

Mass Atrocities

Who, after all, speaks today of the annihilation of the Armenians?

—German Führer Adolf Hitler (August 22, 1939)

Essential Question: What were the causes and consequences of mass atrocities from 1900 to the present?

The deaths of fighting forces in the two world wars were only part of the total casualties. Genocide, ethnic violence, and other atrocities took place as extremist groups rose to power. During and after World War I, the Ottoman Empire, ruled by a clique of “Young Turks” who were disturbed by the continuing decline of Ottoman power, perpetrated the Armenian genocide in which some 1.5 million Armenians died. As Adolf Hitler implemented the Holocaust, he referred to the Armenian annihilation as a reminder of how little the Nazis need fear for the systematic murder of six million Jews.

Ethnic atrocities did not end after World War II. Dictator Pol Pot wanted to “purify” Cambodian society along racial, social, and political lines, resulting in the deaths of 1.6 to 1.8 million Cambodians. (See Topic 8.6.) And in Rwanda, the majority Hutu government directed mass slaughter of the Tutsi minority.

Atrocities in Europe and the Middle East

After three years of a bloody stalemate, the United States entered World War I in 1917, despite considerable popular protests in the United States against American involvement. By the summer of 1918, when U.S. forces were in place in Europe, U.S. actions helped push the war in the Allies’ favor. Allied advances against the Central Powers forced Germany to surrender on November 11, 1918, which became known as **Armistice Day**.

Between 8 million and 9 million soldiers died in the war, with more than 21 million wounded. In France, Germany, Russia, and Austria-Hungary, fewer than half of all young men who fought for their countries returned physically unharmed. Soldiers who did return often bore emotional scars.

Civilian casualties were harder to record, but estimates range anywhere from 6 million to 13 million. This was one of the first modern wars where civilians were considered legitimate targets. Although the Allies’ propaganda often exaggerated accounts of atrocities, reports of German soldiers raping women and killing families during their march through Belgium were common.



World War I Casualties				
Country	Alliance	Dead (in millions)	Wounded (in millions)	Imprisoned (in millions)
Germany	Central Powers	1.8	4.2	0.6
Russia	Allies	1.7	5.0	0.5
France	Allies	1.4	3.0	0.5
Austria-Hungary	Central Powers	1.2	3.6	0.2
Great Britain	Allies	0.9	2.1	0.2
Italy	Allies	0.5	1.0	0.5
Turkey	Central Powers	0.3	0.4	Not known
United States	Allies	0.1	0.2	Fewer than 0.05

Armenian Genocide The most shocking example of such atrocities were the deaths of between 600,000 and 1.5 million **Armenians** in Turkey. This action has been called the 20th century’s first **genocide**, the attempted killing of a group of people based on their race, religion, or ethnicity. The Ottoman government alleged that the Christian Armenians, a minority within the Ottoman Empire, were cooperating with the Russian army, an Ottoman enemy during World War I. As punishment for this cooperation, the Ottoman government deported Armenians from their homes between 1915 and 1917 and into camps in Syria and what is today Iraq. Many Armenians died from starvation, disease, or exposure to the elements. Turkish troops executed others. Armenians have argued that the deaths were genocide. The Turkish government has said the deaths were the result of actions of war, ethnic conflicts, and disease, not genocide. (Connect: Create a graphic organizer comparing the Armenian genocide with the Nazis’ extermination of millions of Jews. See Topic 7.6.)

Pandemic Disease

War-related deaths continued past Armistice Day in the form of an **influenza epidemic**. Under peacetime circumstances, a virulent disease might devastate a concentrated group of people in a particular region. However, in 1918, millions of soldiers were returning home as the war ended. As they did, they had contact with loved ones and friends, thereby spreading the flu. In 1919, the epidemic became a **pandemic**, a disease prevalent over a large area or the entire world, killing 20 million people in Europe, the United States, and elsewhere. India alone may have lost 7 million people to the disease.

The worldwide spread of the disease was another sign that while nationalism remained a powerful political force, improvements in transportation were creating a global culture that would create global challenges. Whether people could create effective international responses was unclear.

