EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION

Postwar Europe as History

DAN STONE

‘Who would dare to impute to those masses who have risen in Europe against Nazi rule that they are fighting for the revival of a past whose profound weaknesses and irrevocable collapse they have experienced? Their goal is a new world!’

Le Franc-tireur, 1 March 1944

‘We live on the cusp of two worlds. If we find an ethic that will have as its goal the welfare of man and not economic profit or the selfish interests of some race, nation, or social class, then, perhaps, we will be able to clear the rubble from our continent and provide education and comfort to people who crave housing, work, and books more than uniforms, guns, and tanks.

Anatol Girs

‘You are likely to lose faith in yourself and in mankind when you see the survivors of the cataclysm trying to build up a new world by building into it all the same structures that led to the decomposition of the old.’

Gregor von Rezzori

Primo Levi is famous as the author of one of the great testimonies of Europe’s catastrophe. Indeed, the rise to prominence of the genre of testimony in the late twentieth

---

century is unthinkable without him. But Levi was also the author of numerous short stories, which he published in Italian journals in the 1960s and 1970s. Where If This Is a Man and The Truce eventually came to define the Holocaust and to establish Auschwitz as postwar Europe’s epitome of evil, ‘Gladiators’, first published in L’Automobile in 1976, seems to sum up many of the postwar period’s characteristics: technology, wealth, leisure, sport, and changing gender relations; but also mass consumption, alienation, ‘massification’, and violence. All are exemplified in Levi’s story, in which the eponymous fighters—mostly convicts—are thrown into an arena where, armed only with a hammer, they must face being mown down by cars. The spectators applaud when a gladiator performs an acrobatic manoeuvre that facilitates his escape, but the wildest applause is reserved for the gladiator who smashes in the head of a driver with his hammer. The violence in this story is shocking, all the more so for being juxtaposed with leisure, relaxation, and that epitome of postwar mass culture, the automobile. But coming from the pen of Levi, with the ominous threat of Auschwitz always in the background, ‘Gladiators’ also suggests that the apparent stability of postwar European consumer society belies the fact that Europe’s darker history is still present, just below the surface. In contrast to a novel like Georges Perec’s W or The Memory of Childhood (1975), in which an entire society is based on the rigid lines of sport—an allegory of the attempt to turn interwar and wartime society into a grand barracks—Levi’s vision is of a society not permanently mobilized, as under fascism, but nevertheless ready and willing to employ and enjoy violence.

Italy in the 1970s, when Levi wrote ‘Gladiators’, was a society scarred by the memory of fascism. In its most violent manifestation, the extreme-left Red Brigades (Brigate Rosse) sought to expose the ‘objective’ fascism of the modern state by provoking it into a clampdown, forcing a rightward shift. As with the Red Army Faction in West Germany at the same time, the Red Brigades were, unwittingly, doing the work of the fascists for them; indeed, their immature psychological proclivities towards violence made them, despite their stated ideologies, heirs to European fascism in a complex way. In a time defined by both Eurocommunism and Eurosclerosis, the everyday chaos of postwar Italian politics meant that violence, corruption (including the machinations of the P2 masonic lodge), instability, and terrorism coexisted with historically unprecedented economic prosperity in the new, peaceful context of the EEC.

It is tempting to tell the story of Europe in the twentieth century in two halves: the first, a sorry, bleak tale of poverty, war, and genocide; and the second, a happy narrative of stability and the triumph of boring normality over dangerous activism and exuberant politics. This is not entirely unwarranted, especially if we stick to Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘short twentieth century’ of 1914–1989. However, as the Italian example shows, while the extremes of the ‘second thirty years war’ did not return to Europe between 1945 and 1989, it behoves us to dig a little deeper and uncover some of the subplots of the redemptive narrative which is so appealing. Quite apart from the fact that Europe in 1944–45

could not feed itself—and therefore that the view from the early twenty-first century should avoid whiggish triumphalism—there were numerous fault lines along which European politics, culture, and society split, sometimes very dangerously. Most obvious of these is of course the Cold War, which divided the continent in a way that defined it for forty years and whose after-effects are still evident. I will say more about the Cold War shortly, but it should not be taken as synonymous with the postwar period tout court, for this would lead one to overlook many other significant pressure points.

