

# CHAPTER 13

## The World Between Wars 1900-1950 Part - I

At the beginning of the 20th century, the world had a population of 1.6 billion people. Industrial capitalism had changed the way many people earned their livelihood but only in the Western countries. Some of these countries, especially Britain, were the leading industrial powers and also held vast colonial empires, spread all over the world. The world was divided into the West which was experiencing economic growth and ‘the Rest’ whose acute backwardness was worsened by colonial exploitation by the West.

Eric Hobsbawm, a historian, called the 20th century ‘The Age of Extremes’. Politically, the world saw shoots of democratic aspirations grow amidst the rise of Fascist domination which fostered ideologies of unquestioned power and hatred for other people. Literacy levels and average life expectancy grew immensely for all. New forms of art like movies emerged. Scientific knowledge rose to new heights unlocking the secrets of atom and life. Women, who constitute half the world’s population, got their right to vote in this period, starting with the West. Literally more than a hundred nations walked to independence and freedom across the world. This was also an age of great experimentation as people strove to build socialist societies based on the principles of equality and fraternity or alternatively a liberal democracy based on political liberty and capitalist economy. But the same period saw the “Great Depression” causing massive unemployment and economic breakdown and two World Wars in which millions died and the lives of many more millions were dislocated. Hence, the 20th century was a period of great expectations, experiments and dangerous developments.



*Fig 13.1 : Logo of International Women's suffragist movement an organisation established in 1914*

We shall, in this chapter, introduce you to some of these things. We would talk about the making and consequences of the two World Wars, the three responses to the Great Depression of 1929 and the creation of an institution, like the United Nations, to ensure World peace and development.

- Look at some of the pictures in the next page, connect them with one or the other point mentioned above and write a short note on each of them.

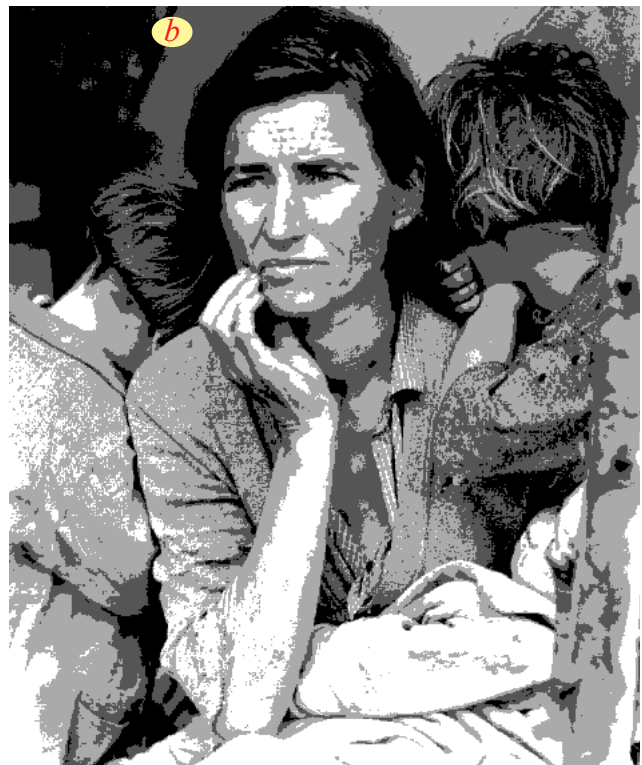


Fig 13.2 :

- 1934 rally of Hitler's Nazi party at Nuremberg. Compare it with the political rallies you have seen.
- Famous photograph of Polish immigrant Florence Owens during Depression by Dorothea Lange. It depicts destitute pea pickers in California, March 1936. What would she be thinking?
- Atom Bomb in Nagasaki, also look at the picture at the end of the chapter which shows the effect of this bomb.
- A painting by Kustodiev in 1920 on The Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. What is the artist trying to say? Who the giant leader could be?
- A cartoon in German with caption "Buy from the Jews, betray your people" 1929. What bias does it show?