Suffering and Famine

A more intangible casualty of the war was the loss of a sense of security and hopefulness. The term **Lost Generation**, first used to describe American expatriate writers living in Paris after the war, came to be used more broadly to describe those suffering from the shock of the war. World War I was the bloodiest war thus far in history. It resulted in tremendous suffering and death for both military personnel and civilians.

Famine in the Ukraine In the Soviet Union, peasants strongly resisted Stalin's collectivization of agriculture. They hid or destroyed their crops and killed their livestock rather than turning them over to state control. This led to famines from human action rather than by weather or crop failures. The famines in 1932 and 1933 were especially devastating in the Ukraine, one of the Soviet Union's most fertile farming regions. An estimated 7 million to 10 million peasants died as a result of these famines. The government took much of the crops that were grown to feed industrial workers or to use for industry. Although peasants starved, industry grew.

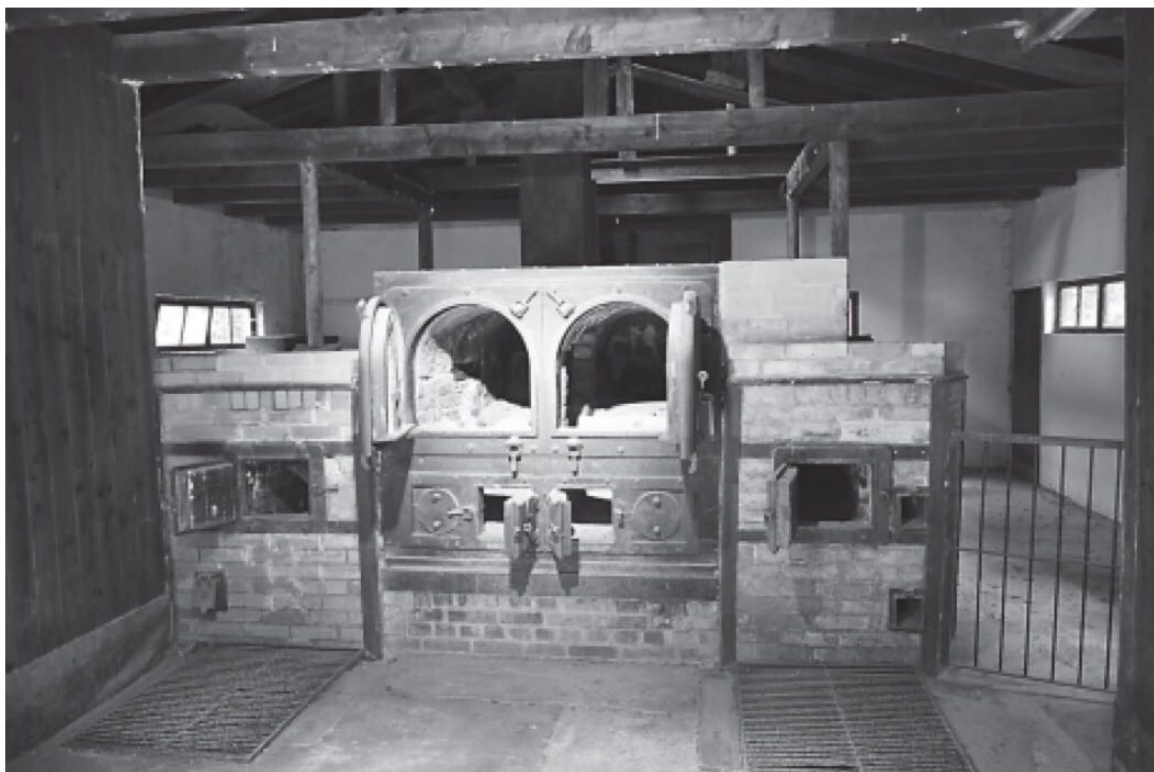
Casualties of World War II

Because of the widespread fighting, advances in the technology of destruction, and its impact on the economies and civilian life of so many nations, the effects of World War II were unprecedented. Although exact casualty figures have been impossible to determine, total deaths probably numbered 40 million to 50 million. Maybe half of those were citizens of the Soviet Union, and millions of others were from Germany, Poland, China, and Japan. Losses among U.S. troops were fewer, but still considerable: about 290,000 soldiers killed and more than 600,000 wounded. Civilian casualties from attacks on land, air, and sea; from government executions based on political rationales, including genocide; and from disease and starvation caused by the war likely exceeded military casualties.

