

View from the Cliff-Part 1

In 1938, the world was on the brink of its second major global catastrophe in under thirty years. The road leading to World War II was long and winding, full of twists, turns, and surprises. WWII was not an inevitable event or something that was unavoidable. The reasons behind WWII cannot be put into a pretty, clean package with a bow on top. Instead, WWII was a tragic event that was the result of ill-advised choices, unpredictable reactions, and simple twists of fate. Yes, WWII could have been avoided. We will be stepping back from the edge of this cliff to look at the events that lead up to WWII, looking at the major world themes in the 200 years leading up to the war.

Life Before WWI

To fully understand WWII, we must go back in time, to the period between 1700 and 1913. During this period, mankind had achieved a level of success that few had dreamed possible. They had explored the four corners of the globe, invented the engine, created vaccines to prevent deadly illness, harnessed the power of electricity, conquered gravity with the first aircraft, and mass produced goods with machines that made the age-old institution of slavery obsolete. Western Civilization was able to travel farther, move faster, work harder, and be more productive than any other point in human history. On top of this, they had conquered major social issues, such as abolishing slavery and protecting basic human rights. This was beginning to crumble the power of the long standing traditions of having monarchies and empires, established over 2,000 years ago by Alexander the Great. This was a glorious time for (most of) humanity. This glory was mirrored in the music, art and writing of the time. These three mediums reflected the idea that mankind was knocking on the door of Utopia, or paradise, and that it was only a matter of time before was in its grasp. (See *Pre-WWI Poetry*). Indeed, life *seemed* very good.



Pre-WWI Poetry

"My Pretty Rose Tree" ~ William Blake

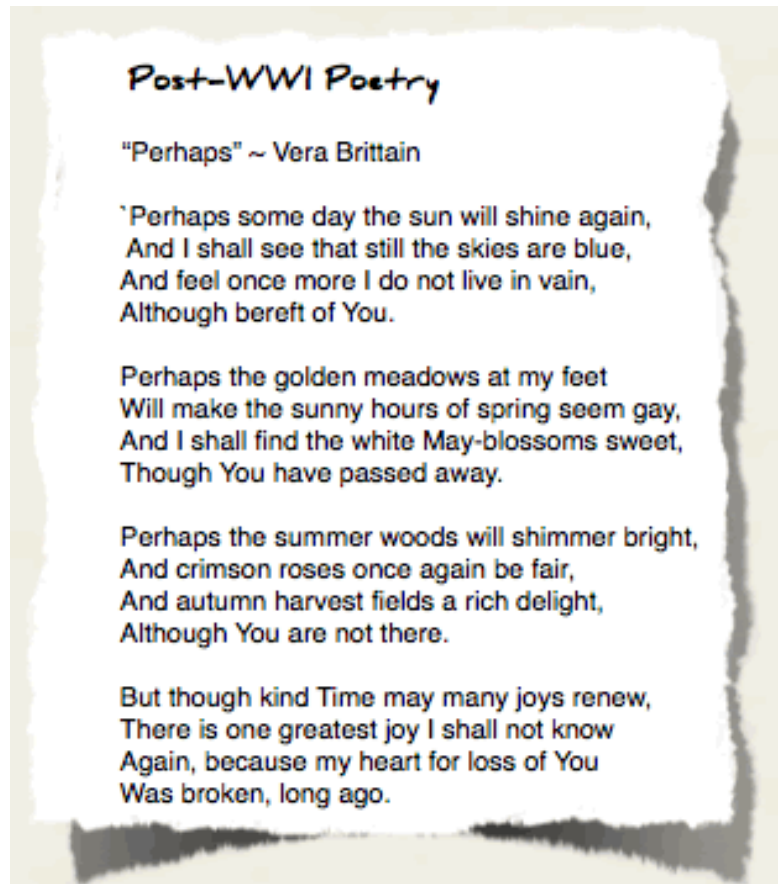
A flower was offered to me,
Such a flower as May never bore;
But I said "I've a pretty rose tree,"
And I passed the sweet flower o'er.

