The Decade That Changed America: A Look at the 1940's

Harrison Dylan
Miss Spencer
Junior English
February 1, 2010
The Decade That Changed America: A Look at the 1940's

The forties were dominated by World War II. It was the most costly and destructive war in history and its effects, for good and ill, were felt far beyond the battlefields…After the war was over, the United States entered a period of great prosperity. A soaring birthrate produced more consumers who fueled the economy…the United States emerged as the most powerful nation, along with the Soviet Union. The entire world seemed to line up on either side with one of these superpowers, under the dread shadow of the atomic bomb. (Hills 56)

Throughout America's history, there have been many decades that influence and shape the future of American society. Decades filled with hardship and war may be difficult to live with at the time, but change for the better often grows out of an era that presented great challenges for our country. The 1940s was a time in American history which has changed American society forever. It also was a time of hardship and every aspect of life was affected by World War II. The rights of different groups of people were also an issue during the 1940s. The inventions of different technology like computers, nuclear weapons, and rockets affected the whole world and television began to change American's lives. The 1940's not only saw the end of one great conflict, World War II, but the beginnings of the Cold War, which would last
another forty years. The 1940s had many different social, political, and technological changes which have since had great impact on America. It is important to examine life in the 1940s so that Americans today can understand how our past has shaped the present situation and what lessons can be learned that will enable us to create a better future for our nation.

The 1940s were defined by World War II. The war began on December 7, 1941, after the Japanese attacked the United States Naval Base in Hawaii. President Roosevelt came on the radio the next morning and announced that the United States was going to war. "…Hostilities exist...our territory and our interests are in grave danger. With confidence in our armed forces--with the unbounding determination of our people--we will gain the inevitable triumph...a state of war has existed..." (Sullivan 17). Roosevelt is stating to the American people that war is inevitable and in order to win this war, the United States needs support from all Americans. The next day, Congress declared war on Japan. The United States was now officially part of World War II. The United States and the Allies were not successful in the war's early stages. President Roosevelt encouraged Americans on the home front, while General Eisenhower commanded troops in Europe and General MacArthur and Admiral Nimitz commanded troops in the Pacific. After a disastrous beginning, the United States began to take the offensive and gradually began to turn the tide against Axis armies in Africa, Europe and on hundreds of tiny islands in the Pacific. Germany finally surrendered in May of 1945. Japan was not as easy to defeat, and a secret atomic bomb had to be used against the Japanese mainland. In August of 1945 Japan surrendered and World War II ended. The costs and sacrifices of the war were astounding. This 1,364 day war cost the United States and estimated $341 billion and 407,318 American soldiers (Uschan 12-17). A huge price to pay for victory, and one that might not have been great enough if not for some equally heroic actions by civilians on the home front during World War II.
World War II was not just fought by the troops overseas, but also by America's women and children. When war was declared, many huge numbers of American men enlisted or were drafted into the armed forces. This created a labor shortage in factories and other blue collar jobs. The United States turned to its female population to replenish the labor supply. Women began to work in factories, making bullets and riveting planes, tanks, and other war supplies. By 1943, half the workers on American assembly lines and factories were women. "The war allowed us to have jobs in factories or in the military, because all of the men were off fighting in the war" (Fontana). This was the first time in American history that women held jobs that had been regarded as for men only. The results were surprising. Women built products faster than most men could build them. At one point toward the end of the war, women had built so many war supplies that the government had a problem dealing with the surplus of war material. Of course, not all women stayed behind in America. Some women joined special branches of the armed forces like the Army's WAC (Women's Army Corps) or the Navy's WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Services). The Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, and the Red Cross also created special sections for women. Children were also victims and participants of the war effort. They were victims in the sense that more children roamed the streets because their mothers were working and fathers were fighting in the war. Some regarded these children as delinquents. But children were also able to participate in the war effort. They collected scrap metal, old tires, and even toothpaste tubes. These supplies were recycled and used to make more war supplies. By 1945, these recycled products had supplied enough steel and tin to meet the country's needs until the end of the war. American children also grew victory gardens, which supplied one third of the fresh vegetables consumed in the United States (Duden 11-21). As a result of those social trends during World War II, women gained a new independence and were
able to enter the workforce in much larger numbers and in a different capacity. The fact that children were able to contribute to the war effort introduced the concept of working mothers to the American landscape. It created a wave of social and economic changes, a wave matched by another type of change that grew out of World War II—a new social role for African Americans.