The Nazis During the war, the world gradually learned about Nazi brutality. In its pursuit of territory, Germany forcefully removed many Slavic peoples, including one million Poles, and Roma, also known as Gypsies, from their homes. **Heinrich Himmler**, the leader of the Nazi special police, the SS, oversaw these policies. In addition, more than 7 million residents of conquered territories were forced to work in labor camps or in jobs that supported the German war effort. The Nazis sent political opponents, people with disabilities, and gay people to the camps. But the largest single group the Nazis targeted were the Jews. When Hitler became chancellor, he instituted many policies that reflected these extreme anti-Semitic views, such as the **Nuremberg Laws** of 1935 that banned Jews from certain professions and certain schools. Jews were forced to live in sections of cities called **ghettos**.



In 1942, the Nazi persecution of Jews turned into mass murder. They began a campaign led by the SS to kill all Jews in Europe, a plan they called the “**Final Solution**.” Initially, Nazi killing units moved from place to place, shooting Jews and burying them in mass graves. Later the SS began rounding up Jews and shipping them to death camps, where Nazis gassed them. Auschwitz and Treblinka in Poland and Dachau in Germany were some of the largest camps. By the end of the war, the Nazis had killed about six million Jews, an act of genocide known as the **Holocaust**. The Nazis killed another five million people who belonged to other persecuted groups or were Soviet prisoners of war. The Nazis worked many to death in labor camps and massacred others.



One shocking aspect of the Holocaust was how the Nazis used technology—trains, poisonous gas, and ovens for cremation (shown here)—to make their attempt at genocide more efficient and more deadly.

The Japanese During the Second Sino-Japanese War in 1937, Japanese soldiers killed at least 100,000 Chinese soldiers and civilians in what was called the Rape of Nanking. During World War II, although the Japanese did not carry out a dedicated policy of genocide that paralleled the Holocaust, millions of people died as a result of their policies. Under the program “**Asia for Asiatics**,” Japan forced people they had conquered into labor programs. These included service in the military, on public works projects, and on farms to reduce the food shortage in Japan. The Japanese army forced women in Korea, China, and other occupied countries to become “comfort women,” prostitutes for Japanese soldiers. Because of these harsh programs, more than a million civilians died in Vietnam alone. Perhaps an equal number of Allied prisoners of war and local workers perished while doing forced labor for Japan.

The Allies Air warfare carried out by the United States and the other Allies brought a new type of deadly combat to civilians. The Allies' **firebombing** of German cities, particularly **Hamburg** in 1943 and **Dresden** in 1945, caused large casualties. The number of deaths in Hamburg was about 50,000. Dresden had fewer casualties, maybe 25,000 deaths, as 15 square miles of its historic city center were destroyed. The United States also used firebombing in **Tokyo**.

The final two air attacks in the war, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, produced not only high casualties, but tremendous fear about the destructiveness of a future war fought with nuclear weapons. These weapons had been developed by an international group of scientists working in the United States. The scientific achievement was impressive, but it also required developments in other areas to have military use. For example, to deliver the nuclear weapons required improvements in airplane design to allow long flights carrying heavy loads. There is a great difference between the planes used in World War II and those used in World War I. In addition, the widespread use of the aircraft carrier by several powers extended the airplanes' reach. Using these developments in planes and ships, countries could carry out air attacks anywhere in the world.

Genocide and Human Rights

The global community said "never again" to genocide after the horrors of the Holocaust. However, genocides continued to occur.

