
INTRODUCTION



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By any of the customary measures we deploy to demarcate historical epochs, the twentieth century does not appear to be a very coherent unit. The beginnings and ends of what we choose to call centuries are almost invariably years of little significance. But there is little agreement over when the twentieth century C.E. arrived, and there were several points both before the year 2000 (the collapse of the Soviet Union, the reunification of Germany, the surge of globalization from the mid-1990s) and afterward (9/11, or the global recession of 2008) when one could quite plausibly argue that a new era had begun. A compelling case can be made for viewing the decades of the global scramble for colonies after 1870 as a predictable culmination of the long nineteenth century, which was ushered in by the industrial and political revolutions of the late 1700s. But at the same time, without serious attention to the processes and misguided policies that led to decades of agrarian and industrial depression from the late 1860s to the 1890s, as well as the social tensions and political rivalries that generated and were in turn fed by imperialist expansionism, one cannot begin to comprehend the causes and consequences of the Great War that began in 1914. That conflict determined the contours of the twentieth century in myriad ways. On the one hand, the war set in motion transformative processes that were clearly major departures from those that defined the nineteenth-century world order. On the other, it perversely unleashed forces that would undermine Western world dominance and greatly constrict the forces advancing globalization, both of which can be seen as hallmarks of the opening decades of the twentieth century. This intermingling of the forces and processes that were arguably essential components

of two epochs we routinely set apart as centuries suggests the need for flexibility in demarcating phases of world history, and for determining beginnings and endings that accord with major shifts in political and socioeconomic circumstances and dynamics rather than standard but arbitrary chronological break points.

In the decades that followed the Great War, the victorious European powers appeared to have restored, even expanded, their global political and economic preeminence only to see it eclipsed by the emergence of the Soviet and U.S. superpowers on their periphery and a second round of even more devastating global conflict. The bifurcated international system that resulted from the cold war standoff extended the retreat of globalization, but nurtured the liberation of most of humanity from colonial rule. The collapse of the Soviet empire, and the freeing of its satellite states across Eastern Europe beginning in the late 1980s, marked another major watershed that further problematizes uncritical acceptance of the historical coherence of the chronological twentieth century. And the reunification of Germany and the reemergence of international terrorism, which were powerfully symptomatic of the unprecedented reach and intensity of the processes of globalization on either side of the otherwise unremarkable last and first years of the old and new millennia, represented both a return to trends reminiscent of the opening decades of the twentieth century and a major break from the prevailing dynamics of the cold war.

In addition to the problems posed for conceptualizing the twentieth century as a discrete era of world history due to overlap with the preceding period and disconcertingly radical shifts in the course of global development in the 1900s, contradictory forces and trends, which perhaps more than any other attribute distinguish this turbulent phase of the human experience, render it impervious to generalized pronouncements and difficult to conceptualize broadly. As the essays in this collection document in detail, paradox pervades the time span we call the twentieth century, no matter how it is temporally delineated. Never before in history, for example, had so many humans enjoyed such high standards of living, and never had so many been so impoverished or died of malnutrition and disease. If the period from the 1870s is included in a long twentieth century (and perhaps even if it is not), migration served as a mode of escape from oppression and poverty and, in many instances, as an avenue toward advancement for an unprecedented number of people that soared well into the hundreds of millions by century's end. But for a clear majority of these migrants, movement was coerced by flight from war and oppression or was enticed by labor recruiters who preyed on the desperately poor. The prospects for the great majority were almost invariably lives of drudge labor in urban sweatshops, on tropical plantations, or on the wharves of an expansive, global export economy.

Throughout the century, advances in human rights, which were spread ever more broadly among different social groups—including women, laborers,

ethnic minorities, and gays—made strides that were perhaps greater than all of those achieved in previous history combined. During the same time span, however, state tyranny and brutal oppression reached once unimaginable levels—in large part due to the refinement or introduction of new technologies of repression and surveillance and modes of mass organization and control. Breakthroughs in the sciences that greatly enhanced our understandings of the natural world and made for major advances in medicine and health care were very often offset by the degradation of the global environment and massive spurts in excessive mortality brought on by warfare, famine, periodic genocidal onslaughts, and worldwide epidemics. In no previous epoch of history was war so vilified and peace so consciously pursued through the establishment of international organizations and diplomatic exchanges. Despite these endeavors, the levels of domestic and international violence within human populations and the ravages visited upon animals and the natural world by humans vastly exceeded that of any previous era in history. In a century where human communities globally and individuals locally had the potential to be much more intensely connected by new communications technologies, state-sponsored programs to achieve autarky, a global epidemic of ethnic strife, uncontrolled urban growth, and the dissolution of extended family ties in many societies divided nations and communities and isolated individuals to an extent unparalleled in recorded human history.

