

The World in Depression

Syllabus: History 415/515, Fall 2016

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Course meets Tuesdays and Thursdays, 12:00-1:20 in 175 Lillis

Course Description:

In 1929, the American economy and the economies of most of the rest of the world began a collapse that led to a decade-long depression. Along with the Great Depression of the 1930s came revelations of financial misdeeds, violent political extremism, religious and ethnic discrimination, and ominous international conflicts that ended in the outbreak of World War II. For the next three generations, people asked, "Could it happen again?" In 2008, as the world economy stood once again on the brink of disaster, many feared a repeat of the horrors of the 1930s. Today, although the last decade has not matched the disasters of the early collapse, there are disturbing parallels. The "Great Recession" of the last few years has made understanding the Great Depression more important and more urgent.

There are two main themes in History 415/515, *The World in Depression*. First, we'll examine the causes, consequences and human significance of economic collapse. Beginning around the time of the stock market crash in October 1929, the United States entered into an unprecedented economic depression. Recovery came slowly and fitfully; the economy remained depressed until the U.S. entered World War II. Although the timing, duration and impact of economic crisis varied from country to country, the Great Depression was a worldwide catastrophe.

Second, we will look at the political, social and cultural response to crisis. It is too simple to attribute the rise of dictatorships around the world to economic causes, but economic collapse challenged the viability of democracy as it threatened the survival of capitalism. The 1930s were marked by conflicts and thrusts by fascist and militarist regimes that gathered momentum and led to the outbreak of World War II. At the same time, we'll examine how cultural institutions and creative individuals contended with economic disaster and the looming presence of war.

Readings:

I've ordered two books for the course. Some additional readings will be online and I'll ask you to do a short paper on a work of fiction about the 1930s. The two required books are:

1. Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s*: This is a long but (in my opinion) intelligent and well-written narrative history of the 1930s, stressing economic depression, political crises and military confrontations along with the human dimension of the decade of crisis. We'll read most but not all of it.

2. Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals: Reflections on Roosevelt's America, Mussolini's Italy, and Hitler's Germany*: Schivelbusch is an original and provocative thinker. He's comparing the United States' experience and policies in the 1930s to those of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy. Without ignoring the contrasts, he finds some striking (and perhaps disturbing) similarities.

Course Requirements:

1. Responses to discussion questions to be posted on Canvas. I'll post four prompts for your comments during the term; you're expected to respond briefly to three of the four. Instructions coming soon. Worth about 15% of your course grade.

2. Two short papers (c.3-5 pages), one on a question about Wolfgang Schivelbusch's book (see above—details to follow), the other on a movie or novel from or about the decade. Soon I'll supply instructions and lists of possible films and novels. As an alternative to one of the papers, you may choose to make a 15-20 minute presentation to the class on a topic that you and I agree on in advance. Each paper (or the class presentation) is worth about 25% of your course grade.

If you want to do a class presentation, we need to agree on your topic by October 20.

The first paper is due on or before November 3 at class time.

The second paper is due on or before November 29 at class time.

3. A final exam, scheduled for Friday, Dec. 9 at 8:00 ☹. However, I will provide a take-home alternative. Final exam (either take-home or in-class version) is worth about 35% of your course grade.

Note: For any graduate students enrolled in the course as Hist 515, requirements will be different. I'll be happy to discuss possibilities with you before or at the beginning of winter term. I also will try to schedule a few grad student-only discussion sessions during the term.

Class Sessions:

Try to finish the assigned readings by the dates where they are listed. Unless otherwise noted, the readings besides the Brendon and Schivelbusch books will be on Canvas. Links to outlines, illustrations and relevant websites will be added to this syllabus shortly before each class session.

Sept.27: Introduction: A Thirty Years War?

PART ONE: THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Sept. 29: Economic Collapse

Read: Brendon, ch.1-3; F. Scott Fitzgerald, "[Echoes of the Jazz Age.](#)" from *Scribner's Magazine*, vol. 95 (Nov. 1931). Click on the image scan to magnify it for easier reading.

Oct. 4: Why so long? How widespread?

Oct. 6: Economic policies—the Keynesian response

Read Brendon, ch.4; John Maynard Keynes, "[The World Economic Outlook.](#)" from *The Atlantic*, May 1932. (This link leads you to a posting of excerpts from Keynes's essay on the blog of an economist--a U of O faculty member--with some commentary on its current-day implications following the excerpts.)

