

Unit 8: 20th-Century Global Conflicts

Unit 8 covers Europe's most violent decades. It runs from the long-term causes of World War I through the Russian Revolution, the Versailles settlement, the Great Depression, the rise of fascism, and World War II, ending with the Holocaust and the cultural response to the wars.

AP European History

20th-Century Global Conflicts

About 14 minutes to read

How to use this guide

Read the pages in order because the topics connect causally. The war produces the revolution, the revolution and the war produce the settlement, the settlement feeds the Depression and the rise of fascism, and those lead back to war. Exam questions constantly ask you to trace those connections, so pay attention to the causal language on each page.

After the first read, use the trap boxes and the confusions table for the distinctions the exam tests most often. Finish with the practice questions, then complete the recall check on the last page out loud and note any items you cannot explain yet.

What this unit is worth. Unit 8 is one of the heaviest units on the AP European History exam. Two world wars, two revolutions, the peace settlement, the interwar crises, the Holocaust, and the cultural aftermath make it dense with testable material. Chronology matters here more than anywhere else, so learn the dates alongside the definitions.

8.2 World War I: The Long Fuse

The **long-term causes of World War I** are usually grouped as militarism, entangling alliances, imperial competition, and nationalism. European powers raced to build armies and navies, tied themselves together in rigid alliance systems, competed for colonies abroad, and stoked nationalist feeling at home. None of these alone made war inevitable, but together they made Europe ripe for war once a spark arrived.

The spark came in June 1914 with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Hungary in Sarajevo. Within weeks the alliance system turned a regional crisis into a continental war. Austria-Hungary moved against Serbia, Russia mobilized in Serbia's defense, and Germany's alliance obligations pulled it in against Russia and France.

Germany opened with the **Schlieffen Plan**, its strategy for a quick victory over France. The plan called for a rapid flanking move through Belgium to encircle Paris before Russia could fully mobilize in the east. It failed when the advance stalled at the Marne in September 1914, and the war settled into the pattern that defined it.

Trench warfare was the grinding positional warfare of the Western Front. Armies dug in along fortified lines stretching from the North Sea to Switzerland, and neither side could break through. Machine guns, artillery, and barbed wire made attacking across open ground suicidal, so the war became a stalemate that produced mass casualties for tiny gains of territory.

Total war describes how the war mobilized entire societies and economies. Governments took control of industry, rationed food and fuel, drafted millions of men, and directed propaganda at the home front. The line between soldiers and civilians blurred, because victory depended on the factory worker and the farmer as much as on the infantryman.

Trap. The Schlieffen Plan was Germany's opening strategy, not a cause of the war. Questions about causes want militarism, alliances, imperialism, and nationalism. The Schlieffen Plan belongs with questions about how Germany fought and why the opening campaign produced the stalemate of the trenches.

8.3 The Russian Revolution and the Soviet State

The **Russian Revolution** of 1917 came in two stages. The February Revolution (March by the modern calendar) toppled the tsar after military defeats and food shortages made his government untenable. Power passed to the **Provisional Government**, a moderate administration that insisted on continuing the war. Its refusal to end the war or redistribute land destroyed its support, and workers' soviets revived as a rival center of power.

The October Revolution (November by the modern calendar) brought the **Bolsheviks** to power. Led by **Vladimir Lenin**, the Bolsheviks were the radical Marxist faction that promised peace, land, and bread. Lenin's seizure of power created the Soviet state and pulled Russia out of the war, which is why the Eastern Front collapsed and Germany could concentrate on the west in 1918.

The **Russian Civil War** followed, a protracted fight between the Bolsheviks (the Reds) and their opponents (the Whites, aided by foreign powers). The Bolsheviks won, but the war devastated the economy. To recover, Lenin introduced the **New Economic Policy (NEP)** in 1921, a compromise that temporarily restored limited free-market activity to get the economy moving again.

Trap. February and October were two different revolutions with two different outcomes. February removed the tsar and created the Provisional Government. October removed the Provisional Government and brought the Bolsheviks to power. If a question asks who ended tsarist rule, the answer is the February Revolution, not Lenin.

Stalin's Turn: Forced Modernization

Joseph Stalin consolidated power after Lenin's death in 1924 and drove the Soviet Union through forced industrialization. His **Five-Year Plans** were state-directed campaigns to build heavy industry at breakneck speed, replacing the NEP's limited markets with central planning.

