

ECONOMICS 101-8-20, FRESHMAN SEMINAR

"DID ECONOMICS WIN THE TWO WORLD WARS?"

SYLLABUS, READING LIST, AND CALENDAR

"The First World War . . . was nothing less than the greatest *error* of modern history."

— Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, p. 462.

"The Second World War is the largest single event in human history, fought across six of the world's seven continents and all its oceans. It killed fifty million human beings, left hundreds of millions of others wounded in mind or body, and materially devastated much of the heartland of civilisation."

— Keegan, *The Second World War*, p. 5.

"Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."

— Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*

Winter Quarter 2026
MW 3:30-4:50pm, ANN G29

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The Purpose of Freshman Seminars. By now you have already taken one of your two freshman seminars. The guidelines to instructors as provided by the WCAS Office of Studies list these major goals of Freshman Seminars: (1) to teach intellectual skills (reading critically, thinking logically, speaking effectively and persuasively), (2) to allow freshmen to become acquainted with faculty members more informally than is usually possible in large courses, (3) as the key writing experience for freshmen, to emphasize the rules on plagiarism and citations, (4) Freshman Seminars should never be lecture courses, (5) Freshman Seminars are never a substitute for introductory courses in a given field.

This Seminar: What it is and is not. The subject matter covers both history and economics, but it is in no way an introductory course to the history of Europe nor an introduction to Economics. Despite its title, "Did Economics Win the Two World Wars?" this seminar is not just about economics, but also is about the political and military history of the two wars.

Prerequisites and Advance Knowledge. There are no prerequisites for this seminar. Nobody is expected to know *anything in advance* about European history or about economics. We are all here to learn together, from the readings, from class discussions, and from writing papers. While some people may know more than others at the beginning of the class, others may be better writers. It is the quality of your papers and classroom discussion that matters, not how much you know on the first day of class.

The two world wars were the pivotal events of the twentieth century. These topics cover a substantial period of years, relate to many countries, and involve topics upon which thousands of books have been written. Our goal is to read enough general historical commentary to comprehend the main events and the issues that are subject to debate, and to develop critical skills by pulling apart the conflicting arguments, discussing them in class, and writing papers about them. This course is about the big issues; it is not about dates or facts.

Reading

There are two sources of reading. These are (1) one required book that you must purchase, and (2) selected items on library electronic "Course Reserve" accessed through Canvas.

The required purchase book is Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, Norton paperback, 1995. This book is about World War II and is used only in the second half of the course. *Please note:* Because this book is widely available new or used on the internet, it is not stocked by the bookstores. You are responsible for obtaining it on your own from any web source you prefer. Be sure to have it in hand by February '1.

The NU library provides all of the required reading material online through a Canvas link to electronic library resources (details below about how to access). You will be able to read all of the course readings from your own computer or any computer on campus.

Beyond the articles and book chapters listed below on the reading list, additional optional books are available in the library to help you in writing your papers. You will be able to write your first paper entirely from the books and articles on course reserve and will not need to visit the library until writing your second or third paper.

Posted on Canvas in the "Getting Started" module is a supplementary list of books that you may find useful when writing your second or third paper.

Writing

There are no quizzes or exams in this Seminar. Your grade will depend 60 percent on the quality of your written work, and 40 percent on your class participation. There will be three writing assignments, two short papers of 5 pages, and one longer paper due at the end of the quarter of more substantial length, roughly 12 pages. There will be no choice in the topic of the first paper, and a choice of two topics on the second paper. There will be unlimited latitude for choice of topic for the longer paper, as long as it has something to do with the economics of World War II.

For the first two papers, we will use a technique called "peer editing" which is encouraged by WCAS. Groups of students will exchange the first draft of a paper by e-mail the night before the first draft is due; each pair of students will bring a printout of both papers to class with comments. Students will exchange comments in the last 15 minutes of the designated class. Then the final version of the paper will be turned in via Canvas to me for a grade after the subsequent class.

WCAS awards prizes for the four best papers written in Freshman Seminars during this academic year. Winning such a prize would look very good on your future resume and in any graduate school application. I encourage you to do your best, and I will nominate the two best papers submitted during the quarter. Four of my students have won the freshman writing prize in the past.

Class Rules and Procedures

Attendance is *required* at every class. 40 percent of your grade will depend on the quality of your class participation. If you have a legitimate excuse for missing a class, especially any medical or health problem, send me an e-mail to let me know in advance

of the class you must miss. The same is true for student athletes who must miss class due to road trips. Unexcused absences will reduce your score on classroom participation.

