

The “Age of Anxiety”: 1914-1950

- I. World War I resulted in an end to the old order
 - A. End of rule by the Hohenzollerns (Germany), Hapsburgs (Austria), & Romanovs (Russia)
 - B. Democracies in Europe remained intact or took root.
 1. France & Britain remained democratic
 2. Germany became a democracy -- Weimar Republic
 3. New state of Czechoslovakia was democratic
 - C. 1920s, communist totalitarianism took root in Russia and fascism emerged in Italy; fascism in Germany in the 1930s
 - D. Political crises in the 1920s were followed by the Great Depression beginning in 1929 and then the road to World War II in the 1930s.
 - E. The new world in the aftermath of WWI created an “age of anxiety”
 1. World War I was a staggering blow to Western civilization
 2. Many people felt as if the world they knew had been turned upside down and they had little control to change things for the better.
 3. People saw themselves living in an age of continual crisis (until at least the early 1950s)
 - WWI, revolutions at the end of the war, political and financial crises in the 1920s, the Great Depression, World War II and the onset of the Cold War.
- II. Modern Philosophy
 - A. After the war, new and upsetting ideas began to spread through the entire population
 1. Before 1914 most people still believed in Enlightenment ideas of progress, reason and the rights of the individual.
 2. Optimistic pre-WWI view was the result of significant progress of the past two centuries.
 - B. Critics of the pre-war world anticipated many of the post-war ideas.

1. Rejected the general faith in progress and the power of the rational human mind.
2. **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900):
 - a. One of the most important critics of the rationalism of the Enlightenment
 - b. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883-85), he blasted religion and famously claimed "**God is Dead**"
 - Claimed Christianity embodied a "slave morality," which glorified weakness, envy, and mediocrity.
 - Individualism had been quashed by society.
 - c. In *Will to Power* (1888) he wrote that only the creativity of a few supermen—*übermenschen*—could successfully reorder the world.
 - d. Though not widely read by his contemporaries, his writings seemed relevant in the atmosphere of post-World War I pessimism.
3. **Henri Bergson** (1859-1941): in the 1890s, he convinced many young people that immediate experience and intuition were as important as rational and scientific thinking for understanding reality.
4. **Georges Sorel** (1847-1922): **Syndicalism** (a manifestation of anarchism)
 - a. Believed socialism would come to power through a great, violent strike of all working people.
 - b. Ideas foreshadowed the Bolshevik Revolution; control by an elite few
5. **Freudian psychology** was first developed in the late 1880s by **Sigmund Freud** (1856-1939)
 - a. Traditional psychology assumed a single, unified conscious mind processed sensory experiences in a rational and logical way.
 - b. Freudian psychology seemed to reflect the spirit of the early 20th century, with its emphasis on

humans as greedy irrational creatures.
c. Became an international movement by 1910 and received popular attention after 1918, especially in Protestant countries of Northern Europe and the U.S.

d. Freud asserted that because the human unconscious (**ID**) is driven by sexual, aggressive, and pleasure-seeking desires, humans are therefore NOT rational! The ID battles the Ego & Superego

- **Ego**: Rationalizing conscious mediates what a person *can* do.

- **Superego**: Ingrained moral values specify what a person should do.

- Shattered the enlightenment view of rationality and progress.

e. Freud agreed with Nietzsche that mechanisms of rational thinking and traditional morals values can be too strong on the human psyche

- They can repress sexual desires too effectively, crippling individuals and entire peoples with guilt and neurotic fears

- Many opponents and some enthusiasts interpreted Freud as saying that the first requirement for mental health is an uninhibited sex life

- After WWI, the popular interpretation of Freud reflected and encouraged growing sexual experimentation, particularly among middleclass women.

