

N-LAI FERGUSON, INT. WAIR 2006 OF THE WORLD INTRODUCTION

easy. People are slaughtered like beasts. Finally, all that remains are smouldering ruins and piles of desiccated corpses.

All of this destruction and death Wells imagined while pedalling around peaceful Woking and Chertsey on his newly acquired bicycle. Of course (and here was the stroke of genius), he cast Martians as the perpetrators. When such scenes subsequently became a reality, however, those responsible were not Martians but other human beings – even if they often justified the slaughter by labelling their victims as ‘aliens’ or ‘subhumans’. It was not a war between worlds that the twentieth century witnessed, but rather a war of the world.

The hundred years after 1900 were without question the bloodiest century in modern history, far more violent in relative as well as absolute terms than any previous era. Significantly larger percentages of the world’s population were killed in the two world wars that dominated the century than had been killed in any previous conflict of comparable geopolitical magnitude (see Figure I.1). Although wars between ‘great powers’ were more frequent in earlier centuries, the world wars were unparalleled in their severity (battle deaths per year) and concentration (battle deaths per nation-year). By any measure, the Second World War was the greatest man-made catastrophe of all time. And yet, for all the attention they have attracted from historians, the world wars were only two of many twentieth-century conflicts. Death tolls quite probably passed the million mark in more than a dozen others.\* Comparable fatalities were caused by the genocidal or ‘political’ wars waged against civilian populations by the Young Turk regime during the First World War, the Soviet regime from the 1920s until the 1950s and the National Socialist regime in Germany between 1933 and 1945, to say nothing of the tyranny of Pol Pot in Cambodia. There was not a single year before, between or after the

\*The Mexican Revolutionary War (1910–20), the Russian civil war (1917–21), the civil war in China (1926–37), the Korean War (1950–53), the intermittent civil wars in Rwanda and Burundi (1963–95), the post-colonial wars in Indo-China (1960–75), the Ethiopian civil war (1962–92), the Nigerian civil war (1966–70), the Bangladeshi war of independence (1971), the civil war in Mozambique (1975–93), the war in Afghanistan (1979–2001), the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88) and the on-going civil wars in Sudan (since 1983) and Congo (since 1998). Before 1900 only the rebellions of nineteenth-century China, in particular the Taiping Rebellion, caused comparable amounts of lethal violence: see Appendix.

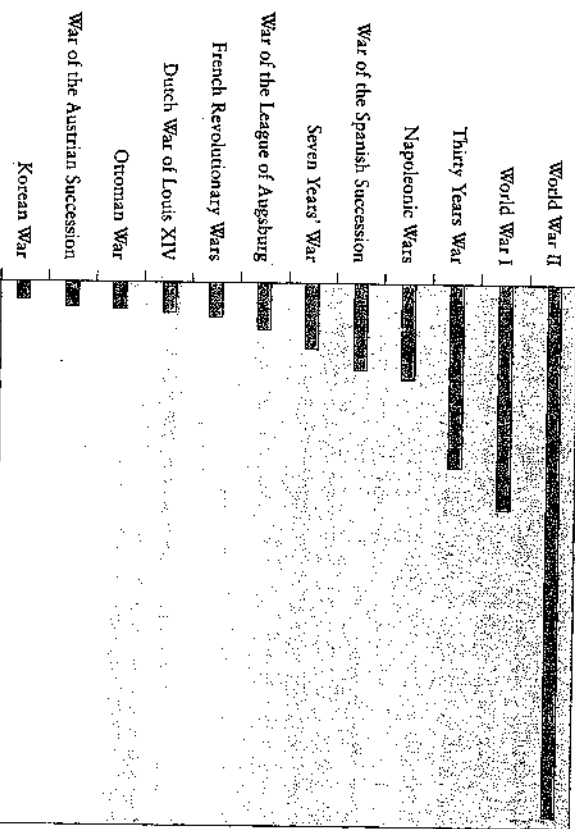


Figure I.1 Battlefield deaths as percentages of world population

world wars that did not see large-scale organized violence in one part of the world or another.

Why? What made the twentieth century, and particularly the fifty years from 1904 until 1953, so bloody? That this era was exceptionally violent may seem paradoxical. After all, the hundred years after 1900 were a time of unparalleled progress. In real terms, it has been estimated, average per capita global domestic product – an approximate measure of the average individual’s income, allowing for fluctuations in the value of money – increased by little more than 50 per cent between 1500 and 1870. Between 1870 and 1998, however, it increased by a factor of more than six and a half. Expressed differently, the compound annual growth rate was nearly thirteen times higher between 1870 and 1998 than it was between 1500 and 1870. By the end of the twentieth century, thanks to myriad technological advances and improvements in knowledge, human beings on average lived longer and better lives than at any time in history. In a substantial proportion of the world, men succeeded in avoiding premature death, thanks to improved nutrition and the conquest of infectious diseases.