The impact of World War II, the largest and bloodiest conflict in world history, leaving so many dead that ‘the very earth seemed to breathe,’ did not end in 1945. Without understanding the nature of World War II, one cannot get to grips with what followed. It was not just a classic territorial struggle best understood in terms of military strategy, but an ideological clash, in which a racialized vision of a Europe united under German domination fought, after 1941, against an uneasy alliance of liberals and communists. This war of ideologies, inspired primarily by Nazi chiliasm, gave the war its millenarian character, and accounts for the fact that in every state there was a mini-war going on, with large sections of the European population believing—with a peak in about 1941–42—that a Nazified Europe was an unstoppable reality. Military and ideological collaboration with Nazism meant that the viciousness of the fighting was akin to a civil war. As the Italian fascist novelist Curzio Malaparte wrote:

all over Europe, a frightful civil war was festering like a tumour beneath the surface of the war which the Allies were fighting against Hitler’s Germany. In their efforts to liberate Europe from the German yoke Poles were killing Poles, Greeks were killing Greeks, Frenchmen were killing Frenchmen, Rumanians were killing Rumanians, and Jugoslavs were killing Jugoslavs… While the Allies were allowing themselves to be killed in the attempt to liberate Italy from the Germans, we Italians were killing one another.

In the Yugoslav context, renegade communist Milovan Djilas put it even more succinctly: ‘A people was at grips with the invader, while brothers slaughtered one another in even more bitter warfare’. The Liberation itself was a bloody and frightening process for millions of Europeans, from the citizens of Normandy whose towns were bombed by the Allies on and after D-Day, to the inhabitants of Nazi camps who were too dazed and weak to comprehend what was happening, and who continued to die in droves after being ‘liberated’. In the immediate postwar years, many millions of people—especially Germans—were displaced as borders were shifted and populations expelled or forcibly ‘transferred,’ in the largest internal population migration in recorded European

---

5 See Dan Stone, Histories of the Holocaust (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), ch. 1 for more detail.
history. By the end of the war, the Allies were in effect promoting what the Nazis had advocated in the 1930s: ‘ethnic homogeneity as a desirable feature of national self-determination and international stability’. Purges of collaborators—often carried out by people who themselves had dubious pasts—resulted in tens of thousands of deaths before the return of governments-in-exile. Even so, it is remarkable that, after the violence of the war, retribution was not more terrible.

Displaced persons (DP) camps, especially housing Jewish survivors of the Nazi camps and of postwar antisemitic violence in Eastern Europe, were a blot on the Central European landscape until more than ten years after the war, when the establishment of the state of Israel permitted the last remaining DPs to go where they wanted. Violence and civil war continued in many parts of Europe. Communist authorities did not put down the last pockets of nationalist resistance in Poland until the early 1950s; civil war in Greece precipitated British withdrawal from Great Power status and permanent American intervention in Europe, in the shape of the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Programme). In the midst of the bloodiest war of European decolonization, in Algeria, France nearly succumbed to civil war in 1958, following a right-wing military plot. Decolonization in general was a great shock to European notions of superiority and power, which had long been casually assumed. The leaders of the decolonization movements simply continued the struggles they had fought against the Japanese or in service in Europe during World War II against the colonial powers that sought to reassert their control after liberation. Even in the continuing arrangements of neocolonialism and clientelism, which benefited the former colonial powers, decolonization brought new challenges: mass, non-white immigration into Europe, Third Worldism, and other political positions broadly associated with the ‘New Left’ that did not fit comfortably into paradigms that the establishment could understand. Dictatorships continued to exist in Spain and Portugal until the 1970s, as the Franco and Salazar regimes played on their supposed wartime neutrality and their anti-communist credentials to persuade the US and its allies that in the context of the Cold War they ought to be tolerated. Twenty years after the end of its civil war, Greece in 1967 fell prey


to military dictatorship, a brutal junta that rose and fell over the question of Cyprus, itself one of the longest running sores of postwar politics.