C. Post-war philosophers and authors expanded on the earlier pessimism

1. **Paul Valéry** (1871-1945): Poet who spoke of the "cruelly injured mind" besieged by doubts and suffering from anxieties due to economic, political, and social disruptions of the 1920s.
2. **Logical empiricism (logical positivism)** -- took root in English-speaking universities
 - a. Developed by **Ludwig Wittgenstein** (1889-1951), part of the **Vienna Circle** in the 1920s and 1930s.
 - b. Philosophy is only the logical clarification of thoughts
 - c. Abstract concepts regarding God, freedom, morality, etc, are senseless since they can neither be tested by scientific experiments nor demonstrated by the logic of mathematics.
 - d. Only experience is worth analyzing.
3. Anti-utopian authors reflected a pessimistic uncertain future
 - a. **Oswald Spengler** (1880-1936) – *The Decline of the West* (1918-22)
 - Every culture experiences a life cycle of growth and decline; Western civilization was in its old age, and death was approaching in the form of conquest by Asians.
 - b. **T. S. Eliot** (1888-1965), "**The Waste Land**" (1922): Depicted a world of growing desolation.
 - Considered the most famous long poem of the 20th century
 - c. **Franz Kafka** (1883-1924): Portrayed helpless individuals destroyed by inexplicably hostile and surreal forces.
 - *The Trial* (1925), *The Castle* (1926); *The Metamorphosis* (1915)
4. **Erich Maria Remarque: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929**
 - Powerful novel detailing the horrors of trench warfare during World War I.
5. **Existentialism** took root in Continental countries after World War II.

- a. In the wake of the horrors of World War II and the advent of the atomic age, pessimism and hopelessness were expressed by existentialists.
- b. Existentialists saw life as absurd, with no inherent meaning.
- c. Viewed a world where the individual had to find his own meaning
- d. Most existentialists were atheists
- e. **Jean-Paul Sartre** (1905-1980): Wrote that life had no meaning and that humans simply exist
 - He was strongly attracted to communism
- f. **Albert Camus** (1913-1960)
 - Individuals had to find meaning to life by taking action against those things with which they disagree.
 - One's actions are derived from personal choices that are independent from religion or political ideology.
- g. Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers were also prominent existentialists.

6. Christian Existentialists shared the loneliness and despair of atheistic existentialists.

- a. Stressed human beings' sinful nature, need for faith, and the mystery of God's forgiveness
- b. Broke with Christian "modernists" of late 19th century who reconciled Bible & science
- c. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855): rediscovery of his 19th century works led to revival of fundamental Christian belief after WWI.
- d. Believed Christian faith could anchor the individual caught in troubling modern times.
- e. **T.S. Eliot** created his work within a perceived traditional Christian framework.
 - Advocated literary allegiance to tradition.

7. **George Orwell** (1903-1950) – **1984** (1949): "Big

Brother" (the dictator) & his totalitarian state use a new kind of language, sophisticated technology, and psychological terror to strip a weak individual of his last shred of human dignity.

8. "Theater of the absurd" also reflected pessimism after

World War II

- Samuel Beckett (1906-1989): Irish playwright
 - *Waiting for Godot* (1952): Throughout the play two characters wait for Godot (perhaps God?) but he never comes. The dialogue is disjointed and convoluted.

III. Science

A. By the late 19th century, science was a major pillar supporting Western society's optimistic and rationalistic view of the world.

B. "**New Physics**," much popularized after WWI, challenged long-held ideas and led to uncertainty

1. **Max Planck** (1858-1947): developed basis for quantum physics in 1900
 - a. Postulated matter & energy might be different forms of the same thing.
 - b. Shook foundations of 19th century physics that viewed atoms as the stable, basic building blocks of nature, with a different kind of unbreakable atom for each element.
2. **Albert Einstein** (1879-1955):
 - a. 1905, **Theory of relativity** of time and space challenged traditional ideas of Newtonian physics ($E=MC^2$)
 - b. United apparently infinite universe with incredibly small, fast-moving subatomic world.
 - c. Matter and energy are interchangeable and that even a particle of matter contains enormous levels of potential energy
3. **Ernest Rutherford** (1871-1937): In 1919, he demonstrated the atom could be split.
4. 1927, **Werner Heisenberg** (1901-1976): "principle of uncertainty"-- as it is impossible to know the position and speed of an individual electron, it is therefore impossible to predict its behavior.
 - Heisenberg's principle: The dynamics of an experiment alters the state of the subject.