Life expectancy in the United Kingdom in 1990 was seventy-six years, compared with forty-eight in 1900. Infant mortality was one twenty-fifth of what it had been. Men not only lived longer; they grew bigger and taller. Old age was less miserable; the rate of chronic illness among American men in their sixties in the 1990s was roughly a third of what it had been at the start of the century. More and more people were able to flee what Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had called 'the idioecy of rural life', so that between 1900 and 1980 the percentage of the world's population living in large cities more than doubled. By working more efficiently, people had more than treble the amount of time available for leisure. Those who spent their free time campaigning for political representation and the redistribution of income achieved considerable success. Barely a fifth of countries could be regarded as democratic in 1900; in the 1990s the proportion rose above half. Governments ceased to provide merely the fundamental public goods of defence and justice; new welfare states evolved that were pledged to eliminate 'Want . . . Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness', as the 1944 Beveridge Report put it.

To explain, in the context of all these advances, the extraordinary violence of the twentieth century, it is not enough simply to say that there were more people living closer together, or more destructive weapons. No doubt it was easier to perpetrate mass murder by dropping high explosives on crowded cities than it had once been to put dispersed rural populations to the sword. But if those were sufficient explanations, the end of the century would have been more violent than the beginning and the middle. In the 1990s the world's population for the first time exceeded six billion, more than three times what it had been when the First World War broke out. But there was actually a marked decline in the amount of armed conflict in the last decade of the century. The highest recorded rates of military mobilization and mortality in relation to total population were clearly in the first half of the century, during and immediately after the world wars. Moreover, weaponry today is clearly much more destructive than it was in 1900. But some of the worst violence of the century was perpetrated with the crudest of weapons: rifles, axes, knives and machetes (most obviously in Central Africa in the 1990s, but also in Cambodia in the 1970s). Elias Canetti once tried to imagine a world

in which 'all weapons [were] abolished and in the next war only bring [was] allowed'. Can we be sure there would be no genocides in such a radically disarmed world? To understand why the last hundred years were so destructive of human life, we therefore need to look for the motives behind the murders.

When I was a schoolboy, the history textbooks offered a variety of explanations for twentieth-century violence. Sometimes they related it to economic crisis, as if depressions and recessions could explain political conflict. A favourite device was to relate the rise of unemployment in Weimar Germany to the rise of the Nazi vote and Adolf Hitler's 'seizure' of power, which in turn was supposed to explain the Second World War. But, I came to wonder, might not rapid economic growth sometimes have been just as destabilizing as economic crisis? Then there was the theory that the century was all about class conflict – that revolutions were one of the main causes of violence. But were not ethnic divisions actually more important than the supposed struggle between proletariat and bourgeoisie? Another argument was that the twentieth century's problems were the consequences of extreme versions of political ideologies, notably communism (extreme socialism) and fascism (extreme nationalism), as well as earlier evil 'isms', notably imperialism. But what about the role of traditional systems like religions, or of other apparently non-political ideas and assumptions that nevertheless had violent implications? And just who was fighting the twentieth century's wars? In the books I read as a boy, the leading roles were always played by nation states: Britain, Germany, France, Russia, the United States and so on. But was it not the case that some or all of these polities were in some measure multinational rather than national – were, indeed, empires rather than states? Above all, the old history books told the story of the twentieth century as a kind of protracted, painful but ultimately pleasing triumph of the West. The heroes (Western democracies) were confronted by a succession of villains (the Germans, the Japanese, the Russians) but ultimately good always triumphed over evil. The world wars and the Cold War were thus morality plays on a global stage. But were they? And did the West really win the hundred years war that was the twentieth century?

Let me now reformulate those preliminary schoolboy thoughts in

people were selected for murder on the basis of their race or  
Sometimes they were the victims of indiscriminate violence, as ...  
the British and American air forces bombed whole cities to rubble.  
Sometimes they were murdered by foreign invaders; sometimes by  
their own neighbours. Clearly, then, any explanation for the sheer  
scale of the carnage needs to go beyond the realm of conventional  
military analysis.

Three things seem to me necessary to explain the extreme violence  
of the twentieth century, and in particular why so much of it happened  
at certain times, notably the early 1940s, and in certain places, specif-  
ically Central and Eastern Europe, Manchuria and Korea. These may  
be summarized as ethnic conflict, economic volatility and empires in  
decline. By ethnic conflict, I mean major discontinuities in the social  
relations between certain ethnic groups, specifically the breakdown of  
sometimes quite far-advanced processes of assimilation. This process  
was greatly stimulated in the twentieth century by the dissemination  
of the hereditary principle in theories of racial difference (even as that  
principle was waning in the realm of politics) and by the political  
fragmentation of 'borderland' regions of ethnically mixed settlement.  
By economic volatility I mean the frequency and amplitude of changes  
in the rate of economic growth, prices, interest rates and employment,  
with all the associated social stresses and strains. And by empires  
in decline I mean the decomposition of the multinational European  
empires that had dominated the world at the beginning of the century  
and the challenge posed to them by the emergence of new 'empire-  
states' in Turkey, Russia, Japan and Germany. This is also what I  
have in mind when I identify 'the descent of the West' as the most  
important development of the twentieth century. Powerful though the  
United States was at the end of the Second World War - the apogee  
of its unspoken empire - it was still much less powerful than the  
European empires had been forty-five years before.