When the 1940s began, racial discrimination was still very much the norm in American society. By the end of the decade, those attitudes were beginning to change based on events of the past ten years. In the early 1900s, African Americans began a great migration from the rural south to the northern cities. This migration began during the WWI era because the war caused labor shortages, and African Americans had a chance of getting jobs in northern factories. The migration benefited both the African American population and the economy too. African Americans and whites served together in the military and business world, but the United States was still a segregated society. During World War II, there were many heroic African American outfits like the Tuskegee Airmen, a squad of daring pilots who fought in Italy. After World War II ended, African Americans were eager to be accepted. One of the first breakthroughs came by way of America's pastime, baseball. Only white players were allowed on the major league teams.

African Americans had to play in their own segregated league. A number of famous African American baseball stars were eager to make a break for the big leagues, especially an older player named Satchel Paige. *Time* magazine reported on this eagerness and said, "Many a shepherd of a limping major club has made no secret of his yearning to trade more than a couple of buttsprung outfielders for colored players of the caliber of Satchel Paige" (Bowen 230). They are saying that famous African American players like Paige deserved to get a shot in the major leagues. Soon after this article was printed, it was announced that the Brooklyn Dodgers were going to sign an African American player, but it was not Paige. In 1947 the Dodgers drafted a
young infielder named Jackie Robinson. He did not know it at the time, but he would end up being a symbol of hope that a multi-racial society could exist. Throughout the season Robinson received death threats and racial insults but racism could not stop him. Robinson stayed with the team. Racial discrimination only served to make the already feisty and tough Robinson an even more determined player. By the end of the season, the Dodgers won the World Series and Robinson was named Rookie of the Year. He had courageously paved the way for all future African Americans in sports and society. As Bowen states, the old racial barriers came crashing down and the following season half a dozen African Americans starred in baseball, including Paige (230-34). Robinson's acceptance in the major leagues did not just have an impact on sports. Breaking the color barrier in baseball was a tremendous milestone in America's search for a multi-racial society. It would have a future impact on America, as would a number of technological breakthroughs that were also emerging in the 1940s.

The computer was one of the most significant technological advances made in the 1940s. From the early 1800's scientists had imagined what it would be like to have a machine that could compute complex mathematical solutions. This dream finally came true in 1946 when the first all electronic digital computer was developed. The name of this computer was the ENIAC or the Electrical Numerical Integrator and Calculator. It worked from the flow of electrons in 18,000 vacuum tubes. It also consisted of 70,000 transistors and 6,000 switches. The most surprising fact about the ENIAC was that it weighed over thirty tons and was large enough to fill a room the size of a gymnasium. This may seem gigantic by today's standards, but in the 1940's this was top of the line technology. The ENIAC was used to determine the path of bullets and bombs for the Army. This computer was able to do as much work in one hour as most people could do in one week (Duden 30). The computer age started in the 1940s and had its origins as a tool to help
the military win World War II. Since that time, it has had a major impact on life in the United States--an impact perhaps second only to television, another staple of the modern American scene that emerged in the 1940s.

The television actually was invented in the late 1930s but did not gain much popularity at the start of the decade. When World War II began, production of televisions and other electronics was stopped in order to devote factory capacity to the war effort. In 1946, after the waned, the ban on the production of electronics was lifted and televisions began rolling off the assembly lines again. Consumers in post-war America had an increasing amount of disposable income, and television flew off the shelves of stores around the country. The 1948 Olympic games were shown on television, and they attracted the largest broadcast audience in history (Peterson). Between 1949 and 1951, the number of TV sets in America jumped from one million to more than ten million. A social commentary written in 1949 had this to say about the impact of this phenomenon: "Television is going to be part of our world…We are doomed—or privileged, according to your point of view---to be the television generation" (Fyson 64). The television created a social impact on the United States in many ways. People were buying televisions in record numbers and television was becoming a common part of life (Duden 43). The television movement impacted life in the United States in many ways, and provided Americans with easier access to information and entertainment with pictures and words. Television has remained a major part of life in America and is still the major source of entertainment and information for most Americans.