For teachers, in particular, the challenge of weaving together in meaningful ways the seemingly disparate strands of global history in the twentieth century has often led to its neglect. The fact that the most recent phase of the human experience is usually covered only at the end of a multiterm sequence of world history units has meant that it often ends up becoming a rushed add-on of rather random, abbreviated capsule summaries and general overviews. In view of the fact that no phase of history can begin to match the twentieth century in terms of the extent to which it has shaped the contemporary world, this marginalization is particularly pernicious and has been at times literally lethal. The unmatched abundance and accessibility of primary documents and secondary works on world history in the past 100–150 years, which are clearly evident in the citations that accompany the essays in this collection, makes this neglect all the more lamentable. Taken together, the key themes and processes that have been selected as the focus for each of the eight essays provide a way to conceptualize the twentieth century as a coherent unit for teaching, as well as for written narrative and analysis. Though they do not exhaust the crucial strands of historical development that tie the century together—one could add, for example, nationalism and decolonization—they cover in depth the defining phenomena of that epoch, which, as the essays demonstrate, very often connect in important ways with these and other major developments.

The opening essays of this collection underscore the importance of including the late 1800s in what is best conceived as a “long” twentieth century. The

contributions by Jose Moya and Adam McKeown and Howard Spodek consider in nuanced detail key developments in transport and communication technologies, demographic trends, and socioeconomic shifts that represented watershed transformations in where humans lived, how they earned their livings, and their unprecedented ability to move about the globe. Moya and McKeown set the patterns of migration in the twentieth century against those extending back millennia, and they compare in imaginative ways the similarities and differences among diverse flows in different geographical areas and across ethnic communities and social strata. They consider not only the nature, volume, and direction of migrant movements motivated primarily by opportunities for economic advancement—including the massive movement of rural agriculturalists to rapidly growing urban areas—but also the often-neglected displacements of populations that resulted from the wars, revolutions, and natural and man-made disasters of the twentieth century.

Howard Spodek's essay charts the development of the urban areas that have been the destination for the great majority of both international and domestic immigrants in the modern era, and that in 2005 became the place of residence for the majority of the world's human population for the first time in history. He gives considerable attention to changes in city planning, patterns of urban growth, and important differences between industrialized Europe and North America and the developing world, as well as the contrasts in urban design and living conditions between different sorts of political regimes—communist, capitalist, colonial, and fascist. Particularly revealing are Spodek's discussions of the influence of prominent urban planners and architects—including Le Corbusier and the Chicago School—urban preservation and the city as the locus of global cultural development, and the ways in which slums and shanty towns have morphed into long-term homes and viable communities for perhaps a majority of urban dwellers worldwide in the last half of the twentieth century.

Broadly conceived and remarkably comprehensive, Bonnie Smith's essay provides an overview of the gendering of political and social transformations over the course of the twentieth century. Attentive to differences across cultures and regions and under varying political regimes, Smith chronicles the struggles of women to improve their situation within the domestic sphere and the conditions under which they labored to expand the career opportunities available to them at different times and in diverse settings. She places special emphasis on the important but often overlooked roles they played in politics, particularly those associated with resistance movements, and their contributions to arts and letters worldwide. Drawing on the essay collections and series on women in world history that she has edited over the past decade, Smith's fully global perspectives make clear that even though gender parity has rarely been attained in any society and there have been major setbacks or few advances in

many countries, the position of women worldwide has improved dramatically and has very often empowered a substantial portion of humanity in ways that would have been unthinkable a century ago.

Jean Quataert's contribution to gender shifts in the twentieth century focuses more narrowly on the variable fortunes of human rights causes in an era marred by phases of totalitarian oppression and genocidal excesses that were far more severe and widely distributed throughout societies across the globe than at any other time in human history. She traces the ways in which humanitarian impulses—which were often linked to pacifist movements and largely confined to visionary leaders, social thinkers, and small groups of activists in the 1890s—were institutionalized on a global basis by the establishment of the League of Nations and its subsidiary agencies in the aftermath of the catastrophic war that engulfed much of the world between 1914 and 1918. Though the colonized peoples of Africa and Asia and the peasants and laborers that made up much of the world's population in the postwar decades derived little benefit from the interwar campaigns for human rights and dignity, principles were enunciated and precedents established that would form the basis for the more broadly based human rights struggles of the last half of the century. Due in large part, however, to the weaknesses of the League, resistance to the rise of internal repression and interstate aggression in the interwar years was feeble at best. Stalinist, fascist, and Japanese militarist contempt for civil rights, much less even peaceful protest, opened the way for brutally repressive regimes that actively promoted or systematically engineered the massive episodes of rape, oppression, and genocidal killing that were major offshoots of a second global conflict in the early 1940s. The barbarous treatment meted out to tens of millions of men, women, and children in a decade that marked the nadir of recorded human history provided much of the impetus for a worldwide resurgence of human rights activism, agitation, and legislation that came to be centered in the United Nations after 1945.