Oct. 11: Human impact of unemployment

Read: George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, ch. 5. Online at http://www.george-orwell.org/The_Road_to_Wigan_Pier/4.html. Listen to three classic Depression songs on YouTube: "[Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?](#)"; "[Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries](#)" and "[We're in the Money](#)".

Optional: Marienthal was an Austrian town whose textile plant closed, throwing half the population out of work. Read Marie Jahoda et al., *Marienthal: the Sociography of an Unemployed Community*, chapters [five](#) and [seven](#) and/or look at the [introduction](#), [study description](#) and some of the [photos](#) on a website about this famous sociological study of the impact of unemployment.

PART TWO: POLITICAL RESPONSES TO ECONOMIC CRISIS

Oct. 13: Political Responses –The Nazis Come to Power

Between now and Nov.1, read: Brendon, ch. 5 through 12 (ch. 14 and 19 are optional), and Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals*. This provocative book compares Hitler’s Germany, Mussolini’s Italy and Roosevelt’s New Deal United States. We’ll focus on the issues it raises in discussing dictatorships and democracy, their differences and their similarities in the Depression years.

Oct. 18: Political Responses—Nazis in Power

Oct. 20: Political Responses--Japan: Militarism and Expansionism

Oct. 25: Political Responses–A Refuge from Depression? USSR, terror and industrialization

Read: an American [admirer interviews Joseph Stalin](#) in 1933; *Time Magazine* names [Joseph Stalin “Man of the Year”](#) for 1939—cover here.

Oct. 27: Political Responses–Democracy in Crisis

Listen to FDR’s [Fireside Chat, Sept. 30, 1934](#) (YouTube excerpt, about 10 minutes)—full text [here](#) is optional. FDR’s [Second Inaugural Address, Jan. 20, 1937](#) (text and audio excerpt—about four minutes). Keep reading *Three New Deals*.

Nov. 1: Political and Cultural Responses to Crisis: Discussion of Schivelbusch, *Three New Deals*

PART 3: WARS OF A DECADE OF “PEACE”

Nov. 3: Imperialism and anti-imperialism: Mussolini in Ethiopia

Read: Brendon, ch. 13; [C.L.R. James on Abyssinia](#) [Ethiopia]; Time names Ethiopian emperor [Haile Selassie man of the year](#) for 1935.

FIRST SHORT PAPER DUE

Nov. 8: Colonial and anti-imperialist protest

Read: Selections from [Gandhi](#) and [Nehru](#) on India. [For Nehru, read “Marxism, Capitalism and India’s Future (1941),” not the item on neutralism below it.] Also read George Padmore on Africa and West Indies, [The Life and Struggles of Negro Toilers](#), (1931): read Part 4, Sections 3 (West Africa) and 6 (Haiti)

Nov. 10: Spain and the Spanish Civil War

Read: Brendon, ch. 15-16;

PART 4: AN INTERLUDE ON DEPRESSION CULTURE

Nov. 15: Media, Culture and Tradition in the 1930s

Read: Walter Benjamin, ["The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,"](#) on the web. Benjamin’s essay is complicated; I’ll post some notes about it on Canvas to get you started.

Suggested: Browse some of the ads for radios and radio equipment from the 1930s [online here](#).

Nov. 17: Visual Culture of the 1930’s: Walt Disney/Charlie Chaplin/Pablo Picasso

Examine the PBS website, [Guernica: Testimony of War](#).

Nov. 22: Depression Culture: The World of the Future

Watch [“To New Horizons”](#), a 23-minute film produced by General Motors for the New York World’s Fair of 1939-40.

Nov. 24: THANKSGIVING—NO CLASS

PART 5: THE COMING OF WORLD WAR II

Nov. 29: Coming of War

Read: Brendon, ch. 18, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26, Conclusion (chs. 19, 20 and 23 are optional); *New York Times* reports the [Nanjing Massacre, 1937](#). Optional: A Western journalist describes the [Chinese Communists' "Long March"](#).

SECOND PAPER DUE

Dec. 1: A Summing Up

Read: Henry Luce, ["The American Century"](#) (1941)

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