Table I.1. Mixed marriages as a percentage of all marriages involving one or two Jewish partners, selected European countries, regions and cities in the 1920s

	Percentage of mixed marriages per 100 couples	Percentage of mixed marriages per 100 couples
Luxembourg	15.5	7.9
Basel	16.1	1.3
Strasbourg	21.2	Hungary 20.5
Germany	35.1	Budapest 28.5
Prussia	35.9	Trieste 59.2
Bavaria	35.9	Poland 0.2
Hessen	19.9	Posen/Poznań 39.2
Württemberg	38.1	Breslau/Wrocław 23.8
Baden	26.4	Lemberg/Lwów 0.5
Saxony	43.5	Bucharest 10.9
Berlin	42.7	Soviet Union (European) 12.7
Magdeburg	58.4	Russia (European) 34.7
Munich	47.3	Leningrad 32.1
Frankfurt am Main	30.4	Kirovograd 8.8
Hamburg	49.1	Ukraine 9.6
Austria	20.9	Byelorussia 6.1
Vienna	19.8	Lithuania 3.3
Czechoslovakia	17.2	Lithuania 0.2
Bohemia	36.3	Estonia 13.5
Moravia-Silesia	27.6	Vilna 1.2

Note: All data are for the period 1926 to 1929 or 1930 except Trieste (1921-1927), Poland (1927), Lemberg/Lwów (1922-1925), Soviet Union (1924-1926), Russia (1926), Leningrad (1919-1920), Kirovograd (1921-1924), Ukraine (1926), Byelorussia (1926), Lithuania (1928-1930), Estonia (1923) and Vilna (1929-1931).

systematic campaign of rape directed against Bosnian Muslim women, with the aim of forcing them to conceive and give birth to 'Little Četniks'. Was this merely one of many forms of violence designed to terrorize Muslim families into fleeing from their homes? Or was it perhaps a manifestation of the primitive impulse described above - to eradicate 'the Other' by impregnating females as well as murdering males? It would certainly be simplistic to regard raping women as a form of violence indistinguishable in its intent from shooting men. Sexual violence directed against members of ethnic minorities has often been inspired by erotic, albeit sadistic, fantasies as much as by 'eliminationist' racism. The key point to grasp from the outset is that

the 'hatted' so often blamed for ethnic conflict is not a straightforward emotion. Rather, we encounter time and again that volatile ambivalence, that mixture of aversion and attraction, which has for so long characterized relations between white Americans and African-Americans. In calling the period from 1904 to 1953 the Age of Hatred, I hope to draw attention to the very complexity of that most dangerous of human emotions.

## THE RACE MEME

If it can plausibly be argued that 'race' is not a genetically meaningful concept, the question the historian must address is why it has nevertheless been such a powerful and violent preoccupation of modern times. An answer that suggests itself - also, as it happens, from the literature on evolutionary biology - is that racism, in the sense of a strongly articulated sense of racial differentiation, is one of those 'memes' characterized by Richard Dawkins as behaving in the realm of ideas the way genes behave in the natural world. The idea of biologically distinct races, ironically, has been able to reproduce itself and retain its integrity far more successfully than the races it claims to identify.

In the ancient and medieval worlds, no identity was wholly indelible. It was possible to become a Roman citizen, even if one had been born a Gaul. It was possible to become a Christian, even - at first especially - if one had been born a Jew. At the same time, blood feuds could run for years, even centuries, between ethnically indistinguishable but irreconcilably hostile clans. The notion of immutable racial identity came late to human history. The Spanish expulsion of the Jews in 1492 was very unusual in defining Jewishness according to blood rather than belief. Even in the eighteenth-century Portuguese Empire, it was possible for a mulatto to acquire the legal rights and privileges of a white through the payment of a standard fee to the crown. As is well known, the first ostensibly scientific attempt to subdivide the human species into biologically distinct races was by the Swedish botanist Carolus Linnaeus (Carl von Linné). In his *Systema Naturae* (1758), he identified four races: *Homo sapiens americanus*, *Homo sapiens asiaticus*, *Homo sapiens afer* and *Homo sapiens europ-*