5. Impact of "new physics" on the common mind
 - a. The new universe seemed strange and troubling.
 - b. Universe was now "relative," dependent on the observer's frame of reference.
 - c. Universe was uncertain and undetermined, without stable building blocks.
 - d. Physics no longer provided easy, optimistic answers, or any answers for that matter.

IV. Art and Entertainment

A. Functionalism in architecture

1. Late 19th century U.S.: Louis Sullivan pioneered skyscrapers – "form follows function"
2. In 1905, architectural leadership shifted to Germanspeaking countries (until Hitler in 1930s)
3. **Bauhaus movement: Walter Gropius** (1883-1969), broke sharply with the past in his design of the Fagus shoe factory at Alfeld, Germany (1911).
 - a. Clean, light, elegant building of glass and iron.
 - b. Represented a jump into the middle of the 20th century.

B. Painting

1. **Pablo Picasso** (1881-1973): most important artist of the 20th century
 - a. Developed **cubism** along with Georges Braque
 - Cubism concentrated on a complex geometry of zigzagging lines and sharply angled, overlapping planes.
 - b. Often tried to portray all perspectives simultaneously
 - c. **Guernica** (1937) is considered his masterpiece.
 - Huge mural portraying the bombing of a Spanish city by the German *Luftwaffe* in 1937.
2. Non-representational art
 - Some expressionists like **Wassily Kandinsky** (1866-1944) sought to evoke emotion through non-figural painting
3. **Dadaism**: "Dada" was a nonsensical word that mirrored a post-WWI world that no longer made sense.
 - a. Attacked all accepted standards of art and behavior, delighting in outrageous conduct.
 - b. e.g., *Mona Lisa* painted with a mustache (Marcel

Duchamp)

4. **Surrealism: Salvador Dali** (1904-1989) most important (influenced by Freud's emphasis on dreams)

- a. After 1924, painted a fantastic world of wild dreams and complex symbols, where watches melted and giant metronomes beat time in impossible alien landscapes.
- b. His most famous painting is "Persistence of Memory", 1931

C. Music

1. **Igor Stravinsky** (1882-1971): Most important composer of the 20th century
 - "Rite of Spring" (1906) experimented with new tonalities (many of them dissonant) and aggressive primitive rhythms
2. **Arnold Schönberg** (1874-1951): pioneered "12-tone" technique (atonality)
 - This style of music was somewhat akin to Wassily Kandinsky's non-figural painting in his extreme abstract expressionist style.

D. Movies

1. Moving pictures were first shown as a popular novelty in naughty peepshows and penny arcades in the 1890s, especially in Paris.
2. **Charlie Chaplin** (1889-1978), Englishman, became the king of the "silver screen" in Hollywood during the 1920s.
3. German studios excelled in expressionist dramas—e.g., *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919).
4. Advent of "talkies" (films with sound) in 1927 resulted in a revival of national film industries in 1930s, especially France
5. Motion pictures became the main entertainment of the masses until after WWII.
6. Motion pictures, like radio, became powerful tools of indoctrination, esp. in countries with dictatorial regimes.
 - a. Lenin encouraged development of Soviet film making leading to epic films in the mid-1920s.

- Most famous films directed by Sergei Eisenstein (1898-1948) who dramatized the communist view of Russian history.
- b. In Germany, Leni Riefenstahl directed a masterpiece of documentary propaganda, *The Triumph of the Will*, based on the Nazi party rally at Nuremberg in 1934.

E. Radio

1. **Guglielmo Marconi** developed transatlantic "wireless" communication in 1901
2. Radio was used for military purposes in WWI
3. Not until 1920 were first major public broadcasts of special events made in Great Britain & US
4. Most countries established direct control of radio by the gov't (only in U.S. was there private ownership)
 - a. **British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)**
 - b. Radio became used effectively for political propaganda (e.g. Hitler & Mussolini)