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The Deadliest Century of All Time: A Reflection on Last Century

In one of our most recent lectures, we touched on the topic of the twentieth century being the deadliest in human history. The twentieth century was a contemporary period, which piqued my interest on the topic. Many people in our society today have been born during the last century and the way that people thought back then is not so different than how the people think today. For these reasons I believed that it would be worth studying and looking deeper into. It is important for us, especially in our module concepts of peace, to thoroughly analyze these events so the same atrocities are not repeated in the future. While major conflicts and genocides such as the Holocaust of the Second World War are often referenced, it is important to acknowledge the atrocities that are not as well-known, such as the Greek Genocide and the Burning of Smyrna, which also contributed to the century's high death toll. Ultimately, understanding the factors that led to these high deaths will allow us to prevent them in the future.

When people think of casualties in the twentieth century, the events that immediately come to mind are the two World Wars, several totalitarian regimes, and the Cold War. According to the librarian Matthew White, World War I (1914-1918) and World War II (1939-1945) were responsible for fifty-three percent of all the casualties from last century (White). These wars are

regarded as the deadliest conflicts in human history. Both World Wars caused approximately one hundred million deaths, including the systematic genocide of eleven million people during the Holocaust (White). The rapid advancement of military equipment significantly contributed to the high death tolls during both wars (ANZAC Portal). Following the industrial revolution's boom, the twentieth century saw the development of more sophisticated technology such as airplanes, tanks, and nuclear weapons (ANZAC Portal). These impressive innovations, combined with the advancement of modern warfare, allowed for mass casualties on an unprecedented scale. During World War I, the controversial use of mustard gas introduced an entirely new form of brutality to the battlefield, chemical warfare (ANZAC Portal). During World War II, the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki demonstrated the devastating potential of nuclear warfare (United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs). In the present day, states should consider implementing additional rules of war to mitigate the extensive destruction caused by modern warfare.

While both World Wars and the Holocaust are widely recognized conflicts, the twentieth century also witnessed lesser discussed, but equally devastating genocides. These tragedies are often overshadowed by the vast scale of the two World Wars but nonetheless contributed significantly to the staggering death toll. One of the more tragic and less spoken about genocides of the twentieth century was the Greek Genocide, which took place during the final years of the Ottoman Empire, from 1914-1923 (Greek Genocide Resource Center). The Greek population in the Ottoman Empire faced a systematic ethnic cleansing as part of the larger agenda to eliminate the ethnic minorities in the empire. The genocide specifically targeted Greek Orthodox Christians, most notably those living in the Pontus region and Anatolia. This genocide is estimated to have resulted in the deaths of over five hundred thousand people (Greek Genocide Resource Center). The Ottoman government employed harsh methods such as mass executions,

forced deportations, and inhumane death marches (Greek Genocide Resource Center). These tactics were also used against the Armenians and Assyrians during the same period.

The tragic Burning of Smyrna in September of 1922, is another overlooked atrocity. After the end of the Greco-Turkish War (1912-1922), the city of Smyrna was destroyed by a humongous fire that obliterated the Greek and Armenian quarters (Greek Genocide Resource Center). Interestingly, the Turkish quarters were not affected. Tens of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes, and the destruction of Smyrna marked the turning point of decades of ethnic and religious turmoil in the region. The remaining population who survived the tragedy was forced into a population exchange which displaced hundreds of thousands of people from Turkey to Greece (Middle East Research and Information Project). These exchanges were not peaceful and contributed to more deaths causing more suffering for communities that were uprooted from their homes. The well-known Armenian Genocide often overshadows the Greek Genocide, but it is vital to acknowledge both as a way to understand how the Ottomans leveraged wide-scale ethnic violence as their empire began to crumble (Middle East Research and Information Project). By analyzing these atrocities, we can recognize the warning signs of escalating tensions that lead to violence. This foresight not only honors the victims of the past but also has the potential to prevent another human rights crisis like the ones we witnessed last century. Awareness of these atrocities is crucial to ensuring that such a deadly century is not repeated this century or ever again.

As we approach the second quarter of the twenty-first century, we as students must identify patterns from the past to try and avoid the same shortfalls in the future. As a result, we must make an effort to understand all of the tragedies from the twentieth century, not only the mainstream ones. Thankfully, we live in a more interconnected society than before. The rise of

technological advances and international dialogues such as the United Nations (UN) has led to peace and prosperity in many parts of the world (United Nations). We should continue to capitalize on these international institutions as a way to minimize violent conflicts. The end of the Cold War late last century and the expansion of democracy in many regions is also encouraging. That said, while the world has made tremendous strides in peace with the help of the UN, the threat of a nuclear fallout remains a key threat. New forms of warfare such as drone warfare, cyberattacks and financial slavery are also rising issues in our society (Land Power Forum). Past examples and potential regulations on modern warfare should inform our generation about how to effectively approach to conflict and diplomacy.

While the twentieth century was undeniably the deadliest in human history, it is not certain that the twenty-first century will follow the same dreaded path. The rise of peaceful organizations that target peace, diplomacy, and communication offer states a better way to collaborate (United Nations). However, as we have seen through less-common atrocities such as the ethnic cleansing of the Pontic Greeks in Asia Minor as well as the Burning of Smyrna, the potential for violence and ethnic tensions can still arise. In order to avoid the horrors from the past century repeating again, it is essential that states remain committed to human rights, peace, and diplomatic organizations. The lessons from the past must guide our actions as we look to build a more secure and peaceful world.

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