

# The 1930s



# The 1930s:

## *The Reality and the Promise*

Edited by

J Bret Bennington,  
Zenia Sacks DaSilva,  
Michael D’Innocenzo  
and Stanislao G. Pugliese

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## 30 FACES OF THE 1930S

ZENIA SACKS DASILVA, MICHAEL D'INNOCENZO,  
J BRET BENNINGTON AND STANISLAO G. PUGLIESE

In 2010, Hofstra University celebrated its 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary, inviting scholars to campus to discuss the world as it was in the year Hofstra was founded. The conference *1935: The Reality and the Promise* provided a wide ranging exploration of the 1930s with presentations, discussions, and events highlighting the arts, entertainment, society, politics, literature, and science in that momentous decade. This volume encompasses a selection of the most interesting and enlightening papers from this conference, providing both depth and breadth of coverage. By any measure, the 1930s was a pivotal decade in modern history—a time when the reality of current events and the foreshadowing of events to come tempered all promise. The tension between reality and promise is a recurrent theme in the chapters that follow, as well as in the personalities and faces that came to define this decade. As an introduction to the essays that follow, we present for you here an admittedly incomplete selection of the people who, for better or worse, made the world of the 1930s what it was.

We would like to express our most heartfelt and sincere appreciation to President Stuart Rabinowitz, Provost Herman A. Berliner, Hofstra College of Liberal Arts and Sciences Dean Bernard J. Firestone, and the editorial staff of Cambridge Scholars Publishing for their support in bringing this project to fruition.



Hofstra College Seal 1935

### Franklin Delano Roosevelt (1882-1945)



Charlotte, North Carolina, 10 September 1936 (Wikimedia Commons / National Archives and Records Administration)

When FDR was reelected governor of New York in 1930 during the Depression, the stage was set for his New Deal presidency. Many of his “Brain Trust” advisors came to Washington with him where the “First Hundred Days” set the stage for “relief” and “recovery.” The pace of legislation was dynamic as FDR’s “alphabet agencies” turned citizens’ attention to the national government. The president’s use of radio for “Fireside Chats” helped to expand his party’s control in 1934 and 1936, and more of his “2nd New Deal” focused on “regulation” and “reform.” FDR was ahead of Congress and the American public in his efforts to assist the British when they were under German attack. His programs of “Lend Lease” and his “Destroyers for Bases” deal were essential in aiding Britain and showed his creativity in executive leadership.

### Neville Chamberlain (1869-1940)

The Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1937 to 1940, Chamberlain is most remembered for his Munich Agreement with Hitler in 1938. Regarded as “appeasement foreign policy,” Chamberlain believed that Hitler’s aggressive expansionism would cease if he were granted the German-speaking areas of Czechoslovakia (“Peace in our time.”) Undeterred, however, Hitler invaded Poland in 1939, leading both Great Britain and France to declare war on Germany. Chamberlain continued to serve as Britain’s Prime Minister for the first eight months of the war.



British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain arrives at Munich for the Munich Conference, 29 September 1938. (Wikimedia Commons / German Federal Archive)

**Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962)**

12 August 1933 at White Top Mountain, Virginia (Wikimedia Commons / National Archives and Records Administration)

Her uncle President Theodore Roosevelt presented Eleanor when she married her 5<sup>th</sup> cousin Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1905. When Franklin developed polio and then ran for Governor of New York in 1928, she worked to promote his campaign to women. During the 1930s when FDR was president, the range of her activities as First Lady was unprecedented. She wrote newspaper columns (*My Day*), held press conferences, went on speaking tours, particularly advocating for civil rights. Her work at the UN led directly to the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” John Kennedy sought her support by naming her to his “Presidential Commission on the Status of Women.” Gallup cited her as 9<sup>th</sup> on its “List of the Most Widely Admired People of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.”

**Fiorello H. La Guardia (1882-1947)**

The 99<sup>th</sup> mayor of New York City, La Guardia was a Republican who supported Roosevelt’s New Deal programs and made the city a model of progressive, reform-minded urban planning. Elected in 1934, he served three consecutive terms as mayor guiding New York through the Great Depression and World War II. His accomplishments as mayor included modernizing city parks and expanding transportation facilities. His popularity began to fade in the early 1940s after he became the first director of the newly created Office of Civilian Defense, which required him to split his attention between Washington and New York.