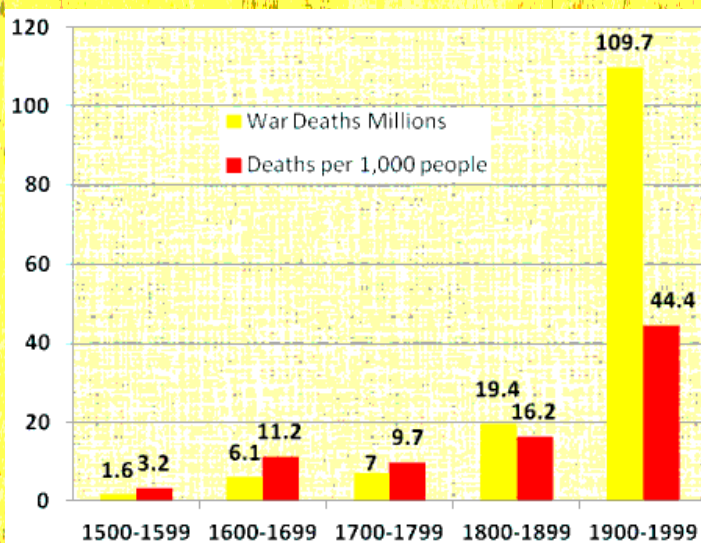
## World Wars: Ominous Facts

At the beginning of the century, the world was divided into developed industrialised countries of the West (including Britain, USA, Germany, France, Italy, Japan, etc) and colonial countries of Asia, and Africa. While the colonial countries were just beginning their struggles for independence, the industrialised countries were at loggerheads with each other. They were divided into rival blocks (Germany-Austria-Hungary Vs Britain-France-Russia), each vying for world domination which would give it control over the colonies and markets. The First World War broke out in 1914 – it was truly a World War as virtually no country was left untouched by it from Japan and China in the East to the US in the West. It ended in the defeat of Germany and its allies and in the victory of Britain and France in 1918. The conditions of peace that followed only created the seeds of another and more deadly war from 1939 to 1945. This war too was fought between Germany and its allies like Italy and Japan on the one side and Britain, France, China, USSR and US on the other side. It ended in the defeat of Germany and its allies but before it ended it had ravaged all the warring countries.

### Death and destruction

The two World Wars were different from other wars that the world had seen till then. The death and destruction caused by them was unprecedented. World War I had claimed 10 million men in battle. (This included about 75,000 Indian soldiers who fought in Africa and Europe on behalf of Britain.) The consequences of World War II were even more terrible. It resulted in about 22–25 million military casualties and the deaths of approximately 40–52 million civilians, including nearly 6 million Jews, the victims of the Holocaust and the US attack on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan with atom bombs which killed between 150,000 to 246,000 people immediately. The after-

Graph 1 : War related deaths 1500 - 1999



Source: Lesser RB et al State of the World 1999 A World Watch report on Progress towards a Sustainable Society (London Earthscan publication, 1999).

The last column tells us the proportionate death due to wars – number of war deaths for every thousand people who lived during those centuries. Thus about less than four people out of thousand died in the 16th century while it rose to more than 44 persons in the last century – nearly 4.5% people!

effects of these bombings, like leukaemia and cancer, lingered on for decades.

- Find out: How long did the India Pakistan war last in 1971? How many people were killed?

The previous wars between nations may have lasted longer but those wars were not geographically as widespread nor their effects as lethal as the ones in the 20th century.

## Power Blocks

The second fact about the world during this period is the division of the world into nation states and grouping of these nations of the world into power blocks and the degeneration of these alliances into war camps. You have read in the earlier class about the emergence of nationalism and movements for nation states in the 19th century. But the process of nation formation also accelerated the scramble among the industrialised nations for control over the world, greater say in world diplomacy and armies to back up national interests. By the end of the 19th century different nations of Europe entered into alliances with each other against other blocks. Two main blocks emerged – the Centre and the Entente or Allies. They were a manifestation of that process of scramble for power and control over territory. The insecurity caused by this scramble led to the formation of alliances, mostly secret ones, between known enemies of the past like Austria and Italy or Britain and France.

Similar blocks continued into the Second World War – the Axis powers led by Germany and the Allies led by Britain, US and USSR.

## Causes of the two World Wars compared

No one can say that any two events are similar. The two World Wars of the 20th century were also dissimilar separated as they were by 21 years and changes in economic conditions, diplomatic alliances, military hardware etc. However, for purposes of understanding the differences, comparing the two World Wars of the 20th century will be a good method. We will first compare the immediate provocations and, then, the main causes of these two World Wars.