Bosnia Ethnic conflict drove the genocide in **Bosnia**. The end of World War I brought with it the creation of several new nations in Eastern Europe, including Yugoslavia. That country was home to Serbians, who were Eastern Orthodox Christians; Croats and Slovenes, who were Catholic; and Muslims in the regions of Bosnia and Kosovo. Marshal Josip Broz Tito led communist Yugoslavia from the end of World War II until his death in 1980. As dictator, Tito tried to suppress separatist tendencies among the peoples of Yugoslavia by keeping Serbia and Croatia, the two largest republics, from dominating the smaller ones.

After the Soviet Union collapsed, so did Yugoslavia. When Slovenia, Croatia, and Montenegro declared independence, they each defined citizenship in terms of ethnic background and religion. Serbian nationalists led by the demagogue **Slobodan Milošević** were particularly emphatic about ethnic purity. Serb forces, in attempts to dominate states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina and Kosovo, committed horrific acts of **ethnic cleansing** against Muslims from Bosnia and Kosovo, killing or driving people who were not part of the main ethnic group from their homes. Bosniaks, Kosovars, and Croats fought back, causing more casualties. Serb soldiers raped untold numbers of Muslim women. In total, more than 300,000 people in the region perished over the course of Yugoslavia's **balkanization**, or disintegration into separate states.

Rwanda One of the smallest countries in Africa, **Rwanda** was the site of one of the worst genocides in modern history. Ethnic and tribal hatred going

back to the colonial era was behind the slaughter. Belgian colonizers had treated the minority **Tutsis** better than the majority **Hutus**. The latter group resented all the power that the Tutsis enjoyed. When Rwanda won independence from Belgium in 1962, the Hutu majority easily won control of the government and took revenge on the Tutsis by discriminating against them. In response, tens of thousands of Tutsis fled the country and formed a rebel army.

In 1993, Tutsi and Hutu forces in Rwanda began negotiations for a coalition government in which both ethnic groups would share power. The negotiations were cut short in 1994 when Rwanda's president, a Hutu, was killed in an airplane crash, supposedly shot down by rebel forces. This incident lit the flames of genocide. Over the next three months or so, between 500,000 and 1 million civilians—mostly Tutsis and some moderate Hutus—were killed. Some sources estimate that casualties were even higher.

International responses ranged from insufficient to callous. United Nations peacekeepers were instructed *not* to use force to restore order. There were also too few peacekeepers to protect all Rwandans. Individual countries, including the United States, evacuated their personnel from the country after Belgian peacekeepers were killed. UN peacekeepers and individual nations failed to evacuate any Rwandans. The Rwandan genocide focused attention on the lack of leadership in the international community. It became clear that the United Nations needed to think seriously about its role in violent conflicts if it wanted to effectively protect human lives and human rights.



Source: Wikimedia Commons

A school building in Rwanda has space set aside for a display of skulls, bones, and mummified bodies to remind people of the genocide of hundreds of thousands of people in 1994.



Sudan Another genocide erupted in 2003 in **Darfur**, a region located in western Sudan. Most of the people involved were Muslim, but some were nomadic pastoralists of Arab descent, while others were non-Arab farmers. The government of Sudan was controlled by Arab Muslims. Two Darfur rebel groups composed of non-Arabs took up arms against the Sudanese government in response to attacks from nomads. In response, the government unleashed Arab militants known as the **Janjaweed** (translation: “evil men on horseback”) on the region. Together with Sudanese forces, the Janjaweed attacked and destroyed hundreds of villages throughout Darfur, slaughtering more than 200,000 people, mostly non-Arab Muslim Africans. More than one million people were displaced, creating a refugee crisis that spilled into neighboring Chad. Despite negotiations, appeals, and the **International Criminal Court** charging Sudan’s President **Omar al-Bashir** with war crimes, the genocide continued.

The genocides in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Sudan became stains on the conscience of the world. International organizations and the broad global community were supposed to defend human rights after the Jewish Holocaust. Considering the millions of lives lost and human dignity shattered, the failure of the international community appeared obvious. (Connect: Write a paragraph comparing genocides in Africa during the last three decades with the Holocaust.)

