

Wars of the 1900s

In addition to smaller conflicts, America engaged in five significant wars in the 20th century: World Wars I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars (both of which were part of the broader Cold War against communism), and the Persian Gulf War.

World War I

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the heir to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, by the Serbian Yugoslav nationalist Gavrilo Princip in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914 was the official trigger of World War I. Princip was a Serbian who sought to liberate other Slavs from rule by Austria. Austria-Hungary made a series of demands of Serbia; Serbia accepted most but not all, which Austria-Hungary cited as justification in declaring war on Serbia. Russia honored its defense pact with Serbia; and Germany did the same for Austria-Hungary (and in fact, the Germans, which had built a massive war machine, may have sought a pretext for a war and encouraged Austria-Hungary's hardline). Because the nations of Europe had undertaken a variety of such treaties, alliances, and defense pacts, most of the continent was eventually pulled into the war.

On one side were the Allies, primarily France, Great Britain, Russia, and their colonial and imperial territories. On the other side were the "Central Powers" – primarily Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire centered in Turkey.

The 1917 Russian Revolution and the takeover of that country by socialists and eventually the Bolsheviks, which created the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (or USSR), removed Russia from the war in 1918.

Favoring the broad contours of George Washington's call to remain detached from European affairs, the United States initially avoided participation in the war; indeed, both the incumbent Democratic President Woodrow Wilson and his Republican challenger Charles Evans Hughes pledged to keep America out of the war.

However, two events made that neutral course more difficult. The first was the continued German use of submarines to sink American ships in order to stop the shipment of supplies to Britain. The second was the release of the "Zimmerman Telegram," in which Germany offered to help Mexico annex parts of the American Southwest if Mexico would join the side of the Central Powers and keep America militarily occupied (rather than possibly joining the Allies). Thus, in 1917, America entered the war on the side of the Allies.

The Allied military strength turned the tide, and on November 11, 1918, an armistice putting an end to fighting was declared. A few months later, in 1919, the belligerents signed various treaties bringing the war to an end. The most significant was the Treaty of Versailles with Germany, signed on June 28, 1919, five years to the day of Franz Ferdinand's death.

These treaties and their aftermath broke up several of the defeated nations' empires: the centuries-old Ottoman Empire was dismantled, resulting in not only the creation of modern Turkey but also the loss of many other nations in the mid-East, such as present-day Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel, which were to be supervised by the Allies. Austria and Hungary were split and other nations that had been a part of its empire received independence, such as

Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. An independent Poland comprised land from Austria-Hungary, Germany, and Russia.

Largely at the instigation of France, which had suffered greatly during the war, Germany, held to be the predominant aggressor, also suffered significant territorial losses, such as part of present-day Poland (which isolated most of Germany from its historic base in Prussia or east Germany); other Germans ended up within the borders of the newly created Czechoslovakia, in a region called the Sudetenland. The regions of Alsace-Lorraine, which Germany captured from France roughly forty years earlier, was restored to France; German colonies in Africa were also forfeited to the Allies. In addition, to prevent further military aggression, the size and scope of the German military was limited: the Treaty of Versailles imposed limits on the number of soldiers, types of armaments, and deployment of forces, while also requiring reparations to be paid by Germany to the Allies.

World War II

German resentment of these harsh terms helped fuel that country's militarism and the rise of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party. In the 1930s Germany had already forcibly annexed Austria, the Sudetenland part of Czechoslovakia it had given up after World War I, and then eventually Czechoslovakia itself. (For a variety of reasons, the British and French governments had largely acceded to these German actions, especially the incorporation of the German-speaking areas, in a controversial policy called appeasement.) After securing a peace treaty with Joseph Stalin, the communist ruler of the Soviet Union (USSR), by which the two countries would divide Poland between them, Germany successfully invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, beginning World War II.

France and Britain had guaranteed Poland's freedom, so they came to its defense as the core of the Allies. They were joined not only by countries like China but also current or former parts of their empires; for Britain, this included self-governing Commonwealth members such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand and parts of the empire like India. Italy had been one of the Allies in World War I but believed it had not been appropriately rewarded with territorial gains; Italy thus signed a treaty with Germany in 1936 and joined with Germany. Japan, seeking to build an empire in the Pacific Ocean, formed the third participant in what became known as the Axis Powers.

Germany soon defeated France in 1940 (though the "Free French Forces" led by General Charles de Gaulle continued to fight alongside the Allies), leaving Britain under its Prime Minister Winston Churchill largely isolated in Europe. But Hitler soon betrayed Stalin and invaded the Soviet Union in 1941, causing the USSR to switch to the side of the Allies.

As before, the United States sought to stay out of the war, although President Franklin Roosevelt assisted the British by providing supplies, as well as imposing embargoes on Japan, which had captured much of the Pacific Ocean. In order to secure Japan's resource base before American sanctions crippled it, making a future conflict with the Allies, should it come, unwinnable, on December 7, 1941 the Japanese launched a sneak attack on the American naval base in Pearl Harbor, hoping to destroy the American navy in the Pacific.