aeus. Linnaeus, like all his many imitators, ranked the various races according to their appearance, temperament and intelligence, putting European man at the top of the evolutionary tree, followed (in Linnaeus's case) by American man ('ill-tempered... obstinate, contented, free'), Asian man ('severe, haughty, desirous') and - invariably at the bottom - African man ('crafty, slow, foolish'). Whereas European man was 'ruled by customs', Linnaeus argued, African man was ruled by 'caprice'. Already by the time of the American Revolution, this way of thinking was astonishingly widespread; the only real debate was whether racial differences reflected gradual divergence from a common origin or, as polygenists insisted, the lack of such a common origin. By the end of the nineteenth century, racial theorists had devised more elaborate methods of categorization, most commonly based on skull size and shape, but the basic ranking never changed. In his *Hereditary Genius* (1869), the English polymath Francis Galton devised a sixteen-point scale of racial intelligence, which put ancient Athenians at the top and the Australian aborigines at the bottom.

This was a profound transformation in the way people thought. Previously, men had tended to believe that it was power, privilege and property that were inheritable, as well, no doubt, as the social obligations that went with them. The royal dynasties who still ruled so much of the world in 1900 were the embodiments of this principle. Even the republics that occasionally arose in the modern period - in the Netherlands, North America and France - tended to retain the hereditary principle with respect to wealth, if not to office and status. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries new political doctrines arose. One theory asserted that power should not be a hereditary attribute, and that leaders should be selected by popular acclamation. Another called for the demolition of the edifice of inherited privileges; all men should instead be equal before the law. A third argued that property should not be monopolized by an elite of wealthy families, but should be redistributed according to individual needs. Yet even as established democrats, liberals and socialists advanced these arguments, racisnarchy' asserted that the hereditary principle should nevertheless apply in every other field of human activity. Racial theorists claimed that not discrimination, segregation, persecution, expulsion and, ultimately, only colour and physiognomy but also intelligence, aptitude, character

and even morals and criminality were passed on in the blood from generation to generation. This was another central paradox of the modern era. Even as the hereditary principle ceased to govern the allocation of office and ownership, so it gained ground as a presumed determinant of capability and conduct. Men ceased to be able to inherit their father's jobs; in some countries during the twentieth century they even ceased to be able to inherit their estates. But they could inherit their traits, as legacies of their parents' racial origins.

The crucial normative question, however, was how far the manifest ability of the different races to interbreed ought to be tolerated. To some, 'miscegenation' seemed simply to be inevitable. A number of thinkers even came to regard it as desirable - that, at any rate, was a strong implication of early anthropological theories about 'exogamy', as well as the developing understanding of hereditary illness and the somewhat exaggerated perils of cousin-marriage. However, an increasingly frequent reaction to the phenomenon was condemnation. In his *History of Jamaica* (1774), for example, Edward Long found 'the Europeans [there]... too easily led aside to give a loose to every kind of sensual delight: on this account some black or yellow *quashaba* is sought for, by whom a tawney [sic] breed is produced'. Arthur (1853-55), echoed Linnaeus in identifying three archetypal races, which the Aryan (white) was supreme and, as usual, responsible for all the great achievements of history. But Gobineau introduced a new idea: that the decline of a civilization tended to come when its Aryan blood had been diluted by intermarriage. He, too, regarded the fusion of the intellectually superior white race and more emotional dark and yellow races as inevitable, since the former was essentially masculine, the latter essentially feminine. Yet that did not make miscegenation any less repellent to him: 'The more this product reproduces itself and crosses its blood, the more the confusion increases. It reaches infinity, when the two races are so numerous for any equilibrium to have a chance of being established... Such a people is merely an awful example of racial anarchy'.

In its most extreme forms, hostility to 'racial anarchy' produced discrimination, segregation, persecution, expulsion and, ultimately, annihilation. For many years it seemed to be incumbent

on historians to deny the existence of such a continuum of racial discrimination and to treat one particular event – the National Socialist ‘Final Solution’ to the ‘Jewish Question’ – as *sui generis*, a unique ‘Holocaust’, without precedent or parallel. A central hypothesis of this present book, however, is that German anti-Semitism in the mid-twentieth century was an extreme case of a general (though by no means universal) phenomenon. In claiming that Jews were systematically trying to ‘pollute the blood’ of the German *Volk*, Hitler and the other National Socialist ideologues were, as we shall see, saying nothing novel. Nor was it unique that such ideas became the basis not just for segregation and expulsion but ultimately for systematic genocide. The principal distinguishing feature of what became known as the Holocaust was not its goal of racial annihilation but the fact that it was carried out by a regime which had at its disposal all the resources of an industrialized economy and an educated society.