Every war is triggered by some immediate provocations built upon some long term causes. The immediate provocation for World War I was the murder on 28th June 1914 of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian fanatic. Austria declared war on Serbia. As Serbia was with Allied Powers (like UK, France and Russia) the Austrian attack on it led these powers to come to Serbia's defence. Then, the Central

### Timeline

Beginning of First World War August 1	• 1914
Russian Revolution	• 1917
End of First World War	• 1918
Treaty of Versailles	• 1919
Formation of League of Nations	• 1919
Rise of Hitler in Germany	• 1933
Breakout of Second World War	• 1939
German Invasion of USSR	• 1942
Formation of United Nations Organisation	• 1945
End of Second World War August	• 1945

Powers (like Germany and Italy), allied to Austria, also joined the War and this marked the beginning of World War I.

Similarly, the immediate provocation for World War II was the German tanks driving into Poland on September 1, 1939. Hitler invaded Poland as punishment for refusing to handover the port of Danzig to Germany. Polish territory lay between two parts of Germany. Hitler thought the takeover of Poland will also be a small military operation. But Poland had a defence pact with Britain which jumped on to the Polish side and France joined them a day later. This marked the beginning of World War II.

Now, let us turn to the long term causes of the two World Wars. The build-up for World War I started in the 19th century. Aggressive nationalism, Imperialism, Secret alliances and Militarism were the main long term factors which led to World War I. These causes continued to push the world to war but some new long term causes were also added to the origins of World War II. One of these was the dissatisfaction of Germany with the legacy of World War I. We can list these long term causes one by one.

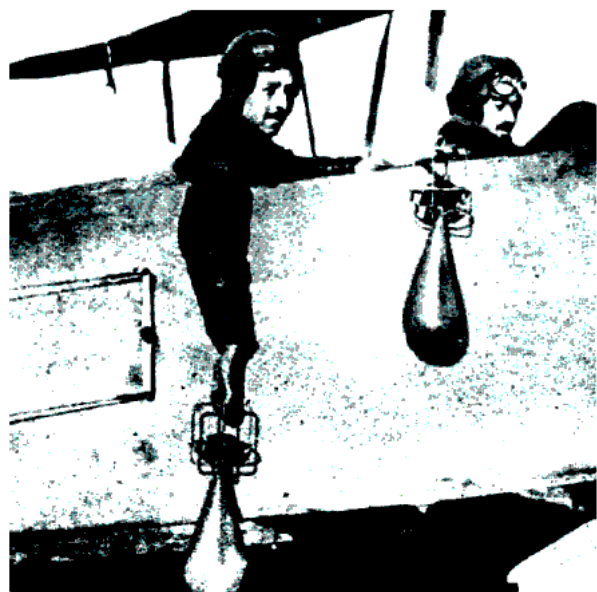
### **Aggressive nationalism**

The ideology of nationalism was a positive impulse. It was the foundation of modern nation states and the force behind the unification of Germany and Italy. But this ideology could also be used to create pride in one self and hatred against neighbours. This hatred was slowly building up in the 19th century between the states of Europe.

Italian Fascism from 1923 and National Socialism of German Nazis were the other forms of aggressive Nazism in destructive mode. Fascists played up the spirit of aggressive nationalism and tried to build images of victorious Germans ruling over the world and mobilised the Germans against other nations of Europe.