KEY TERMS BY THEME		
<p>GOVERNMENT: War Armistice Day Hamburg Dresden Tokyo</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Policies genocide Final Solution Holocaust Asia for Asiatics ethnic cleansing balkanization</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Organizations International Criminal Court</p>	<p>GOVERNMENT: Countries Bosnia Rwanda Darfur</p> <p>GOVERNMENT: Leaders Heinrich Himmler Slobodan Milošević Omar al-Bashir</p> <p>CULTURE: Movements Lost Generation</p> <p>CULTURE: Ethnic Groups Armenians Tutsis Hutus</p>	<p>TECHNOLOGY: Warfare firebombing</p> <p>ENVIRONMENT: Disease influenza epidemic pandemic</p> <p>SOCIETY: Discrimination Nuremberg Laws ghetto Janjaweed</p>

Causation in Global Conflict

*As long as there are sovereign nations possessing great power,
war is inevitable.*

—German-American Physicist Albert Einstein (1945)

Essential Question: What was the relative significance of the causes of global conflict from 1900 to the present?

The 20th century saw significant changes to the global order. At the beginning of the century, the West dominated the global political order. However, the First and Second World Wars resulted in a power shift within the Western political sphere from Western Europe to the United States. These global conflicts also resulted in the emergence of new states around the world as independence movements ended the colonial relationships that existed in the previous century.

The Ottoman, Russian, and Qing empires that had existed at the beginning of the century all collapsed due to internal decay and political revolutions. Other areas of the world also saw political upheaval as nations struggled with both economic depression and calls for greater democracy. Often, though, totalitarian governments emerged out of these political and economic crises.

Political Causes of Global Conflict in the 20th Century

Many historians refer to World War I as the first “total war.” The war was fought on an industrial scale by soldiers from around the world, including soldiers from colonial areas. The combatants discovered more, and deadlier, methods of killing each other. Long-range artillery, poison gas, flamethrowers, and machine guns led to the deaths of millions of soldiers on both sides. The roots of this conflict lie in several main causes. A balance of power in Europe had been established during the 19th century through a constantly shifting system of alliances. However, these alliances proved instrumental in escalating the scope of the war as European nations jumped into the conflict to honor their commitments.

Nationalism was a growing force for political change in Europe. As such, Serbian nationalism was the main spark that created conflict in the Balkans, known as the “powder keg of Europe,” which led to the expansion of the war



throughout Europe. An arms race among the great powers of Europe helped to increase the possibility of war as well. Lastly, the imperial rivalry among Western nations, as well as Japan and Russia, helped to increase tensions over commerce and access to resources.

Colonial Soldiers Serving with the British Army in World War I	
Colony or Dominion	Number of Soldiers Who Served (1914–1918)
Canada	418,218
Australia	331,814
New Zealand	112,223
South and East Africa	76,164
India	1,500,000
West Indies	16,000

Source: Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War 1914-1920

Some of the same issues that brought about World War I also led to World War II. Fascism was nationalism in an extreme form. The fascist governments of Germany and Italy defied international pressure and treaties when they invaded neighboring territories. The alliance of Germany, Italy, and, eventually, Japan was opposed by the Western democracies of Great Britain and France. However, it was the inability of the Western democracies to offer a strong response to Germany's aggressive militarism that launched Europe and the rest of the world into war. Additionally, Japan's imperial ambitions in Asia were the main cause for war to break out in the Pacific between Japan and the United States. (Connect: Compare the motivating factors for wars fought in the 20th century with wars fought in the 19th century. See Topic 6.3.)

