

# 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.

<b>Colonial Soldiers Serving with the British Army in World War I</b>	
<b>Colony or Dominion</b>	<b>Number of Soldiers Who Served (1914–1918)</b>
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.

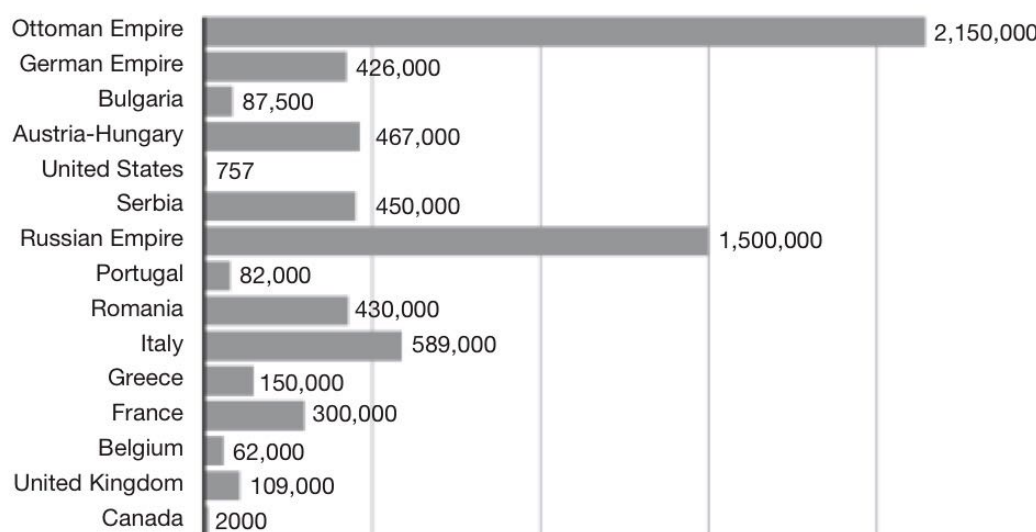


The Opium Wars, the First and Second Sino-Japanese War, the Crimean War, and eventually the First and Second World Wars had these economic factors as some of their root causes. For example, the desire of Imperial Japan to take over territory in Asia to obtain sources of oil, rice, rubber, and other raw 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.

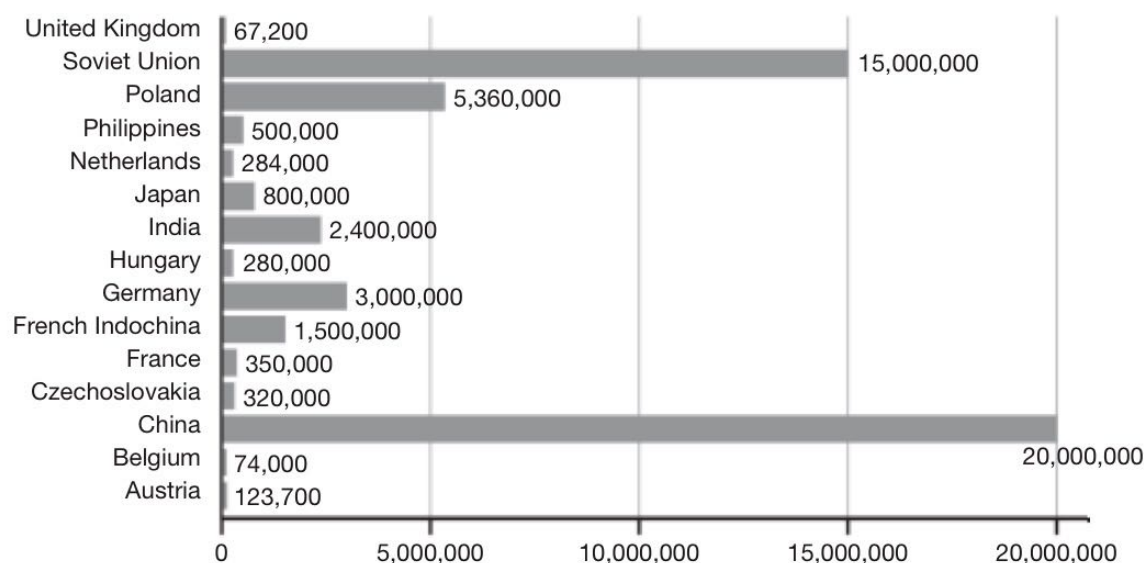
**Civilian Deaths in the First World War**



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.