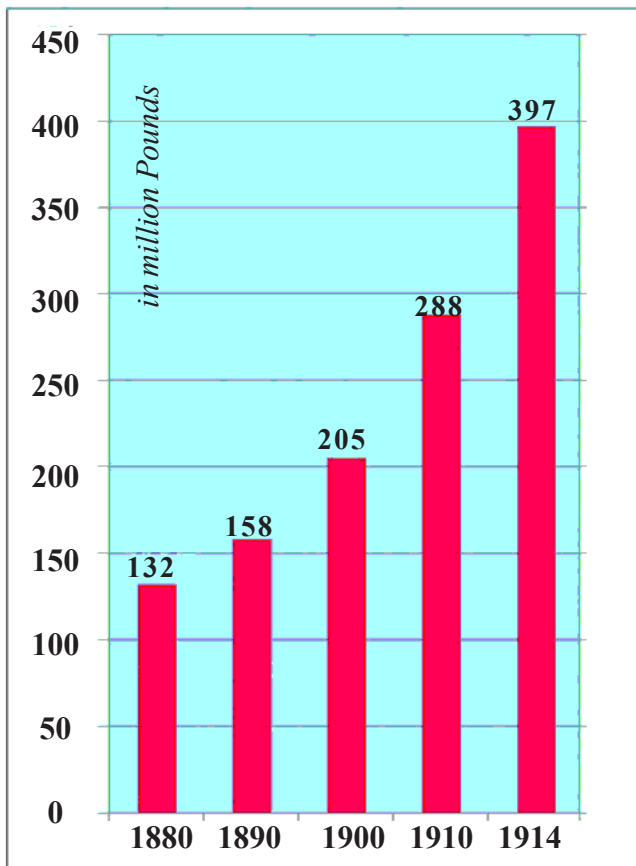
### **Imperialism**

As industrial capital developed in the European countries like Britain, Germany and US, they needed markets for their products and access to raw materials. As capital further accumulated in Banks and financial institutions, they looked for safe investment opportunities in colonies. Thus by the end of the 19th century there was a race for colonies between the European powers. The



*Fig 13.3 : For the first time in history planes were used to drop bombs in WW I.*

Graph 2 : The Armaments Race



Military expenditure by great powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Great Britain, Russia, Italy and France 1880-1914 (source The Times Atlas of World History, London 1978)

irritants, with Britain in 1904. Russia, France and Britain formed their Triple Entente in 1907. The Triple Alliance led by Germany and the Triple Entente made the European powers jealous and suspicious of one another. Instead of real peace, these alliances created an atmosphere of fear and 'armed peace' in Europe.

### Militarism

Militarism is the belief that military might is the best way to ensure security and war is good way to solve problems. From 1880 to 1914, the military expenditure of the

governments of these countries acted on behalf of their capitalists to increase their areas of influence and reduce the areas under their competitors. As new industrial powers (like Japan, Germany and Italy) emerged they wanted to re-divide the colonies but the old powers were not ready for this. This created much stress often leading to wars.

### Secret alliances

After defeating France in 1870, Bismarck, the German Chancellor, decided to isolate it. To achieve this end, he entered into a secret alliance with Austria in 1879 and with Italy in 1882. This defensive alliance was meant to partly save Austria from Russia and Italy from France. The French broke their isolation by striking a mutual alliance with Russia in 1891 and, after resolving

- In what ways do you think industrialisation has created the conditions for modern wars?
- Do you think the love for one's country among people of different countries leads to wars?
- If one country takes an aggressive stance against another country, should the other country also respond aggressively? Can there be other ways of handling the problem?
- Do you find the presence of aggressive nationalism, imperialism, power blocks and militarism around us today too? Give examples and discuss in the class.
- Find out about some of the wars fought during the last ten years and see to what extent these four factors caused them.

six big powers (viz. Germany, Russia, Austria, Italy, France and Britain) increased by over 300%, i.e. from £ 132 million to £ 397 million. Three things are noteworthy in the context of militarism. Each of these countries built massive standing armies, competed with each other in increasing their armaments and built a mindset among the people to support wars. A large industrial complex producing arms emerged which constantly promoted the idea of using war as a solution to diplomatic problems. Wars usually increased their profits manifold.

## The special context of the Second World War

### The Treaty of Versailles

World War I ended with the Conference on Peace at Versailles in 1919. This was the biggest conference as it was attended by 32 national delegations and they covered three-fourths of the population of the world. The five big victorious powers of the time, viz. USA, UK, France, Italy and Japan, participated in this conference. But Socialist Russia and the vanquished powers, for example Germany, Austria and Turkey, were not invited to the Conference. Hence, those deliberating the future of the world did not have the wise counsel or deeply felt wishes of these powers. It is not surprising, therefore, that Germans thought the Treaty at Versailles was a diktat imposed on them and they had no respect or responsibility for it. To weaken Germany, the Treaty of Versailles imposed some territorial penalties and military cuts on it. Firstly, Germans were asked to return their colonies in Africa occupied in the 1880s and European areas like Alsace and Lorraine which they occupied from France in 1871. Secondly, Germany was asked to pull down its army strength to 100,000 from 900,000 during World War I. It was also asked not to have submarines and restrict its naval strength to six battleships of less than 10,000 tonnes and a dozen torpedo boats and destroyers each.

