

# THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND BEYOND (1945–present)

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## The Postwar World

As World War II drew to a close in 1945, Allied leaders created the United Nations (the UN). The UN was meant to replace the League of Nations. Most people hoped it would promote peace around the world. That did not happen. Small wars kept breaking out here and there. Sometimes the UN helped, but other times it didn't. One of the biggest problems the UN faced was the fact that the strongest nations—the United States and the Soviet Union—were sworn enemies. It was difficult for the UN to do anything if either the United States or the Soviet Union opposed the action. The Cold War between the world's two superpowers would last more or less until the final breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991.

The Cold War affected three countries directly. They were divided in two with one half ruled by the communists and the other half by non-communists. Germany was divided into East Germany (run by communists) and West Germany (a democracy). The city of Berlin itself was divided in half. The communists built the Berlin Wall to seal off their half of the city. (Germany was finally reunited in 1990.)

Korea was also cut in half, with the communists controlling the north and the non-communists presiding over the south. In 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea. This time the UN took action and sent troops to stop the North Koreans. The Korean War (1950–1953) ended in a stalemate. As a result, there is still a communist North Korea and a non-communist South Korea.

Another country that was split in half was Vietnam. The split took place in 1954, and when elections to reunite the country were not held in 1956, the communists in the north felt cheated. So they began a campaign to topple the non-communist government in the south. The United States, trying to stop the spread of communism, fought on the side of the South Vietnamese. The North Vietnamese and their communist allies in South Vietnam, called Viet Cong, eventually won the war. In 1975, Vietnam was reunited under communist rule.

In the Middle East, a country was not divided in half, but a special region was. About 6 million Jews died in Nazi concentration camps. The Jewish people swore, "Never again." One way to make sure such future tragedies were avoided was to give Jews their own country. Throughout most of their long history, the Jews had no home. They lived in nations of other peoples. In 1948 the Jews declared the new nation of Israel in Palestine to be the home of the Biblical Jews. The region was already occupied by Palestinian Arabs, however, so since 1948 Israel and her Arab neighbors have fought four wars that have settled little. Tensions remain high today.

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## The Modern World

In many ways the world has become a much, much smaller place since World War II. Thanks to high-speed trains, superhighways, and the jet plane, travel time has been cut drastically. Thanks to the fax machine, e-mail, and the computer, communication is virtually instant. Also, the world, which was once rich in clearly distinct cultures, is increasingly becoming one global culture. Almost anywhere in the world people are wearing blue jeans, eating a Big Mac, or drinking a Coke.

The growing global culture is the flip side of the growing global market. Western Europeans saw what a vast free market did for the United States. A person in Oregon can sell any legal product thousands of miles away to a person in Florida without any trade barriers or special taxes. But someone in France could not do the same with someone just a few miles away in Belgium or Spain. So the idea of a large “free market” attracted Europeans. They wanted something similar to the United States for themselves. So in 1957, six nations—France, West Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg—formed the European Common Market. The goal of this Common Market was to reduce the barriers to trade and to boost economic growth. Later, other nations joined, and the Common Market was replaced by the European Union (EU). The EU had the additional goal of pledging to aid its weaker members. Europeans even adopted a single currency—the Euro—to replace old national currencies since those separate currencies had to be exchanged for trade across national borders.

In North America, the United States, Canada, and Mexico eliminated trade barriers when they signed a new trade agreement called NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement).

While in many ways the world is coming more and more together, in some ways it is falling apart. Ethnic and religious conflicts are the new plague. Today nations don’t fight each other so much as different groups within a country fight each other. During the 1990s, for example, Yugoslavia broke up. In the process, certain groups tried what has been called ethnic cleansing. That meant killing members of other ethnic groups. Similar things have happened in recent years in Rwanda, Somalia, Indonesia, and other places. Internal conflicts have also haunted many of the nations in Central and South America.

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## **Into the Twenty-First Century**

The twentieth century witnessed stunning technological change. In terms of motorized flight, for instance, humans were stuck on the ground until the Wright Brothers took a brief flight in 1903. Just 66 years later, humans stood on the Moon. Similar advances took place in communication, biology, medicine, and dozens of other fields. There is little reason to think that the pace of scientific progress will slow down in the twenty-first century.

There are dark clouds on the horizon, however. One is the growth of population. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the world’s population stood at 1.6 billion. By the end of the century, it stood at more than 6 billion. Medical and technological advances made it possible for people to live longer than at any other time in history. However, that meant there were almost four times as many mouths to feed in 2000 than there had been in 1900. Technology has made it possible to feed most of these people, but how long can technology outrun population growth?

Another problem is the environment. Human activity has polluted much of the land, water, and air. In addition, scientists worry about the loss of the rain forests. These oxygen-producing forests are being cut down to make way for more farms to feed the growing population. Global warming and melting ice caps also trouble scientists. How will a warmer environment affect people’s ability to grow food? Then there is a

question of fossil fuels, such as oil, coal, and natural gas. The growing demand for them has forced us to invade ecologically fragile regions. How long can this last?

On the other hand, humans have faced tough problems before and have usually found a solution. There will be one difference in the twenty-first century, however. People will be less likely to look for solutions as citizens of a certain community or nation and more likely to look for solutions as citizens of the world.

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