THE 20TH CENTURY: FROM THE SECOND WORLD WAR TO THE END OF THE MILLENNIUM

The Second World War. After Baldwin’s retirement in 1937, the leader of the Conservative Party Arthur Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940) became Prime Minister (1937-1940), following a policy of appeasement in foreign affairs like his predecessor.

The international situation became more and more critical when Hitler began to carry out his intention to unify under Third Reich all German native tongue of Europe, Austrians and south inhabitants of Czechoslovakia. In March 1938 he made a second attempt to annex the independent State of Austria and moved against the country occupying Vienna. Though the Versailles Settlement (June 1919) forbade union between the two countries, Hitler, who was Austrian by birth, accomplished the operation with little international resistance. The frontier of Czechoslovakia now lay exposed to German advance from the Austrian side, and in September 1938, under the pretext of defending the rights of the German minority in the Southland, the German dictator attacked Czechoslovakia.

The British policy of appeasement came to end when Hitler began to menace Poland and invaded the western areas of the country: the alliance stipulated with that country was the formal reason for Britain’s and France’s declaration of war on Germany; on September 3rd 1939 the Second World War broke out.

The first phase of the war known as the «phony war» did not bring about dramatic events on both sides and, apart from the fall of Poland and skirmishes on the Maginot Line, nothing really important happened.

The hard offensive opened in April 1940; Germany invaded Denmark and Norway, and conquered the Low Countries and France, which made the strategic position of Britain extremely critical.

At the beginning of the war, Chamberlain had reconstituted his government, but in May 1940 it became clear that the country needed a new man: this was to be Sir Winston Churchill, eloquent, resolute and courageous.

After the fall of France, Britain stood alone for almost a year against Hitler and his ally, Italy, which entered the war on 10th June 1940. Italy attacked Britain on the African front (August 1940) and also invaded Greece (October 1940) and Yugoslavia (April 1941).

The series of reverses suffered by Britain reached a climax in the retreat of the British Expeditionary Forces from the beaches of Dunkirk; the Battle of Britain (1940) to gain air superiority over the Channel cost heavy losses on both sides.

However Hitler failed to get air superiority and was compelled to abandon his plan of invading Britain. When he turned to the East and launched his attack on the Soviet Union (June 1941), the Russians opposed a desperate resistance and the German invaders were halted at the gates of Leningrad, Moscow and Sebastopol.

On December 7th 1941, the Japanese, without any previous declaration of war, bombed the American base at Pearl Harbour and the United States joined the war. The entry of the two great neutral powers transformed the European war into a truly World War: Germany, Italy, and Japan on one side (the Axis Powers), and France, Great Britain, the United States, and most of the Commonwealth countries on the other (the Allied Powers).

The joint efforts of Britain and the United States succeeded in driving the German and Italian forces out of North Africa: General Montgomery (1887-1976), commander of the British Army, defeated the troops of the German General Erwin Rommel in October 1942 at El Alamein, in Egypt. The British victory was the turning point of the war; Germany was now suffering the horrors of heavy bombing which she had inflicted on Britain in 1940.

In the winter of 1942, the Russians defeated the German Sixth Army led by General Paulus in the Battle of Stalingrad.

The American and British forces attacked Italy in July 1943 and landed on the coast of Sicily. On July 25th Mussolini was deposed and Marshal Badoglio continued the war, until he was compelled to make peace on September 8th. In October 1943 Italy declared war against Germans.

The war reached its climax on June 6th 1944, when American and British forces landed in Normandy. The operation led by General Dwight D. Eisenhower contributed to the final fall of Germany.

In February 1945, Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin met at Yalta to agree on the future territorial asset of Europe. Hitler committed suicide on April 30th, and in May 1945 Germany finally surrendered; only Japan was still at war and on 6th and 9th August two atomic bombs were dropped respectively on Hiroshima and Nagasaki; the Emperor Hirohito accepted «unconditional surrender» and the war in Europe officially ended.
Britain after the Second World War. The conclusion of the war was followed by a period full of tensions; the world was confronted with social and political problems and divided into two blocks: communist and non-communist countries waging a «Cold War» against each other. The major issue in foreign policy was to preserve a balance of powers.

In 1945 Britain became a charter member of the United Nations Organization (O.N.U.), which replaced the «League of Nations» for the maintenance of international peace and security. The post-war years saw the formation of international organizations depending on O.N.U., which set new patterns for international cooperation, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (F.A.O.) and United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (U.N.E.S.C.O.) in 1945; the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (U.N.I.C.E.F.) in 1946; the World Health Organization (W.H.O.) in 1948.

In 1949 Britain also became a charter member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, a military alliance of western countries to ensure collectively the security of each Member State and to control Russia and Communist regimes.

In home affairs British Government tried to solve the post-war problems and endemic difficulties such as unemployment, the improvement of housing and education, and evolved the concept of a Welfare State according to the plans contained in the «Beveridge Report» of 1942. The experiences of the war contributed to change the national outlook and the general mood was to avoid new conflicts and to lay the bases of a better society. The new current of opinions, which led to the formation of the Welfare State in taking into account the needs and the aspirations of the people, also favoured the independence of British overseas territories.

Though the transformation of the British Empire did not always take place smoothly, most colonies became self-governing countries. India, Pakistan and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) gained independence in 1947, Eire became totally independent in 1949, and South Africa in 1960.