The two global wars that generated the myriad abuses of human rights, while also unleashing potent forces for the liberation of women and colonized peoples more generally, are analyzed in considerable detail in John Morrow's wide-ranging essay on the causes, experience, and impact of mechanized warfare in the twentieth century. Departing from a tendency among historians to specialize in one or the other of what have been viewed as very different wars, Morrow not only compares the two conflicts in detail, but also approaches each war and its linkages from a thoroughly global perspective. This combination of rigorous comparison and breadth allows him to repeatedly challenge long-established myths, provide alternatives to narrowly conceived interpretations, and offer quite an original take on the most extensively covered conflicts in human history and the decades of unprecedented global violence they framed. Morrow's contribution here, as in his recent research and scholarship as a

whole, treats the two wars and their prehistory and aftermaths as genuinely global phenomena, not as conflicts among the great powers of Europe, the United States, and Japan, which has been the obsessive focus of most of the vast literature on this subject that defined much of twentieth-century history.

As Carl Guarneri argues cogently in his contribution to the collection, which provides the fullest bibliographic references, the emergence of the United States first as one of the world powers in the late 1800s and—however briefly—as a global hegemon in the second half of the twentieth century, comprised one of the more dramatic historical shifts in a century replete with transformative processes. One of the most articulate of a growing number of advocates of the full integration of American history into the broader global experience, Guarneri explores a whole range of ways that the United States has from the outset been connected to broader global developments and often a major contributor to those larger processes. Though he focuses on these linkages in the twentieth century, as his citations amply illustrate, many of them had their origins in the 1800s and even the colonial era. Guarneri argues that it is necessary to include the United States in world history surveys and give serious attention to global influences on American history. He traces the legacies of the various European powers that colonized different portions of North America; the impact of major migration flows from virtually all of the other continents; contacts and exchanges across the borderlands; patterns of expansionism and interaction with indigenous peoples that parallel those of other settler colonies; the direct cross-influences among the U.S. and various European nations in terms of political institutions, social movements, and economic systems; and the repercussions of transcontinental and overseas American interventions from the late 1800s.

The last two essays in this collection focus on vital themes that assumed growing importance in the last decades of the twentieth century, and will very likely be considered by subsequent generations to be among the processes that distinguish that era, not only from those proceeding it but from the rest of human history altogether. The essay by Gabrielle Hecht and Paul Edwards provides a nuanced interweaving of analyses of the nuclear arms race, debates over nuclear power as a major energy source, and the communications revolution made possible by computer technologies that did so much to shape the cold war standoff between the Soviet and American superpowers and the transition to a new century and millennium. Hecht and Edwards underscore the vital connections between the genesis of and incessant innovations in computer technologies and the development of both nuclear power generators and atomic weaponry, and they also examine the ways that advances in these enmeshed fields of scientific and technological endeavor became emblematic in the cold war decades of national power and prestige, as well as symbols of modernity itself. They go well beyond the usual focus on the two superpowers

to look at “nuclear politics,” which encompasses both state initiatives and popular dissent, in former but diminished national great powers such as France and Great Britain and in emerging and aspiring high-tech states of very different sorts in Israel, India, and China. Equally impressive in terms of the global range of questions they include, Hecht and Edwards look at the impact of the nuclear nations’ quest for viable, stable sources of uranium and sites for testing nuclear devices in locales as disparate as French Polynesia, Niger, Gabon, and the Belgian Congo.

Having had the good fortune to escape the global nuclear holocaust that was once widely accepted as inevitable if not imminent, humanity came to recognize, albeit more gradually, a second threat to global survival in the last years of the century—accelerated climate change brought on by the release of ever-increasing, polluting emissions into the earth’s atmosphere. But, as Richard Tucker shows, this ultimate peril comprises only one of the many strands of environmental degradation that have, in their intensity and cumulative repercussions, set the world history of the twentieth century off from all previous phases of the human experience. Though he takes into account natural planetary processes and the impact of human endeavors on the environment in previous epochs, Tucker focuses on how the exponential increase in human reliance on fossil fuel energy sources over the course of the long twentieth century has degraded the land, water, and air of the planetary environment. From multinational corporations to impoverished peasants burning away the rain forest for land to plant their crops or pasture their cattle, he seeks to identify the specific agents responsible for both pollution and ecological degradation. And he tracks underlying trends and factors—such as rapid population growth, rampant consumerism, and global warfare—that have contributed to global climate change. Tucker concludes his rather pessimistic assessment of these key dimensions of the twentieth-century experience with cautionary explorations of key sources of our increased recognition and understanding of these processes and their implications for life on the planet, as well as with an overview of some of the measures that have been proposed for bringing them under control.

Taken together, the thematic essays included in this collection provide the basis for fashioning a coherent, inclusive, and wide-ranging approach to teaching and thinking about the history of the long twentieth century. As that designation suggests, they surmount the problems involved in designating a starting point by including the last decades of the 1800s, which are critical for all of the key subjects and processes considered—from demographic and gender shifts to war, the rise and decline of the great powers, and environmental change. Each essay deals with an underlying and all-encompassing process that in its depth and magnitude is one of the more distinctive features that is definitive for the era as a whole—the advance and retreat of the process of globalization.

Exploring the forces that explain this dynamic not only helps to explain some of the apparent paradoxes that bedevil those who aspire to make sense of the history of planet Earth over a span of more than a hundred years but also provides the basis for maintaining a semblance of continuity despite the genuinely cataclysmic break points that obscure the century's fundamental unity.