

Module 04: The End of Optimism? The Great Depression in Europe

Conclusion

The real end of the Depression in Europe came only, as in the United States, with the onset of war in 1939. The increasing military expenditures during the late 1930s put millions to work in ways that had not been possible through the more limited recovery programs adopted by the governments of Britain, France, and Germany in the earlier years of the Depression. Yet certain steps taken during the 1930s illustrate how the responses to the Depression shaped the political situation on the eve of war. The crucial question for historical analysis, then, focuses on the relationship between the end of the Depression and the forces of cohesion and division within each society.

In England, "hunger marches" emerged as an effective means of social protest and political mobilization. Groups of men, and occasionally women and children, participated in demonstrations to call attention to unemployment and the inequities of the Means Test. While the leadership of such movements often included political radicals, the marchers themselves frequently generated considerable sympathy among lower- and even middle-class observers. Despite the persistence of economic problems, marchers served to mediate the apparent conflict between the classes. In contrast to the situation prior to the Depression, the British public was far more aware of the relative deprivation suffered by those in situations of economic distress. At the same time, even those in oppressed conditions — excepting the most radical of political activists — seemed to accept the legitimacy of the current political situation and sought to influence, rather than overthrow, their elected leaders at the local and national levels.

German recovery from the Depression under the Nazi government occurred, in the words of Gordon Craig, "with a speed that amazed the world." Hitler's popularity derived largely from his explicit promise to put Germans back to work.

Rearmament played the greatest role in economic growth, although government investment in industry, public works programs, and tax relief for major industries also contributed to the rapid recovery. Unemployment, which had reached six million in 1932, fell to less than one million by 1936. Claims that Hitler ended the Depression certainly overstate the extent of his personal role in the transformation, although such claims do reflect the broader perception in Germany and throughout much of Europe at the time that fascist governments responded more effectively to economic crisis than representative governments. Moreover,

within Germany, the renewed growth of the economy and the profound changes in public attitudes accounted for increased support for Hitler's government, which had begun to shift its attention towards foreign policy.

Rearmament also played a role in French recovery from the Depression, although the bitter political disputes over the perceived threat from Germany, in combination with collective memory of the costs of the First World War, made the French government reluctant to invest heavily in militarization. While the Popular Front government led a modest recovery from the Depression, continuing political divisions contributed to the anxiety and ambivalence that characterized the French response to the increasingly aggressive stance taken by Hitler. The tensions within the French democratic government thus constituted yet another consequence of the Depression, and one that contributed indirectly to the coming of war in 1939.