

16 War and peace after the Cold War

An interwar decade

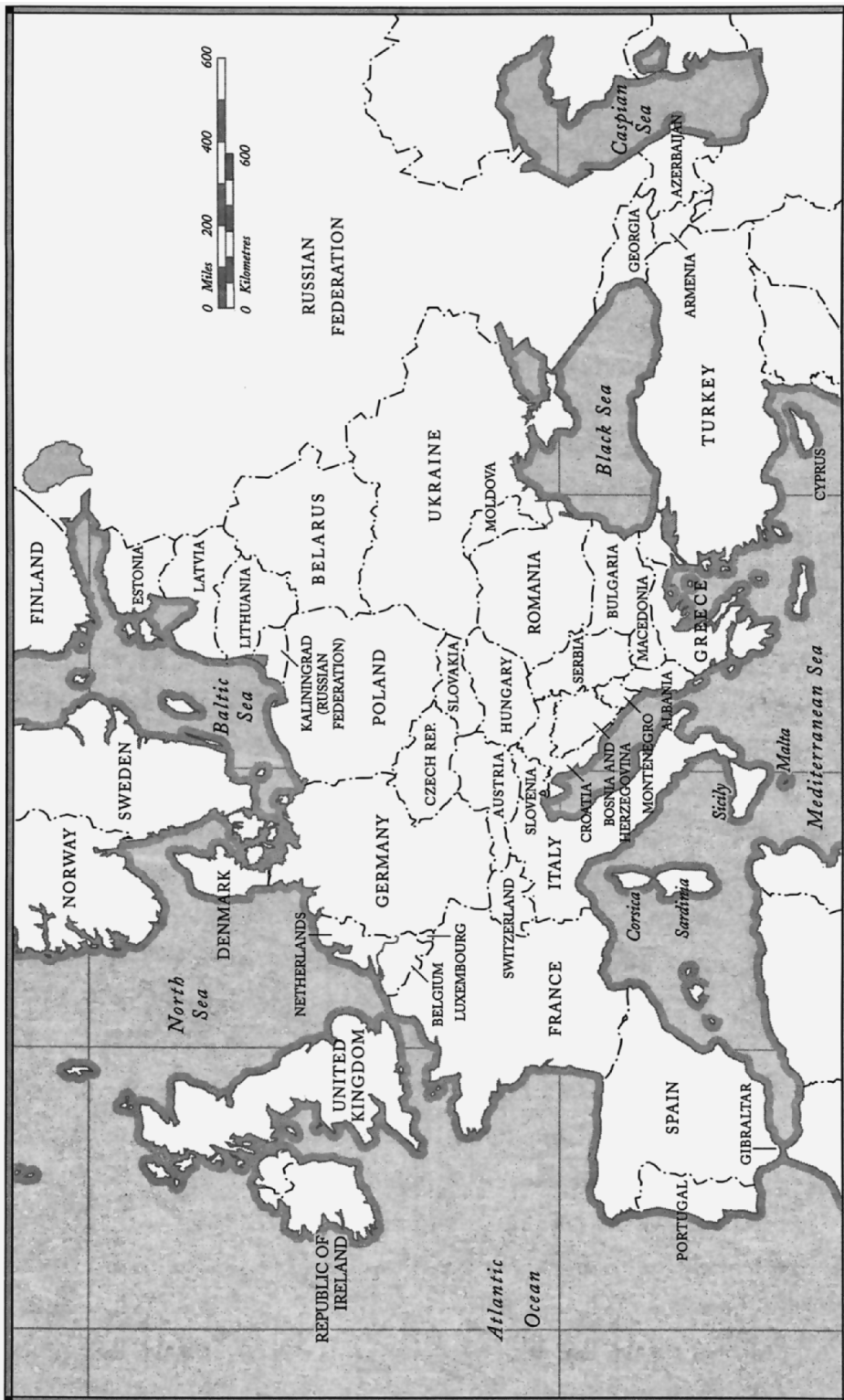
Reader's guide: The 1990s as an interwar period. A unipolar world. The 'new wars' thesis. The bloody conflicts of the decade.

Introduction: the interwar thesis

It is useful to think of the 1990s as an interwar decade, though this is a controversial thesis (Gray, 1994). This latest interwar period dates from November 1989, when the Berlin Wall was breached, to 9/11 (11 September 2001), when the global political and strategic contexts were dramatically altered by another great surprise event. What happened on 9/11 was the functional equivalent of the Wall Street Crash of 29 October 1929. Just as understanding of the 1920s and 1930s is organized into the periods before and after the Crash and the subsequent Depression, so the post-Cold War period should be divided into the years pre- and post-9/11.

An important reason why some commentators have not been attracted to the thesis that the immediate post-Cold War years comprised an interwar period is because they are convinced that the era of great interstate conflicts has passed (Mandelbaum, 1998–9; R. Smith, 2005: 1–26). Allegedly, that era was eroded and retired by a combination of nuclear weapons, which rendered warfare impractical; by economic globalization, the logic of which finds no place for war; and by the decline in the authority and autonomy of the state, through both globalization and a decline in national feeling. General Rupert Smith (2005: xiii) argues that a new paradigm of war has succeeded the old paradigm of combat between regular armies. The new paradigm is of war 'amongst the people'.

The interwar thesis comes in two principal variants. First is the proposition that there is another great power conflict waiting to occur in the future, most probably organized around the United States and China as competing poles. Second, one can break away from the traditional focus on great interstate struggles and instead endorse the official American view which holds that 'America is a nation at war' (Rumsfeld, 2005: 1). In that view, 9/11 ended the latest interwar period. It produced a strategic context wherein the sole global superpower, the United States, is at war with Islamic extremists who employ violence. Officially, America is at war with 'terror', but that literally is an impossibility. In practice, it is at war only with the Islamic fundamentalists who have declared war upon



Map 16.1 Europe after the Cold War