**Chapter Twenty-Six:**   
Global Catastrophe: The Great Depression and World War II 1929 – 1945

**Chapter Twenty-Six Focus Questions:**

1. What was the global impact of both the Great Depression and the attempts to overcome it?
2. How did dictatorships and democracies attempt to mobilize the masses?
3. How did World War II progress on the battlefield and the home front?
4. How did the Allied victory unfold, and what were the causes of that victory?
5. In what ways did peace movements serve as a countertrend to events in the period from 1929 to 1945?

**Chapter Twenty-Six Summary:**

Major changes in leadership and government accompanied the new geopolitical order after World War I. While the Great Depression created conditions for totalitarian rulers to rise and thrive, the mass media gave them the vehicle to mobilize the masses towards their causes. With the new totalitarian leaders firmly entrenched in countries like Japan, Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union, the competition among them led to a second global war. World War II officially began in Asia, with Japan’s imperial desires, and was greatly expanded by the appeasement of Western democratic leaders. As the war waged on, the Allies were able to secure victory through somewhat unlikely alliances, but the victory in itself was only the beginning of the next great struggle between the two newly emerged superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. While the global war that devastated countries and populations was not repeated in the Cold War, fear and tensions remained at all time highs. However, as the Counterpoint of this chapter examines, even during war, some individuals and groups, such as Nigerian women and Gandhi, used nonviolence and pacifism to try to achieve their aims and goals.