1940 (Wikimedia Commons / Library of Congress)

### Father Charles Coughlin (1891-1979)



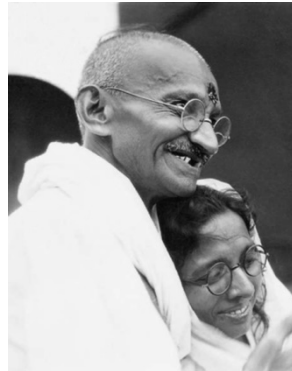
1933 (Wikimedia Commons)

Canadian born Father Charles Coughlin, a Catholic priest steeped in ultra-conservative theology and fired with a fierce populism, became one of the most powerful political figures in the USA of the 1930s. At first his radio broadcasts were devoted to religious teachings. But soon they evolved into vehement denunciations of exploitive capitalists, usurious bankers, socialists, communists, FDR (whom he had initially supported), the New Deal, and Jews, to whom he attributed most of the world's economic woes and wars. With an estimated weekly following of some thirty million, he was able to form the right-wing National

Union for Social Justice and to lead a burgeoning Christian Front. By 1939, however, his open support for Hitler and Mussolini led to his disavowal by the Church, and shortly afterwards the government forced his removal from the air.

### Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948)

As a young man Gandhi's spiritual journey extended from India to England to South Africa. By the time of his 1914 return to India he was widely admired for his eloquence and his ascetic life style that included prayer, fasting and meditation. At this point he was already called "Mahatma" (the great souled one). Gandhi's growing protests against the British were known as *satyagraha* (soul force) as he practiced nonviolence and forms of noncooperation. His nonviolent protests led in 1935 to The Government of India Act and eventually to Indian independence. Gandhi used hunger strikes to try to calm Hindu and Muslim conflicts, but he was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic.



Mohandas Gandhi and political activist Maniben Patel, 1931. (Wikimedia Commons)

**John L. Lewis (1880-1969)**

1938 (Wikimedia Commons)

Lewis started working in coal mines at age 17 and later went on to become a powerful orator and effective labor union organizer. During the 1920s he was a Republican and was offered the position of Secretary of Labor in Calvin Coolidge's Cabinet. However, with the Great Depression, Lewis' United Mine Workers made the

single largest contribution to Franklin Roosevelt's reelection campaign. He then served on several New Deal advisory boards striving to improve wages and working conditions. As he expanded the membership and power of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) he had more conflicts with the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In 1964, Lyndon Johnson gave Lewis the Presidential Medal of Freedom, describing him as an "eloquent spokesman of labor, [who] has given voice to the aspirations of the industrial workers of the country and led the cause of free trade unions within a healthy system of free enterprise."

**Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955)**

Bethune was one of seventeen children born to a pair of former slaves and the only one to receive an education. Undaunted by poverty, she became a teacher and determined to bring the redemption of education to those who for centuries had been deprived. She founded the Institute for Negro Girls in Daytona, Florida, which became a college for African American students. She founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Women to take on the struggle for equal human rights. In 1932 she campaigned vigorously for Franklin D. Roosevelt's election, moving many traditionally Republican Southern voters into the Democratic fold. A member of Roosevelt's so-called Black Cabinet, she remained a trusted friend and White House advisor throughout his presidency



With Sara Delano Roosevelt, 1934 (Wikimedia Commons / Library of Congress)

### Frances Perkins (1880-1965)



1932 (Wikimedia Commons / Library of Congress)

Her very close association with Franklin Roosevelt began in 1929 when he named her Commissioner of the New York State Department of Labor. In 1933 she was appointed the first woman cabinet member in American history as Secretary of Labor. She and Harold Ickes were the only cabinet officials to serve for all 12 years of the Roosevelt presidency. In addition to her substantial role in the U.S. adoption of social security, unemployment insurance, federal laws regulating child labor, and adoption of the federal minimum wage, she worked with Eleanor Roosevelt to establish a “sister” organization to the Civilian Conservation

Corps. Intending to assist unemployed women, Perkins helped to establish the She, She, She Camps – a female version of the CCC.