What does the grade for classroom participation involve? You want to emerge from your freshman year not only as a good writer, but as an effective participant in a group meeting, a role that you will play many times in future life, not to mention job interviews where you will need to be able to speak effectively with self-confidence. Effective classroom participation means learning to speak confidently, concisely and persuasively; not to bury your head in your notes. *Most important*, I will be looking for comments, interruptions, and questions by all students. The more you raise your hand to say something relevant, the better.

Your grade in the course will be lower than your grade on the papers if you are silent during the class sessions. What if you have nothing to say? Just ask questions to those students who are speaking and to me. “What actually happened after event A that caused event B?” “What economic forces caused outcome C?”

Policy on Laptops. Laptops are absolutely prohibited from this class, because any student with a laptop open is looking at a screen, not participating in the discussion and not focusing his/her attention on the student who is speaking. You are expected to prepare your classroom discussions before class and print out any notes you wish to bring to class (and/or bring handwritten notes). An easy way to keep track of what you want to say about discussion questions is to scribble a few main points on the hard-copy sheets that will be distributed for all the discussion questions.

The easiest way to talk to me is just to remain after class, since I can stay as long as you want. Also, you can make an appointment for Zoom office hours as often as you want. If you have questions or comments about any aspect of the course, send me an e-mail and if your question is of general interest, I will forward your question and my answer to the other students. If you have a personal problem or question, make that clear in your e-mail and I will of course treat it as confidential.

The class schedule lists specified deadlines for submission of final drafts of papers. The “peer editing” system automatically creates an incentive for you to have your first draft ready several days before the final draft is due.

Papers will be submitted via Canvas in Microsoft Word format; I will read them on my screen and return them to you with my comments inserted throughout and summarized at the end. Every paper must have a title page with the paper's title and your name, and pages must be numbered, starting with the first page of text as "Page 1". You can insert page numbers by themselves or embed page numbers in a header.

This syllabus is required to include the following statement: Students are expected to adhere to basic principles of academic integrity as outlined in the booklet: "Academic Integrity at Northwestern: A Basic Guide." As all papers are submitted electronically, any are subject to being tested by AI detection tools for plagiarized content. Any use of generative artificial intelligence tools in this course is considered to be plagiarism. This policy supports the development of each student's ability to think and write creatively and independently. Any work suspected to be generated by AI will be referred to the Dean of Academic Integrity.

COURSE READING BY TOPIC

Notes: "WX" means that this item is available through online Course Reserve and is listed under week "X", e.g., "W1" for "week 1".

To find electronic reserve items grouped by week, as in "W1" = "week 1", go to this course in Canvas, click on the left tab "Course Reserves." This will give an overall list of all the items on course reserve (many of which are not required reading). Along the top bar you will find a list of weeks; click on "Week 1". This will give you the list of items designated by "W1" on the list of readings below. To the left of the item title you will see an underlined "View Item." The item will then download -- scroll below the copyright page and your item will be there, ready to read by scrolling down.

1. Overview of the Century

A. Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Extremes*, Pantheon, 1994, Preface, "The Century: A Bird's Eye View," pp. 1-17 (W1).

B. J. M. Roberts, *The Twentieth Century*, Viking, 1999 (W1).

Excerpts Ch. 1, "By Way of Introduction," pp. 3-10; pp. 25-30.

Excerpts Ch. 2, "Structures," pp. 47-58; 67-74.

Excerpts Ch. 4, "Shapes of Things to Come," pp. 123-35.

2. Causes and Consequences of World War I

A. (Motivation for the course). "Look Back with Angst," *Economist*, December 21, 2013. (W2)."

B. "Attempted Suicide," *The Economist*, December 31, 1999, pp. 31-32 (W2)

C. Francis Fukuyama, "It Could Have Been the German Century," *Wall Street Journal*, December 31, 1999, editorial page. (W2)

- D. "Why Germany made it global," *Economist*, May 12, 2001. (W2)
- E. "It Really Was All Germany's Fault," review of Max Hasting's *Catastrophe 1914*. *New York Times*, October 17, 2013. (W2).
- F. A. J. P. Taylor, *A History of the First World War*, Berkeley Medallion, "Preface" and "Chapter One: 1914", **SKIP pp. 25-29**. (W2).
- G. Robert Cowley, *What If?* Putnam, 1999, "The What Ifs of 1914," **READ ONLY pp. 263-277 and 288-291**. (W2)
- H. Niall Ferguson, *The Pity of War*, Basic Books, 1999, Chapter 6, "The Last Days of Mankind: 28 June — 4 August 1914," **READ ONLY pp. 143-58 and 168-73**. (W2).
- I. Richard F. Hamilton and Holger H. Herwig, 2003, Chapter 14, "Why Did It Happen?" **SKIP pp. 447-450**. (W2)

