Your notes

GCSE History: revision notes

America, 1920–1973: Opportunity and inequality

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The 1920s boom

- After the First World War, the USA was the world's richest country. Republican presidents followed **laissez-faire** policies (leaving business alone), kept taxes low and used tariffs to protect American industry.
- **Mass production**: Henry Ford's assembly line cut the price of the Model T, and the car industry boosted steel, rubber, glass, oil and road building. People bought consumer goods such as radios and fridges on **hire purchase**, encouraged by advertising. Many bought shares, often 'on the margin' (with borrowed money).
- Not everyone shared the boom: farmers suffered from overproduction and falling prices, and many black Americans and workers in older industries, such as coal and textiles, stayed poor.

Society in the 1920s

- **Prohibition** (1920–1933) banned the making and selling of alcohol, but led to illegal bars (speakeasies), bootlegging and organised crime, such as Al Capone's gang in Chicago. It was ended in 1933.
- The 'Roaring Twenties' brought jazz, cinema, sport and 'flappers', young women who enjoyed new freedoms. Women gained the vote in 1920.
- Intolerance: the Ku Klux Klan had millions of members by the mid-1920s; the Red Scare targeted immigrants and radicals (Sacco and Vanzetti were executed in 1927); new laws in 1921 and 1924 limited immigration; and Jim Crow laws kept **segregation** in the South.

The Great Depression and the New Deal

- The **Wall Street Crash** (October 1929) wiped out investors. Banks failed, businesses closed, and by 1933 about 13 million Americans (a quarter of the workforce) were unemployed. Homeless people lived in shanty towns nicknamed '**Hoovervilles**', after President Hoover.
- Franklin D. Roosevelt (FDR) won the 1932 election, promising a '**New Deal**'. In his first Hundred Days (1933), he reopened sound banks and created '**alphabet agencies**', such as the CCC (conservation jobs for young men), the AAA (help for farmers), the TVA (dams and electricity in the Tennessee Valley) and the NRA (fair wages and prices).
- The Second **New Deal** (1935) brought the Social Security Act (pensions and unemployment insurance), the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the Wagner Act (rights for trade unions).
- Opponents included the Supreme Court, which ruled parts of the **New Deal** unconstitutional; Republicans and business leaders, who said it gave the government too much power; and critics such as Huey Long, who said it didn't go far enough.
- The Second World War ended the Depression. Lend-Lease (1941), then joining the war after Pearl Harbor (December 1941), created huge demand for war production. Women ('Rosie the Riveter') and African Americans gained jobs, though discrimination continued.

Post-war America and civil rights

- The 1950s brought prosperity, suburbs, cars and television, but also fear of communism: Senator Joseph McCarthy accused many people of being communists, often without evidence (McCarthyism).
- Civil rights: Brown v Board of Education (1954) ruled that school **segregation** was unconstitutional. The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–56), sparked by Rosa Parks' arrest, ended segregated buses there and made Martin Luther King a national leader. Little Rock (1957), sit-ins (1960), the Freedom Rides (1961), the Birmingham campaign (1963) and the March on Washington (August 1963) kept up the pressure.
- The **Civil Rights Act** (1964) banned **segregation** in public places and discrimination at work. The Voting Rights Act (1965) protected black Americans' right to vote. Malcolm X and the Black Power movement demanded faster change. King was assassinated in April 1968.
- President Johnson's 'Great Society' introduced Medicare and Medicaid (1965) and a 'war on poverty'.
- The women's movement: Betty Friedan's book The Feminine Mystique (1963), the Equal Pay Act (1963), the National Organization for Women (1966), and Roe v Wade (1973), which made abortion legal across the USA (it was overturned in 2022). The Equal Rights Amendment was passed by Congress in 1972 but never ratified.

Your notes

Key terms

Laissez-faire	The idea that the government should leave business alone.
Mass production	Making large numbers of identical goods quickly, as on an assembly line.
Hire purchase	Buying goods by paying for them in instalments.
Prohibition	The ban on making and selling alcohol in the USA from 1920 to 1933.
Wall Street Crash	The collapse of share prices on the New York stock exchange in October 1929.
Hooverville	A shanty town of homeless people during the Depression.
New Deal	Roosevelt's policies to end the Depression.
Alphabet agencies	New Deal organisations known by their initials, such as the TVA.
Segregation	Keeping people of different races apart.
Civil Rights Act	The 1964 law that banned segregation in public places and discrimination at work.

Quick questions

Cover the answers and test yourself: remembering is what makes it stick.

1. What was Prohibition?
2. Which gangster controlled much of Chicago during Prohibition?
3. What did Henry Ford's assembly line do?
4. What is hire purchase?
5. Which group did NOT share in the 1920s boom?
6. When did the Wall Street Crash happen?
7. What were Hoovervilles?
8. What did the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) do?

Answers

1. A ban on making and selling alcohol
2. Al Capone
3. Made cars much cheaper to produce
4. Buying goods by paying in instalments
5. Farmers
6. October 1929
7. Shanty towns of homeless people during the Depression
8. Built dams to control floods and provide electricity

Your notes

What to do next

Practise 13 questions on this topic

Try 4 exam questions, with mark schemes

Read the lesson, one step at a time

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