The 19th century has been examined in considerable detail. Riddled with contradictions, the years between 1815 and 1905 can be evaluated in many different ways, even from the chosen perspective of world order. Those in the mainstream of the European international law community at the end of the 19th century believed that they had come close to perfecting an ancient tradition of legal norms. Especially, but not only, in the civil law countries of Europe, there was widespread satisfaction in the belief that a truly legal system of world order would operate best – like the private law system of ancient Rome – as a wholly autonomous system directed by its own internal logic and forms of procedure. Classical international law was a system of formal rules that very nearly excluded considerations of justice and political reality, just as it discouraged reference to economic, cultural and religious diversity. Hopes were fixed on the attainment of a universal and uniform rule of law, as might be accomplished through the introduction of international legal institutions.

The years since 1905 have been a period of remarkable growth for the classical system, and for the neo-classical institutions introduced in the years between 1919 and 1950, such as the League and UN versions of the World Court and the International Law Commission entrusted with the codification and progressive development of international law. Moreover, it has introduced concepts of “world order” and other constructs of the post-classical era. These developments are so important that they deserve full treatment, at the same level of historic detail devoted to the 19th century. But this is the final chapter of a long book, and the years still to be covered are such a recent contribution to world history, that they must be treated together as the contemporary age. Historians generally are a bit skittish about their capacity to bring objectivity and detachment to the treatment of their own era. So perhaps in a work of this kind, it is excusable to limit the final chapter to a profile of the principal world order events, trends and ideas of our most immediate past.

The Milieu of Contemporary World Order

At the very least, the 20th century was an “Age of Extremes” (Hobsbawm, 1995). Tragically, the impressive trends in our own time toward an inclusive, almost universal, system of world law cannot be separated from two uniquely perilous challenges to international order. The first half of the 20th century was overwhelmed by the two
costliest wars in world history. In retrospect, it is clear that nothing accomplished in
the development of international law and diplomacy came close to warding off the
worst calamity in military history.

The slaughter on the battlefield during the First World War would alone have made
the early decades of the 20th century the most lethal of all eras in modern military
history. Most historians have given up trying to estimate the total casualties – at least
9.1 million in uniform alone, possibly three to five times the official count, in some
countries close to 20 percent of the total national population. The losses in mass wars
are virtually unquantifiable. Even although several industries do profit out of war,
mobilization for the war effort on that gigantic scale devastates economies as a whole
due to the unprecedented strains placed on the labor force. Like most other partici-
pants, Great Britain fought both world wars on an economically unsustainable scale.
In many ways, the British economy never fully recovered. Yet it was the Western
democratic economies that had proved more adaptable than the German model of
rational-bureaucratic administration. As Hobsbawn suggests, Britain's civilian con-
sumption fell by over 20 percent by 1945, but ended the war with a slightly better-fed
and healthier population, due in the main to a war-planned economy slanted toward
equality and fairness of distribution and social justice.

After many years of relative neglect by historians, the First World War has recently
attracted a new generation of scholars. Was the First World War simply the result of
German militarists determined to carve out wealth and territory for the new Ger-
man Reich? Or was the appalling slaughter on the battlefield fuelled by a nationalist
uprising, building over long years of dammed-up resentment at the efforts of the
other European powers to hold off the inevitable unification of the German people?
To what extent was the First World War the final death struggle between old and new
ideologies, such as the forces of absolute monarchy and the supporters of freedom
and constitutional democracy (Roberts, 1999)

Niall Fergusson (1999) has confronted a number of “myths” surrounding the most
traumatic of modern wars. He questions, for example, whether the European “culture
of militarism” explains as much as it is supposed to do, suggesting instead that mili-
tarism was in decline by 1914, due in part to a process of gradual democratization. He
disputes the notion that the war was the result of British determination to prevent
the spread of German and Italian colonization in Africa. Germany's ambition to est-
ablish an empire even further away had been known, and not actively resisted, for
over two decades! In fact, he argues, Britain was simply unprepared for a war, which
was assumed most likely to flare up again between Germany and France. He denies,
in particular, that the First World War was inevitable.

However interpretations change, most historians accept that at least 10 million
lives may have been lost in that calamity, estimated to cost in monetary terms almost
$210 billion in 1995 dollar equivalents. It also killed off four of the great empires that
had dominated world history for three or more centuries. The British Empire sur-
vived, but, as Fergusson documents, “mortgaged to the hilt”.

The “war to end all wars led directly to the world’s first comprehensive effort to
establish a highly institutionalized system of global order and cooperation, but, as-
tonishingly, it was succeeded within two short decades by an even more ruinous