Collectivization was the forced consolidation of peasant farms into state-run collectives. The **kulaks**, the land-owning peasantry, were liquidated along with other perceived enemies of the state during this process. Stalin ruled by terror, and the economic modernization of the Soviet Union came at an enormous human cost.

Trap. The NEP and the Five-Year Plans point in opposite directions. The NEP was Lenin's 1921 retreat toward markets to fix a broken economy. The Five-Year Plans were Stalin's 1928 march toward total state control of industry. A question about Soviet market concessions is asking about the NEP. A question about rapid industrialization is asking about the Five-Year Plans.

8.4 The Versailles Settlement

The **Versailles settlement** was the Paris peace settlement that ended World War I. It satisfied few of the parties and failed to resolve the war's underlying challenges. Its provisions on guilt and reparations poisoned German politics and left the new democratic government struggling for legitimacy from the start.

American president Woodrow Wilson arrived with the **Fourteen Points**, his proposals for peace, including self-determination for national groups and a League of Nations to keep the peace. The European leaders wanted punishment and security instead, so the Fourteen Points influenced the settlement without surviving it intact.

The **war-guilt clause**, Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles, assigned Germany full blame for the war. It was a statement of responsibility, and it gave the Allies the legal basis for the second punishment.

Reparations were the actual payments imposed on Germany, and they strained the German economy for years. The clause assigned responsibility for the war, while reparations were the payments Germany actually had to make.

The **Weimar Republic** was Germany's new democratic government, weakened from birth by economic crisis and political extremism. Germans across the political spectrum associated it with the humiliation of Versailles, and it never built the broad loyalty a democracy needs to survive hard times.

The **League of Nations** was the international organization created to preserve peace through collective security, the one Fourteen Points idea that survived. It lacked an army, the United States never joined, and it could not stop determined aggressors. The **mandate system** put former Ottoman and German territories under League supervision, an arrangement that extended European control while promising eventual self-rule.

Trap. The war-guilt clause and reparations are two different things that questions love to pair. The clause assigned blame. Reparations were money. If a question asks what made Germany pay, the answer is reparations. If it asks what forced Germany to accept blame, the answer is the war-guilt clause.

8.5–8.6 Economic Crisis and the Rise of Fascism

The **Great Depression** began with the American stock market crash of 1929 and became a worldwide economic collapse, marked by bank failures, mass unemployment, and collapsing trade. It destroyed faith in liberal governments everywhere it struck, and it arrived in Germany just as the Weimar Republic was at its weakest.

Germany had already lived through **hyperinflation** in 1923, when the currency collapsed and savings were wiped out. Middle-class Germans who lost everything in 1923 were primed to distrust democracy when the Depression hit six years later. The two crises together made Weimar seem unable to protect ordinary life.

Fascism was the ultranationalist ideology that rejected both democracy and communism, glorifying the state and a supreme leader. **Totalitarianism** was broader. It described any rule seeking total control over public and private life through terror, propaganda, and one-party dominance. Stalin's Soviet Union was totalitarian but not fascist. Fascism was a specific ideology. Totalitarianism described a method of rule.

Propaganda was the tool both kinds of regimes used. State-controlled messaging shaped belief and crushed dissent, turning the modern media of radio and film into instruments of the party.

The leaders fit the pattern. **Benito Mussolini** built the first fascist movement in Italy and became the model for later fascists. **Adolf Hitler** and the **Nazi Party** took power in Germany in 1933, built on ultranationalism, antisemitism, and the Führer principle. Hitler's expansionism and racial ideology would lead to World War II and the Holocaust.

In Spain, the **Spanish Civil War** of 1936 to 1939 brought **Francisco Franco** to power. Franco allied with Italian and German fascists, while the Western democracies stood aside. The war served as a rehearsal for World War II, letting Germany and Italy test the weapons and tactics they would soon use on a larger stage. Franco's victory produced authoritarian rule in Spain that lasted from 1936 to the mid-1970s.

Trap. Do not call every totalitarian regime fascist. Fascism is the ideology of Mussolini and Hitler, with its ultranationalism and glorification of the state. Totalitarianism describes the total control itself, which Stalin's communist state also exercised. On the exam, match the ideology to the leader and the method to the regime type.

8.7–8.8 From Appeasement to World War II

Appeasement was the British and French policy of conceding to Hitler's demands to avoid another war. The democracies were haunted by the trenches, weakened by the Depression, and convinced that Hitler might be satisfied with limited concessions. Each concession taught him that aggression worked.