### Amelia Earhart (1897-1937)

When Mary Amelia Earhart got her first taste of flying, she was instantly committed to aviation and to the premise that women could do the things that were usually reserved for men. In 1928 she became the first woman to fly across the Atlantic, along with two male aviators, and in 1932 she became the first woman to fly across alone. Her return was hailed by an exuberant public, among them the book publisher and publicist George Putnam. Soon they became friends and then married, happily joined in “a partnership with dual controls.” Amelia’s



1935 (Wikimedia Commons / NBC Photo-NBC Radio)

fame grew with her every adventure. She was the first person to fly solo from Hawaii to California, from Mexico to Newark—and she craved the ultimate challenge, to be the first woman to fly around the world. She took off on June 1, 1937 with one male crew member. By July 2 they had flown all but 7,000 miles of their 29,000 mile journey when they became lost on approach to Howland Island, 2500 miles east of New Guinea. No trace of the plane nor its crew has ever been found.

### Adolf Hitler (1889-1945)

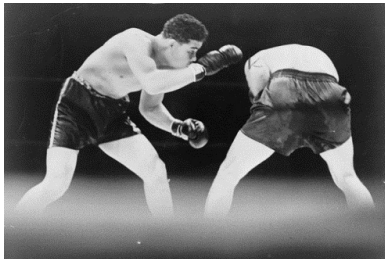


April 20<sup>th</sup>, 1937.  
(Wikimedia Commons /  
German Federal  
Archive)

After being appointed Chancellor in 1933, Hitler transformed his prior minority status into a single party dictatorship. His National Socialist German Workers Party (Nazis) was built on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, written while he was imprisoned in the 1920s. Railing against post World War I restrictions against Germany, Hitler sought to expand territory for the German people as he emphasized "racial hygiene." This led to eugenics policies resulting in the deaths of as many as 14 million people, including about 6 million Jews. Seeking European dominance, Hitler invaded Poland on September 1, 1939. Britain, France, the United States and the Soviet Union eventually allied to oppose Germany as an estimated 50 million people died in World War II and Eastern and Central Europe were devastated and impoverished.

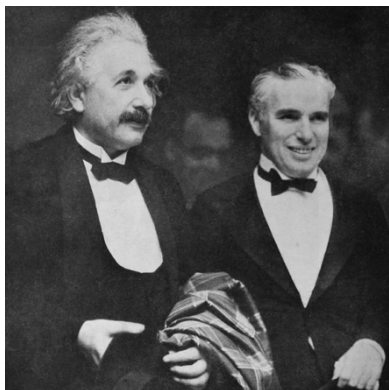
### Joe Louis (1914-1981)

Born in Alabama, the 8<sup>th</sup> child of a poor sharecropper, Joe Louis was the great-grandson of an American slave. By the end of 1934, he was the American Athletic Union light heavy weight champion, having won 54 matches (43 by knockouts). In his first pro year, Louis won all 14 bouts and earned \$370,000. He later gained worldwide attention because of his two fights with the German boxer Max Schmeling. Praised by Hitler as evidence of Nazi superiority, Schmeling beat Louis with a 12<sup>th</sup> round knockout in 1936. Their rematch took place in 1938 and Louis knocked Schmeling out in 2 minutes and 4 seconds in the first round. Known as the "Brown Bomber," he later enlisted in the U.S. army and held the heavyweight championship from 1937-1949, longer than any other boxer. Many sports analysts consider him America's greatest boxer ever.



(Wikimedia Commons / World  
Telegram staff photographer - Library  
of Congress.  
New York World-Telegram & Sun

### Albert Einstein (1879-1955)



1931 Photo of Albert Einstein and Charlie Chaplin at the Los Angeles premiere of the film *City Lights*. Like Chaplin, Einstein was a pacifist and he said Chaplin was the only person in Hollywood he wanted to meet. (Wikimedia Commons)

Arguably the most important scientist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Albert Einstein's theories of special and general relativity fundamentally altered our understanding of the structure of the universe and generated insights into the nature of space, time, light, and gravity that continue to be explored and verified today. Unable and unwilling to return to Germany under Nazi rule, Einstein joined the Institute of Advanced Study at Princeton in 1933 and became an American citizen in 1940. He published his famous  $E=MC^2$  equation in 1935 and at the end of that decade Einstein coauthored a letter to President Roosevelt warning of the danger of Germany developing an atomic bomb. The letter and

subsequent lobbying by Einstein convinced the Roosevelt administration to initiate the Manhattan Project, which led to the United States dropping two atomic bombs on Japan to end the war in the Pacific in 1945.