### The League of Nations

The Treaty of Versailles also set up the League of Nations to prevent wars in the future. Russia or Germany was not invited to become members of the League and USA could not become a member as the US Congress (parliament) refused to sanction the proposal of the President Woodrow Wilson even though he was very active in the formation of the League. Hence, even at its peak in 1934, the League had 58 members only. It was hoped that it will help eliminate wars through 'collective security' and settle disputes between countries through arbitration or negotiation. It also set up several international agencies for conducting welfare activities like health, labour welfare and also an International Court of Justice for legal disputes between nations. Even



Fig 13.4 : A cartoon depicting Hitler as man of peace as well as man of war.

though it showed a lot of promise and much was expected of it, it failed eventually to prevent Germany and Italy from violating international agreements and attacking other countries.

### German Challenge to vengeful domination

After the defeat of Germany at the end of the First World War in 1919, the victorious Allies wanted to punish Germany for starting the war and also cripple it

- Some organs of the League of Nations like the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and World Health Organisation (WHO) continue to function to this day. Find out about their activities and prepare a project report on one such organ.
- Do you think the Second World War could have been avoided if the victorious powers had been more considerate towards Germany in 1919?

so that it cannot rise again. For the Germans, the provisions enforced on them by the Treaty of Versailles were slavish. This created a reaction in Germany which led to the rise of Hitler and his Nazi party. They wanted to recover the territories lost by them in the Treaty of Versailles, restore German dominance over Central Europe and end the restrictions on German armaments. Germany reindustrialised itself furiously under the Nazis and developed a massive army and armament industry which could only be served by a war.