3. The Role of Economics in World War I and its Aftermath

- A. Stephen Broadberry and Mark Harrison, *The Economics of World War I*, Cambridge University Press, 2005, Chapter 1, "An Overview", pp. 3-40 and 2) and Albrecht Ritschl, "The Pity of Peace: German's Economy at War, 1914-1918 and Beyond," pp. 41-76 in the same volume. (W4)
- B. Gerd Hardach, *First World War 1914-18*. University of California Press, 1977, Ch. 1-2, 5. (W4fSS)
- C. Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*, Simon & Shuster, 1991, Chapters 8 "The Fateful Plunge" and 9 "The Blood of Victory: World War I". (W4fSS)

4. Economic and Political Aftermath of World War I and the Origins of World War II

- A. Liaquat Ahamed, *Lords of Finance: The Bankers Who Broke the World*, Penguin, 2009, Chapters 7 (pp. 99-129) and 9 (pp. 155-176). (W5)

- B. Richard Overy and Andrew Wheatcroft, *The Road to War: The Origins of World War II*. MacMillan, 1989. "Introduction", pp. 1-20 and "Conclusion", pp. 297-316. (W5)
- C. John Keegan, *The Second World War*. Viking, 1989. Chapter 2, "Fomenting World War", pp. 31-51. (W5fSS)

5. World War II: Why the Allies Won and Strategic Dilemmas

- A. Richard Overy, *Why the Allies Won*, Norton, 1995, Chapters 1 and 10 (Required for purchase)
- B. John Keegan, *World War II* (W7)
 - Ch. 6, Hitler's Strategic Dilemma, pp. 127-41
 - Ch. 12, Tojo's Strategic Dilemma, pp. 240-50
 - Ch. 17, Churchill's Strategic Dilemma, pp. 310-19
 - Ch. 24, Stalin's Strategic Dilemma, pp. 450-57
 - Ch. 29, Roosevelt's Strategic Dilemma, pp. 536-45.

6. The Role of Economics in World War II

- A. Overy, Chapter 6 (required purchase).
- B. Mark Harrison, *The Economics of World War II*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, esp. Chapter 1 "The Economics of World War II: an Overview," pp. 1-42. (W8)
- C. Robert J. Gordon, "Did Economics Cause World War II?" NBER Working Paper 14560, December 2008. (W8)
- D. Yergin, *The Prize*, Chapter 16, "Japan's Road to War," 17 "Germany's Formula for War," 18 "Japan's Achilles' Heel," 19 "The Allies' War." (W8fSS)

LIST OF TOPICS AND ASSIGNMENTS

M	05 Jan	NO CLASS	
W	07 Jan	Student Introductions, Course Introduction	
M	12 Jan	Ungraded Papers due, World in 1901	1A-1B
W	14 Jan	More World in 1901; Causes of World War I	2A -2G
M	19 Jan	NO CLASS: Martin Luther King, Jr., Birthday	
W	21 Jan	More on Causes of World War I	2H-2I
M	26 Jan	First drafts Paper #1 "peer editing"; Debate Causes of World War I	
W	28 Jan	Final drafts Paper #1 due; Economic Issues of WWI	3A-3C
M	02 Feb	Economic Issues (Discussion #2)	
W	04 Feb	Treaty of Versailles and its Aftermath	4A-4C
M	09 Feb	Major events of the interwar period	
W	11 Feb	Why the Allies Won	5A
M	16 Feb	First drafts Paper #2 "peer editing"; What Happened in WWII	
W	18 Feb	Final drafts Paper #2 due; More on What Happened in WWII	
M	23 Feb	Strategic Dilemmas of WWII	5B
W	25 Feb	Economic Issues of WWII	6A-6C
M	02 Mar	Role of Oil in WWII	6D
W	04 Mar	Economic Issues of WWII; Hitler's Mistakes	
M	09 Mar	Last Class: Videos on the WWII Home Front (Germany, USSR, Chicago, US)	
F	20 Mar	Paper #3 due, no extensions	