**Chapter Twenty-Six Annotated Outline:**

1. Backstory
   * 1. Significant changes in the nature of government and in the relationships between governments and their peoples accompanied the new geopolitical order after World War I.
     2. The mass media that developed in and after the war contributed to the rise of nationalist dictators, and when a depression struck in the late 1920s, these dictators posed a grave threat to world peace.
     3. As the Depression left established democracies baffled, the militarism it spawned led to aggression, until finally the democracies were forced to declare war.
     4. As the hot war turned to cold war after 1945, the world’s two new superpowers, the U.S. and the USSR regarded each other with deep, ideological distrust.
2. 1929: The Great Depression Begins
   * 1. A rapid decline in agricultural prices, followed by the U.S. stock market crash of 1929, people everywhere saw their livelihood destroyed, and despair often turned to outrage, as many rose up in rebellion.
3. Economic Disaster Strikes
4. In the 1920s, U.S. corporations and banks, as well as many individuals invested in the stock market, which seemed to churn out endless profits.
5. Because of new regulations and restrictions, investors had to sell their stocks to raise cash and repay their loans. This wave of selling caused prices on the market to collapse, and a breakdown of the economy as a whole followed.
6. The stock market crash helped spark the Great Depression because the U.S. had financed postwar economic growth by lending money around the world.
7. In Europe, the lack of credit and decline in consumer buying caused the European economy to slump.
8. Farmers had already been suffering through rough times for years, as prices collapsed after World War I, and government responses to the crisis aggravated the situation.
9. One solution for imperial powers was to increase economic exploitation in the colonies. They demanded higher taxes from colonial subjects to compensate for falling revenues back home.
10. Social Effects of the Great Depression
11. Despite the economic crisis, modernization proceeded, and many in the upper classes prospered during the Great Depression.
12. People adapted to the situation, or took advantage of those less fortunate, and places in Latin America actually showed either rising production or increased exports by 1933.
13. Arms manufacturers made huge profits throughout the Great Depression as nations militarized.
14. The majority of Europeans and Americans actually had jobs throughout the 1930s, allowing them to benefit from the decline in consumer prices. But even the employed people were aware of the struggling of others, and a storm cloud of fear and resentment settled over many parts of the globe.
15. The Economic catastrophe strained social stability and upset gender relations. While many men stayed at home unemployed, women could find low-paying jobs doing work from home.
16. Often women became breadwinners, and a reversal of gender expectations fueled discontent. The Great Depression disrupted the most fundamental human connections, the relationship between family members.
17. Protesting Poverty
18. The Great Depression also caused rising protest. Communist parties flourished because they promised to end joblessness and exploitation, and union members worldwide took to the streets to demand relief.
19. Economic distress added to smoldering grievances in the colonies, and colonial farmers withheld their produce from imperial wholesalers.
20. Discontent ran deep across the Middle East and Asia as well, fueled by the injustices of the World War I peace settlements, increasing taxation, and general hard economic times.
21. Western educated native leaders, such as Ho Chi Minh and Mohandas Gandhi, led popular movements to contest their people’s subjection.
22. European officials were quick to use their military might to put down colonial uprisings, however they were slow to recognize a much grater threat: the spread of totalitarianism.
23. Militarizing the Masses in the 1930s
    * 1. Representative government collapsed in many countries under the sheer weight of social and economic crisis, and dictators gained vast support by mobilizing the masses in ways that had previously been attempted only in times of war.
      2. This has led to the term of totalitarianism, a highly centralized system of government that attempts to control society and ensure obedience through a single party and police terror, to be applied to the Fascist, Communist, and Nazi regimes of the 1930s.
      3. Many citizens overlooked the brutal side to totalitarian governments, as the discipline they brought to social and economic life were seen as keys to recovery.
      4. Politicians of these movements also appealed to racism, and they targeted enemies which allowed them to mobilize the masses to fight this supposed internal or external enemy instead of building national unity around democratically solving problems.
24. The Rise of Stalinism
25. Joseph Stalin led the astonishing transformation of the USSR from a predominantly agricultural society into a formidable industrial power by replacing Stalin’s NEP with the first of several five-year plans intended to mobilize Soviet citizens to industrialize the nation.
26. He established central economic planning, a policy of government direction of the economy, and production soared.
27. Central planning created a new elite class of bureaucrats and officials who forced workers to leave the countryside for jobs in state-run factories.
28. Brutality reigned, and as peasants refused to turn over their grain to the government, Staling called for the “liquidation of the kulaks,” a term applied to any independent farmer.
29. Confiscated kulak land became the new collective farms as traditional peasant life was brought to a violent end. But the experiment with collective farming resulted in mass starvation as Soviet grain harvests declined.
30. Stalin blamed the crisis on enemies of communism and instituted purges, while also expanding the system of lethal prison camps, or Gulags.