### Charlie Chaplin (1889-1977)

Charles (Charlie) Chaplin and his alter-ego, the lovable little tramp who somehow could survive society's malfunctions, was one of the most recognized and idolized figures of his time. The British born actor and filmmaker ruled the silent screen of the 1920s with a following that reached well beyond the English-speaking world. In the 1930s the tone of Chaplin's films changed, reacting to the Great Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe. Chaplin released *The Great Dictator* in 1940, a ribald parody of Hitler that ended with a passionate denunciation of dictatorship and an anti-capitalist plea. Later, J. Edgar Hoover accused him of Communist leanings and Chaplin became the object of various controversies, both political and personal, but the honors continued to flow. Statues of Chaplin now stand in at least eight major cities, from Europe to the Far East.



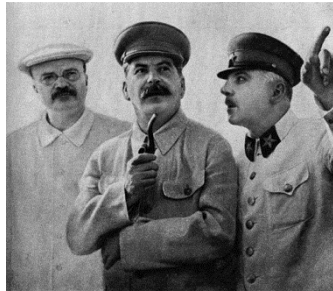
**Chiang Kai-shek (1887-1975)**

1940 (Wikimedia Commons)

Unlike his predecessor, Sun Yat-sen, Chiang Kai-shek's "Nationalists" had worsening relationships with Communists in the late 1920s. A major civil war continued intermittently until battles stopped in 1949. Two de facto states then existed, each claiming to be China's legitimate government: the Republic of China (ROC) relocated to Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China (PRC) in mainland China. Chiang had ruled mainland China for 22 years; he then ruled in Taiwan for 30 years until his death in 1975.

**Joseph Stalin (1878-1953)**

From his Bolshevik role in the 1917 Russian Revolution Stalin consolidated power after the 1924 death of Lenin. He led the "Great Purge" of the 1930s, when millions he characterized as "enemies of the Soviet people" were exiled, imprisoned or executed. After failing to develop collaboration with European nations, Stalin, in August 1939, entered into a "non-aggression" pact with Nazi Germany. Hitler broke that agreement in June 1941, with a



Molotov, Stalin and Voroshilov, 1937 (Wikimedia Commons)

massive German invasion of the Soviet Union. The Russians took huge losses defending their nation and then in joining the Allies to defeat Germany. When World War II ended, the Soviet Union, despite depletions from the war, emerged as one of the world's two superpowers.

### General Francisco Franco Bahamonde (1892-1975)



General Francisco Franco during the nationalist victory parade celebrating the end of the Spanish Civil War on 20 May 1939. (Wikimedia Commons)

monarchists and fascists, he launched his first attack against the Spanish government in July of 1936. So began the fratricidal struggle that devastated a population. Franco assumed absolute power in March of 1939, persecuting and annihilating all opposition, suppressing freedom of religion and of expression, and he retained that power for some thirty-five years.

### Benito Mussolini (1883-1945)

Building a cult of personality, and known as *il Duce* (“the leader”), Mussolini in 1922 became the youngest Prime Minister in Italian history (until Matteo Renzi in 2014). However, two years later he created a one-party Fascist dictatorship. Determined to regain the luster of the Roman Empire he pushed many internal government sponsored projects. His alliance with Germany collapsed with the Allied invasion of Italy in 1943. Ousted and imprisoned by King Victor Emmanuel III, he was then freed by German Special Forces. After he was tracked down and killed in 1945 by Italian partisans, his body was hung upside down in Milan to provide public confirmation of his death.



1932 (Wikimedia Commons / German Federal Archives)

“El Generalísimo”  
Francisco Franco came to power in March of 1939 after leading a successful rebellion against the crumbling Republican government of Spain that had been elected in 1936. With the military aid of Hitler and Mussolini, the approval of much of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and a coalition of conservatives, religionists,

### All Star Sluggers 1937



(Wikimedia Commons / Harris & Ewing Collection, Library of Congress)

The fifth All-Star game between the National League and its younger rival, the American League, featured some of the greatest names in baseball history. Here (*from left to right*) are seven of the American League's premier sluggers: Lou Gehrig (New York Yankees), Joe Cronin (Boston Red Sox), Bill Dickey and Joe DiMaggio (Yankees), Charlie Gehringer

(Detroit Tigers), Jimmie Foxx (Red Sox) and Hank Greenberg (Tigers) on the eve of their 8-3 victory. Winning pitcher: the Yankees' Lefty Gomez. Losing pitcher: Dizzy Dean, ace of the St. Louis Cardinals. The game was punctuated by many spectacular moments: the first pitch, thrown by FDR himself; homers by Lou Gehrig and the Cardinal's Joe Medwick; and then a strangely hit ground ball that broke the toe of the brilliant young Dizzy Dean and ended his career at age 26.

