

PART XI CULTURAL PLURALITY: FROM THE MIDDLE TWENTIETH CENTURY ON

Chapter 33 Absurdity and Alienation: World War II and the Postwar Period

I. World War II

1. While World War I had been for the most part a European war, World War II was truly global.
2. World War II actually consisted of four distinct though interrelated conflicts.

A. The Second Anglo-French-German War, 1939–1945

1. “Hitler’s war” began when England and France declared war on Germany after the Nazis invaded Poland.
2. Germany quickly defeated the French with a combined air and tank assault called the *blitzkrieg*.
3. The British fended off a German invasion with their victory over the Germans in the skies over Britain in the “Battle of Britain.”
4. The Allies struck back initially through North Africa and Italy and lastly through the D-Day invasion at Normandy.
5. The British “convoy system” used flotillas of small naval fighting ships (destroyers) to safeguard merchant ships from German submarines.
6. In addition to strategic strikes on military targets, aerial bombardments struck civilian populations.

B. The Russo-German War, 1941–1945

1. The Russo-German War was the largest land war in history and between twenty and thirty million Russians died.
2. The Germans nearly won but were unable to take the major cities of Leningrad and Moscow.
3. In 1942 they lost the decisive battle of Stalingrad.
4. The United States played a critical role in supplying the Soviet Army.
5. In a counteroffensive, as they marched through Eastern Europe on to Germany, the Russians wiped out political adversaries in anticipation of incorporating those countries into the Soviet sphere after the war.
6. It was largely in Eastern Europe that the Nazis carried out their systematic campaign of genocide against the Jewish people, as well as Gypsies and other minorities.

C. The Japanese-American War

1. Sea power dominated the Pacific War between the United States and Japan.
2. The Japanese drove the Dutch and British from their colonial holdings ending their era of European colonization in Asia.
3. The Naval Battle of Midway in 1942 proved to be a decisive victory for the United States.
4. After a series of fierce battles, island by island toward Japan, the United States relentlessly bombed Japanese cities.
5. More death and destruction resulted from the fire bombing of Tokyo than from the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.
6. The unleashing of atomic weapons on Japan by the United States remains a controversial decision.

D. The War for Greater East Asia, 1931–1949

1. This war began with the Japanese invasion of the Chinese mainland.
2. The Chinese fought the occupation at a great cost of human life using guerrilla war tactics.

3. The Chinese regime fought the Japanese while at the same time fighting a civil war against the Communists under Mao Zedong.
4. After the defeat of Japan, the Communists prevailed in the civil war.
5. The Nationalist army collapsed and Chiang Kai-shek and loyalists fled to Taiwan.

#### E. The Human Cost of World War II

1. The casualty rate from World War II is estimated at about 50 million people.
2. In contrast to World War I, the number of civilian casualties exceeded military ones.
3. Apprehension about modern warfare's terrible potential was intensified by the use of atomic weapons.
4. This apprehension was further intensified by the development of atomic weapons by the Soviet Union.
5. Lingering institutional racism in the United States undermined its moral authority for world leadership in the dangerous postwar period.

### II. The Postwar Period

1. The center of power shifted out of Western Europe and the United States was the most powerful nation.
2. Europe was now geographically positioned between two great powers, the United States and the Soviet Union, with each vying for influence and attempting to draw European nations into their sphere of influence.
3. The dissolution of Europe's colonial empires led to scores of new nations.
4. The United States sought peace and security through alliances to counter the Soviet threat and supported the creation of the United Nations to foster international initiatives and resolve disputes.

#### A. The Cold War

1. Following the end of the Korean War, the closest the United States and the Soviet Union came to an armed confrontation was the Cuban Missile Crisis.
2. President Kennedy said that the presence of Soviet missiles in Cuba represented an unacceptable threat to the security of the United States.
3. As Soviet freighters steamed toward a naval blockade of Cuba, Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev backed down.
4. The postwar period was a time of prosperity and complacency about political and societal concerns.
5. Concern about the ideology of worldwide communism led to an age of suspicion about possible penetration of American institutions by communist "agents."
6. Congressional tribunals in the era of McCarthyism destroyed and discredited many individuals, but the investigative process itself was eventually discredited and dismissed as a "witch hunt."