This is not to say that all the perpetrators of the Holocaust were actuated by fears of miscegenation, though there is compelling evidence that this was indeed a strong motivation among many leading Nazis. Many of those who actively contributed towards genocide were motivated by crude material greed. Others were little more than morally blinkered cogs in a bureaucratic machine whose ‘cumulative radicalization’ they did not individually will. Some perpetrators were merely ordinary men acting under peer-group pressure or systematic military brutalization; others were amoral technocrats obsessed with their own pseudo-scientific theories; still others were brainwashed youths in the grip of an immoral secular religion. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that the racial world view was fundamental to the Third Reich and that this was rooted in a particular conception of human biology – a singularly successful ‘meme’ that had already replicated itself all over the world by the start of the twentieth century. It could be transmitted even to quite remote and seemingly unpropitious locations. In the late nineteenth century, Argentina was widely regarded as an ideal destination for Jewish emigrants from Europe precisely because of the absence of anti-Semitism. Yet by the early 1900s writers like Juan Alsina and Arturo Reynal O’Connor were warning that the Jews posed a mortal threat to Argentine culture.

‘Only a few years ago,’ lamented the Labour Zionist journal *Brot und Ebre* in 1910,

we could speak about Argentina as a new *Eretz Israel*, a land that opened generously its door for us, where we enjoyed the same freedom the Republic gives all its inhabitants, without distinction of nationalities or beliefs. And now? The whole atmosphere around us is filled with hatred of Jews, eyes hostile to Jews are staring from all corners; they lie in wait in all directions, awaiting an opportunity to attack . . . All are against us . . . And this is not simply a hatred of Jews; it is a sign of a future movement, which is long known [elsewhere] under the name of anti-Semitism.

## BLOOD BORDERS

Why did large-scale ethnic conflict occur in some places and not in others? Why in Central and Eastern Europe more than in South America? One answer to that question is that in certain parts of the world there was an exceptional mismatch between ethnic identities and political structures. The ethnic map of Central and Eastern Europe, to take the most obvious example, was a true patchwork (Figure 1.2). In the north – to name only the largest groups – there were Lithuanians, Latvians, Byelorussians and Russians, all linguistically distinct; in the middle, Czechs, Slovaks and Poles; in the south, Italians, Slovenes, Magyars, Romanians and, in the Balkans, Slovenes, Serbs, Croats, Bosniaks, Albanians, Greeks and Turks. Scattered all over the region were German-speaking communities. Language was only one of the ways the different ethnic groups could be distinguished. Some of those who spoke German dialects were Protestants, some Catholics and some Jews. Some of those who spoke Serbo-Croat were Catholics (Croats), some Orthodox (Serbs and Macedonians) and some Muslims (Bosniaks). Some Bulgarians were Orthodox; others (the Pomaks) were Muslim. Most Turkic-speakers were Muslims; a few (the Gagauz) were Orthodox.

The political geography of Central and Eastern Europe before the nineteenth century had been consistent with this exceptionally heterogeneous pattern of settlement. The region had been divided between

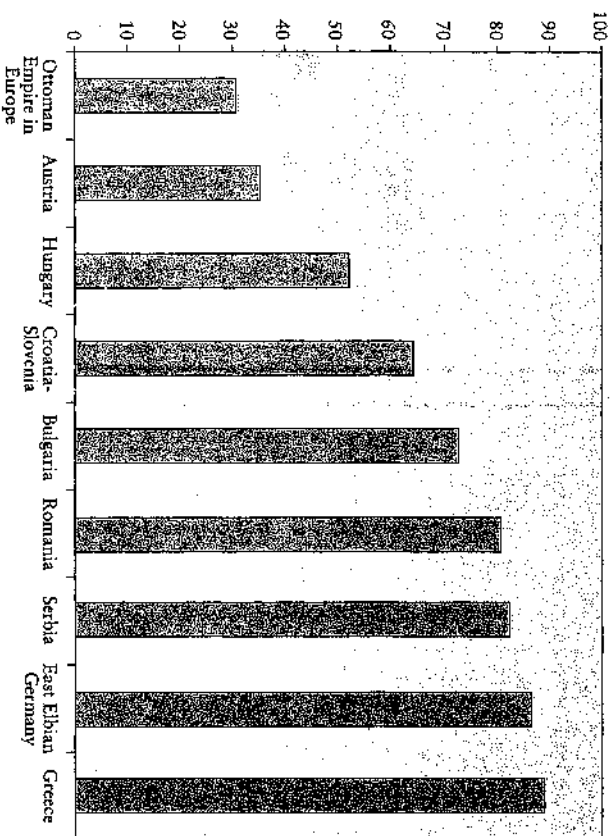


Figure 1.2 Majority population as a percentage of total population

large dynastic empires. Most people had primarily local loyalties while at the same time owing allegiance to a remote imperial sovereign. Many had identities that defied rigid categorization, speaking more than one language; typically, Austrian demographers drew a distinction between 'mother tongue' and 'language of everyday use'. Most Slavs continued to work the land, as they had as serfs before the emancipations of the nineteenth century. The towns of Central and Eastern Europe, by contrast, were often quite ethnically distinct from the surrounding countryside. In the north, Germans and Jews predominated in urban areas, as they also did in the basin of the Danube; further east the towns were inhabited by Russians, Jews and Poles. The towns of the Adriatic coast were often Italian; some Balkan towns were distinctly Greek or Turkish. Most striking of all were those cosmopolitan trading centres where no one ethnic group predominated. One of many examples that might be cited was Salonika, present-day Thessaloniki, an Ottoman port of Greek provenance where Jews slightly outnumbered Christians and Muslims. Each religious community could, in turn, be subdivided into sects and

