915: Olympic track and field champion Jim Thorpe begins his professional football career. ▶

1916: *Chicago Poems* by Carl Sandburg appears.

1917: Russia Bolsheviks seize control of Russia in October Revolution.

◀ 1915: **England** Because of the war in Europe, travelers are cautioned against transatlantic voyages. The *Lusitania* would be sunk despite these warnings.



**The Great Depression** The boom, of course, could not last. In October 1929, the stock market crashed, spurring the Great Depression. By mid-1932, about 12 million Americans—one quarter of the work force—were out of work. Bread lines formed and soup kitchens opened. Depression became more than an economic fact; it became a national state of mind.

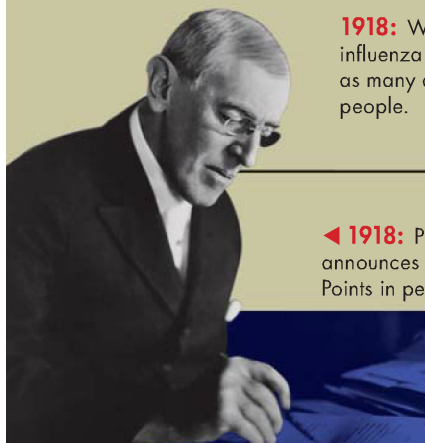
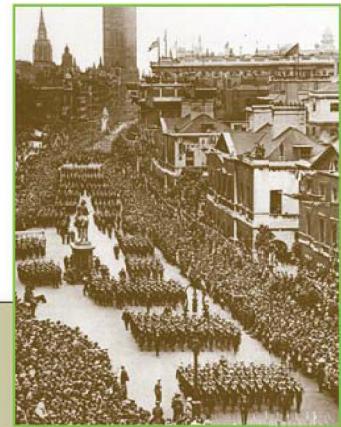
**The New Deal** In the presidential election of 1932, New York's governor Franklin D. Roosevelt defeated president Herbert Hoover. Roosevelt initiated the New Deal, a package of major economic reforms, to strengthen the economy. People found work on huge public projects, such as building dams and bridges. Roosevelt's leadership and policies helped end the Depression and earned him reelection in 1936, 1940, and 1944.

**World War II** Only twenty years after the end of World War I, the German invasion of Poland ignited World War II. Even after the fall of France in 1940, the dominant mood in the United States was one of isolationism, with most Americans preferring to stay out of the conflict. However, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7, 1941, isolationism and neutrality came to a swift end. The United States declared war on the Axis powers—Germany, Japan, and Italy.

After years of bitter fighting in Europe and in the Pacific, the Allies, which included the United States, Great Britain, France, and the Soviet Union, defeated Nazi Germany. Japan surrendered three months later, after the United States dropped atomic bombs on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Peace, and the Atomic Age, had arrived.

### Key Historical Theme: War and Its Aftermath

- After the shock of World War I, Americans left behind many of the optimistic attitudes and humane values of the prewar world.
- During the Roaring Twenties, Americans gave way to self-indulgence; during the Thirties, they endured intense economic hardship.
- World War II ushered in the Atomic Age.



**1918:** Worldwide influenza epidemic kills as many as 20 million people.

◀ **1918:** President Wilson announces his Fourteen Points in peace plan.

**1919: France** Treaty of Versailles ends World War I. ▶

**1919:** Prohibition becomes law; repealed in 1933.



**1921**

◀ **1920:** Nineteenth Amendment to Constitution gives American women the right to vote.