This brought the United States into the war on the side of the Allies; four years later, in mid 1945, both the German and Japanese armies surrendered, bringing an end to World War II. (Italy had been defeated earlier).

Italy suffered relatively small territorial losses, primarily in giving up its African empire. Japan gave up much of the territory it had gained, including some in the previous decades such as Korea, the Manchurian region taken from China. After the expulsion of most ethnic Germans from the regions, Germany not only lost its recent gains in central Europe but had to give up much of its original territory as well, such as its historic east Prussia, much of which was taken by the Soviet Union either directly or indirectly. As the war ended Germany was itself divided based on which Allied Power's military forces had seized its territory. The western parts taken by the rest of the Allies resumed being an independent country, but East Germany was, like Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Albania, soon folded into a puppet state as part of the Soviet-controlled treaty known as the Warsaw Pact. In terms of territory gained, the Soviet Union was the clear winner of World War II.

In addition, the Soviet Union also helped export communism through much of the world, most prominently in China, which became communist in 1949. Under the leadership of, initially, American President Harry Truman and Britain's Winston Churchill, the anti-communist countries – largely the Allies, minus the Soviet Union – organized a defense pact called the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, more commonly known as NATO. Its purpose was to prevent a similar fate of Eastern Europe from befalling the rest of the world and to defend values such as political freedom, constitutionalism, civil liberties, and representative government under free and fair elections. Over time, many of its members and their allies also sought to stop the spread of communism throughout the rest of the world.

The Korean and Vietnam Wars

This eventually resulted in the Cold War. Although the United States and Soviet Union never came to open and direct combat during this period, the two countries and their allies engaged in various proxy wars: the Soviet Union, seeking to expand the sphere of international communism, and the United States and its allies to block it.

The first such major war was the Korean War. In the aftermath of World War II, the Korean peninsula had been divided between a communist North Korea and a non-communist, republican South Korea. With encouragement and support from the Soviet Union, North Korea's ruler Kim Il Sung invaded South Korea in June 1950. The United Nations, which had been formed as a venue to stop wars of aggression, called on member states to help defend the integrity of South Korea; many countries joined the effort, most significantly Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey, and the Philippines.

While the United States neither formally declared war nor created an authorization for use of military force, President Truman deployed American forces in what was initially dubbed a "police action" of international partners and allies protecting South Korea. Eventually, American involvement grew to almost two million servicemembers. American forces under General Douglas MacArthur invaded North Korea, forcing North Korean forces to retreat and reversing their gains. The intervention of Chinese military forces (as well as, secretly, Soviet

military forces) helped restore the stalemate. The end result was an armistice in 1953 returning to the situation before the war: a divided Korean peninsula, half communist, half republican.

The Vietnam War began similarly: communist forces under Ho Chi Minh, which had defeated French soldiers in what was the colony of "Indochina" and established the communist country of North Vietnam, sought to capture South Vietnam. America had previously placed military advisors there, and, under President Lyndon Johnson, steadily increased its military presence.

In 1964, in response to a reported attack on an American destroyer, the USS Maddox, Congress authorized the use of military force to deter further aggression, and formal American involvement in the Vietnam War began. Other significant forces fighting on the side of South Vietnam (and its neighbors Laos and Cambodia also facing communist insurgencies) included South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, and Thailand. The North Vietnamese forces had support from various communist paramilitaries (such as the Vietcong), but most prominently China.

The war lasted for years, growing increasingly unpopular in America. Eventually U.S. President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger ramped up American military engagement force in order to strengthen the position of South Vietnam and allow the U.S. to withdraw at last, which it did in 1973 under the Paris Peace Accords. As had occurred at the end of the Korean War, the accords divided the Vietnam Peninsula between a communist north and a republican south.

The war soon restarted, however, but no longer with American presence. A supply-constrained South Vietnam appealed to America for assistance; President Gerald Ford requested Congress provide financial support to South Vietnam but Congress declined. The communist forces soon captured the capitol of South Vietnam, Saigon, which it renamed Ho Chi Minh City, the capitol of the now reunified, communist nation of Vietnam.

The Persian Gulf War/First War in Iraq

After Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of his neighbor, the similarly bellicose Iran, turned to a bloody, almost decade-long stalemate, Hussein invaded another neighboring country, the much smaller Kuwait, in August 1990. President George H.W. Bush assembled a massive coalition to expel the Iraqi army and restore the sovereignty of Kuwait, in what was called the Persian Gulf War. (Other large contingents included Britain, France, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.) After an extended military buildup, in January 1991, coalition forces began their attack on Hussein's forces; by the end of February, they had defeated Hussein's army and liberated Kuwait. In order to discourage further militarism, Hussein was required to give up his supply of weapons of mass destruction (nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons), consent to weapons inspectors, and provide the region of Kurdistan with a level of self-government (enforced by American and British enforcement of a "no fly zone").