### James Cleveland "Jesse" Owens (1913-1980)

Born in Alabama, the youngest of ten children, Owens' family was part of "The Great Migration" when 1.5 million African-Americans left the segregated South for better opportunities in the North. In Cleveland where a teacher misheard "James" and called him "Jesse" Owens began to excel in track. Although he went to Ohio State and gained fame and records as the "Buckeye Bullet," he still contended with American racial discrimination. In 1935, in what has been described as "the greatest 45 minutes in sport," Jesse set 3 world records and tied another in a Big Ten meet. While winning 4 gold medals at the 1936 Berlin, Germany Olympics, he became a symbol countering Hitler's protestations of Aryan superiority.



1936 Summer Olympics  
(Wikimedia Commons /  
Reproduction of photograph  
in *Die Olympischen Spiele*,  
1936 p. 27).

### Walt Disney (1901-1966)



1946 Publicity photo  
(Wikimedia Commons)

Fortune didn't come immediately to Walt Disney, the world-renowned creator of animated cartoons. But his innovations and the characters that flowed from his pen eventually captured the public imagination - Mickey Mouse and Minnie, Donald Duck and Daisy, Goofy, Pluto. In the early 1930s, Disney added color to his "Silly Symphonies" and synchronized sound to his Mickey—the first to do so—and Depression be damned, the world fell in love. Mickey and friends flourished, eventually moving into television, comic books, dolls, toys, clothes and countless ancillaries. At the same time, Disney was pursuing other innovative ventures. In 1934 he launched the first animated feature film, a musical fantasy

called *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Many more followed, and even after his death in 1966, his creations continued to entertain on Broadway and in Disney theme parks in the USA and Europe.

### Agatha Christie (1890-1976)

Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie, Lady Mallowan DBE is reputed to be the best-selling novelist of all time, having authored 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections that have combined sales of over one billion copies. Her second marriage to archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan in 1930 led to travel that influenced some of her greatest works published in the following decade, including *Murder on the Orient Express* which she wrote while staying at the Pera Palace Hotel in Istanbul, Turkey at the southern terminus of the railway.

Other archaeologically themed mysteries from this period include *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *Death on the Nile*, both of which featured her signature detective Hercule Poirot, a character she later came to dislike.



Image from a plaque for the Agatha Christie mile at Torre Abbey in Christie's hometown of Torquay, England.

**Will Rogers (1879-1935)**

Date Unknown (Wikimedia Commons / Underwood and Underwood Collection, Library of Congress)

It may have been providential that Will Rogers was born on Election Day. A major part of his acclaim during the 1920s and 1930s was his ability to use humor to deflate those who misused power and to elevate the confidence of everyday citizens. Because of his versatility Will Rogers became one of the wealthiest entertainers in the U.S. He first ran off with a circus to do rope tricks. Then he began to offer “observations” on the news and society as he twirled his lariat. From stand-up comedy, he moved to motion pictures, to writing columns (syndicated in hundreds of newspapers), authoring books and doing live radio broadcasts. Rogers traveled the nation organizing fund-raisers for citizens hurt by the Great Depression. He died in 1935 in an airplane crash.

**Clark Gable (1901-1960)**

(William) Clark Gable, “The King of Hollywood”, began his role as a leading man in 1932 and starred in more than sixty major films during the next three decades, partnered with many of the screen’s foremost leading ladies: Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Myrna Loy, Lana Turner, Ava Gardner and ultimately Marilyn Monroe (in the last appearance for both). Despite the dark years of the Depression, his popularity never waned as his films appeared in rapid succession: *Red Dust* (1932), *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935), *Saratoga* (1937), and others. Without question Clark



Publicity photo of Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh for *Gone with the Wind*, 1939.

(Wikimedia Commons)

Gable is most remembered for his role as Rhett Butler in Margaret Mitchell’s Civil War drama, *Gone with the Wind* (1939), co-starring Vivien Leigh, as Scarlett O’Hara. Domestically and globally, *Gone with the Wind* still ranks among the greatest successes of the silver screen.

