Unit 8 Overview: Global Conflict 1914 to 1991 CE

After each of the world wars, world leaders hoped to create a system that would prevent future wars. They all failed. What can we learn about this period of global conflict from the art of young people who experienced it?

0:03

Video footage of German troops invading Czechoslovakia—soldiers ride in in trucks towing cannons and people line the street saluting Hitler; photo of Petr Ginz and his family; illustrations by Petr Ginz of his time-traveling dinosaur

March 15th, 1939. German troops invade Czechoslovakia, another step in the world's march to Total War for the second time in 20 years. In an apartment in the Czech capital of Prague, a teenage Jewish boy named Petr Ginz hid from the invaders. An avid reader of science fiction, Petr wrote a story about a time-traveling dinosaur who attacked a human village. The dinosaur named Ka-Du destroyed the little village just as Nazi soldiers were destroying Petr's home. Even as he was deported, first to a ghetto, then to a concentration camp Petr continued to inspire his community with art and stories. He was murdered in an Auschwitz gas chamber in 1944. He was 16.

0:52

Illustrations of war and conflict drawn by young children

Stories and art by teenagers like Petr Ginz are a reminder of the consequences of war. They are also sources that historians can read to understand the experience of individuals living through war.

Images of cannons firing, warships sinking, and buildings reduced to rubble

The period between 1914 and 1991 was an era of global conflict. In this period the size of wars—especially the number of people involved and killed—surged. This was an era of world wars and of what we call Total War—in which civilian populations were both contributors to and targets of the war effort.

Driving Question: What caused the global conflicts and atrocities from 1914 to 1991, and how did people experience this period of global war?; timeline of the three major wars of the 20th century—World War I, World War II, and the Cold War

What caused these wars and how did they change people's lives? In Unit 8, we focus on three conflicts that involved people all around the world. The first of these three conflicts was once known as "the war to end all wars," but now we just call it the First World War.

01:58

Footage of a neighborhood reduced to rubble; images of people celebrating the end of World War I; photo of the Leage of Nations; footage of soldiers in tanks

The First World War was started in in 1914 and involved countries that collectively contained over half the world's population. Almost 60 million people were mobilized to fight as soldiers, sailors and airmen. Over 16 million people died in the war, and it ended with civilian genocides, revolutions, and the ruin or collapse of many countries who fought in it. Lots of people who lived through the First World War believed this conflict would be the last war—that's why they called it "the war to end all wars." Some of those people tried to set up a system centered on an international organization called the League of Nations—designed to prevent wars. But that effort failed. That's why it's called the First World War. In just 20 years, the world was again engulfed in the Second World War. And this time, it truly was Total War.

02:58

Footage of bombs exploding and large guns being fired; photos of Jewish people

The Second World War involved twice as many soldiers and sailors as the first. And it led to far more deaths. Moreover, the Second World War saw the murder of civilian populations taken to new extremes. Millions were killed because of their ethnicity,

being rounded up by German soldiers

religion politics, disability or sexuality. But there were also massive civilian casualties as a result of industrial scale bombing of cities around the world.

03:28

Photos of women working in factories building weapons; Nagasaki before and after being attacked with a nuclear bomb; footage of people fleeing under a fence; photo of U.S. and Taiwanese soldiers standing together in salute; photo of Soviet communists marching with a large banner of Joseph Stalin

The industrial slaughter of the Second World War was a result of whole societies being turned toward the design production and use of weapons of mass destruction. The most powerful of these were nuclear weapons—used for the first time against Japan. These nuclear attacks on two Japanese cities ended the Second World War in 1945. This time, there were few who believed that peace in 1945 would bring an end to war. Partly, this was because the war ended with two sets of victorious powers, temporarily allied but also deeply divided and suspicious of each other. On one side was the United States and its allies who embraced a capitalist, free-market economic system. On the other side was the Soviet Union and other communist states, who chose a state-directed economy.

04:22

Poster with the heading "Red...or dead!"; schoolchildren hide under desks during a nuclear attack drill; footage of a rocket launch

Each embraced a very different system of government and economics, and each saw the other as a rival for power and leadership of the world. Frighteningly, both sides were soon equipped with nuclear weapons. In the years between 1945 and 1991, these two superpowers faced off in a global conflict known as the Cold War.

04:50

Footage of the invasion of Korea and soldiers running off an aircraft carrier

Though the fear of nuclear weapons kept the US and USSR from direct conflict with each other, they supported allies in smaller regional wars and political confrontations on every continent as they competed for influence, resources, and prestige. Many Cold War conflicts played out in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, the Caribbean and Asia where local populations sought to escape the rule of empires like Britain and France, which had been weakened by the Second World War. Millions of people from these colonies fought in the First and Second World Wars. They returned home and wondered why they had risked their lives to fight fascist tyranny only to return home to colonial oppression.

05:40

Footage and photos of the African decolonization movement

After 1945, independence movements erupted across the colonized World. These movements—known collectively as decolonization—created new independent nations, sometimes with rival factions competing for power. These factions often turned to the Soviets or the Americans for support against their rivals.

05:59

Photo and footage of the fall of the Berlin Wall—people stand atop the wall and pour out champagne

The Cold War ended, not with a bang, but with a whisper, as the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991—partly due to the financial strain caused by funding nuclear arsenals and Cold War conflicts. But yet again, the end of this conflict did not end war. Wars still happen in the 21st century—even if they aren't as widespread or devastating as those of the 20th century. Which means, unfortunately, that children today in many parts of the world still experience war and suffering.

06:37

Illustration of Petr Ginz's time-traveling dinosaur with the last paragraph of his story displayed across the image

Petr Ginz concluded his story with the destruction of Ka-Du and these words: "The world was liberated from a supposedly prehistoric monster. But it has to be added, is it not possible that a new monster may appear on the surface of this Earth, worse than this one—a monster that, controlled by an evil will and equipped with the most advanced technical means, will torture mankind in a terrible manner?"

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