Economic Causes of Global Conflict in the 20th Century

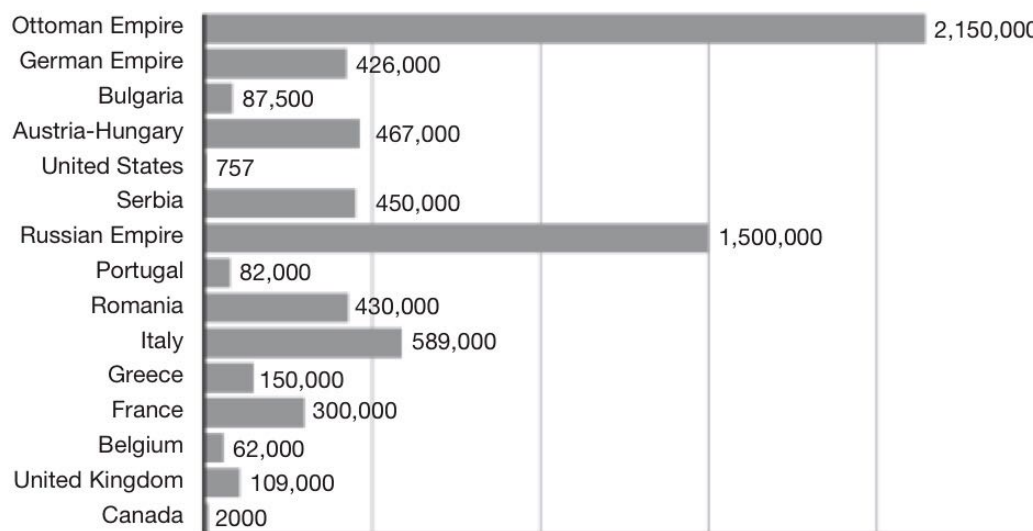
The primary economic cause of global conflict in the early 20th century was the acquisition and control of markets and resources. In the 19th century, Western European governments, followed by the United States, Russia, and Japan, began policies to take control of trade, territory, or both in Asia and Africa. In previous centuries, armed conflict would often erupt over the rivalry to control the natural resources of these areas. However, as the Industrial Revolution spread from Great Britain to the rest of Western Europe, and then to the United States, Russia, and Japan, control over markets to sell consumer goods was a primary motive of imperialistic policies. Attempts were made, particularly in the late 19th century, to prevent wars over trade but these attempts had mixed success.

The Opium Wars, the First and Second Sino-Japanese War, the Crimean War, and eventually the First and Second World Wars had these economic factors as some of their root causes. For example, the desire of Imperial Japan to take over territory in Asia to obtain sources of oil, rice, rubber, and other raw materials led to the decision of the United States (and other countries) to place an embargo on Japan that cut off oil and steel exports from the United States to Japan. The result was the Japanese decision to attack the U.S. Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, causing the United States to enter World War II. Economic crisis also helped lead to global conflict. The severe economic effects of the Great Depression (1929–1939), including high unemployment and low wages, led to the rise of populist leaders like Adolf Hitler who promised to rebuild the economies of their states.

Effects of Global Conflict in the 20th Century

Rapid advances in science and technology led to a better understanding of the natural world and brought about advances in many areas, including communication, transportation, industry, agriculture, and medicine. States also improved their war-making capabilities. As a result, one of the most significant effects of the global conflicts of the 20th century was the immense loss of life as warfare became deadlier to both combatants and civilians alike. Large-scale aerial bombing that targeted populated areas, deadly policies that targeted specific minority groups such as European Jews, and the use of new military technology such as the atomic bomb all meant that global conflict would cause unprecedented deaths among the civilian population. In addition, mass starvation and crimes against humanity were also responsible for millions of civilian deaths during the 20th century.

