WARS IN THE 20TH CENTURY

I see it only as a century of massacres and wars.
René Dumont

The Twentieth Century has been 'without doubt the most murderous century of which we have record by the scale, frequency and length of the warfare which filled it'.
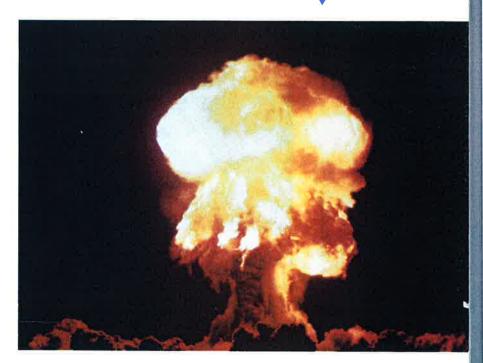**From Eric Hobsbawm,** *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century,* **1994**

At the end of the 19th century, many people were convinced that war could no longer be used as a 'tool of **diplomacy**', yet war would become the dominant theme of the 20th century. There were two 'world' wars, each of which killed millions of people; Niall Ferguson calls World War II (1939–45) 'the greatest man-made catastrophe of all time', costing the lives of more than 50 million people. Terrible as these wars were in terms of death toll, however, they are only two of many other conflicts that took place during the 20th century. In between the world wars and after 1945, there were numerous wars both between nations and within nations in which casualties were often high.

A nuclear bomb detonating. Nuclear weapons are the ultimate tools of total war.

The changing nature of warfare in the 20th century not only dramatically increased the number of casualties, but also blurred the distinctions between combatant and non-combatant. At the beginning of the century, there were eight times as many military casualties in war as there were civilian casualties. By the 1990s, the situation had reversed.

The technological development of weapons has also brought the threat of the total destruction of humanity. Nuclear weapons have raised the destructive potential of any war; their use in 1945 and the clear dangers they posed to the future of mankind also affected the way that wars were fought in the second half of the century.

Why is the study of war important?

As you can see from the map on p.6, and as we have suggested above, wars have played a pivotal role in the 20th century. World War I swept away empires and the 'old order', and set the stage for new social and political developments in Europe. World War II led to the emergence of the USA and USSR as **superpowers** and also to the decline of European powers such as Britain and France. These effects in turn led to the Cold War and the collapse of European empires, developments that dominated world politics after 1945 and shaped the world in which we live today.

World War II was 'total' for many civilians of Europe and Asia due to the intensive bombing of cities.

What terms do we use to describe different types of war?

Total war

'**Total war**' means that a country uses all its human, economic and military resources to fight the war and ensure complete victory over the enemy. In practical terms this means:

- Creating a large fighting force through the use of conscription
- Using civilians in the war effort, e.g. in industry and home defence
- Using all weapons available and developing new ones in order to ensure victory
- Government control of key aspects of the economy, so that it can be directed into the war effort
- Government control of the media in order to maintain civilian morale and also to ensure that the population sees the enemy as one that must be defeated at all costs
- The targeting of civilians as well as combatants in the quest for 'total' victory over the enemy's political, social and military structures.

Limited war

In contrast to total war, '**limited war**', as the term suggests, is the idea of limiting or constraining the way in which war is conducted. This restraint can involve:

- Confining the geographical area in which fighting takes place
- Limiting the type of targets that can be attacked
- Limiting the weapons that can be used
- Limiting the degree of mobilization.

Limited war was a characteristic of many wars of the 19th century, reflecting both the limited aims involved in such conflicts and the fact that full mobilization of all resources was too difficult for the countries involved. After 1945, limited war became a necessity in order to prevent nuclear war – both the USA and the USSR had to impose restrictions on themselves in order to prevent the very real danger of a superpower confrontation involving nuclear weapons. Thus both the Korean War (1950–53) and the Vietnam War (1963–75) can be classed as 'limited' wars because they did not involve the USA using of all its military and economic resources (though, of course, for the Koreans and the Vietnamese these wars

were total). Examples of limited war considered in this book are the Falklands War (1982) and the Gulf War (1990–91).

Civil wars

Civil wars are conflicts fought between two factions or regions of the same country, the warring sides clashing over ethnic, religious, political or **ideological** issues. An example is the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), fought between Republicans and Nationalists. Generally speaking, during a civil war the combatants aim to take control of the political and legal institutions of the state, although the violence is longer lasting than a *coup d'état*. Usually, civil war combatants can be identified as either **incumbents** or **insurgents**. Often there is foreign involvement in civil wars, and depending on its role and impact, this could be viewed as broadening a civil war into an international conflict.