linguistic sub-groups: there were Judesmo-speaking Sephardic Jews as well as Ashkenzizm, Christian Greeks, Bulgarians and Macedonians – some speaking Greek, some Vlach, some a Slavic language – and myriad kinds of Muslim: Sufis, Bektashis and Mevlevis as well as Nagshbandis and Ma'nin, who were converts from Judaism. However, with the emergence after 1800 of the nation state as an ideal for political organization, these heterogeneous arrangements began to break down. A number of ethnic groups were sufficiently large and well organized that by the early twentieth century they had already established their own nation states – Greece, Italy, Germany, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania – though in each case there were ethnic minorities within their borders and diaspora groups beyond their borders. \* The Magyars enjoyed nearly all the privileges of independence as the junior partners within the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. The Czechs could aspire to some measure of political autonomy within Bohemia and Moravia. The Poles could dream of restoring their lost sovereignty at the expense of the three empires that had snuffed it out. But many other ethnic groups could not credibly aspire to statehood. Some were simply too few in number: Sorbs, Wends, Kashubes, Vlachs, Székelys, Carpatho-Rusyns and Ladins. Others were too scattered: the Sinti and Roma (often known, misleadingly, as Gypsies). Still others could aspire to build states only on the Ottoman periphery: the Jews and the Armenians.

The more the model of the nation state was applied to Central and Eastern Europe, then, the greater the potential for conflict. The discrepancy between the reality of mixed settlement – a complex patchwork of pales and diasporas – and the ideal of homogeneous

\* In the eastern regions of the German Reich, for example, there were more than 3 million Poles, more than 100,000 Czechs, around the same number of Lithuanians and around 90,000 Sorbs, to say nothing of significant Danish populations in the north and French-speaking Alsatians in the west. One in every four inhabitants of Bulgaria was not an ethnic Bulgarian. Minorities accounted for 18 per cent of the population of Romania, 16 per cent of the population of Serbia and 10 per cent of the population of Greece. At the same time, just over 13 million Germans lived outside the Reich; 4 million Romanians lived outside Romania (compared with a total population of Romania of 5.5 million); just under 2 million Serbs lived outside Serbia (compared with a total population of Serbia of 2.3 million); and 2 million Greeks lived outside Greece (compared with a total Greek population of 2.2 million).

political units was simply too great. The stakes, as national borders took on increasing importance, were too high, and diverging birth rates only served to heighten the anxieties of those who feared minority status. It was, in theory, conceivable that all the different ethnic groups in a new state would agree to subsume their differences in a new collective identity, or to share power in a federation of equals. But it turned out to be just as likely that a majority group would set itself up as sole, or at least senior, proprietor of the state and its assets. The more functions the state was expected to perform (and the number of these functions grew by leaps and bounds after 1900) the more tempting it became to exclude this or that minority from some or all of the benefits of citizenship, while at the same time ratcheting up the costs of residence in the form of taxation and other burdens.

It is therefore no coincidence that so many of the locations where mass murder was perpetrated in the 1940s lay in precisely these regions of mixed settlement – in such many-named towns as Vilna/Vilna/Vilne/Vilnius, Lemberg/Lwów/Lviv and Czernowitz/Cernăuți/Chernovtsy/Chernivtsi. Nor is it a coincidence that a significant number of leading Nazis came from beyond the eastern frontier of the German Reich of 1871. To give just a few examples: Alfred Rosenberg, author of *The Myth of the Twentieth Century* and a key figure in Nazi racial policy, was born in Reval/Tallinn, Estonia. The son of a German emigrant to Argentina, Walther Darré, Hitler's Minister for Agriculture, developed his version of racial theory while breeding horses in East Prussia. The Nazi Secretary of State Herbert Backe was born in Batumi, Georgia, where his mother's peasant family had settled in the nineteenth century. Rudolf Jung, who grew up in the German enclave of Iglau/Jihlava in Bohemia, was only one of many Germans from the borderlands to attain high rank in the SS. Significantly, Breslau/Wrocław in Upper Silesia was one of those places where local Nazis campaigned most overtly for legislation against miscegenation in 1935. Austrians and Sudeten Germans supplied a disproportionate number of anti-Semitic contributions to the newspaper *Der Stürmer*. At least two of the small group of SS officers who ran the Belzec death camp were so-called 'ethnic Germans' from the Baltic and Bohemia.