The Cold War itself—in the broader context of US–Soviet rivalry—obviously threatened the stability not just of Europe but of the world as a whole. The Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 brought the world shockingly close to nuclear annihilation—it is impossible to read the transcripts of President Kennedy’s discussions with EXCOMM (Executive Committee of the National Security Council) and the Joint Chiefs of Staff without one’s palms sweating—and the revival of the nuclear arms race in the 1980s not only reawoke fears of Mutual Assured Destruction (as in films such as *The Day After*) but understandably contributed to preventing the vast majority of Kremlin watchers from predicting the demise of communist Europe just a few years later. From the communist takeover of Eastern Europe in the immediate postwar years to the various Berlin crises, the establishment of NATO and the Warsaw Pact, the violent suppression of the workers’ uprisings of 1953, the Hungarian revolution of 1956, and the ‘Prague Spring’ of 1968, the Korean war, the Vietnam war and many other episodes, the global Cold War both influenced and was influenced by events in Europe.

Moving away from high politics, many other spheres of life changed dramatically in the postwar period, so that simplistic notions of stability and normality cannot do justice to the complex realities. In the field of gender relations and sexuality, the period was the first in human history in which women could take control of the reproductive process. Even if feminism and the ‘sexual revolution’ look somewhat jaded from the perspective of the twenty-first century, when the gender stereotypes against which feminism fought are being staunchly reinforced, the phenomenon of women’s rights (to equal pay for equal work, to divorce, to protection from rape, especially in marriage, to contraception, and to abortion) backed by legislation was still unprecedented. Homosexuality was a subject that was not only unthinkable for most Europeans, but certainly unmentionable in ‘respectable’ society in the 1940s; from the late 1960s onwards, gay rights, though achieved steadily and unevenly, and sometimes in the face of violent opposition, made their appearance in Western European law. The expansion of higher education, the rise of mass consumerism and tourism, the obsession with ‘things’, ownership and wealth, the availability of cheap credit; all were phenomena of the postwar world. As Max-Stephan Schulze notes, ‘the increase in material prosperity was probably the major characteristic of economic and social development in Western Europe since 1945’. The same is true for Eastern Europe; even though from the 1960s onwards, standards of living fell sharply below those in the West, for many, conditions were better than before the war and, importantly, the perception that improvements were possible became widespread.

---

However, postwar phenomena also included, in Western Europe, racialized understandings of immigration and decolonization, often resulting in riots and the rise of new far-right parties, sometimes with direct linkages to interwar fascism; terrorism of the radical left and right, as well as nationalist movements such as the IRA or ETA; the suppression of critical thought in the postwar period as old elites pushed with all their might for their rehabilitation at the expense of those with new ideas for anti-fascist grassroots politics. In Eastern Europe, the period saw the creation of police states backed up by powerful and all-pervasive secret police forces that were far more extensive than the Gestapo; the homogenization of living and working conditions; and the dominance of ideology over the private sphere, with sometimes tragicomic, sometimes lunatic results. Indeed, if one compares Western or Eastern Europe in 1945 with Europe in 2000, in every sphere—political, economic, cultural, social, educational, and sexual—the difference between the start and the end of the period is so vast that probably no other comparably short period of European history has ever witnessed such remarkable change.

Recognizing that fact and explaining it is the historian’s task, and thus we can see that postwar Europe is fast becoming history. This process of historicization is being set in train in many ways, but clearly, comfortable notions of stability and progress are insufficient for the job. In his 1895 inaugural lecture at Cambridge, Lord Acton noted that ‘there is far more fear of drowning than of drought’ when encountering the sources for writing modern history—and that in an age when history was restricted to diplomatic history. Some clear-cut conceptual parameters are therefore required in order to make sense of this mass of material, encompassing every conceivable sphere of human activity.

**Conceptual Parameters**

Since the end of the Cold War, Europe’s postwar years have increasingly been historicized. Where earlier postwar Europe was—understandably—confined to the sphere of current affairs, and was written about by journalists, politicians, political scientists, and sociologists, now historians have made their mark, with a stream of research on all aspects of the period, from diplomacy to consumerism. Yet, despite the appearance of several superb synthetic works, there is as yet no real sense of a coherent historical field or any consensus about what ‘postwar Europe’ means. How did a continent in ruins in 1945 become one of the most prosperous and privileged corners of the world? What changes had to be made to ‘late European modernity’ to maintain economic and social stability at the end of the century? The objective of this *Handbook* is to attempt to maintain a productive tension between, on the one hand, bringing some coherence to the field and, on the other hand, giving readers a sense of the multifaceted nature of the existing and forthcoming research.