#### B. Independence in Asia

1. The Japanese victories ended the era of white power in Asia that had begun nearly 450 years earlier.
2. The British and Dutch tried to return after the Japanese defeat but quickly abandoned their Asian holdings.
3. The French tried to hold onto their colonies more persistently.
4. A communist-led independence movement led by Ho Chi Minh defeated the French in Vietnam and the U.N. partitioned the country, leaving a pro-Western regime in the south.

5. Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese in the north rejected the partition and fought to reunify the country under their control.
6. Independence for India from Britain ignited a bitter conflict between Hindus and Muslims, which led to partition of the subcontinent into India and Pakistan.

#### C. Independence in Africa

1. African independence from the yoke of colonialism paralleled that of Asia.
2. The French fought a bloody civil war over Algeria which had a substantial French population and was considered by the French to be not a colony but part of France.
3. Some of the British colonies in sub-Saharan Africa remained in the hands of white colonists for decades to come.
4. The Portuguese attempted to hold onto their colonies in West Africa but yielded to armed local insurgencies in 1975.

#### D. Neocolonialism

1. The ease with which the African continent was liberated brings into question the extent to which independence was truly achieved.
2. Puppet leaders who protected Western economic and political interests informally maintained significant vestiges of colonialism.
3. To guard against this “neocolonialism,” Caribbean intellectual Franz Fanon called for periodic uprisings by the working people.

#### E. Black Liberation Movements

1. The black liberation movement was particularly successful in the United States.
2. The *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1954 gave renewed impetus to the civil rights movement.
3. Led by Martin Luther King, the civil rights movement peacefully took on segregation and other aspects of institutional racism throughout the South as well as subtler manifestations of racism in the North.

#### F. The Middle East

1. In the Balfour declaration, the British declared their support for an eventual Jewish “homeland” in Palestine.
2. The British became the governing authority of the region after World War I.
3. The regional Arab population opposed the idea of a Jewish resettlement in the area from the outset.
4. The *Holocaust* and its aftermath helped justify and gave urgency to the need for an independent Jewish state in the Middle East.
5. The formation of Israel has been a source of recurring and violent contention between Arabs and Jews in the Middle East since Israel declared independence in 1948.

### III. European Literature

1. World War II and its aftermath left the *humanities* in crisis.
2. The attempted genocide of the Jews, the death camps, and use of atomic weapons raised terrifying questions.
3. The role of the humanities as a humanizing force was put into question.

#### A. Literature and the Holocaust: Primo Levi (1919–1987)

1. The Holocaust as a literary or artistic theme was controversial in the early postwar period.
2. Many works nonetheless chronicled the privation and dehumanizing suffering of its victims as well as the ultimate triumph of some in spiritual or humanistic terms.
3. Primo Levi was a scientist and Italian Jew who was one of the survivors liberated from a concentration camp.
4. His book *If This Is A Man* and others offer great literary feeling and are among the most sensitive and telling first-person accounts of the Holocaust..

B. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Existentialism

1. Existentialism was the most influential philosophical and literary movement to come out of the war years.
2. Developed much earlier in the works of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others, it was popularized and refined by the French intellectual Jean Paul Sartre.
3. Sartre expresses the view that humanity was not given “being” but “existence,” and existence is defined by the choices one makes.
4. Existentialism rejects the idea of God and of good and evil, which leads to a sense of limitless and anxiety-producing human freedom.
5. The self is defined by the exercise of that freedom.
6. He believed that life in France under Nazi occupation represented an acute existential experience that the complexities of postwar life obscured.

C. Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986)

1. Best known in the United States for the feminist treatise, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir was Sartre’s life partner.
2. The two philosophers were colleagues and intellectual allies as well as lifelong companions.
3. *The Second Sex* was met with hostility in France where it was thought to disparage the traditional role of women.
4. Two decades after its publication, it served a leading role in the intellectual firmament of the women’s movement.

D. Albert Camus (1913–1960)

1. Though he refused to call himself an existentialist, the work of Albert Camus is part of the postwar existential canon.
2. The human demands reason, logic, and order but the world is inherently irrational and “absurd,” according to Camus.
3. Individuals must create their own morality and reality in developing a resistance to the absurdity of life.
4. Camus’ *Myth of Sisyphus* is his most developed statement of the absurd.

E. In the Wake of Existentialism: The Theater of the Absurd

1. The Holocaust, the A-Bomb, Stalinist purges, and other horrific events of the war and early post-war period gave the sense of despair and absurdity of existentialism more relevance than its more heroic side.
2. The “Theatre of the Absurd,” which developed in Paris during the 1950s, found new forms for dramatizing this sensibility.
3. Like Artaud’s theater of cruelty, these works assault the audience to rouse them from their complacency.

