

The Human Cost of War

The global nature of World Wars I and II wreaked a level of destruction unknown before. National economies were exhausted; farmland, towns, and villages were destroyed. More soldiers died in World War I than in all the conflicts of the previous three centuries, and millions more died in World War II. Civilians died by the millions as a result of military operations, concentration camps, the bombing of towns and cities, and starvation and disease.

Military Cost

Both sides in the two world wars suffered tremendous military casualties, including dead, wounded, and missing in action. About 8.5 million soldiers died in World War I and 19.4 million in World War II. The excerpts show how weapons and tactics contributed to the large number of casualties.

PRIMARY SOURCE

INTERACTIVE

Trench Warfare

British sergeant major Ernest Shephard remembers the first day of the Battle of the Somme in his diary.

A lovely day, intensely hot. Lots of casualties in my trench. The enemy are enfilading us with heavy shell, dropping straight on us. A complete trench mortar battery of men killed by one shell, scores of dead and badly wounded in trench . . . Every move we make brings intense fire, as trenches so badly battered the enemy can see all our movements. Lot of wounded [from the front] . . . several were hit again and killed in trench. We put as many wounded as possible in best spots in trench and I sent a lot down, but I had so many of my own men killed and wounded that after a time I could not do this. . . .

[L]iterally we were blown from place to place. Men very badly shaken. As far as possible we cleared trenches of debris and dead. These we piled in heaps, enemy shells pitching on them made matters worse.

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

Judging from the quotation, what was Shephard's attitude toward the battle?

PRIMARY SOURCE

INTERACTIVE

Iwo Jima

Japan lost 21,000 soldiers and the United States 6,800 in the Battle of Iwo Jima. A U.S. Marines correspondent described part of the fighting below.

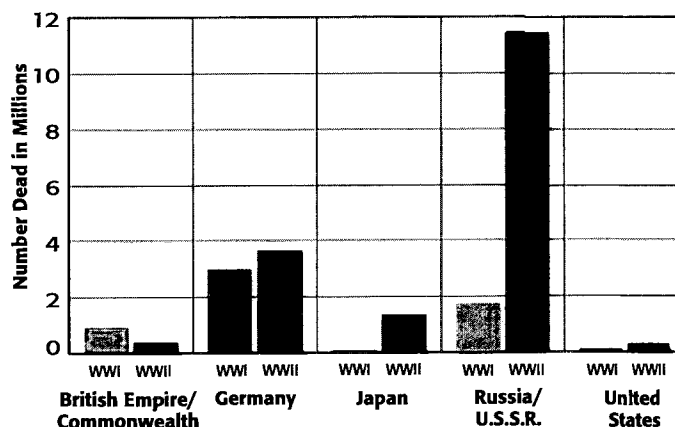
Behind a rolling artillery barrage and with fixed bayonets, the unit leaped forward in . . . [a] charge and advanced to the very mouths of the fixed [Japanese] defenses. . . . [T]he men flung themselves at the tiny flaming holes, throwing grenades and jabbing with bayonets. Comrades went past, hurdled the defenses and rushed across Airfield no. 2. . . . Men died at every step. That was how we broke their line. . . .

Across the field we attacked a ridge. The enemy rose up out of holes to hurl our assault back. The squads re-formed and went up again. At the crest they plunged on the [Japanese] with bayonets. . . . The [Japanese] on the ridge were annihilated.

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

What attitude do you think the soldiers on both sides had to adopt to fight in such a bloody conflict as this?

Military Casualties, World War I and World War II



Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica

SKILLBUILDER: Interpreting Graphs

What factors may have contributed to the increased number of deaths in World War II over World War I?

Civilian Cost

Civilians suffered not only as the direct victims of war, but also from the loss of their homes, the workplaces that gave them an income and produced useful goods, and the farms that supplied food. They also experienced the unsanitary conditions that resulted from bombing.

PRIMARY SOURCE

Displaced Persons

Laura de Gozdawa Turczynowicz, an American married to a Polish nobleman, described fleeing the advance of the German army into Suwalki, Poland.

At the [Vilno] station were crowds of Suwalki people. One man of our acquaintance had brought with him only his walking stick! Another man had become separated from his young son, fourteen, and daughter, sixteen, . . . and the poor father was on the verge of losing his reason. . . .

Such a lot of people came for help that my money melted like snow in the sunshine. I took just as many as could be packed in our [hotel] rooms. . . .

The next day dragged wearily along, everybody waiting, living only to hear better news. The city was rapidly filling with refugees. In one place, an old convent, they were given a roof to sleep under, and hot tea.

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

Under what conditions did the Polish refugees flee from the Germans?

PRIMARY SOURCE

Atomic Bomb

In this excerpt, Dr. Tatsuichiro Akizuki describes the people who began arriving at his hospital in Nagasaki the day the bomb was dropped.

It was all he could do to keep standing. Yet it didn't occur to me that he had been seriously injured. . . .

As time passed, more and more people in a similar plight came up to the hospital . . . All were of the same appearance, sounded the same. "I'm hurt, hurt! I'm burning! Water!" They all moaned the same lament. . . . [T]hey walked with strange, slow steps, groaning from deep inside themselves as if they had travelled from the depths of hell. They looked whitish; their faces were like masks.

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

Why did the doctor not recognize his patients' symptoms?

PRIMARY SOURCE

Internment Camps

After Pearl Harbor, thousands of Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps mainly located in the western United States.

DOCUMENT-BASED QUESTION

Judging from the photograph, what was the government's attitude toward Japanese Americans?



INTERACTIVE

INTERACTIVE

Comparing & Contrasting

1. Given the conditions described during trench warfare and on Iwo Jima, why would soldiers continue to fight?
2. How were the human costs of war, military and civilian, similar to each other? How were they different?
3. Given what you have read on these pages, if another world war broke out, would you prefer to be in the military or to be a civilian? Why?

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Look up the numbers of civilian casualties suffered in different countries during World War II in an encyclopedia or other reference source. Use the graph on page 958 as a model. Be sure to include the countries with the most significant figures in different parts of the world. Write a paragraph explaining why these countries had the greatest number of casualties.