31. Stalin used artists and writers to help mobilize the masses, and they followed the official style of “socialist realism” in return for housing, office space, and secretarial help.
32. Japanese Expansionism
33. The Great Depression struck Japan as it was recovering from a catastrophic earthquake that laid waste to both Tokyo and the port city of Yokohama. The earthquake sparked murders of Korean and Chinese workers who were seen as being responsible for the devastation.
34. Although in 1925 men over the age of twenty-five had gained the vote, and Hirohito had become emperor, the economic downturn and social unrest made Japan unstable.
35. An ambitious military, impatient with democratic institutions gained control, and military leaders offered their own solution: conquer nearby regions to provide new farmlands and create markets.
36. Japan’s military leaders promoted the idea that the military was the “emperor’s army” not subject to civilian control, and the army took the lead in making claims to racial superiority as entitlement to the lands of the “inferiors.”
37. In 1931 the Japanese army blew-up a Japanese train in the Chinese province of Manchuria and blamed it on the Chinese, and used this as an excuse to invade, set up a puppet government, and pushed further into China.
38. The Chinese did not sit idly by, as Jiang Jieshi introduced the “New Life” Movement, which was inspired by European fascist militarism, and was designed to militarize the life of the people.
39. To Jiang, national unity demanded mobilization against the Chinese Communist Party, not the Japanese, but ultimately Jiang joined the Communists in fighting the Japanese, instead of fighting one another.
40. Hitler’s Rise to Power
41. Mass politics reached terrifying proportions in Germany when Hitler achieved his goal of overthrowing German democracy. When the Depression struck Germany, the Nazis (National Socialist German Workers’ Party) began to outstrip their rivals in elections.
42. The Nazis won approval by targeting all their parliamentary opponents as a single group of enemies, and many thought it was time to replace democratic government with a bold new leader who would take on these enemies.
43. Hitler used modern propaganda techniques to build his appeal, and Nazi rallies were masterpieces of mass spectacle. But military, industrial, and political elites, fearing the Communists for their opposition to private property, saw to it that Hitler legally became chancellor in 1933.
44. Hitler and the Nazis closed down representative government, suspended civil rights, imposed censorship of the press, and prohibited meetings of political parties.
45. Storm troopers harassed democratic politicians into allowing the passage of the Enabling Act, and the SS and Gestapo enforced obedience to Nazism by arresting Communists, Jews, homosexuals, and activists and executed them or sent them to concentration camps.
46. To improve economic conditions, the government stimulated the economy by investing in public works projects, closed down labor unions, and aimed to control everyday life, including marriage and childbirth.
47. The Nazis defined Jews as an inferior “race” and responsible both for the loss in WWI and for the Great Depression. In 1935 the Nuremberg Laws deprived Jews of citizenship, and doctors in the late ‘30s helped organize the T4 project, which killed two hundred thousand “inferior” people.
48. In 1938 after a Jewish teen killed a German official, the Nazis retaliated with *Kristallnacht* (the Night of Broken Glass), where they attacked synagogues, Jewish-owned stores, and threw more than twenty thousand Jews into prisons and camps.
49. Hitler’s mobilization against an enemy was successful, and by 1939 more than half of Germany’s Jews had emigrated to escape. Their persecution brought Germans new resources as the took Jewish property and jobs.
50. Democracies Mobilize
51. Facing economic depression and totalitarian aggression, democracies rallied in support of individuals’ rights and citizens’ well-being. As the Depression wore on, some governments undertook bold social and economic experiments while still emphasizing democratic values.
52. In the U.S., after FDR was elected president, he pushed through a torrent of legislation including relief for businesses, price supports for farmers, and public works programs for the unemployed.
53. Roosevelt also used the new mass media expertly to build faith in democracy, and his bold programs and successful use of the media mobilized citizens to believe in a democratic future.
54. Sweden’s response to the crisis focused on instituting social welfare programs and central planning of the economy. They also addressed the population problem by introducing prenatal care, free childbirth in a hospital, and subsidized housing for large families.
55. Facing the economic and political turmoil, France narrowly avoided a fascist takeover, as French liberals, socialists, and Communists formed an antifascist coalition known as the Popular Front. Although the Popular Front enacted welfare benefits, the upper class disapproved, and sent their savings out of the country, causing the Popular Front to fall.
56. Democratic cultural life also fought the lure of fascism, as artists produced work that applauded ordinary people and captured their everyday struggles.
57. Global War 1937 – 1945
    * 1. The Depression intensified competition among nations for access to land, markets, and resources, and the mobilization of the masses led the world toward another catastrophic war.
      2. Democratic statesmen hoped that sanctions would stop new aggression, but military assaults escalated, started with Japan’s invasion of China and the outbreak of war there in 1937.
58. Europe’s Road to War
    * 1. Western imperialist powers increased their exploitation of resource-rich colonies, leading to mounting local resentment, and the authoritarian regimes unleashed bolder aggression in the name of their own people’s superior rights to empire.