Because World War II was the dominant event during the 1940's, it's not surprising that the entertainment industry made nationalistic films that emphasized support for the war and the United States. Several classic movies like Casablanca and Citizen Kane that came out at the
beginning of the 1940s did not fit this pattern. But once America became fully engaged in the war effort, the tenor and content of films and other forms of entertainment were different. The GI Joe comic book was introduced to the world in 1942 by *Yank Magazine*. He epitomized the "real American hero," and gave children and families hope for their loved ones fighting in the war. Disney decided to devote ninety percent of its money and time toward war-related projects. The studio made training films for the Army as well as many different public service ads. Movie stars and other famous people also began to appear in public service messages, urging people to support the country and spend extra money on war bonds. The idea of a sleepover was also a product of the war years. Children, who were often left unsupervised while their mothers were working in factories, could spend a night at a neighborhood friend's house so they did not get in trouble (Duden 13-17). Changes affecting the entertainment industry, many of them related in some way to World War II, were a lasting trend that emerged in the 1940s.

In the field of science and technology, the 1940s were a proving ground for many developments that would shape future decades. For example, German experiments with rocketry, intended as part of their war effort, were actually the beginning of the space age. In 1942, Germany launched the first V-2 rocket, a weapon intended to terrorize the citizens in England and other Allied nations. The V-2 rocket flew at several times the speed of sound and gave no warming as it approached. This impressive technological advance was developed by many German scientists, but mainly by Dr. Werhner von Braun. The V-2 carried a one-ton warhead of the highly deadly chemical Amatol. The engine of the V-2 was similar to the design of today's long range rocket engines. The difference between the engine of the V-2 and those developed earlier was that the V-2 did not draw oxygen from the air to burn fuel. This was because the V-2 carried its own oxygen within the engine. This allowed the V-2 to be able to fly
outside of the atmosphere of the Earth. The German scientists also developed a variety of liquid and solid propellant rocket vehicles. At the end of the war, when Germany surrendered to the United States, Von Braun's work was discovered. The United States was interested in the research and allowed him to continue working on the rockets in the United States. Braun and his expertise with rockets became important in the United States space program. Braun even helped to build the rocket that took Americans to the moon in 1969 (Fyson 23). Braun and his team of German scientists were responsible for the entire manned space program. The space program, which became one of the most important and historic achievements in United States history, began in the evil German empire of World War II. But the Germans were not the only people developing a deadly weapon during the war. America had a secret program as well.

The atomic bomb, one of the most powerful and deadly technological advances in history, was developed in the 1940's. In 1941, nuclear physicists discovered that two uranium derivatives, U-235 and plutonium, could be used to create rapid fission. In simple terms, fission is when a neutron penetrates a nucleus of uranium; the nucleus then splits and gives off more neutrons and energy. The nuclear physicists felt they could create a chain reaction, if the neutrons from the fission reaction would penetrate a different nucleus. In December of 1942 a physicist named Enrico Fermi solved this problem and created the first nuclear reaction. He developed this reactor under the University of Chicago athletic stadium from a square mixture of uranium and graphite bricks. This was the secret "Manhattan Project" that went on to develop the first atomic bomb (Fyson 23). When the bomb was dropped on August, 1945, none of the Allies had an accurate sense of the devastating effect this weapon would have on the world. After the bomb was dropped on Japan, no one living in the city really knew what had happened. Futaba Kitayama was a resident of Hiroshima and witnessed the dropping of the bomb. "I don't
remember which came first—the flash of light or the sound of an explosion that roared down my belly... Soon I noticed that the air smelled terrible. Then I was shocked by the feeling that the skin on my face had come off” (Fyson 36). This was the first time that this atomic bomb had ever been used, but it was not the last. Three days later, another atomic bomb was dropped on the Japanese city of Nagasaki. Since that day in August 1945, no other atomic bomb has ever been used against another nation. The discovery of this atomic reaction may have ended World War II and saved many American lives, but it put the United States into another perilous situation—a nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union.