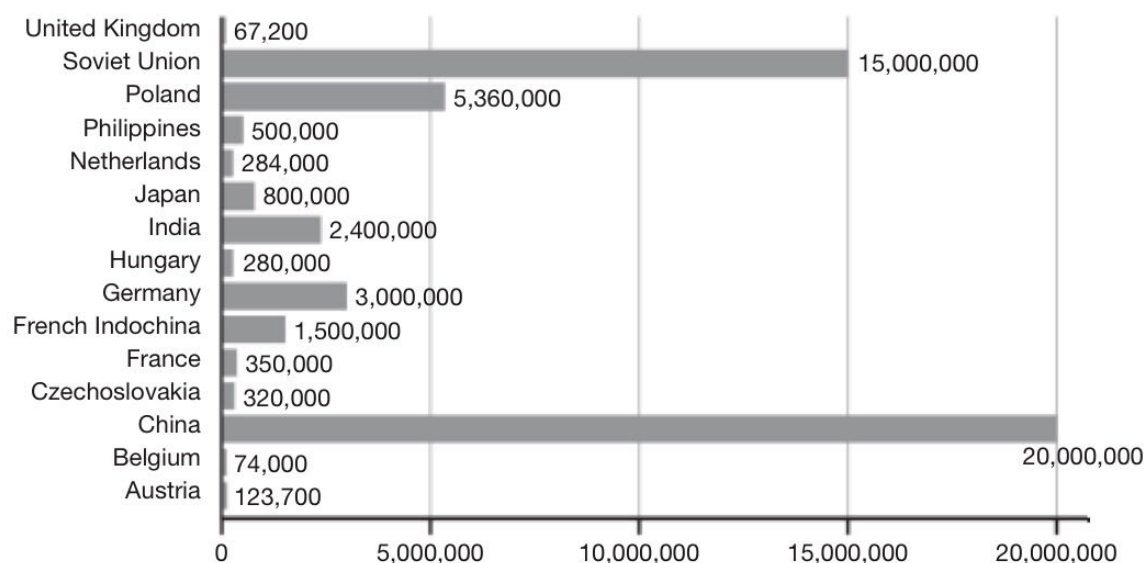
Civilian Deaths in the First World War



Source: Centre Européen Robert Schuman



Civilian Deaths in the Second World War



Source: Centre Européen Robert Schuman

Global conflict in the 20th century also brought about notable political changes in the world. In the beginning of the century, the Mexican Revolution took place because many Mexicans wanted political and economic reforms. Populist movements formed and, eventually, Mexico created a new constitution with more political and economic rights for the majority of Mexicans. However, true democratic institutions in Mexico emerged and evolved slowly. As a result of World War I, regime change occurred in both the Ottoman Empire and the Russian Empire. In addition to the effect of the First World War, ineffective or corrupt leadership was also instrumental in bringing about the political revolutions that toppled the monarchies of these states. While the Ottoman government was replaced by a Western-style democracy, the Russian Revolution instituted a totalitarian government headed by the Communist Party.

Resentment of the Treaty of Versailles, the peace agreement that ended World War I, also helped to bring about totalitarian regimes in Germany and Italy. These fascist governments appealed to people's nationalism and desire to restore the country's glory and standing in the world, leading their nations toward war.

World War I weakened the colonial powers, and after the war, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson advocated for the self-determination of people to choose their government or nation-state. This was seen as a sign that colonies had the right to demand independence. Many people in the colonies also felt that their support of or active participation in the war meant that they were owed some form of self-government. When those in power did not meet these demands, organized independence movements formed or grew.

The desire for independence continued to grow after World War II, as the colonial powers were further weakened by the war and unable to afford the cost and labor power to rebuild and maintain their empires. Many new

states formed during this time. Former colonies that had a small foreign settler population gained their independence relatively peacefully, while colonies that had a sizeable foreign settler population often experienced a more violent process towards independence.

Perhaps the largest independence movement, in terms of the number of people involved, took place in India. Relying on passive resistance and civil disobedience, the people of the British colony of India achieved independence in 1947. However, due to religious and ideological differences, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into a Muslim-dominated Pakistan (which originally included East Pakistan, now Bangladesh) and a Hindu-dominated India. (See Topic 8.6.) The tensions between Muslims and Hindus living in British India did not disappear with independence. These tensions have led to several military conflicts between the two countries since partition.

Another significant effect of the global conflicts of the 20th century was a repositioning of power in the Western countries—away from Western Europe and to the United States. Because of the participation of the United States in both the First and Second World Wars, as well as the smaller scale of destruction the U.S. experienced compared to Western European countries, the United States became a world power, playing the dominant role in the transatlantic relationship. However, the Soviet Union soon emerged as a second superpower in opposition to the United States.