### The fear of Socialism and the USSR

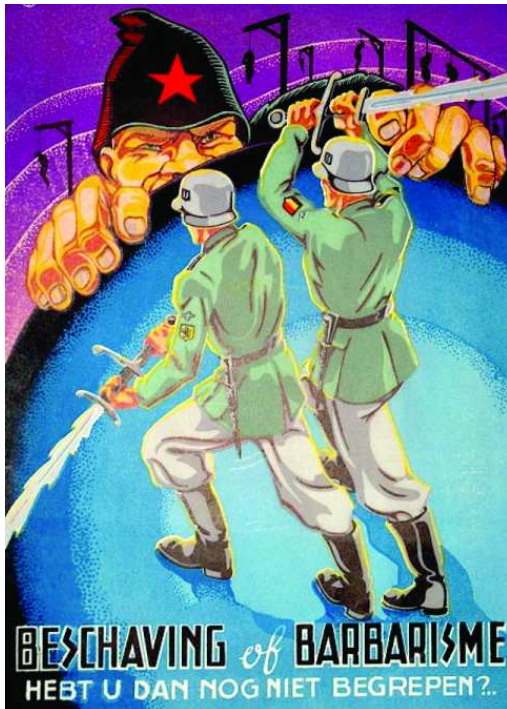


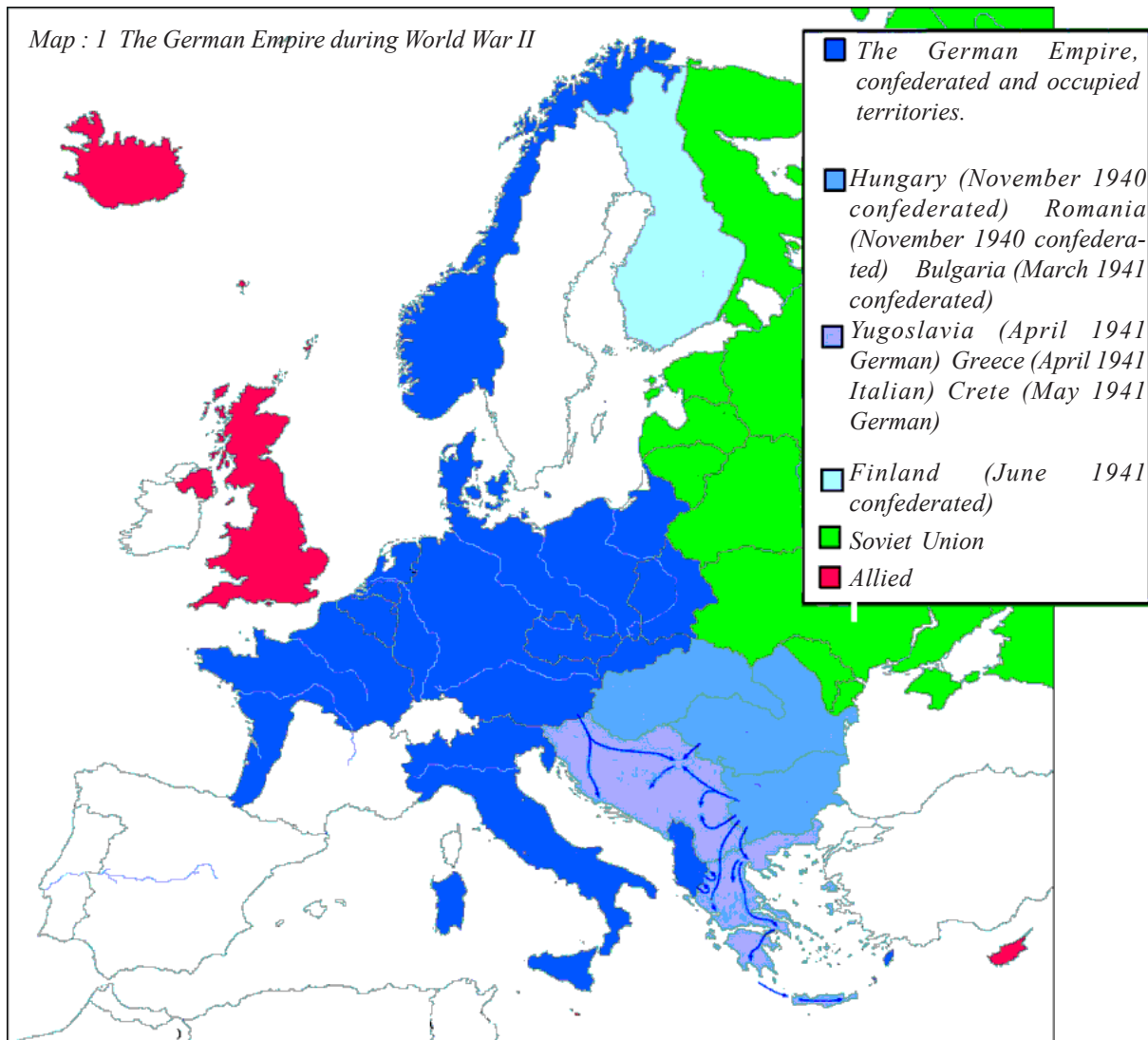
Fig 13.5 : A Dutch poster from the 1940s: caption "Civilisation or Barbarism" "Don't you still understand?"

The disastrous results of First World War caused great social upheavals all over Europe and the workers turned to ideologies of Socialism and Communism. All over Europe Peace Movements gained great popularity. In Russia a revolution took place in 1917 which resulted in the establishment of a Communist state there. One of the first acts of the new government was to end Russia's participation in the War and begin peace negotiations. (It became the Union of Soviet Socialist States - USSR in 1924.) The western capitalist countries like Britain were afraid of a similar revolution in other countries of Europe and initially encouraged Hitler and the Nazis to consolidate themselves to act as a buffer against Soviet Socialism. This was the policy of 'appeasement' of Hitler.

However, in 1939 Germany and USSR entered into a non aggression pact and Hitler turned against Britain and France alliance. This started the II World War. Hitler was able to establish complete mastery



over most of West European continent. He then decided to attack USSR in 1942. In the same year Japan an ally of Germany attacked USA and with this USA and USSR joined the fight against Germany.



## Consequences of the World Wars

The World Wars had a long lasting impact on the politics, society and economy of the world. These can be enumerated as follows.

### Enormous human cost

The first consequence of the Wars was widespread deaths and injuries. As stated earlier, almost 10 million people were killed in the First and 20 to 25 million in the Second World War. Most of those who died were men and almost all of them were under forty years of age. The two wars also established a regime of lethal arms race, particularly of nuclear and chemical weapons. The world is still living constantly under the threat of total destruction of all life through even accidental use of such weapons.