The **Munich agreement** of 1938 was appeasement's defining failure. Britain and France allowed Hitler to take the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, a country whose representatives were not even at the table. The agreement bought less than a year of peace while making German aggression harder to stop.

The **Nazi-Soviet Pact** of August 1939 was a nonaggression agreement between Hitler and Stalin. It let Hitler invade Poland without fearing a two-front war. It was a cynical deal between ideological enemies, not an alliance, and Hitler broke it in 1941 when he invaded the Soviet Union.

World War II began in September 1939 with the invasion of Poland and became the global war begun by Axis aggression. Germany's opening campaigns used **blitzkrieg**, lightning war built on rapid mechanized attack, tanks and aircraft moving together to punch through and encircle. It was the opposite of trench warfare, and it worked until it met the Soviet Union's depth and winter.

Winston Churchill became Britain's prime minister in 1940 and provided the leadership that held the country together through the bombing and the threat of invasion. His leadership, alongside American and British industrial power and the Soviet Union's full military commitment, contributed critically to the Allied victory.

The war in Europe ended in May 1945. The war in the Pacific ended after the **atomic bomb**, the nuclear weapon used against Japan in August 1945. The bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki remain the only wartime use of nuclear weapons, and they opened the era of nuclear proliferation that the course framework treats as a required topic.

Trap. The Nazi-Soviet Pact was not an alliance. It was a nonaggression deal between two leaders who planned to destroy each other, and it lasted barely two years. If a question calls it an alliance or asks when Germany and the USSR became allies, the premise is wrong.

8.9 The Holocaust

The persecution of the Jews under Nazi rule followed a sequence you should know in order. The **Nuremberg Laws** of 1935 stripped Jews of German citizenship and basic rights, turning persecution into law. Jews were expelled from professions, forbidden to marry non-Jews, and marked as outsiders in their own country.

The **Final Solution** was the Nazi plan for the systematic murder of Europe's Jews, decided as state policy in 1942. It meant deportation to extermination camps, mass shootings in the east, and the industrial killing of the death camps. The word "final" is the Nazis' own term. It meant the end they planned for an entire people.

The **Holocaust** was the Nazi systematic murder of European Jews and other targeted groups, including Roma, disabled people, Slavs, political opponents, and gay men. About six million Jews were murdered. **Genocide** is the broader term for the deliberate extermination of a people, and the Holocaust is its defining modern example.

Trap. Know the order of persecution. The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 legalized discrimination and stripped citizenship. The Final Solution, decided in 1942, was systematic murder. A question that asks about the first legal step toward the Holocaust wants the Nuremberg Laws. A question about the decision to murder all of Europe's Jews wants the Final Solution.

8.10 The Lost Generation

The **lost generation** was the disillusioned and cynical post-World War I generation, the young Europeans who came of age in the trenches and never believed in the old certainties again. Writers like Hemingway and Remarque turned that disillusionment into the literature of the era. The war also transformed women's lives, as wartime work opened new roles, and democratized societies that had lost faith in their old ruling classes.

Confusions That Cost Points

PAIR	HOW TO KEEP THEM STRAIGHT
War-guilt clause vs reparations	The clause assigned blame for the war. Reparations were the payments Germany had to make. Blame versus money.
NEP vs Five-Year Plans	The NEP was Lenin's 1921 retreat toward markets to fix a broken economy. The Five-Year Plans were Stalin's drive toward total state control of industry. Market concession versus forced industrialization.
Appeasement vs Munich agreement	Appeasement was the British-French policy of concessions. Munich was the 1938 agreement that showed the policy failing. Policy versus event.
Fascism vs totalitarianism	Fascism is the ultranationalist ideology of Mussolini and Hitler. Totalitarianism is rule seeking total control over all life, which Stalin's state also practiced. Ideology versus method of rule.
Nazi-Soviet Pact vs alliance	The pact was a nonaggression deal between enemies, broken in 1941. Germany and the USSR were never allies. Temporary convenience versus real partnership.

Nuremberg Laws vs Final Solution — The laws of 1935 stripped rights and legalized discrimination. The Final Solution, decided in 1942, was the plan for systematic murder. Persecution versus extermination.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations are on the next page, so complete the questions before checking them.