Guerrilla warfare

Guerrilla warfare (from the Spanish word for 'little war') was a key feature of 20th-century conflicts. It is described as 'unconventional warfare' because, rather than trying to attack an enemy head-on with conventional tactics, small groups of fighters use tactics such as ambush and small-unit raids against a larger and less mobile formal army. The forces of Chinese communist leader Mao Zedong, for example, used guerrilla tactics in the Chinese Civil War from the late 1920s through to 1949. This type of warfare became common after 1945 for several reasons:

- Many conflicts after 1945 involved peoples of Asia and Africa trying to free themselves from the **colonial** rule of powerful European countries. With only limited military resources, the insurgents have used guerrilla tactics as a way of attempting to achieve their goals. The use of guerrilla tactics has been promoted by the fact that many post-1945 conflicts have been fought in areas where the terrain has aided guerrilla fighting, e.g. jungles in Vietnam, or bush in Rhodesia and mountains in Afghanistan. In these conflicts the guerrilla fighters have often also had the support of the local population and good knowledge of the terrain. In contrast, combatants of the European countries often faced local hostility and mobility problems in places that lacked a developed infrastructure.
- The development of the **Cold War** after 1945 also encouraged guerrilla warfare; in a situation where all conflicts were seen in the context of a struggle against either **communism** or **capitalism**, unpopular governments were often supported by one or other of the superpowers, meaning that the local opposition often had no choice but to resort to guerrilla warfare. In fact, given that the dangers of direct confrontation in the Cold War were too great, the USSR and USA often fought war 'by proxy', sponsoring local insurgencies rather than fighting themselves.
- The spread of **Marxism** has also had an influence. The belief that the masses must rise up against established capitalist governments clearly supports the idea of guerrilla warfare, and indeed many successful guerrilla movements have been Marxist in orientation.

- In the post-Cold War world, guerrilla warfare has become increasingly central, such as seen in al-Qaeda's war against the West, because **democratic** political systems are particularly vulnerable to guerrilla tactics.
- Technological developments have enabled insurgents to become more formidable warriors than was possible at the beginning of the 20th century, taking advantage of the global distribution of weapons such as shoulder-launched missiles and powerful **small arms**.
- The international coverage of the mass media now provides the kind of publicity that guerrilla fighters need in order to win support for their cause.

Mujahideen warriors in Afghanistan. In their wars against both the Soviets and the West, the *Mujahideen* have used the techniques of guerrilla warfare.

Key terms

When studying wars, historians not only use labels such as 'total' or 'limited', but they also divide both the causes and the effects of wars into different categories. Most wars will be caused by, and result in, a combination of the factors listed below.

Economic cause: This term refers to conflict over economic resources. For instance, a war could be fought over a country's need to secure foreign markets or raw materials. An example is the Gulf War of 1990–91, in which the Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein, looking to solve Iraq's drastic economic problems, invaded neighbouring Kuwait in an attempt to capture its oil reserves.

Economic effects: War can have a dramatic impact on the economic situation of a country, resulting in effects such as **inflation** or food rationing. The economic consequences of World War I for Germany, for example, were so severe that they contributed to the internal collapse of Germany in 1918.

Social cause: Wars are often caused by tensions between different social groups or classes in a country or region. Such tensions were a key element in the Spanish Civil War.

Social effects: The structures, customs and traditions of a society are frequently changed by war. For example, World War I brought about huge transformations in European society, including a shift in the status of women and the beginning of the collapse of the traditional ruling classes.

Political cause: A political cause refers to wars that begin through a clash between different political factions, such as occurred in the Spanish Civil War.

Political effects: Wars can change the structure of a government or nation, and result in a complete reconfiguration of how a country is run. For example, a key political result of World War I was the break-up of empires and the creation of new states.

Ideological cause: A fundamental clash of ideas between different groups about how government and society should be run is another leading cause of conflict. For example, at the root of the political clashes that caused the Spanish Civil War in 1936–39 were clear differences in ideology. The war was seen primarily as a clash between **fascism** and communism.

Ideological effects: War can also affect the ideological position of a country or of groups within a country. For example, World War I provided some of the conditions in which the communist revolution in Russia took place in 1917.

STUDENT STUDY SECTION

Questions

1. Look at the conflicts on the map (on p.6). Using the information above, decide into which category – total, limited, civil or guerrilla – each war would fit. (You may find that wars can fit into more than category.)

2. What other wars do you know of that are not shown on the map? What wars do you know about that are still being fought today?

3. Wars can be given many other labels. How would you explain the following definitions of wars?
   - Revolutionary war
   - Colonial war
   - Ideological war
   - Economic war
   - Defensive war
   - Religious war
   - **Neo-colonial** war.

4. Consider the following developments of the 19th and 20th centuries. How has each one affected the conduct of war? Can you give examples of wars in which these developments have had an impact?
   - The Industrial Revolution (which saw the rise of mass production and technological advances in manufacturing)
   - The development of the railways
   - The growth of the mass media
   - The invention of the aeroplane
   - The development of nuclear weapons
   - **Globalization**
   - Satellite technology
   - The internet.

ToK Time

…the intensity of war often unleashes or accelerates numerous forces for change, transforming industry, society and government in ways that are fundamental and permanent. By weakening or destroying traditional structures, or by impelling internal reforms, wars may create conditions conducive to social change and political modernisation.
From James Sheehan, *The Monopoly of Violence: Why Europeans Hate Going to War*, 2008

Can war ever be seen as a 'positive' force within and between societies? Discuss in pairs the above quotation and attempt to find examples of when and where war has brought about 'social change and political modernization'.