

# Europe and the wider world: Topic 3 Dictatorship and Democracy in Europe, 1920-1945 | Sample answer

## **What were the main challenges facing France, 1920-1945?**

The inter-war years were fraught with difficulties for the Third French Republic. The Great War devastated the country and the problems lingered on for years while political instability prevented continued growth. Extremist voices from both sides gained popularity while the Great Depression and strikes wreaked havoc on the economy. By the time war broke out in 1939, they had cycled through dozens of governments and were woefully unprepared for war. The war itself of course did not signal an end to the country's problems and it became divided having fallen soon after the German invasion.

Many of France's problems in the 1920's can be traced back to the effects of the First World War. Of the 8 million men mobilised, almost 1.5 million were killed and another 3 million were injured. A whole generation of males was almost entirely depleted. The industrial north-east of the country, crucial to their economy, was ruined by war. Millions of its citizens were refugees and there was record levels of homelessness. The cost of all this would be immense and the effects of the war were felt into the 1920's and beyond.

This era for France was characterised by political instability. However, this was most obvious in the early part of the 1920's. Following George Clemenceau's resignation in 1920, the country saw a series of Prime Ministers come and go. Alexandre Millerand, Georges Leygue and Aristide Briand all held power for short periods before some form of stability returned with the election of Raymond Poincaré in January 1922. This volatility and uncertainty restricted growth as well as slowing the recovery from the War. Even Poincaré only maintained power for a little over 2 years before resigning after the Senate rejected his tax proposals.

Next into government was the Cartel Des Gauches but they too faced their share of issues. This "Left Alliance" was made up of Radicals and Socialists and this is where they encountered many of their problems. When they were forced to deal with an economic crisis caused by years of mismanagement of public expenditure, their inherent differences caused friction. The Prime Minister, Edouard Herriot and his Radical supporters refused to raise taxes and decided to instead borrow money which only worsened the crisis. The French Franc collapsed. The

Socialists pushed Herriot into seeking a tax on capital but the conservatives in the senate rejected this and he was forced to resign.

Under the Government of National Union, France enjoyed a short-lived recovery. Back in power, Poincaré now ruled by decree due to the circumstances and this allowed him to act swiftly and he steadied the economy and stabilised the Franc. The northeast finally got the funding needed and the car industry began to boom and the country became the second largest car manufacturer in the world. However, the Wall Street Crash of 1929 and the subsequent Great Depression again caused havoc. America cancelled their loans to Germany and this put an end to German reparations to France. Unemployment rocketed as the effects of the global crisis set in and the government's laissez-faire approach led to serious industrial unrest.

The next issue to face France was the rise of fascist movements. The political instability of the period led to a sense that democracy was failing and many looked to extremist organisations that promised firmness and action. Fascist leagues as they were known gained massive popularity. Action Française, Solidarité Française and Jeunesses Patriotes were all fiercely anti-Communist and anti-Semitic and primarily drew support from the middle and upper classes. The most popular league, Croix de Feu, was not anti-Semitic and was mainly composed of ex-servicemen. They gained the support of many newspapers such as Le Matin and Le Journal and these slandered left and centrist politicians while spreading the word of the Croix. This rise of fascism led to a culture of hate in society and made the political arena all the more volatile.

The Stavisky Affair of 1934 brought some of these issues to a head. When Serge Stavisky, a Russian Jewish financier was found dead, supposedly of suicide, allegations of corruption and fraud were thrown at the Cartel Des Gauches government. Right-wing newspapers claimed he had been killed to prevent him naming government ministers involved in his swindles. This gave the fascist leagues an opportunity to attack the parliamentary democratic system they hated. In February 1934, they marched through the streets of Paris and prepared to attack the Chamber of Deputies. Fourteen people were killed before the riot was crushed. Camille Chautemps, the Prime Minister, resigned as a result of the scandal.

In 1936, widespread strikes were the latest problem that faced the Republic. Following the rise of fascism, the left pooled their resources and managed to form a "Popular Front" government in 1936. Socialist Leon Blum led the government but was immediately faced with strikes

brought about by a lack of social reform and the slowness of France's recovery. The Matignon Agreement of 1936 saw the strikes come to an end but only after Blum controversially gave in to the union's demands. Wages were raised and hours were reduced while the Bank of France would be closely supervised. Production dropped but prices still rose and Blum resorted to borrowing to finance his reforms. He eventually halted the reforms and the strikes resumed. A slogan at the time declared "Better Hitler than Blum". He soon resigned.

This of course was not the end of France's problems. World War 2 brought its many challenges and the Third Republic eventually fell due to how poorly prepared it was for war. The political instability that plagued France during this period also meant they could not adequately prepare. It became almost as soon as the Germans invaded that the Republic would fall. The Maginot Line on the north-eastern border which had been built was little match for the Nazi advance. An armistice was signed and the country was split into the German occupied North and Vichy France in the south. France was liberated in 1944 following the D-Day Landings but the damage caused by the war crippled the country.

France faced a litany of problems in the years prior to the outbreak of war. The country was plagued by political instability, the rise of fascist leagues, and strikes in the inter-war years. These issues meant they were unprepared for war when it arrived in 1939. The Third French Republic fell inauspiciously soon after the Germans invaded. The massive damage caused by the Second World War brought its own challenges.