      2. Hitler aimed for further *Lebensraum*, or living space, for the supposedly superior “Aryans,” and in 1935 he rejected the Treaty of Versailles’s limitation on military strength and openly began rearming.
      3. In the same year, Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, whose capital fell in 1936. The League of Nations voted to impose sanctions against Italy, but it showed a lack of will to fight aggression.
      4. Nazi territorial expansion began in 1938 with troops entering Austria, but the enthusiasm of Nazi sympathizers there made the annexation appear to demonstrate “self-determination.”
      5. Hitler then turned to Czechoslovakia which prompted European leaders to hold the Munich Conference, and strive towards appeasement, which allowed Hitler to claim the Sudetenland.
      6. However, appeasement failed, and in March 1939, Hitler invaded the rest of Czechoslovakia.
59. The Early Years of the War, 1937 – 1943
    * 1. Amid the European totalitarian expansion, World War II had already begun in East Asia. In 1937, Japan attacked Shanghai and then Nanjing, massacring hundred of thousands of Chinese in the “Rape of Nanjing.”
      2. Japan then described its expansionism as the foundation for the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, which would free Asians, and the world, from the oppressive white race.
      3. As the Japanese fought to conquer China, Hitler launched an all-out attack on Poland on September 1, 1939, after signing a nonaggression agreement (the Nazi-Soviet Pact) with the USSR.
      4. German forces let loose and overpowering Blitzkrieg (“lightning war”) to stun the ill-equipped Polish defenders and allowing the army to conserve supplies.
      5. In April 1940, the Blitzkrieg crushed Denmark and Norway, before Belgium, the Netherlands, and France fell in May and June. Meanwhile, Stalin took the Baltic states, adding them to the half of Poland acquired in the Nazi-Soviet Pact.
      6. As Winston Churchill took over as prime minister, Hitler ordered the bombardment of Britain. The Battle of Britain was a German bombardment of all parts of British life, as the British poured resources into anti-aircraft weapons, its Ultra code-detecting group, and developments of radar.
      7. By the fall of 1940, German air losses had driven Hitler to abandon his planned conquest of Britain, and in June 1941, Hitler violated the Nazi-Soviet Pact and launched an all-out campaign against the Soviet Union.
      8. Although the German troops quickly penetrated Soviet lines, the Soviet people fought back, and the Nazi soldiers were unprepared for the onset of winter.
      9. Meanwhile, Japan swiftly captured Western colonies in Asia, and after the U.S. stopped supplying industrial goods, in December 1941 Japanese planes bombed Pearl Harbor.
      10. President Roosevelt summoned Congress to declare war on Japan, but by spring 1942, the Japanese had conquered much of the southwestern Pacific, and the victories strengthened the appeal of the Japanese military’s ideology.
      11. Germany and Italy quickly joined Japan in declaring war on the United States, and although the U.S. and the USSR mistrusted each other, they both joined with Great Britain and the Free French to form the Grand Alliance.
      12. The Allies, as they were collectively known, were joined by twenty other countries, and together they fought the Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan, with both sides facing the bloodiest fight in world history.
60. War and the World’s Civilians
    * 1. Victory in World War II depended on industrial production geared toward total war and mass killing, but far more civilians than soldiers died in the war. Both sides bombed cities to destroy civilians’ will to resist, because in total war, workers were as important as soldiers.
      2. As the German army swept through eastern Europe, it slaughtered all those whom the Nazis deemed “racial inferiors,” and the Japanese deliberately murdered millions of Chinese civilians.
      3. The extermination of Jews became a special focus of the Nazis, as initially many died of starvation and disease in ghettos and camps. Shortly after, the Nazis put into operation the “Final Solution,” the organized rounding up and transporting of Europe’s Jews to death camps.
      4. In the end, six million Jews, along with millions of Roma, homosexuals, Slavs, and others were murdered in the Holocaust.
      5. Despite their early conquests, the Axis countries remained at a disadvantage, and the Allies produced more than three times as much as the Axis in 1943 alone.
      6. Allied governments were also successful in generating civilian participation, especially among women, who maintained the workforce at home, and helped in the war.
      7. Propaganda saturated society in move theaters and on the radio even more than in World War I. Much of the media, however, was tightly controlled, and filmmakers were subject to censorship unless their films conveyed the right message. Both sides used caricatures of the enemies to support their cause.
      8. These characterizations eased the way for the U.S. government to force citizens of Japanese origins into its own concentration camps.
      9. As before, colonized peoples were conscripted into armies and forced labor, and collaboration with Axis conquerors was common among colonial people who had suffered the racist oppression of Western powers.
      10. Resistance to the Axis also began early in the war, such as French General Charles de Gaulle, who directed the Free French government from London, and others who planned assassinations and bombed bridges and rail lines.
      11. Ordinary people also fought back, and resisters often played on stereotypes, as women carried weapons to assassination sites and seduced and murdered enemy officers.
61. From Allied Victory to the Cold War 1943 – 1945
    * 1. Allied victory began to look certain in 1943, and in a series of meetings Churchill, Stalin, and Roosevelt (the Big Three) planned the peace they expected to achieve, including the creation of the United Nations to prevent another world war.