### Shirley Temple (1928-2014)



Eleanor Roosevelt and Shirley Temple 1938 (Wikimedia Commons)

Shirley Temple, “Little Miss Sunshine,” was a beacon of light for millions during the hope-starved years of the thirties. Beginning her career at the age of three, the sweetly dimpled curly-haired dancer-singer-actress broke not only all movie box-office records for a decade, but also toppled one of the barriers between black and white in her iconic dances with Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. During the 1930s young Miss Temple was a frequent visitor to the

White House. In later years she became active in Republican politics and served as ambassador to Ghana and Czechoslovakia. Shirley Temple died at the age of 85 in 2014.

### Benny Goodman (1909-1986)

Dubbed “the King of Swing”, Benny Goodman was one of the prime movers of the Big Band era of the thirties and forties, along with such luminaries as Guy Lombardo, Glenn Miller, the Dorsey brothers Tommy and Jimmy, Harry James, Count Basie, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and Sammy Kaye. These bands were the incubator for many vocalists who would enthrall the world of popular music for decades to come: Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Peggy Lee, Rosemary Clooney and Tony Bennett, to name just a few. A virtuoso clarinetist, Benny Goodman also performed with chamber groups and symphony orchestras, touring many continents and nations as diverse as Japan and the USSR.



Benny Goodman with Teddy Wilson at the piano and Mel Torme on drums. (Wikimedia Commons)

### George Gershwin (1898-1937)



Late 1920s – early 1930s  
(Wikimedia Commons /  
Library of Congress)

Born to a working class family in Brooklyn, New York, George Gershwin left school at the age of 13 and by his mid-twenties formed a successful song-writing collaboration with his lyricist and older brother, Ira. He was a jazz pianist, but his work transcended both jazz and the piano. He reshaped the musical stage with his Pulitzer Prize winning *Of Thee I Sing*, and he blended the popular cadence of jazz with classical techniques and tone in his *American in Paris*, *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Porgy and Bess*, the first opera in the truly American repertoire. His life was cut short in 1937 by a brain tumor, leaving the world stunned at the sudden, unexpected loss of this talented young composer.

### Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957)

By far the most renowned conductor of the first half of the twentieth century, Arturo Toscanini was born in Parma, Italy in 1867. Having made his mark at age 19 as a conductor, the gifted young cellist and composer continued for more than fifty years to lead many of the major orchestras of the world, among them La Scala, The Metropolitan Opera, The New York Philharmonic and The NBC



Arturo Toscanini from “Hymn of the Nations,” 1944 (Wikimedia Commons / OWI Film)

Symphony. A vigorous opponent of fascism, in 1931 he was brutally attacked in his native Italy for refusing to play the fascist anthem or to display a portrait of Mussolini. In 1933, after Hitler’s takeover, he withdrew in protest from Germany’s Wagner Festival. And in 1936 he traveled to Palestine to conduct a makeshift orchestra of Jewish musicians who had fled Europe. His international fame grew and he performed on many shores, but New York became his primary venue and his home. He died in his ninetieth year in Riverdale, New York.

### Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)



Portrait by Juan Gris, 1912  
(Wikimedia Commons)

Baptized Pablo Diego Jose Francisco de Paula Juan Nepomuceno Maria de los Remedios Cipriano de la Santisima Trinidad Ruiz y Picasso, Pablo Picasso (he took his mother's surname) was a game changer from the start. Son of a professor of art, curator and painter, he soon rejected formal schooling and the classical training of his tutors. Born to a proud Spanish family with claims to minor aristocracy, he spent most of his life in France in the bohemian company of artists, musicians and writers (though he did make time for certain wealthy collectors and patrons). He was an iconoclast, an innovator, a painter, sculptor, ceramicist, poet and sometimes playwright, a subjective realist, cubist, surrealist, indefinable individualist, an emblem of the tumultuous thirties, and arguably the most pivotal force in twentieth century art.

### John Steinbeck (1902-1968)

Steinbeck knew since he was fourteen years old that he would be a writer, and even during those early years when he worked at any job he could find—ranch hand, farm laborer, store clerk, construction worker, factory worker—he kept writing. When the Depression reduced him and his young wife to planting and fishing for their own food, even to joining the rolls of welfare, he still kept on writing. An ardent New Dealer, he felt for the displaced and disenfranchised. Finally, the thirties brought a flurry of successes—*Tortilla Flat*, *East of Eden*, *The Long Valley*, *Of Mice and Men*, and *The Grapes of Wrath*,—his Pulitzer Prize novel about a family forced from their home in Oklahoma's Dust Bowl to struggle for a new life in California. His ultimate production consisted of sixteen novels and five collections of short stories, seventeen of them made into films. Steinbeck was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1962.