F. Eugène Ionesco (1912–1994)

1. Though it was so startling when it was first performed that it caused riots, Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* (The Bald Soprano) has become one of the longest running plays in history.
2. The play reveals how spoken words can be banal and pointless one minute and violent weapons the next.
3. Ionesco calls his plays "tragic farces."

#### IV. Postwar American Literature

1. American and European literature after the war demonstrate a direct or indirect influence of existentialism.
2. Once again Paris was an artistic hub, especially among African-American writers.
3. Important encounters between African and African-American writers took place in Paris during this period.
4. Richard Wright (1908–1960), author of *Native Son* and James Baldwin, (1924–1987) who wrote *Go Tell It on the Mountain* are two of the African-American authors who wrote from Paris.

##### A. Ralph Ellison (1914–1994)

1. A trained jazz musician, for Ellison the blues became the aesthetic mainspring of his writing.
2. In his celebrated work *Invisible Man*, Ellison's main character assumes a variety of roles to fit the larger society's definition of a "Negro."
3. Each of these roles leaves him feeling empty because they fail to take into account the complexity of his individual existence.
4. A blues motif runs throughout the entire novel with each episode serving as an extended blues verse with the protagonist serving as the singer.

##### B. The Beat Generation: Allen Ginsberg (1926–1997)

1. For many artists, the arms race, consumerism, conformity, and McCarthyism served as an unnerving backdrop to the Eisenhower calm of the 1950s.
2. Writers Norman Mailer and William Burroughs gave voice to the themes of alienation, despair, and revolt.
3. Poets like Allen Ginsberg were leaders of the *beat generation*, which marked the beginning of the counterculture.
4. Ginsberg expresses both disgust at American culture and wonder about America itself.
5. Ginsberg abandoned traditional poetic meter and diction for a form rich in rhythmic effects but close to everyday speech.
6. *Howl*, his best-known work, led to a charge of obscenity, of which he was acquitted.

#### V. Postwar Music: Charlie Parker (1920–1955)

1. World War II was a watershed that severed the musical traditions of the past from the new music of the day.
2. Saxophonist Charlie Parker embodied the pent-up frustrations of black America after the war.
3. Though he represented the crowning achievement of African-American achievement, he was largely ignored and fell prey to drugs and alcohol.
4. The musical style he created, *bebop* or bop, broke with the tradition that had kept jazz tied to dance music and popular songs.

#### VI. Painting After World War II

1. The sense of the absurd, feelings of alienation, and the emphasis on self-expression manifest in writing and jazz music permeated the visual arts as well.
2. With origins in cubism and influenced by jazz, Stuart Davis (1894–1964) made larger canvases filled with vaguely familiar objects rhythmically charged with energy.
3. Georgia O’Keeffe created haunting, desert-inspired visions.

#### A. Abstract Expressionism

1. The style called *abstract expressionism* actually incorporates such a variety of styles that it may not be a school or movement in the usual sense.
2. Most abstract expressionist works are nonfigurative and all of these painters gave primacy to the unconscious mind and to the physical act of making the painting.
3. Drawn into the dialogue that the artist carries on with the paint and canvas, the viewer is a witness to the emotionally charged event of which the canvas is a record.

### VII. Sculpture After World War II

1. Constructed sculpture took on great importance after World War II alongside cast bronze and carved stone.
2. During the 1930s an American, Alexander Calder (1898–1976), began to produce wire and wood constructions with the energy and whimsy of Stuart Davis paintings.
3. Calder created *mobiles* that not only decorated the architectural spaces in which they were placed but also animated them.
4. Using forms that seemed derived from the natural world, they were in fact machined and carefully painted, and seemed to echo the sleek surfaces and large scale of international style architecture.

#### A. David Smith (1906–1965)

1. Smith’s early work originated with surrealism’s emphasis on the subconscious and on dreams as a source of forms.
2. His later work relied on a sculptural language that used a few highly polished stainless steel geometric forms.
3. Like Alexander Calder, Smith’s work represents the possibilities of the nonobjective and expressive language that began with Kandinsky and evolved into constructionism.

#### B. Alberto Giacometti (1901–1966)

1. A friend of Sartre, Giacometti’s work seemed to epitomize the human condition as viewed by the existentialist.
2. Giacometti created individuals who suffered their fate from within society but aloof from it.