

Military History Group, 14 July 2026: Wars of the 20th Century

Most people would be quite right in labelling the 20th Century as the most destructive and bloodiest century in mankind's history. However, it was just the latest in our long history of warfare. Over the last 5,000 years, there have been very few if any years when organised warfare was not underway somewhere on the planet. The 20th Century continued that unenviable record. Every year not only saw conflict somewhere, but there was more than one conflict underway each year. The two world wars were obviously the most terrible periods of warfare, but the century's other wars also contributed not only to the number of war dead, but were also noticeable for the impact they had on our history, with some, for example, leading to other wars or were important in independence struggles or shaping nations for what they are today.

In terms of war dead, the two world wars were the main contributors, but few probably realise that the total deaths from the century's major wars have been assessed as some 143 million. The total deaths during the 20th Century caused by all conflicts are put at 150 million. Add in all man-made other deaths — genocides, political mass killings, and man-made famines — and the total rises to at least 200 million.

The following list of the century's wars is not a comprehensive list of all the wars fought during the period, nor does it include only the bloodiest conflicts. Many other wars were fought, but the list focuses instead on those which, for various reasons, had a major impact on the century's history.

20th Century Wars (1900–2000)

I. Pre–World War I Conflicts (1900–1914)

- Boxer Rebellion (1899-1901) - Demonstrated the fragility of the Chinese Qing dynasty and accelerated the revolutionary forces that would topple it in 1911.
- Second Boer War (1899–1902) - A brutal modern war foreshadowing WWI: trench lines, magazine rifles, and the political consequences of imperial overreach.
- Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) - First modern victory of an Asian power over a European empire; destabilised Russia, contributing directly to the 1905 Revolution.
- Herero and Namaqua Resistance (1904–1908) - Widely regarded as the first genocide of the 20th century; a grim precursor to later racialised mass violence.
- Italo-Turkish War (1911–1912) - First war to use aircraft; weakened the Ottoman Empire and helped trigger the Balkan Wars.
- First Balkan War (1912–1913) - Redrew the map of the Balkans and set the stage for the Second Balkan War.
- Second Balkan War (1913) - Serbia's rise and Bulgaria's resentment contributed directly to the tensions that exploded in 1914.

II. The First World War Era (1914–1918)

- First World War (1914–1918) - Reshaped the world order; sowed the seeds of WWII; introduced mechanised slaughter on an unprecedented scale.

- Arab Revolt (1916–1918) - Laid the groundwork for modern Arab nationalism and the post-Ottoman Middle East.
- Russian Revolution & Russian Civil War (1917–1922) - Established the world's first communist state; shaped global politics for the next 70 years.

III. Interwar Conflicts (1919–1939)

- Third Afghan War (1919) - Marked the end of British attempts to control Afghanistan's foreign policy.
- Polish-Soviet War (1919-1920) - Prevented Bolshevik penetration into Germany and Central Europe; stabilised the eastern flank of the Versailles system until 1939.
- Irish War of Independence (1919–1921) - Led directly to the Irish Civil War and permanently shaped Anglo-Irish relations.
- Irish Civil War (1922–1923) - Left deep political scars; shaped Ireland's party system for decades.
- Greco-Turkish War (1919–1922) - Birth of modern Turkey; one of the largest forced population movements of the century.
- Chinese Warlord Era conflicts (1920s) - Created the political vacuum that enabled both the Chinese Civil War and Japanese expansion.
- Chinese Civil War — First Phase (1927–1937) - Shaped China's political landscape and set the conditions for the decisive second phase after 1945.
- Chaco War (1932–1935) - One of South America's deadliest wars; exposed the weakness of both states and reshaped regional politics.
- Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936) - Demonstrated the impotence of the League of Nations; emboldened fascist aggression.
- Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) - A rehearsal for WWII: ideological conflict, foreign intervention, aerial bombing of civilians (e.g., Guernica).
- Arab Revolt in Palestine (1936–1939) - Set the stage for the later Arab–Israeli conflict.
- Sino-Japanese War (1937–1945) - One of the deadliest wars in history; central to the origins of WWII in Asia.
- Sino-Soviet Conflict at Khalkhin Gol (1939) - Redirected Japan's strategy southward — a key factor leading to Pearl Harbor.

IV. The Second World War Era (1939–1945)

- Second World War (1939–1945) - The defining event of the 20th century; reshaped borders, ideologies, technology, and global power structures; ushered in the nuclear age.
- Yugoslav Partisan War (1941–1945) - One of the most effective resistance movements of WWII; shaped Balkan politics for decades.
- Chinese Civil War resumes (1945–1949) - Created modern China; one of the most consequential outcomes of the post-WWII world.