Yet Central and Eastern Europe was only the most lethal of the

'killing spaces' of the twentieth century. As will become clear, there were other parts of the world that shared some of its key characteristics: a multi-ethnic population, shifting demographic balances and political fragmentation. Considered as a single region, the nearest equivalent at the other end of the Eurasian landmass was Manchuria and the Korean peninsula. In the later part of the twentieth century, for reasons explored in the epilogue to this book, the zones of intense conflict shifted – to Indo-China, Central America, the Middle East and Central Africa. But it is on the first two regions that we must focus our attention if we are fully to grasp the peculiarly explosive character of the fifty-year war of the world.

## VOLATILITY AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Why has extreme violence occurred only at certain times? The answer is that ethnic conflict is correlated with economic *volatility*. It is not enough simply to look for times of economic crisis when trying to explain social and political instability. A rapid growth in output and incomes can be just as destabilizing as a rapid contraction. A useful measure of economic conditions, too seldom referred to by historians, is volatility, by which is meant the standard deviation of the change in a given indicator over a particular period of time. Reliable estimates of gross domestic product are unfortunately available for only a few countries for the entire century. However, figures for prices and interest rates are easier to come by, and these make it possible to measure economic volatility with some degree of precision for a substantial number of countries.

A straightforward and testable proposition is that times of high volatility were associated with socio-political stresses and strains. It is certainly suggestive that, for the seven major industrialized economies (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States) the volatility of both growth and prices reached its highest point between 1919 and 1939 and declined steadily in the post-Second World War period (see Figure 1.3). Economic historians were preoccupied for a long time with the identification of economic cycles and waves of various amplitudes. They tended to overlook



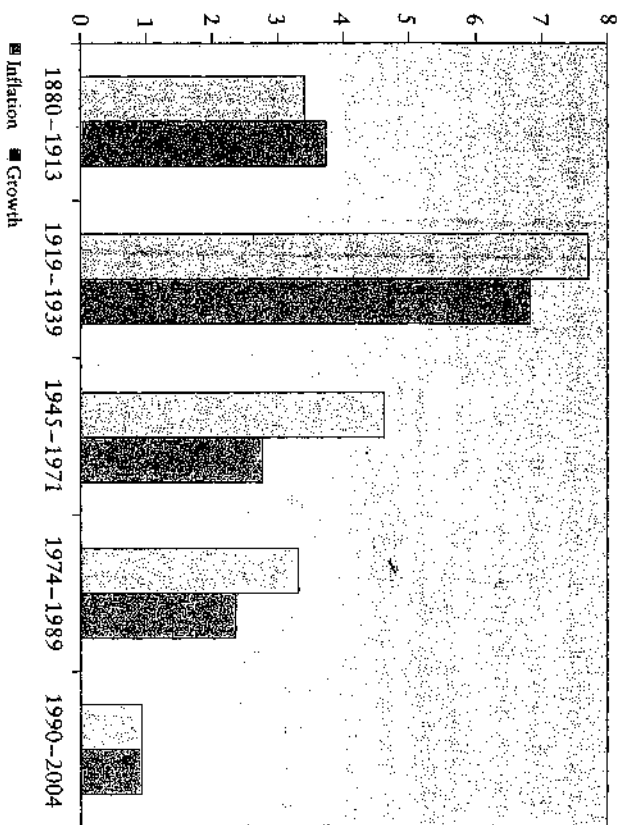


Figure 1.3 Volatility: standard deviations for inflation and growth, G7 economies, 1880-2004

changes in the frequency and amplitude of booms and busts. Yet precisely these were and remain crucial. If economic activity were as regular as the seasons, the expectations of economic actors would adjust accordingly and we would be no more surprised by spurt of growth or a crash than we are by the advent of summer and winter. But it was precisely the unpredictability of twentieth-century economic life that produced such strong shifts in what John Maynard Keynes called the 'animal spirits' of employers, lenders, investors, consumers and indeed government officials.

Over the past hundred years, there have been profound changes in the structure of economic institutions and the philosophies of those who run them. Prior to 1914, the degree of freedom in the international mobility of goods, capital and labour was unprecedented and has only recently and partially been equalled. Governments were only just beginning to extend the scope of their operations beyond the provision of security, justice and other elementary public goods. Central banks were at least to some extent constrained in their operations by self-imposed

rules fixing the values of national currencies in terms of gold; this made for long-run price stability, though also higher volatility in growth than we are now accustomed to. These things changed radically during and after the First World War, which saw a significant expansion of the role of government and a breakdown of the system of fixed exchange rates known as the gold standard. It seemed to many contemporaries that there was a conflict between what international market forces could do in allocating goods, workers and capital optimally, and what governments ought to strive for – for example, maintaining or raising levels of industrial employment, stabilizing the prices of primary products or altering the distribution of income and wealth. Yet the inter-war experiments with protective tariffs, deficit finance, confiscatory taxation and floating exchange rates generally had the unintended consequence of magnifying economic fluctuations. Planned economies did better, but at a considerable cost in both efficiency and freedom. Though the records of both the welfare state and the planned economy were markedly better in the two decades after the end of the Second World War, it was only by moving back in the direction of the free market after 1979 that governments were able to achieve relative stability in prices and growth. Only since 1990 has it been possible for some commentators to speak tentatively of the 'death of volatility' – though it remains to be seen how far this represents the improvement of international economic institutions, how far the success of fiscal and monetary pragmatism at the national level and how far simply a fortunate and quite possibly ephemeral conjuncture between Western profligacy and Asian parsimony.

