The Legacy of World War II       Chapter 26 .Section 5

One American’s Story
When the end of the war came, Elliot Johnson was excited. He was finally going home. However, one of his captains told the troops that it might not be so easy.

PRIMARY SOURCE
“‘You guys are anxious to get home and put this all behind you,’ he said. ‘But you don’t understand how big a part of your life this has been. You’ll put it all behind you for about ten years, and then someday you’ll hear a marching band. You’ll pick up the beat and it will all come back to you and you’ll be right back here on the parade ground marching again.’ And he was right.”—Elliot Johnson, quoted in The Homefront

From the soldiers who survived it to families who lost a loved one, World War II affected millions of people in the United States and around the world.

Worldwide Destruction
KEY QUESTION What were the costs of the war?
No war has caused as much death and destruction as World War II. When peace returned, cities all over the world lay in ruins and millions had died.

The War’s Human Cost  Although specific statistics will never be known, the human cost on both sides was immense. About 20 million soldiers were killed, and millions more were wounded. The Soviet Union suffered the greatest losses, with estimates of about 8 million military deaths and another 5 million soldiers wounded. More than 400,000 American soldiers died and more than 600,000 were wounded.

Civilian casualties also numbered in the millions. Both the Allied and Axis powers had fought a war without boundaries. They bombed cities and destroyed villages. Again, the Soviet Union experienced the worst losses. An estimated 7 to 12 million Soviet citizens died. China, under attack from Japan in the 1930s, lost about 10 million civilians.

The war created a huge wave of refugees. They included orphans, prisoners of war, survivors of concentration camps, and those who fled advancing armies. After the war, 21 million refugees, most starving and
homeless, tried to put their lives back together amid the ruins of Europe and Asia.

**Economic Winners and Losers** The war left many of the world’s economies in ruins. Only the United States—where no major battles were fought except for Pearl Harbor—came out of the war with a strong economy. The wartime boom in industry had pulled the nation out of the Great Depression.

After the war, the U.S. economy kept growing. U.S. forces occupied Japan for several years after the war. During that time, they created programs to help Japan’s economy recover. In 1948, Congress approved Secretary of State George C. Marshall’s plan to help boost European economies. Under the **Marshall Plan**, the United States gave more than $13 billion to help the nations of Europe get back on their feet.

**SUMMARIZE** Describe the costs of World War II.

**Attempts at World Peace**

**KEY QUESTION** What did the international community do to protect world peace?

After the war, the international community took steps to ensure that such a conflict would never happen again.

**The Nuremberg Trials** In July 1945, the Allies held the **Potsdam Conference** to plan the war’s end. They decided to put German war criminals on trial at the **Nuremberg trials**, which opened that November in Germany. The original 24 defendants included some of Hitler’s top officials. They were charged with crimes against humanity for the Nazis’ murder of millions of Jews and others. The U.S. chief counsel spelled out why the trial was needed.

**PRIMARY SOURCE**

“... these prisoners ... are living symbols of racial hatreds, of terrorism and violence, and of the arrogance and cruelty of power.” —**Robert H. Jackson, The Nürnberg Case**

After nearly a year-long trial, 19 of the defendants were found guilty.
Twelve were sentenced to death. Over 130 others were found guilty in later trials. The Nuremberg trials upheld an important idea: people are responsible for their actions, even in wartime.

The Creation of the United Nations The war also helped to establish the principle that nations must work together in order to secure world peace. The outbreak of World War II demonstrated the weakness of the League of Nations, the international peacekeeping body created after the First World War. The League was weak in large part because the United States had refused to join out of a strong desire to stay out of foreign affairs. Toward the end of World War II, President Roosevelt urged Americans not to turn their backs on the world again.

The country listened. In April 1945, delegates from 50 nations—including the United States—met in San Francisco to discuss creating a new international peace organization. In June, all 50 nations approved the charter creating the new peacekeeping body known as the United Nations, or UN.

PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS Describe what nations did to protect world peace.

Changes in America and the World KEY QUESTION What changes did the war bring about? The war radically altered the world. Not only were economies ruined and lives lost, but many nations experienced social change. The war also helped the spread of communism, which America would oppose in the years ahead.

Changes in American Society With millions of veterans back home, competition for jobs and education increased dramatically. The government responded by passing the G. I. Bill of Rights, or G. I. Bill, which paid for returning soldiers’ schooling and gave them a living allowance. More than 8 million veterans went to school under the G. I. Bill. The return of so many veterans also created great demand for housing. The Truman
administration addressed the country’s housing shortage. However, many Americans had to live in crowded urban slums or in country shacks.

Returning veterans found an America that had changed. During the war, millions of Americans had moved to find war-related jobs in California and the cities. By war’s end, hundreds of thousands of African Americans had moved from the South to Northern cities. There, they lived in overcrowded ghettos and experienced prejudice. However, many also found economic opportunity.

International Tensions  Although many countries worked together toward lasting peace, tensions still lingered after the war. In response to the Holocaust, the United Nations created the new nation of Israel in 1948 as a homeland for the Jews in Palestine. Many Arabs in Palestine violently opposed Israel. Fighting broke out as neighboring Arab nations attacked the new nation.

The United States was concerned with the rise of the Soviet Union. Despite huge losses, the Soviet Union emerged from World War II as a great power.

During the war, Stalin had promised to promote democracy in Soviet-occupied Eastern Europe. Instead, he forced the occupied countries to live under Communist regimes and wanted to spread communism. The United States wanted to halt it. This would lead to future conflict.

Finally, the end of the war marked the beginning of the atomic age. The atomic bombs dropped on Japan were a powerful new weapon, one that increased tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union.

SUMMARIZE Explain what changes were brought about by the war.