      2. But on the eve of victory, distrust among the Allies was about to lead to the outbreak of the Cold War between the U.S. and the USSR.
62. The Axis Defeated
63. The Battle of Stalingrad in 1942-43 marked the turning point in the war in Europe. As the fighting dragged on, the German army was ill-prepared for winter, and in February 1943, the Soviet army captured ninety thousand Germans.
64. In North Africa, the British army faced off against German troops led by General Erwin Rommel, who was very skilled in the new mobile warfare. However, he could not overcome Allied access to secret German communication codes.
65. After driving Rommel out of Africa, the Allies landed in Sicily on their way to winning back the Italian peninsula in 1945.
66. After Stalingrad, the Soviet army drove westward and on June 6, 1944 (D-Day), combined Allied forces attacked the heavily fortified coast of Normandy and fought their way through the German-held territory of western France.
67. Facing defeat and refusing to surrender, Hitler committed suicide with his wife, Eva Braun, as the Soviet army took Berlin in April 1945. Germany finally surrendered on May 8, 1945.
68. The Allies had followed a “Europe first” strategy for conducting the war, and left China to fight Japan virtually alone. However, in 1942 Allied forces destroyed part of Japan’s navy in battles at Midway Island and Guadalcanal, and Japan lacked the capacity to recoup the losses of ships and men.
69. The Allies then stormed one Pacific island after another, and in response to Japanese kamikazes, they stepped up their bombing of major cities. Meanwhile, an international team had secretly developed the atomic bomb.
70. The Japanese practice of fighting to the last man rather than surrendering persuaded Allied military leaders that the defeat of Japan would be costly, thus on August 6, 1945, the U.S. government unleashed the new atomic weapon on Hiroshima, and three days later a second on Nagasaki. On August 15, 1945, Japan surrendered.
71. Postwar Plans and Uncertainties
72. Conditions for lasting peace were not good after the war as much of the world lay in ruins, governments and social order were fragile if not broken, and an estimated hundred million people had died with perhaps an equal number being homeless refugees.
73. Colonial peoples were in full rebellion, and it was only a matter of time before they would mount battles for their independence.
74. The founding of the United Nations (officially created before the war was even over) set the conditions for peaceful international cooperation, but it remained to be seen whether this new organization would be successful at maintaining world peace.
75. In addition, a new struggle called the Cold War was taking root between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and amid their opposing views, former British Prime Minister Churchill warned in a March 1946 speech that an “iron curtain” had fallen across Europe, dividing the world into two hostile camps.
76. Counterpoint: Nonviolence and Pacifism in an Age of War
    * 1. While leading nations saw military capacity as the measure of greatness, others realized that nonviolent tactics could be powerful tools as well.
77. Traditional Tactics: The Example of Nigerian Women
78. Some used traditional modes of resistance, such as women in British-controlled Nigeria, who rebelled against new taxes by painting their bodies and singing and dancing in the nude outside the homes of local tax collectors.
79. British officials justified shooting the women, killing fifty-three of them, by calling their behavior irrational and dangerous, but women in Nigeria continued to use these and other nonviolent tactics up into the 1980s.
80. Gandhi and Civil Disobedience
81. Other pacifist traditions were mobilized during the time based on religious beliefs. Gandhi modeled his activism on the teachings of Jesus, Buddha, and other spiritual leaders, and rejected the view that he tactics were passive.
82. Rather, he called his strategy *Satyagraha* (truth and firmness) and claimed that such acts demanded incredible discipline to remain opposed but at the same time nonviolent.
83. Feminists also played key roles with the development of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom after World War I, and religious groups contested the new militarism developing in the interwar years.
84. Many of these groups remained firmly pacifistic, and after World War II, civil rights activists in the United States embraced nonviolence and civil disobedience with “sit ins” in the 1950s and 1960s to protest segregation.
85. Conclusion
    * 1. The Great Depression created conditions in which totalitarian rulers thrived by promising to restore national greatness and wealth.
      2. Mobilized by the mass media, many turned from representative institutions to militaristic leaders who guaranteed a gleaming future.
      3. Leaders of Western democracies, hoping to avoid war, began with a policy of appeasement, which failed to prevent totalitarian advances.
      4. At the war’s end, Europe’s population was reduced, its colonies on the verge of independence, its people starving and homeless, and other parts of the world were in similar situations.
      5. With Europe’s global dominance ended, the Soviet Union and the United States reigned as the world’s superpowers, but they were competing for power and influence in very corner of the world, creating the Cold War.
86. Chapter Twenty-Six Special Features
    1. Reading the Past: “Comfort Women” in World War II
       1. The recounting of a Korean women who was taken to work in a military brothel as a comfort woman for Japanese soldiers.
    2. Lives and Livelihoods: Soldiers and Soldiering
       1. While many men and women worldwide became soldiers, different reasons, including political beliefs, opportunities, and freedom, led them to such a dangerous profession.
    3. Seeing the Past: Technological Warfare: Civilization or Barbarism?
       1. Photograph of Hiroshima, Japan, showing the near-total destruction from the first atomic bomb, and begging the question of morality of such weapons.

