

## Conclusion

Tragedy and Hope? The tragedy of the period covered by this book is obvious, but the hope may seem dubious to many. Only the passage of time will show if the hope I seem to see in the future is actually there or is the result of misobservation and self-deception.

The historian has difficulty distinguishing the features of the present and generally prefers to restrict his studies to the past, where the evidence is more freely available and where perspective helps him to interpret the evidence. Thus the historian speaks with decreasing assurance about the nature and significance of events as they approach his own day. The time covered by this book seems to this historian to fall into three periods: the nineteenth century from about 1814 to about 1895; the twentieth century, which did not begin until after World War II, perhaps as late as 1950; and a long period of transition from 1895 to 1950. The nature of our experiences in the first two of these periods is clear enough, while the character of the third, in which we have been for only half a generation, is much less clear.

A few things do seem evident, notably that the twentieth century now forming is utterly different from the nineteenth century and that the age of transition between the two was one of the most awful periods in all human history. Some, looking back on the nineteenth century across the horrors of the age of transition, may regard it with nostalgia or even envy. But the nineteenth century was, however hopeful in its general processes, a period of materialism, selfishness, false values, hypocrisy, and secret vices. It was the working of these underlying evils that eventually destroyed the century's hopeful qualities and emerged in all their nakedness to become dominant in 1914. Nothing is more revealing of the nature of the nineteenth century than the misguided complacency and optimism of 1913 and early 1914 and the misconceptions with which the world's leaders went to war in August of 1914.

The events of the following thirty years, from 1914 to 1945, showed the real nature of the preceding generation, its ignorance, complacency, and false values. Two terrible wars sandwiching a world economic depression revealed man's real inability to control his life by the nineteenth century's techniques of *laissez faire*, materialism, competition, selfishness, nationalism, violence, and imperialism. These characteristics of late nineteenth-century life culminated in World War II in which more than 50 million persons, 23 million of them in uniform, the rest civilians, were killed, most of them by horrible deaths.

The hope of the twentieth century rests on its recognition that war and depression are man-made, and needless. They can be avoided in the future by turning from the nineteenth-century characteristics just mentioned and going back to other characteristics that our Western society has always regarded as virtues: generosity, compassion, cooperation, rationality, and foresight, and finding an increased role in human life for love, spirituality, charity, and self-discipline. We now know fairly well how to control the increase in population, how to produce wealth and reduce poverty or disease; we may, in the near future, know how to postpone senility and death; it certainly should be clear to those who have their eyes open that violence, extermination, and despotism do not solve problems for anyone and that victory and conquest are delusions as long as they are merely physical and materialistic. Some things we clearly do not yet know, including the most important of all, which is how to bring up children to form them into mature, responsible adults, but on the whole we do know now, as we have already shown, that we can avoid continuing the horrors of 1914-1945, and on that basis alone we may be optimistic over our ability to go back to the tradition of our Western society and to resume its development along its old patterns of Inclusive Diversity.

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by Prof. Carroll Quigley, Head of the Foreign Service  
School, Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.  
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