

# Chapter 6: The Third French Republic, 1920-1945

## Introduction

Between 1920 and 1945, the Third French Republic faced enormous challenges, including economic instability, political crises, and the rise of extreme ideologies. The government struggled to manage post-war reconstruction, contain the influence of both communism and fascism, and defend France against the growing threat of Nazi Germany. Ultimately, the Republic collapsed in 1940 following the German invasion, leading to the establishment of Vichy France.

## 1. The Challenges Facing France After World War I

### Economic Devastation

- 1.4 million French soldiers killed; 4.2 million wounded.
- Entire towns and villages destroyed, especially in northeastern France (e.g. Douaumont, Verdun).
- Infrastructure (roads, bridges, and railways) severely damaged.
- 1,200 km<sup>2</sup> of farmland destroyed by craters and unexploded shells.
- France heavily reliant on foreign loans, leading to huge debts.

### Political Instability

- Fear of communism increased after the 1917 Russian Revolution.
- Socialists and communists gained popularity, alarming the aristocracy, clergy, and middle class.
- Frequent government changes - more than 40 governments between 1920-1940.

## 2. The Treaty of Versailles and France's Attempt to Weaken Germany

- France insisted on harsh penalties for Germany.
- Alsace and Lorraine returned to France.
- Germany forced to pay £6.6 billion in reparations.
- France controlled the Saar coal-mining region.
- France hoped these measures would prevent another German invasion.

### Occupation of the Ruhr (1923)

- Germany defaulted on reparations in 1922.
- French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr, seizing resources.
- German workers resisted, leading to hyperinflation in Germany.
- Occupation lasted until 1925, securing 900 million marks for France.

## 3. Political Instability and Economic Struggles (1920-1939)

### *Bloc National (1919-1924)*

- Led by Georges Clemenceau, aimed to:
  - Crush communism.
  - Restore French prestige.
  - Keep Germany weak.
- Internal divisions and economic troubles led to its collapse.

### *Cartel des Gauches (1924-1926)*

- Left-wing coalition led by Édouard Herriot.
- Introduced social reforms but struggled with debt and inflation.
- Collapsed due to political deadlock.

### *Raymond Poincaré and Economic Recovery (1926-1929)*

- Stabilised the economy through tax increases and currency devaluation.
- France became a major car manufacturer (250,000 cars produced in 1929).
- His policies protected France from the Great Depression until 1931.

### *The Great Depression and the Rise of Extremism (1930s)*

- Industrial production fell by 25% by 1932.
- Unemployment rose to 15%.
- Rise of far-right leagues (e.g. Action Française, Croix-de-Feu).

### *4. The Stavisky Affair and Political Unrest (1934)*

- Alexandre Stavisky, a corrupt businessman, had ties to politicians.
- His mysterious death in 1934 sparked riots.
- 6 February 1934: Right-wing leagues rioted in Paris, killing 15 people.
- Many feared a fascist coup.

### *5. The Popular Front (1936-1938)*

- Left-wing coalition led by Léon Blum.
- Promised social reforms and economic stability.
- Introduced the Matignon Agreements:
  - 40-hour workweek.
  - 12% wage increases.
  - Paid holidays for workers.
- Blum's government collapsed in 1937 due to economic difficulties and opposition from conservatives.

## 6. French Foreign Policy and the Failure to Contain Germany

### The Maginot Line (1929-1940)

- **Massive defensive fortifications built along the German border.**
- **Failed to prevent invasion, as Germany bypassed it through Belgium in 1940.**

### Appeasement and German Expansion

- **France did not act when Hitler reoccupied the Rhineland (1936).**
- **France abandoned Czechoslovakia during the Munich Agreement (1938).**
- **Britain and France only declared war after Germany invaded Poland (1939).**

## 7. The Fall of France (1940)

- **Germany invaded France in May 1940, bypassing the Maginot Line through the Ardennes.**
- **French and British forces were overwhelmed.**
- **Paris fell on 14 June 1940.**
- **France surrendered on 22 June 1940, leading to the creation of Vichy France.**

## 8. Vichy France (1940-1944)

- **Marshal Philippe Pétain became leader of the collaborationist Vichy regime.**
- **Abolished democracy, introduced right-wing authoritarian rule.**
- **Worked with Nazi Germany, assisting in the deportation of Jews.**
- **Opposed by the Free French Forces, led by Charles de Gaulle.**
- **November 1942: Germany fully occupied Vichy France.**
- **August 1944: The Resistance helped liberate France.**

### Conclusion

- **The Third French Republic struggled with economic crises, political instability, and external threats.**
- **Right-wing and left-wing groups competed for control, leading to frequent government collapses.**
- **France failed to act decisively against Hitler, contributing to the outbreak of WWII.**
- **In 1940, France fell to Germany, ending the Third Republic.**

### Key Terms

- **Bloc National:** Conservative coalition ruling France (1919-1924).
- **Cartel des Gauches:** Left-wing coalition ruling France (1924-1926).
- **Occupation of the Ruhr (1923):** French troops occupied German industrial territory.
- **Stavisky Affair (1934):** Corruption scandal that led to political riots.
- **Popular Front:** Leftist government led by Léon Blum (1936-1938).

- **Maginot Line:** Defensive fortifications along the German border.
- **Vichy France:** Pro-German regime led by Marshal Pétain (1940-1944).

