

Chapter 7: Britain During the Interwar Years, 1920-1939

Introduction:

The interwar years were a period of **economic decline, social unrest, and political change** in Britain. The nation faced **post-war economic challenges**, industrial decline, and the effects of the **Great Depression**. The government struggled to balance social welfare with financial stability, while events such as the **General Strike (1926)** and the **Jarrow March (1936)** highlighted the suffering of the working class. However, democracy survived, in contrast to many European nations that turned to authoritarianism.

1. Post-World War I Economic and Social Challenges

The Economic Cost of WWI

- Over **750,000 British soldiers killed** and **1 million wounded**.
- **War debt of £9.5 billion**, with **£900 million owed to the USA**.
- Britain lost **overseas markets** to competitors (USA, Japan).
- Industrial production struggled to recover, with exports **declining by 50% between 1920-1921**.

Social Reforms (1918-1920)

- **Representation of the People Act (1918):**
 - Gave **all men over 21** and **women property owners over 30** the right to vote.
 - **1928:** Voting age for women reduced to **21**, achieving full suffrage.
- **Education Act (1918):** Raised school leaving age to **14**.
- **Unemployment Insurance Act (1920):** Provided **15 weeks of unemployment benefits**.
- **National Health Insurance Act (1920):** Expanded access to medical treatment.

2. Economic Decline and Industrial Unrest

The Collapse of Traditional Industries

- **Coal, shipbuilding, steel, and textiles** faced competition from the USA, Japan, and Germany.
- **Unemployment rose to 2 million by 1921** as industries struggled.
- **British coal became uncompetitive** due to higher wages and outdated technology.

General Strike (1926)

- **Causes:**
 - Decline in coal industry, exacerbated by **reintroduction of the Gold Standard (1925)**, making British goods expensive.

- Mine owners cut wages and increased hours.
- Miners' slogan: "Not a penny off the pay, not a minute on the day."
- Strike began on 3 May 1926, with 2 million workers joining.
- Government response:
 - Used volunteers to maintain essential services.
 - Winston Churchill published the British Gazette, portraying the strike as a communist threat.
 - 12 May: Strike ended without gains for miners.
 - 1927 Trade Disputes Act banned sympathy strikes.

3. The Great Depression (1929-1939)

- Wall Street Crash (1929) led to global economic collapse.
- British exports fell by 50%, causing business closures and mass unemployment.
- Unemployment peaked at 3 million (20% of workforce) in 1932.
- Harsh means-testing of benefits by the Unemployment Assistance Board caused anger.
- North England, Scotland, and Wales suffered worst, while London and the South prospered due to growth in consumer goods industries (cars, radios, household appliances).

Formation of the National Government (1931)

- Led by Ramsay MacDonald, included Conservatives, Liberals, and Labour.
- Policies:
 - Abandoned the Gold Standard, making exports cheaper.
 - Protectionist tariffs introduced to support British industry.
 - Cut public sector wages by 10% and introduced strict means-testing for benefits.

4. The Jarrow March (1936)

Background

- Jarrow, an industrial town in northeast England, suffered 70% unemployment.
- Palmers Shipyard closed (1934), worsening poverty.

The March

- 200 unemployed men marched 300 miles to London.
- Led by Labour MP Ellen Wilkinson.
- Carried a petition with 11,000 signatures.
- Marchers were well-disciplined and avoided violence.
- Government refused to take action upon receiving the petition.

Impact

- No immediate job creation, but the march raised awareness of unemployment.

- Jarrow benefited from rearmament (1938) as war preparations created jobs.

5. British Foreign Policy and the Road to WWII

Appeasement

- Britain avoided confrontation with Germany, focusing on economic recovery.
- Germany remilitarised the Rhineland (1936), annexed Austria (1938), and took Sudetenland (1938) without British intervention.
- Munich Agreement (1938): PM Neville Chamberlain allowed Hitler to take Czechoslovakia.
- Britain only declared war when Germany invaded Poland (1939).

Conclusion

- Britain struggled with economic decline, unemployment, and industrial unrest.
- The General Strike (1926) and the Jarrow March (1936) symbolised worker grievances.
- Democracy survived, unlike in Germany and Italy.
- The government's appeasement policy failed to prevent WWII.

Key Terms

- Gold Standard (1925): Linked currency to gold, making British exports expensive.
- General Strike (1926): Nationwide strike in support of coal miners.
- Means-testing: Strict assessment for unemployment benefits.
- National Government (1931): Multi-party coalition to address the Depression.
- Jarrow March (1936): Protest against unemployment and poverty.
- Appeasement: British policy of avoiding war by allowing Hitler's expansion.