This stylized narrative, it should be stressed, applies to a limited sample of countries and to somewhat arbitrarily defined sub-periods. As will become clear, it would be a mistake to regard the performance of the major industrial economies as a proxy for the performance of the world economy as a whole. The severity of the inter-war extremes of inflation and deflation, growth and contraction, varied greatly between different European countries. And there were quite different trends in volatility in African, Asian and Latin American economies from the 1950s onwards.

Economic volatility matters because it tends to exacerbate social conflict. It seems intuitively obvious that periods of economic crisis

create incentives for politically dominant groups to pass the burdens of adjustment on to others. With the growth of state intervention in economic life, the opportunities for such discriminatory redistribution clearly proliferated. What could be easier in a time of general hardship than to exclude a particular group from the system of public benefits? What is perhaps less obvious is that social dislocation may also follow periods of rapid growth, since the benefits of growth are very seldom evenly distributed. Indeed, it may be precisely the minority of winners in an upswing who are targeted for retribution in a subsequent downswing.

Once again it is possible to illustrate this point with reference to the best-known of cases, that of the Jews of Europe. Traditionally, historians have sought to explain the electoral success of anti-Semitic parties in Germany and elsewhere – as well as that of the occasionally anti-Semitic Populists in the United States – with reference to the Great Depression of the late 1870s and 1880s. However, the decline in agricultural prices that characterized that period provides only part of the explanation. Economic growth was not depressed; nor did stock markets fail to recover from the setbacks of the 1870s. What was galling to those trapped in relatively stagnant economic sectors like traditional handicrafts and small-scale agriculture was the evident prosperity of those better placed to profit from international economic integration and increased financial intermediation. As a rule, sudden and violent punctuations like stock market bubbles and busts had a bigger impact than long-run structural trends in prices and output. The polarizing social and political effects of economic volatility proved to be a recurrent feature of the twentieth century.

## EMPIRE-STATES

Twentieth-century violence is unintelligible if it is not seen in its imperial context. For it was in large measure a consequence of the decline and fall of the large multi-ethnic empires that had dominated the world in 1900. What nearly all the principal combatants in the world wars had in common was that they either were empires or sought to become empires. Moreover, many large polities of the period that claimed to be

nation states or federations turn out, on close inspection, to have been empires too. That was certainly true of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; it remains true of today's Russian Federation. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland (after 1922 only Northern Ireland) was and is to all intents and purposes an English empire; for brevity's sake, it is still commonly referred to as England.\* The Italy created in the 1850s and 1860s was a Piedmontese empire, the German Reich of 1871 in large measure a Prussian one. The two most populous nation states in the world today are both the results of imperial integration. Modern India is the heir of the Mughal Empire and the British Raj. The borders of the People's Republic of China are essentially those established by the Qing emperors. Arguably, even the United States is an 'imperial republic'; some would say it always has been.

Empires matter, firstly, because of the economies of scale that they make possible. There is a demographic limit to the number of men most nation states can put under arms. An empire, however, is far less constrained; among its core functions are to mobilize and equip large military forces recruited from multiple peoples and to levy the taxes or raise the loans to pay for them, again drawing on the resources of more than one nationality. Thus, as we shall see, many of the greatest battles of the twentieth century were fought by multi-ethnic forces under imperial banners; Stalingrad and El Alamein are only two of many examples. Secondly, the points of contact between empires – the borderlands and buffer zones between them, or the zones of strategic rivalry they compete to control – are likely to witness more violence than the imperial heartlands. The fatal triangle of territory between the Baltic, the Balkans and the Black Sea was a zone of conflict not just because it was ethnically mixed, but also because it was the junction where the realms of the Hohenzollerns, Habsburgs, Romanovs and Ottomans met, the fault line between the tectonic plates of four great empires. Manchuria and Korea occupied a similar position in the Far East. With the rise of oil as the twentieth century's principal fuel, so too did the Persian Gulf

\*To the chagrin of Scotsmen and Welshmen afflicted with inferiority complexes. When this author was an undergraduate at Oxford, all modern history fell into two categories: 'English History' and 'General History'. In a concession to Celtic sentiment, the former category was later renamed 'British History' and then 'The History of the British Isles'.