- 1.** Which of the following was a provision of the Treaty of Versailles that assigned Germany full blame for World War I?
 - A. The mandate system
 - B. The war-guilt clause
 - C. Reparations
 - D. The Fourteen Points

- 2.** The New Economic Policy (NEP) differed from Stalin's Five-Year Plans in that the NEP
 - A. imposed central planning on all industry
 - B. forced peasants into state collectives
 - C. temporarily restored limited market activity
 - D. industrialized the Soviet Union through state drives

- 3.** The Munich agreement of 1938 is best understood as
 - A. a German-Soviet treaty dividing Eastern Europe
 - B. the event that ended the policy of appeasement
 - C. an example of the failure of appeasement
 - D. the settlement that created the League of Nations

- 4.** Which sequence correctly orders Nazi anti-Jewish policy from earliest to latest?
 - A. The Final Solution, then the Nuremberg Laws
 - B. The Nuremberg Laws, then the Final Solution
 - C. The Holocaust, then the Final Solution
 - D. Genocide, then the Nuremberg Laws

Answer Key

- 1. B.** The war-guilt clause, Article 231, assigned Germany full responsibility for the war. A describes the League's supervision of former Ottoman and German territories, unrelated to blame. C is the payments Germany had to make, which were justified by the clause but were not the clause itself. D was Wilson's proposals for peace, issued in 1918, not part of the treaty text.
- 2. C.** The NEP was Lenin's 1921 compromise that temporarily restored limited market activity to recover from the civil war. A and D describe the Five-Year Plans, Stalin's state-directed industrialization, which is the opposite direction from the NEP. B describes collectivization, another Stalin policy that destroyed the market concessions of the NEP.
- 3. C.** Munich let Hitler take the Sudetenland from Czechoslovakia, showing that concessions did not stop him. A describes the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, a separate agreement. B gets the direction wrong; Munich was appeasement in action, not its end. D describes the Versailles settlement of 1919, two decades earlier.
- 4. B.** The Nuremberg Laws of 1935 stripped Jews of citizenship and rights. The Final Solution, decided as policy in 1942, was the plan for systematic murder. A reverses the order. C treats the Holocaust, which was the entire murder process, as an earlier step before the plan that caused it. D is incoherent chronology; genocide is the general term, not a dated event.

One-Page Recall Check

- Name the four long-term causes of World War I and explain what each contributed.
- Describe the Schlieffen Plan and explain why it produced trench warfare instead of a quick victory.
- Explain what made World War I a total war.
- Distinguish the February Revolution from the October Revolution in Russia.
- Explain why the Provisional Government lost support and how the Bolsheviks took advantage of it.
- Describe the NEP and explain why Lenin introduced it.
- Contrast the NEP with the Five-Year Plans.
- Explain collectivization and who the kulaks were.
- List the key provisions of the Versailles settlement and explain how each weakened the Weimar Republic.
- Distinguish the war-guilt clause from reparations.
- Explain why the League of Nations failed to keep the peace.
- Connect the Great Depression and German hyperinflation to the rise of fascism.
- Distinguish fascism from totalitarianism.
- Name the fascist leaders and explain what happened in the Spanish Civil War.
- Explain appeasement and why the Munich agreement showed it failing.
- Explain what the Nazi-Soviet Pact was and why it was not an alliance.
- Describe blitzkrieg and explain how it differed from trench warfare.
- Order the Nuremberg Laws and the Final Solution, and explain what each one did.
- Define genocide and explain why the Holocaust is its defining example.
- Describe the lost generation and explain what produced its disillusionment.

Where to go next. Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. In Rycal, open the AP European History deck. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and its practice questions target the same traps named here. If you have a test date, add it in the Test Planner. You can also start your next review with a Brain Dump, then check what you missed against this guide.

Key terms for this unit

Long-term causes of World War I, Total war, Trench warfare, World War I, Schlieffen Plan, Bolsheviks, Joseph Stalin, Kulaks, New Economic Policy (NEP), Provisional Government (Russia), Russian Civil War, Russian Revolution, Vladimir Lenin, Collectivization, Five-Year Plans, League of Nations, Mandate system, Reparations, Versailles settlement, Weimar Republic, Fourteen Points, War-guilt clause, Great Depression, Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Fascism, Francisco Franco, Nazi Party (National Socialism), Propaganda, Spanish Civil War, Totalitarianism, Appeasement, Nazi-Soviet Pact, Hyperinflation, Munich agreement, Blitzkrieg, Winston Churchill, World War II, Atomic bomb, Genocide, The Holocaust, "Final Solution", Nuremberg Laws, Lost generation.

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