France

World War I had an even more devastating effect on France than on Great Britain. In the four years of fighting, the combatants had destroyed thousands of square miles of farmland and forests and reduced villages and cities to rubble. French casualties were enormous. Half of the males between the ages of 18 and 32 were killed in the fighting.

Troubled Years

Like Great Britain, France faced severe economic problems after the war. High unemployment and soaring inflation caused terrible hardships. The French government was nearly bankrupt, and its war debts were staggering. As a result of these financial problems, France's factories, railways, and canals could not be quickly rebuilt.

The political picture was as bleak as the economic one. Many political parties competed for votes. Since each party received seats in the national legislature according to its percentage of the vote, no party ever won a majority of seats. In order to form a government, several parties had to band together into a coalition, or alliance of factions, but the coalition governments often fell apart soon after they were formed.

Extremist groups on both the left and the right also threatened the political stability of the nation. Communists and Socialists struggled for power against Fascists, extreme nationalists favoring a strong government, and outbreaks of violence were common.

The Popular Front

In 1934 the political crisis reached a head. Fascist groups rioted in Paris, killing several people. Fearing a Fascist takeover, the Communists appealed to leaders of the Socialist party for "a broad Popular Front to combat fascism and for work, liberty, and peace."

The new coalition won enough votes in a 1936 election to form a government. Léon Blum, the Socialist leader, became prime minister. The Popular Front was in power for about a year, but in that short time it passed many new laws that benefited workers and farmers.

Foreign Policy

Exhausted and drained by World War I, France wanted, above all else, to prevent another war. Consequently, the French government supported the League of Nations in the postwar years and worked to create a series of alliances to contain Germany. But it also sought friendly ties with Germany's new democratic Weimar Republic. In 1925 France signed the Locarno Agreements with Germany, Italy, Belgium, and Great Britain that appeared to ensure a lasting peace.

As added insurance against a future German invasion, France built a series of fortifications that were 200 miles (320 km) long called the Maginot (MA•zhuh•NOH) Line. This stretch of concrete bunkers and trenches extended along France's border with Germany. French military leaders boasted that the Maginot Line could never be crossed. What they failed to consider was that past German invasions had come through Belgium, whose border with France remained virtually undefended.