After the atomic bomb was dropped on Japan in August of 1945, one great conflict was ended, but another type of war was erupting. At the end of the war, the United States was the dominant country in the world. America had emerged as a superpower. But Russia was a communist country and posed a threat to the United States and other democratic nations. Even more threatening was the fact that with the development of atomic weapons, countries could be wiped out in seconds. With this kind of a threat, there was a need for a world organization devoted to settling disputes peacefully (Maxwell 16). On October 24, 1945, the United Nations was formed by 29 nations, including the United States. The purpose of this was to prevent war in the future. By 1946, 51 nations were in the UN and they outlawed the use of the atomic bombs and other weapons of mass destruction. Another landmark alliance was created in 1959, when eleven countries from North America and Western Europe signed a treaty to form the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The main purpose was to protect any of the NATO countries in the event of an attack by the Soviet Union or other Communist nation (Krull 20). In 1947, the United States adopted a plan which gave money to European nations to allow them to recover from the war. This was called the Marshall Plan and was put into place because the
United States feared that European nations would fall to communism because of the impact of the war. President Truman, speaking to Congress about this issue, said, "Our deepest concern with European recovery is that it is essential to the maintenance of the civilization in which the American way of life is rooted...The next few years can determine whether the free countries of Europe will be able to preserve their heritage in freedom..." (Fyson 50). Truman was trying to convince Congress that money to help rebuild Europe was the best weapon in the fight to preserve democracy. Historians believe that the Marshall Plan was a turning point that solidified America's position as a superpower (Hills 27-32). The UN, formed after World War II to help prevent other wars, is very much in the news today. The UN's ban on weapons of mass destruction is as important now as when it was first adopted. Today, the fear of an attack by Russia has been replaced by concerns about Iraq and North Korea. The Cold War was an outcome from World War II because of the fear of communism, and the silent war between democracy and communism began. The development of the Cold War lasted well into other decades, but was yet another historical legacy that began in the 1940s.

The 1940s are an important decade to study because the history behind it helps Americans understand their heritage and better appreciate the power and freedom enjoyed by this nation in the twenty-first century. The 1940s produced many different changes in the political, social, and technological aspects of life. World War II was a major factor and influenced all of these aspects throughout the 1940s. When the biggest war in the history of the United States finally ended in 1945, a different war was on the horizon--a Cold War. Our enemies in World War II were defeated and the nation was in a period of economic growth and prosperity, but did American culture end the decade on a good note? The social and racial injustices of this decade would eventually lead to a more just and democratic nation in the decades that followed.
Clearly, while the 1940s were a decade that paved the way for significant changes in years to come, the lessons learned from this era were not simple or easy to put into practice.

The last sentence of the conclusion leaves us with a forward thinking idea.
Works Cited


Fontana, Beatrice. Personal interview. 10 January 2010.


Note that the works cited page is double-spaced between and within each entry. It is arranged alphabetically by the author’s last name. Every author on this page is parenthetically cited/used in the paper. That is what makes this a works cited page as opposed to a bibliography.

Please consult WWSHS LLC citation site for further examples of citations: [http://www.wwshs.org/academics/library/citations.htm](http://www.wwshs.org/academics/library/citations.htm)
8. Cover Page For Project

9. How to create a title page?

All the content and elements that you include in this page would depend on what kind of project or document you're preparing. Read on to learn more about the cover page template so that you can prepare your own cover sheet example for your documents.

**Title Page Templates.**

Modern Language Association or MLA

This format is now in its 8th Edition, and it's commonly used in the fields of humanities and arts. Normally, this format doesn't require a cover page, but some instructors still ask for it. If you're required to make a cover page, follow the guidelines set by your instructor. This page presents the key words and phrases for each topic in bold.

Key vocabulary is introduced using short texts, scripts, diagrams, and tables. Many vocabulary items are illustrated. Each unit is divided into sections (usually A and B) and each section has a specific title. Some sections include notes on the key language - for example, explanations of words that have different meanings in technical English and in everyday English, and references to other units where related topics or words are covered in more detail.

Sometimes, the left-hand page may be used as the basis for a presentation, by either the teacher or the learners. Learners can do the exercises individually or in small groups. They can then compare answers with other groups or in a whole-class feedback session. [Research papers that use MLA format do not include a cover page unless requested by your instructor. Instead, start with the information shown at the top of this page. Do not bold the title or use all capital letters. Capitalize the first and last words of the title, and all principal words. If your paper includes a subtitle, separate it from the title by a colon and space, as shown. For more specific guidance on capitalization, see the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 7th Edition (MLA 7th Edition).]

[All text including titles, quotations, notes, and list of works cited uses dou]