

Chapter 3: International history 1900-99

- Debates about the origins of the First World War focus on whether responsibility should rest with the German government or whether it originated from more complex factors.
- The Paris peace settlement in 1919 failed to address central problems of European security, and in restructuring the European state system created new sources of grievance and instability. Principles of self-determination, espoused in particular by Woodrow Wilson, did not extend to European powers' colonial empires.
- The rise of Hitler posed challenges that European political leaders lacked the ability and will to meet, culminating in the outbreak of the Second World War.
- The German attack on the Soviet Union extended the war from short and limited campaigns to extended, large-scale, and barbaric confrontation, fought for total victory.
- The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor brought America into the war in Europe and eventually forced Germany into war on two fronts (again).
- Debate persists about whether the atomic bomb should have been used in 1945.
- Decolonization was founded on the principle of self-determination and marked the eclipse of European power.
- Different European powers had divergent attitudes to decolonization after 1945: some sought to preserve their empires, in part (the French) or whole (the Portuguese).
- The process of decolonization was relatively peaceful in many cases; in others, however, it led to revolutionary wars (Algeria, Malaya, and Angola) whose large scale and ferocity reflected the attitudes of the colonial powers and nationalist movements.
- Independence and national liberation became embroiled in cold war conflicts when the superpowers and/or their allies became involved, for example in Vietnam. Whether decolonization was judged successful depends, in part, on whose perspective one adopts—that of the European power, the independence movement, or the people themselves.
- Disagreements remain about when and why the cold war began, and who was responsible. Distinct phases can be seen in East–West relations, during which tension and the risk of direct confrontation grew and receded.
- Some civil and regional wars were intensified and prolonged by superpower involvement; others may have been prevented or shortened.
- Nuclear weapons were an important factor in the cold war.
- To what extent the arms race had a momentum of its own is a matter of debate. Agreements on limiting and controlling the growth of nuclear arsenals played an important role in Soviet–American (and East–West) relations.
- The end of the cold war has not resulted in the abolition of nuclear weapons.
- Various international crises occurred in which there was the risk of nuclear war. How close we came to nuclear war at these times remains open to speculation and debate.