

The Twentieth Century in World History

Summary. The 20th century has provided one of the relatively rare breaks in world history. Previous similar periods, such as in the 5th or 15th centuries, have met the criteria that occur in the 20th century:

- First is a basic geographical rebalancing among major civilizations. In the 20th century the shift is a relative decline of the West due to two great world wars and the development of other societies. Western population declined while growth soared in other regions. By 1980 just about all the great Western colonial empires had disappeared; so had Western weapons dominance. In world trade and manufacture the West had been joined by important rivals.
- A 2nd criterion involves increasing the intensity and extent of contact among civilizations. Innovations in all aspects of technology and culture now spread faster than ever before. There is no single world culture but great similarities are shared.
- The 3rd criterion is the presence of new and roughly parallel patterns among major civilizations.

The Repositioning of the West.

- The 20th-century shift in balance among civilizations has meant a relative decline for the West. Even the entry of the United States into Western ranks has not changed this pattern. Western decline is indicated in population decline as a percentage of world totals, the end of colonial empires and monopoly over advanced weapons systems, and the loss of its position as preeminent world trader.
- By the 1990s no single civilization had replaced Western preeminence. [Issue of U.S. as separate OR part of Western civilization]

International Contacts.

- Although great diversity of interests remained among nations, international contacts increased as civilizations rebalanced.
- Technology made isolation almost impossible.
- Even though many influences pass from one nation to another, no single world culture has emerged.

International Challenges in Politics and Culture.

- There were many political changes because of imitation of the West or of efforts to counter its dominance.
- Most societies changed their forms of government, while governments have expanded into many new roles.
- Changes in belief systems occurred as secular systems gained adherents.
- Rigid social inequalities declined, but did not disappear.

Using the 20th Century as a New Period in World History. The new period of the 20th century has at least two phases:

- Between 1914 and 1945 two major wars and a great depression brought forward a new international order.
- Since 1945 there have been many adjustments - such as decolonization - to the working out of a new world order.