

# BEYOND THE CAPE OF SUPERHEROES

## THREE EVENTS THAT SHAPED THE FIRST COMICS

*Superheroes aren't just born of their creators' imaginations. They are born of their times. The standouts of the Golden Age of Comic Books—Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, Captain America and Namor the Submariner, and others—came to us at the end of the 1930s into the start of the 1940s, a tumultuous time for America and the world.*



### The roaring 20's

1920s America. The Jazz Age. Having put the horrors of World War I behind them, Americans enjoyed close to a decade of momentous artistic and industrial growth. Women came into the twenties having finally secured their constitutional right to vote, and with that came the era of the flappers. African American culture went mainstream with the widespread popularity of jazz. Cinema took off more than ever as talkies made their way into movie houses. Industry boomed and technological advances paved the way for the mass consumption of cars and telephones. It was truly a wonderful decade...

...that also had a very dark underbelly. January of 1920 saw the start of Prohibition. A year earlier, the 18th Amendment to the Constitution banned the production, sale and transportation of alcohol across the country. Together with the Volstead Act, which helped to define how to enforce the 18th Amendment, America became an entirely dry nation in the 1920s. But only sort-of. People didn't stop wanting alcohol, and so there emerged in major cities across the States some of the first instances of organized crime syndicates—the mob.

### The great depression

Organized crime wasn't the only problem America faced in the 1920s. As the decade came to a close, things crashed. Literally. Black Tuesday, the great stock market crash of October 29, 1929, ushered in a decade of economic catastrophe for the United States and much of the rest of the world. Fortunes were lost and businesses were shuttered overnight. At its height, one in four Americans were unemployed.

As people scrambled to find employment and keep themselves and their families fed, crime unsurprisingly rose. Desperate times led people to commit desperate acts, and in the background, organized crime thrived like never before.

And so mob bosses, hit men and police officers on the take became the main villains in popular culture. It's no surprise, then, that so many of the immediate ancestors to superheroes, like the Green Hornet, The Shadow, and Dick Tracy, found themselves battling these baddies in newspapers and on the radio.



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## World War II

As the thirties came to a close, a second world war got underway in Europe and Asia. Although America wouldn't enter it for a few more years, its shadow covered the nation, and superheroes were born under its influence. Superman—1938. Batman—1939. Namor the Submariner—  
5 1939. Captain America—1940. And Wonder Woman—1941. Over the next handful of years, these superheroes devoted as much of their time to battling the Axis powers and the Japanese as they did the mob. And Americans rallied behind them like never before. Comic books sales soared during these years of conflicts, setting the stage for them to  
10 become a permanent part of American culture.

It can't be understated. Superheroes first arose out of chaos, a time of economic disintegration, corruption, and bloody world conflict.



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### THREE EVENTS THAT SHAPED THE FIRST COMICS

1. Explain the situation of the USA in the 1920's.
2. Why were superheroes created at the end of the 1930's?
3. Explain how these facts led to the uprising of the Superhero genre in the United States.
4. Comment the comic book covers

### ZOOM OUT AND DISCUSS

5. Do you think people need a superhero today?
6. What kind of superhero might rise from today's society?

**Captain America #78**  
Published in 1954

Commie = communist  
To smash = briser / fracasser



available on  
MyEnglishClass.net

**Action Comics #44**  
Published in 1942



**Captain America #1**  
Published in 1941

