“Mankind survived. Nevertheless, the great edifice of nineteenth century civilization crumpled in the flames of world war, as its pillars collapsed. There is no understanding the Short Twentieth Century (1) without it. It was marked by war. It lived and thought in terms of world war, even when the guns were silent and the bombs were not exploding. Its history and, more specifically, the history of its initial age of breakdown and catastrophe, must begin with that of the thirty-one years' world war.

For those who had grown up before 1914 the contrast was so dramatic that many of them - including the generation of this historian's parents, refused to see any continuity with the past. 'Peace' meant 'before 1914': after that came something that no longer deserved the name. This was understandable. In 1914 there had been no major war for a century, that is to say, a war in which all, or even a majority of, major powers had been involved, the major players in the international game at that time being the six European 'great powers' (Britain, France, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Prussia - after 1871 enlarged into Germany - and, after it was unified, Italy), the USA and Japan. There had been only one brief war in which more than two of the major powers had been in battle, the Crimean War (1854-56) between Russian on one side, Britain and France on the other. Moreover, most wars involving major powers at all had been comparatively quick. Much the longest of them was not an international conflict but a civil war within the USA (1861-65). The length of war was measured in months or even (like the 1866 war between Prussia and Austria) in weeks. Between 1871 and 1914 there had been no wars in Europe at all in which the armies of major powers crossed any hostile frontier. There had been no world wars at all.

All this changed in 1914. The First World War involved all major powers and indeed all European states except Spain, the Netherlands, the three Scandinavian countries and Switzerland. What is more, troops from the world overseas were, often for the first time, sent to fight and work outside their own regions. Canadians fought in France, Australians and New Zealanders forged their national consciousness on a peninsula in the Aegean and, more significantly, the United States rejected George Washington's warning against 'European entanglements' and sent its men to fight there, thus determining the shape of twentieth-century history.

That the Second World War was literally global hardly needs to be demonstrated. Virtually all independent states of the world were involved, willingly or unwillingly, although the republics of Latin America participated only in the most nominal manner. The colonies of imperial powers had no choice in the matter. Except for the future Irish Republic, Sweden, Switzerland, Portugal, Turkey and Spain in Europe, and possibly Afghanistan outside Europe, virtually the whole globe was belligerent or occupied or both. As for the battlefields, the names of Melanesian islands and of settlements in the North African deserts, in Burma and the Philippines became as familiar to newspaper readers and radio listeners and this was quintessentially the war of the radio news bulletins - as the names of Arctic and Caucasian battles, of Normandy, Stalingrad and Kursk. The Second World War was a lesson in world geography.

Local, regional or global, the wars of the twentieth century were to be on an altogether vaster scale than anything previously experienced.”

Abridged from The Age of Extremes - The Short Twentieth Century - Eric Hobsbawm, 1994

(1) By "short twentieth century", E. Hobsbawm (1917 – 2012) refers to the period from the start of World War I to the fall of the so-called Soviet bloc. It follows "the long 19th century", the period from the start of the French Revolution in 1789 to the start of World War I in 1914, which the author covered in an earlier trilogy of histories (The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789-1848, The Age of Capital: 1848–1875, The Age of Empire: 1875–1914).

Three massive blocks constitute his design for The Age of Extremes - The Short Twentieth Century. Part One, ‘The Age of Catastrophes’ (1914-1950), covers the period from World War One through the Second World War to ‘the end of empires’ – i.e. the immediate post-war period. Part Two is slightly longer, and is (perhaps ironically) entitled ‘The Golden Age’ (1950-1975). It starts with the Cold War, moves through the social, cultural and economic revolutions of the Sixties through to the Eighties, glances at the emergence of the Third World, and culminates in a brisk discussion of ‘real socialism’. Part Three, ‘The Landslide’ (1975-1991 and beyond), traces the collapse of most things – the world economy, socialism, the artistic avant-garde – as the story limps to a not particularly cheering conclusion, in a new millennium surrounded by poverty and ‘consumer egoism’, all-powerful media, a decline of state power, a rise in ethnic hatred, and an almost total lack of vision.