Chapter One
The Age of Total War

Lines of grey muttering faces, masked with fear,
They leave their trenches, going over the top,
While time ticks blank and busy on their wrists,
And hope, with furtive eyes and grappling fists,
Flounders in mud. O Jesus, make it stop!

– Siegfried Sassoon (1947, p. 71)

It may be thought better, in view of the allegations of 'barbarity' of air attacks, to preserve appearances by formulating milder rules and by still nominally confining bombardment to targets which are strictly military in character . . . to avoid emphasizing the truth that air warfare has made such restrictions obsolete and impossible. It may be some time until another war occurs and meanwhile the public may become educated as to the meaning of air power.

– *Rules as to Bombardment by Aircraft*, 1921 (Townshend, 1986, p. 161)

(Sarajevo, 1946.) Here as in Belgrade, I see in the streets a considerable number of young women whose hair is greying, or completely grey. Their faces are tormented, but still young, while the form of their bodies betrays their youth even more clearly. It seems to me that I see how the hand of this last war has passed over the heads of these frail beings . . .

This sight cannot be preserved for the future; these heads will soon become even greyer and disappear. That is a pity. Nothing could speak more clearly to future generations about our times than these youthful grey heads, from which the nonchalance of youth has been stolen.

Let them at least have a memorial in this little note.

– *Signs by the Roadside* (Andrić, 1992, p. 50)

I

'The lamps are going out all over Europe,' said Edward Grey, Foreign Secretary of Great Britain, as he watched the lights of Whitehall on the night when Britain and Germany went to war in 1914. 'We shall not see them lit again in our lifetime.' In Vienna the great satirist Karl Kraus prepared to document and denounce that war in an extraordinary reportage-drama of 792 pages to which he gave the title *The Last Days of Humanity*. Both saw the world war as the end of a world, and they were not alone. It was not the end of humanity, although there were moments, in the course of the thirty-one years of world conflict between the Austrian declaration of war on Serbia on 28 July 1914 and the unconditional surrender of Japan on 14 August 1945 – four days after the explosion of the first nuclear bomb – when the end of a considerable proportion of the human race did not look far off. There were surely times when the god or gods, whom pious humans believed to have created the world and all in it, might have been expected to regret having done so.

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 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, or, at any rate, its central European members, 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, although in the Far East Japan fought, and beat, Russia in 190 5, thus hastening the Russian revolution.

There had been no *world* wars at all. In the eighteenth century France and Britain had contended in a series of wars whose battlefields ranged from India through Europe to North America, and across the world's oceans. Between 1815 and 1914 no major power fought another outside its immediate region, although aggressive expeditions of imperial or would-be imperial powers against weaker overseas enemies were, of course, common. Most of these were spectacularly one-sided fights, such as the US wars against Mexico (1846 8) and Spain (1898) and the various campaigns to extend the British and French colonial empires, although the worm turned once or twice, as when the French had to withdraw from Mexico in the 1860s, the Italians from Ethiopia in 1896. Even the most formidable opponents of modern states, their arsenals increasingly filled with an overwhelmingly superior technology of death, could only hope, at best, to postpone the inevitable retreat. Such exotic conflicts were the stuff of adventure literature or the reports of that mid-nineteenth-century innovation the war correspondent, rather than matters of direct relevance to most inhabitants of the states which waged and won them.

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 Ze landers forged their national consciousness on a peninsula in the Aegean – 'Gallipoli' became their national myth – 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. Indians were sent to Europe and the Middle East, Chinese labour battalions came to the West, Africans fought in the French army. Though military action outside Europe was not very significant, except in the Middle East, the naval war was once again global: its first battle was fought in 1914 off the Falkland Islands, its decisive campaigns, by German submarines and Allied convoys, on and under the seas of the North and mid-Atlantic.

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. Among seventy-four international wars between 1816 and 1965, which American specialists, who like to do that kind of thing, have ranked by the number of people they killed, the top four occurred in the twentieth century: the two world wars, the Japanese war against China in 1937–39, and the Korean war. They killed upwards of one million persons in battle. The largest documented international war of the post-Napoleonic nineteenth century, that between Prussia/Germany and France in 1870–71, killed perhaps 150,000, an order of magnitude roughly comparable to the deaths in the Chaco war of 1932–35 between Bolivia (pop. *c.* 3 million) and Paraguay (pop. *c.* 1.4 million). In short, 1914 opens the age of massacre (Singer, 1972, pp. 66, 131).

There is not space in this book to discuss the origins of the First World War, which the present author has tried to sketch in *The Age of Empire*. It began as an essentially European war between the triple alliance of France, Britain and Russia on one side, the so-called 'central powers' of Germany and Austria-Hungary on the other, Serbia and Belgium being immediately drawn in by the Austrian attack on one (which actually set off the war) and the German attack on the other (which was part of the German strategic war plan). Turkey and Bulgaria soon joined the central powers, while on the other side the Triple Alliance gradually built up into a very large coalition. Italy was bribed in; Greece, Rumania and (much more nominally) Portugal were also involved. More to the point, Japan joined in almost immediately in order to take over German positions in the Far East and Western Pacific, but took no interest in anything outside its own region, and – more significantly – the USA entered in 1917. In fact, its intervention was to be decisive.

The Germans, then as in the Second World War, were faced with a possible war on two fronts, quite apart from the Balkans into which they were drawn by their alliance with Austria-Hungary. (However, since three of the four Central Powers were in that region – Turkey and Bulgaria as well as Austria – the strategic problem there was not so urgent.) The German plan was to knock out France quickly in the West and then move with equal rapidity to knock out Russia in the East, before the Tsar's empire could bring the full weight of its enormous military manpower into effective action. Then, as later, Germany planned for a lightning campaign (what would in the Second World War be called a *blitzkrieg*) because it had to. The plan almost succeeded, but not quite. The German army advanced into France, among other places through neutral Belgium, and was only halted a few dozen miles east of Paris on the river Marne five to six weeks after war had been declared. (In 1940 the plan was to succeed.) They then withdraw a little, and both sides – the French now supplemented by what remained of the Belgians and by a British land force which was soon to grow enormously – improvised parallel lines of defensive trenches and fortifications which soon stretched without a break from the Channel coast in Flanders to the Swiss frontier, leaving a good deal of eastern France and Belgium in German occupation. They did not shift significantly for the next three-and-a-half years.

This was the 'Western Front', which became a machine for massacre such as had probably never before been seen in the history of warfare. Millions of men faced each other across the sandbagged parapets of the trenches under which they lived like, and with, rats and lice. From time to time their generals would seek to break out of the deadlock. Days, even weeks of unceasing artillery bombardment – what a German writer later called 'hurricanes of steel' (Ernst Jünger, 1921) – were to 'soften up' the enemy and drive him underground, until at the right moment waves of men climbed over the parapet, usually protected by coils and webs of barbed wire, into 'no-man's land', a chaos of waterlogged shell-craters, ruined tree-stumps, mud and abandoned corpses, to advance into the machine-guns that mowed them down. As they knew they would. The attempt of the Germans to break through at Verdun in 1916 (February–July) was a battle of two millions, with one million casualties. It failed. The British offensive on the Somme, designed to force the Germans to break off the Verdun offensive cost Britain 420,000 dead – 60,000 on the first day of the attack. It is not surprising that in the memory of the British and the French, who fought most of the First World War on the western front, it remained the 'Great War', more terrible and traumatic