Then I went to my pretty rose tree,
To tend her by day and by night;
But my rose turned away with jealousy,
And her thorns were my only delight.

So powerful and intoxicating was the innocence of man's spirit and the romantic nature of man's outlook on life, that they became blind to the evils that were brewing beneath their feet. During this time, countries were Imperialistic. Imperialism is the act of building an empire, attempting to build their glory of their home country. They became militaristic, maintaining a

strong military and being ready to use it. These countries were flexing their muscles with the types of weapons they could make, and the size/power of their army. The idea of Nationalism, that every group of people could have their own country, was becoming a powerful force. The large empires and armies, combined with the alliances, or friendships, they had developed, set the stage for a catastrophe beyond the human imagination.

In 1914, an assassination in the region of Serbia set off a chain reaction that was called "The War to End All Wars." So potent and powerful were the new



weapons of war, that the world saw the death of nine million men, with another twenty-one million men wounded. The remains of another seven million men were never found. All of this in four years time. WWI was the death of the innocence of man. Paradise had been lost.

Life After WWI

Those who were left began to pick up the pieces of the broken world around them. The weight of the death and destruction was heavy on their minds and had seared their souls. The music had lost its joy, the art lost its beauty, the poetry lost its sweetness (*See Post-WWI Poetry*). Man once again sought the path to paradise; a cure for the innocence they had lost. But the path that had once lead to a glorious future brought them to an impassable canyon; with humanity on one side and the paradise they sought on the other. Desperate, man became more determined to find a way to ease the pain, to regain a utopia to enjoy in the days to come. There were three main paths that people looked at for answers:



- One path was Communism. This was the idea that materialism and the love of money was the problem, and that everyone should be equal and should share everything equally. Paradise would be found in the equality and survival of the masses.
- A second path was Monarchy/Dictatorship. This was the idea that the elite leaders should be in charge of the countries of the world, forcing their ideas of what utopia would look like on the people. This was similar to the path that had been used to bring man to the door step of paradise the first time. Paradise was found in a rigid class structure where everyone in society has a role and a place.
- The third path was Democracy. This is the idea that exalts the power and beauty of the individual and allowing each person a chance to make their own destiny. Paradise is found in each person being allowed to achieve their own creative potential.

All over the world, humanity divided over the path that they thought would lead them back to utopia... back to paradise. In the 1920's, there was great wealth and prosperity in the USA, which made people feel that maybe democracy and individual freedom were the answers they were seeking. Besides, it was working for the USA, so it must be worth trying. Then, in 1929, the world entered into a period known as the Great Depression. The United States stock market collapsed, sending the entire world into a tail spin; the worst economic crises in modern history. The poverty and despair pushed people to extreme points of view, making them willing to take more drastic steps to achieve the idea of utopia. Large masses rushed towards the ideas of Dictatorship and Communism, with each side embracing the thought that militarism and violence was a necessary part of their plan.

It is in this environment of chaos and despair, there arose three countries with a vision of greatness and a desire to bring their people out of this terrible situation: Germany, Italy and Japan. By 1938, the aggressive nature of these countries, known as the Axis Powers, will send mankind off the cliff into an even greater chasm, plunging the world into the despair of a second global conflict.



Questions

1) Define Utopia? Between 1700 and 1913, why did people feel they were on the door steps of Utopia? What do you feel were the three greatest inventions/advances during this time? Why?

2) In WWI, How many people died, were injured or went missing because of it? What else was lost because of WWI?

3) Using the art & poetry in the reading, fill out the following chart:

	Pre-War Painting (Upper Right Corner)	Pre-War Poetry	Post-War Painting	Post-War Poetry
Emotion of the art/ poetry?				
Story/Message of the art/poetry				
What does it tell you about the time period?				

4) In what ways are the Pre & Post war materials different?

5) List and describe the three paths people choose for searching for Utopia after the war? Explain why people pursued each of these paths.

6) What major world event happened in 1929? Where & why did it happen? What effect did it have on the world? How did people react?

7) Summarize the situation the world was in in 1938 in 4 separate words or short phrases.

8) Define: Inevitable. Was WWII inevitable? Why or Why not?