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**PART I**

**THE 1930S IN CONTEXT**



# CULTURE AND CRISIS: THE SPIRIT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION

MORRIS DICKSTEIN

Considered from every conceivable angle, 1935 was a pivotal year in a whole fraught decade. It was the midpoint of the Depression, with some significant recovery under way, yet hardly an expansive moment for the local or national economy. But Hofstra, founded in 1935, like Queens College, founded in 1938, is one of many examples of things we take for granted today that were built up during the Depression, including the parks, roads, bridges, dams, and public buildings created by the WPA, which came into being in 1935. That year saw the high-water mark of the New Deal, the so-called Second Hundred Days, when FDR secured the passage of such landmark legislation as the Social Security Act, the Wagner Act, assuring fair play in labor relations, and the Banking Act, strengthening the regulatory role of the Federal Reserve. The columnist Walter Lippmann described this as “the most comprehensive program of reform ever achieved in this country in any administration” (quoted in Parrish 340). In the words of historian Michael Parrish, “the Hundred Days [in 1933] may have saved capitalism, but eighty-eight days in 1935 literally changed the face of America for the next half century” (Parrish 340).

On the international left, 1935 was also a momentous year. It signaled the beginning of the Popular Front, formally a political push to unify the fragmented left against the rise of Fascism, but also a shift that, besides enhancing the popular appeal of Communism, had large cultural implications, advancing a wide array of populist themes in the arts. When a whole society was in crisis, as it was for much of the 1930s, we expect art to take a back seat to more urgent matters like jobs, social programs, the sheer effort of survival—keeping bread on the table, holding on to one’s home, keeping the family together—matters that again became so pressing in the recession that began in 2008. Artists and writers who come from a middle-class background may not worry about poverty and destitution for themselves, but they may care deeply about the common good of society. The whole period saw an unexpected flowering of the arts

amid the rubble of hard times, and this work gives us an unusual vantage point on what was taking place then; it helps us gauge the spirit and tenor of the age.

Most scholars explore the Great Depression from an economic and political angle, examining its causes and showing what FDR and the New Deal did to relieve the crisis and reform the system. My own work has taken a different tack and examines the era by way of its creative outpouring in the arts. For a cultural historian, the art, entertainment, and reportage produced during a period serve as a barometer of the times, illuminating not simply what was happening but what people felt about what was happening, their sentiments and relationships, the varied impact on individual lives. Besides offering pleasure and insight, this is how good art can serve as a vital form of historical documentation. While history gives us the social sweep, the long view, really strong art, even, or perhaps especially, when cast as fiction, lets us in on the intimate details that historians often leave out.

The notion that artistic activity can actually be stimulated, not deadened, by social crisis cuts against our standard view of the arts in the twentieth century, in which the 1920s are seen as the shining moment, a dazzling era of modern experiment and innovation. This was indeed the time when America first developed an acknowledged world-class literature, with Hemingway, Faulkner, and Fitzgerald in fiction, with T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, and half a dozen other exceptional poets. It was a time when both classical composers like Aaron Copland and Virgil Thomson and popular artists like George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Cole Porter threw off European models and infused their work with a fresh native idiom. And there were new media like motion pictures, radio, and recordings whose very technology was intrinsically modern, even when they borrowed material from vaudeville or more traditional arts. The last thing I would do is to downplay the creative vitality of the 1920s, only the conclusions that historians and critics have drawn from it.

These familiar notions run as follows: During the prolonged social crisis of the 1930s, the story goes, the arts reverted to lazy traditions—to realism and naturalism in fiction and in the visual arts, to tuneful popular styles in music, to hackneyed rhythms and agit-prop messages in poetry. Writers, it was said, like photographers, were reduced to a kind of carbon-copy art, either documenting the conditions of the Depression—the sufferings stoically endured by ordinary Americans—or producing escapist fluff, such as historical novels, comedies, and musicals, that took people's minds off their problems. This is the standard picture of

Depression movie-going that Woody Allen gave us in 1985 with *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which Mia Farrow plays a waitress whose loutish husband is unemployed, whose life is drab and pinched, and who spends her afternoons at the local movie theater seeking a touch of exotic romance, a story about anything but the actual world around her. She is rewarded when a dashing movie actor, played by Jeff Daniels, steps off the screen and finds his way into her life, a fantasy come alive.