## Democratic principles asserted

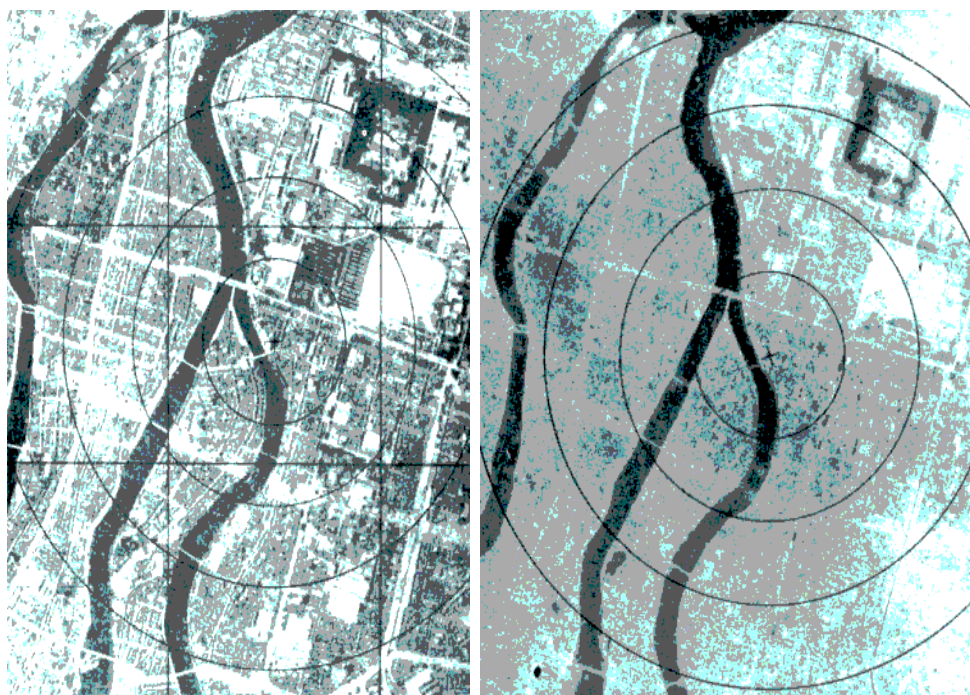
The two wars also brought home the dangers of having undemocratic governments and greatly strengthened the case for democratisation of power. With the First World War several empires also ended (The Austro Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the German Empire etc). Countries like Russia saw a socialist revolution while others like Germany, grew out of their monarchy and became a Weimar Republic. The Ottoman empire was replaced by a democratic and secular state in Turkey. Similarly, during the First World War, on the demand of their subjects the colonialists accepted the principle that self-government is desirable in colonies. With the process of decolonisation, after World War II, the colonies rose to independence and several of new countries were born across Asia and Africa.

## Change in balance of power

With World War I the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Turkish empires came to an end. The map of eastern and central Europe was redrawn on the basis of nationality, economic viability and military security. When World War II came to an end, the map of the world changed yet again as ex-colonies rose to become independent nations.

## New International organisations

After World War I, the League of Nations was formed to resolve disputes peacefully and the United Nations Organisation (UNO) was formed after World War II. UN is a kind of world government based on four principles, viz. preserve peace, uphold human rights, respect international law and promote social progress.



It works through organs like UNICEF, UNESCO, WHO, ILO, etc. You may have heard of some of them or even seen their work. The UNO despite being accused of becoming a tool of the great powers like

*Fig 13.6 : The city of Nagasaki before and after Atom bomb*

USA, and Russia (USSR) has managed to prevent wars on the scale of the Second World War.

## Enfranchisement of women

After a long struggle for political right like right to vote - British women got these rights in 1918. In the long protracted wars like the World Wars, industrial production and other services are necessary. With men away in the battle fields, more women had to work in factories, shops, offices, voluntary services, hospitals and schools. Beginning with the confidence of being bread-winners, women began raising their voice for equality in all walks of life. Getting the right to vote was a big step in that direction.

### Keywords

Industrial capitalism  
Militarism

Alliances  
Fascism

Aggressive nationalism  
Imperialism

### Improve your learning

1. Correct the false statements
  - At the beginning of 20th century disparity across the world was marked by west and the rest
  - 20th century saw the rise of democracy and instances of dictatorship as well as making of new kingdoms
  - Socialist societies wanted to build on the idea of equality and fraternity
  - Army members of countries fighting belonged to many different countries and not just those which directly participated in the war.
  - After or during the First World War many countries changed over from monarchy rule to democracies
2. Make a table to show allies, axis and central powers, participated with following countries on different sides of the world wars: Austria, USSR (Russia), Germany, Britain, Japan, France, Italy, USA
3. How did the idea of nation states and nationalism influence desire for war during World Wars?
4. Write a short note on various causes of two World Wars. Do you think any of these features are prevalent even today in countries around the world? How?
5. What are the different impacts of wars during the first half of 20th century?