**Chapter Twenty-Six Overview (Discussion) Questions:**

**Major Global Development:** The causes and outcomes of the Great Depression and World War II.

1. How did ordinary people react to the Great Depression, and how did their reactions differ from country to country?
2. Why were dictators and antidemocratic leaders able to come to power in the 1930s, and how did all countries—autocratic and democratic alike—mobilize the masses?
3. How are the Great Depression and World War II related historical events?

**Chapter Twenty-Six Making Connections Questions:**

1. What are the main differences between World War I (see Chapter 25) and World War II?
2. In what specific ways did World Wars I and II affect the African and Asian colonies of the imperial powers?
3. How do the strengths and weaknesses of the Allies and the Axis compare?
4. How would you describe the importance of World War II not only to the unfolding of history but also to present-day concerns?

**Counterpoint: Nonviolence and Pacifism in an Age of War**   
 **Counterpoint Focus Question:** In what ways did peace movements serve as a countertrend to events in the period from 1929 to 1945?

**Chapter Twenty-Six Special Features:**

**Reading the Past: “Comfort Women” in World War II**

1. How would you describe Oh Omok’s attitude toward her situation?
2. How might her experience as a “comfort woman” shape her ideas about gender and class relations?

**Lives and Livelihoods: Soldiers and Soldiering**

1. What specific advantages did soldiers from many walks of life see in joining the military?
2. How would you describe soldiers’ lives from 1930 to 1945, and how did they vary?
3. What were the class dimensions of the military?

**Seeing the Past: Technological Warfare: Civilization of Barbarism?**

1. How is a moral argument for the atomic bomb possible?
2. How would you situate the atomic bomb and its use during World War II in the scientific and intellectual history of the West?

**Key Terms**

Allies

appeasement

Axis

central economic planning

civil disobedience

five-year plan

Great Depression

Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere

Holocaust

purge

totalitarianism

United Nations