Churchill, the inspired leader of a national government in which all parties had a share, was relegated to the leadership of the opposition when the first post-war General Election, in July 1945, turned out to be a tremendous victory for the Labour Party. Clement Attlee, acting as Prime Minister (1945-1951), passed important acts such as the National Assistance Act (ending the old Poor Law), the National Health Service Act (which provided free medical care for all), the Education Act, and also nationalized the Bank of England, the coal mining industry, the raw cotton market, electricity, gas, transport and civil aviation.

Discontent with the Labour Party put the Conservatives in power again in 1951 and they dominated the fifties by winning the 1955 and 1959 elections, without altering many of the measures taken by their opponents. The three Conservative leaders who succeeded in the office of Prime Minister were Winston Churchill, Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan.

Meanwhile, the King George VI died (1952) and his daughter Elizabeth II succeeded him.

The Conservative Governments tried to bring to full development a social program; apart from the nationalization of credit, power and transports, their aims did not differ much from those of the Labour Party, but the creeping inflation hampered their plans. The last Conservative Prime Minister, Macmillan, was forced to adopt unpopular measures such as reducing government expenditure and stabilizing prices and wages.

The Labour Party came back to power in 1964 and its leader Harold Wilson became Prime Minister; the problem of inflation was still unsolved, and Wilson’s adoption of a policy of austerity failed to achieve positive results. The consequence was that Britain was compelled to devalue the pound sterling.

Moreover, the critical situation between the Protestant Extremists and the Irish Republican Army (I.R.A.) in Northern Ireland induced the British troops to intervene in 1969, but no positive result was achieved and the problems still persisted.

The Conservatives regained power in 1970, but under their leader Edward Heath unemployment and inflation reached the highest peak, and the only success was the admission of Britain (1973) in the European Economic Community.

The Conservatives were replaced by the Labour Party in 1974, but in 1979 they won the General Elections again and their leader Margaret Thatcher, the «iron lady», became the first woman Prime Minister. The Thatcher government was re-elected in 1983 and 1987.

Then, 1992 was the year of the Conservative John Major.

In 1997 the Labour Party won the election and Tony Blair was appointed as Prime Minister. Blair is the Labour Party’s longest serving Prime Minister, the only person to have led the Labour Party to three consecutive General Election victories. He was succeeded as leader of the Labour Party and as Prime Minister in 2007 by Gordon Brown.
In the 2010 General Election the Conservatives, led by David Cameron, gained a plurality of seats in a «hung parliament» where no party would be able to command a majority in the House of Commons. Brown resigned, marking the end of years of Labour government, and Cameron was appointed Prime Minister at the head of a coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats: at the age of forty-three, he became the youngest British Prime Minister since the Earl of Liverpool two centuries earlier. The Cameron Ministry is the first coalition government in the United Kingdom since the Second World War.

**CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF EVENTS**

1936-1952 Reign of George VI: 1937 → Chamberlain becomes Prime Minister; 1938 → Hitler occupies Austria and Czechoslovakia; 1939 → German invasion of Poland; Second War World breaks out; 1940 → German invasion of Denmark, Norway, Holland, Luxemburg, Belgium and France; Churchill becomes Prime Minister; Italy enters the war; Italy attacks Britain on the African front; Italian invasion of Greece; 1941 → Italian invasion of Yugoslavia; German attack on Soviet Union; Japanese attack at Pearl Harbour; United States joins the war; 1942 → Conference of Washington; Battle of El Alamein; Battle of Stalingrad; 1943 → American and British attack on Italy; Deposition of Mussolini; Armistice between Badoglio and Allies; Italian declaration of war against Germany; 1944 → Landing in Normandy; 1945 → Unconditional surrender of Germany; Suicide of Hitler; Hiroshima’s destruction by the atomic bomb; Nagasaki’s destruction by the second atomic bomb; End of the Second World War; Congress of Yalta; Establishment of O.N.U., F.A.O., U.N.E.S.C.O.; 1945-1951 → Attlee’s Labour Government nationalizes the Bank of England and many industries; Setting up of a National Health Service and National Assistance Service; Education Act; Establishment of U.N.I.C.E.F. (1946); Independence of India, Pakistan and Ceylon (1947); Establishment of W.H.O. (1948); Establishment of N.A.T.O. (1949); Independence of Eire (1949); 1951 → Conservatives in power again.

1952-2010 Reign of Elizabeth II: 1952 → George VI’s death; Queen Elizabeth II ascends the throne; 1952-1963 → The Conservative Governments (Churchill, Eden, Macmillan) try to bring to full development a social program; Independence of South Africa (1960); 1964 → The Labour Party returns to power again under Wilson; 1969 → British troops in Northern Ireland; 1970 → The Conservatives regain power under Heath; 1973 → Britain enters European Community; 1979 → Margaret Thatcher becomes Prime Minister; 1989 → Collapse of Eastern European regimes and end of the «Cold War»; 1990 → Fall of Margaret Thatcher; 1992 → Major becomes Prime Minister; 1997 → Tony Blair (Labour) is appointed as Prime Minister; 2007 → Blair is succeeded by Gordon Brown; 2010 → Cameron is appointed Prime Minister at the head of a coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.