V. Early Cold War Conflicts (1945–1960)

- Indonesian National Revolution (1945–1949) - A key moment in global decolonisation.
- First Indochina War (1946–1954) - A major blow to European colonialism; set the stage for the Vietnam War.
- Greek Civil War (1946–1949) - First major conflict of the Cold War; influenced U.S. containment policy.
- Partition of India & Indo-Pakistani War (1947–1948) - Origin of the long-running India–Pakistan conflict.
- Arab–Israeli War (1948) - Created the Palestinian refugee crisis; set the pattern for future Arab–Israeli wars.
- Malayan Emergency (1948–1960) - Often cited as a successful model of counterinsurgency.
- Korean War (1950–1953) - First major “hot war” of the Cold War; entrenched the division of Korea.
- Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1960) - Exposed the limits of British colonial rule; remains politically sensitive.
- Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) - Ended French colonial rule in North Africa; reshaped French politics (collapse of the Fourth Republic).
- Suez Crisis (1956) - Marked the end of British and French great-power status; Nasser emerged as a hero of Arab nationalism.

VI. Decolonisation & Proxy Wars (1960–1979)

- Congo Crisis (1960–1965) - A textbook Cold War proxy conflict; exposed the dangers of rushed decolonisation.
- Vietnam War (1955–1975) - The defining Cold War proxy war; reshaped U.S. foreign policy and military doctrine.
- Indonesian–Malaysian Confrontation (1963–1966) - A contained but significant Cold War conflict in Southeast Asia.
- Indo-Pakistani War (1965) - Reinforced the centrality of Kashmir to Indo-Pakistani rivalry.
- Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) - One of the century’s worst humanitarian disasters; highlighted the politics of ethnicity in post-colonial Africa.
- Six-Day War (1967) - Redefined Middle Eastern geopolitics; occupation of territories remains central to the conflict.
- War of Attrition (1967–1970) - Set the stage for the Yom Kippur War.
- Yom Kippur War (1973) - Last major Arab–Israeli interstate war; shifted regional alliances.
- Bangladesh Liberation War (1971) - One of the most violent secessionist wars of the century; reshaped South Asia.
- Angolan Civil War (1975–2002) - One of Africa’s longest and most internationalised civil wars.
- Cambodian Civil War (1967–1975) - Prelude to one of the worst genocides of the century.

- Ogaden War (1977–1978) - A dramatic Cold War realignment: the USSR switched sides mid-conflict.

VII. Late Cold War Conflicts (1980–1991)

- Iran–Iraq War (1980–1988) - One of the longest and deadliest wars of the century; devastated both states and destabilised the region.
- Falklands War (1982) - Restored British confidence; contributed to the fall of the Argentine junta.
- Lebanon War (1982) - Transformed Lebanese politics; created Hezbollah as a major regional actor.
- Soviet–Afghan War (1979–1989) - Contributed to the collapse of the USSR; created conditions for civil war and the rise of the Taliban.
- Grenada (1983) - A small but symbolic Cold War intervention; demonstrated U.S. willingness to act unilaterally.
- Sri Lankan Civil War (1983–2009) - One of the longest ethnic insurgencies of the century.
- First Intifada (1987–1993) - Shifted the Israeli–Palestinian conflict from interstate to popular uprising.
- Panama (1989) - Demonstrated post-Vietnam U.S. military confidence; controversial internationally.
- Gulf War (1990–1991) - Showcased modern precision warfare; reshaped Middle Eastern geopolitics.

VIII. Post–Cold War Conflicts (1991–2000)

- Yugoslav Wars (1991–1995) - Europe’s bloodiest conflict since WWII; introduced the term “ethnic cleansing” into modern vocabulary.
- Bosnian War (1992–1995) - Marked by systematic ethnic cleansing; prompted major changes in NATO’s post-Cold War role.
- Rwandan Civil War & Genocide (1990–1994) - One of the most intense genocides in history; exposed catastrophic failures of international intervention.
- First Chechen War (1994–1996) - Humiliated the Russian military; set the stage for the Second Chechen War.
- Kosovo War (1998–1999) - First major NATO war; reshaped debates on humanitarian intervention.
- Eritrean–Ethiopian War (1998–2000) - One of Africa’s deadliest interstate wars; showed how fragile post-colonial borders remained.
- Sierra Leone Civil War (1991–2002) - A symbol of late-century African conflict; prompted global action on conflict diamonds.
- First Congo War (1996–1997) - Triggered the even larger Second Congo War.
- Second Congo War (1998–2003) - Deadliest conflict since WWII; exposed the fragility of post-colonial African states.