Working on *Dancing in the Dark*, I found this contrast between the gloomy, naturalistic work of “serious” Depression artists and the Pollyannaish fancies of popular artists overblown. The line between high art and popular art was never more blurred than during the Depression, when high art, making common cause with journalism, often dealt with the hardships of ordinary people, such as three sharecropper families in James Agee and Walker Evans’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), while popular entertainers were just as likely to focus on the kinds of exceptional people the mass audience loved, such as the idle rich.

But the Depression was such a pervasive experience that it had a powerful effect on both art and entertainment, creating a kind of vernacular modernism epitomized by Agee and Evans, an experimental portrayal of the stresses of everyday life that synthesized populism and modernism. On the other hand, innumerable references to the Depression were embedded in supposedly escapist art, often explicitly, as in Busby Berkeley’s sensationally popular musicals like *42<sup>nd</sup> Street* and *Gold Diggers of 1933*. That movie begins with showgirls clad only in large gold coins rehearsing a number called “We’re in the Money,” till the sheriff’s men close the show down for *lack* of money, for being behind on the rent, though the show must go on for it to *pay* the rent. The final number of the movie is even more daring. It so frightened the studio, Warner Brothers, which prided itself on movies “ripped from the headlines,” that they almost dropped it. This torchy finale is a tribute to the veterans of World War I, now unemployed, and the women who suffer with them and lament their condition. It is called “Remember My Forgotten Man,” after the figure evoked by FDR in one of his 1932 campaign speeches, inspired by the Bonus Marchers who camped out in DC in the spring of 1932. They were petitioning Congress for advance payment on a bonus promised to them for 1945. Instead the administration sent troops to scatter them with tear gas and burn down their camp.

More often these Depression references were more oblique, as in gangster films like *The Public Enemy* (1931) or *Little Caesar* (1931), in which a man ruthlessly claws his way up to the top from the gutter; or in the great series of dance musicals featuring Fred Astaire and Ginger

Rogers as two seemingly mismatched people who learn to make beautiful music together; or in historical romances like *Gone with the Wind* (1939), which shows people trying to survive the calamitous crises of another era; or even in a seemingly harmless and heartwarming musical like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), a perennial favorite.

Rather than dealing directly with Depression material, these movies created key Depression myths. Some of them were success stories that appealed to Depression audiences understandably fascinated with sudden changes of fortune, like the ones that had befallen them in the wake of the Crash. Others were tales of crisis and recovery that also resonated strongly with concerns of the time. The black-and-white opening and closing of *The Wizard of Oz*—the framing story—shows us a patch of rural Kansas that looks poor and depressed even before it's hit by a devastating twister. This whirling cyclone catapults the heroine into a colorful land in which she must battle malignant evil—the Wicked Witch—and work with others (the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, the Cowardly Lion) to find a way to get home. The qualities they seek—mind, heart, and courage—were exactly the ones Americans needed to get through the Depression, and when they reach the Emerald City they learn that no one can give it to them; they already have these qualities within themselves. This is a politically ambiguous message at a time of major New Deal programs, since it points to self-help rather than government programs, yet it connects well with the New Deal project of bucking up the nation's morale. But if popular works like *Gone with the Wind* and *The Wizard of Oz* had covert Depression themes, more socially conscious works like *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) would have found few takers unless they were in their own way entertaining, spicing their stories with vivid characters, starkly impressive settings, memorable scenes, and melodramatic turns of narrative.

These works were hardly as different from each other as they seemed. Both *Gone with the Wind* and *The Grapes of Wrath* center on strong women determined to hold their families together in a time of troubles, and the gritty framing scenes of *The Wizard of Oz*, to say nothing of the twister itself, could have been a swirling dust storm out of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Though serious works tended to be more downbeat, channeling the dark heritage of twenties modernism, while popular works, including songs like “Pennies from Heaven” and “Wrap Your Troubles in Dreams,” were usually more optimistic, they shared a similar message, which was also a key message of the New Deal: Separately we fail, together we may have a chance. Survival takes courage and determination, but it also takes help and encouragement—a recognition that, even as we remain