---

15 For example, Norman Manea, *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
The Handbook is distinct from existing syntheses in two main ways: first, it is structured thematically rather than chronologically; second, it modifies (though of course does not altogether remove) the emphasis usually placed on the Cold War as the main historical framework for understanding the period. Thanks to its size, the Handbook differs from the few existing thematic collections in that it has unusually wide coverage, with a considerable stress on cultural history. This structure allows a number of interesting chronological questions to be raised, rather than taken as given. It also means that among the authors there are not only historians but historical geographers, political scientists, anthropologists, and literary scholars. The result is a collection of essays that indicate how what remains for many people a living part of the present is being historicized in inventive and innovative ways.

The following guidelines have structured this Handbook from its initial conception:

1. Without unthinkingly overturning the standard periodization that divides the twentieth century into two discrete halves, the Handbook questions the extent to which 1945 was really a ‘zero hour’. Instead, lines of continuity as well as discontinuity are traced from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through to the beginning of the twenty-first century. For example by contrast with obvious breaks in the sphere of politics, in social life continuities and more gradual changes are easier to trace from the pre-war period to the postwar years. The following questions have been borne in mind: is ‘postwar’ a period or a concept? Did the postwar period begin in 1945 or has the extent of the break been exaggerated, perhaps being itself part of postwar Europeans’ self-understanding? Maybe the ‘real’ postwar period began only in 1989, after the ‘Cold War parenthesis’? The Cold War can itself now be historicized, instead of being seen as the framework which explains everything else, and set into contexts of longer-term narratives and ‘larger geopolitical frameworks, particularly the collapse of empires and the proliferation of states’.

2. This questioning of chronology in turn permits the thematic investigation of various facets of postwar life—from high politics to economics to tourism and consumerism—in a far-reaching way, around the axes of time and place.

3. ‘Europe’ in this Handbook is understood to mean all of Europe, including a notable emphasis on Eastern Europe as well as on the creation of ‘neo-Europes’ overseas.

---


and ‘reverse colonialism’ in Europe itself. For, as Catherine Lee and Robert Bideleux note, to give one example among many, Europe’s ‘peripheries and perimeters are no less important than the core’, and ‘Europe’ should be understood neither as a geographical nor as a political entity, but rather as a narrative or an idea.

4. ‘History’ is understood to mean as many ways of approaching the past as possible, with considerable emphasis on the achievements of cultural history, the emergence of which is itself a notable postwar phenomenon. Many of the ways in which the past is discussed in this Handbook have been developed within the contexts of the changes that have taken place in the historical profession since 1945. Where before the war, the field was dominated by diplomatic history, high politics, and the historical development of nations, with other approaches, such as social and intellectual history, regarded as distinctly inferior, since 1945 the postwar profession has been vastly expanded in terms of the numbers of historians researching and teaching at higher education institutions and the variety of approaches that are considered acceptable. Political history remains important, for good reason, and diplomatic history, especially in the context of human rights and international relations, is undergoing something of a renaissance, but social, cultural, economic, and intellectual history are all now enormously productive areas of historical research. Within these major divisions, new fields such as gender, the history of the body or of the emotions, the history of the book, memory studies, environmental history, media history, or the history of science and medicine are all major developments. Some existed in a nascent state before 1945, but only with the expansion of the profession since then have they come into their own. In other words, the descriptions of the past that the chapters of this Handbook provide have themselves only become possible because of—and are thus products of—changes in the postwar world. Even a book of thirty-six chapters cannot cover everything, but my aim as editor has been to represent as wide a variety of historical approaches as possible, for this variety in itself tells us something about the period the book is describing and narrating.


5. The contributions stress the interplay between the local, national, and international, and between the political and the intimate, especially in the Cold War context. As well as highlighting the variety of historical approaches, the Handbook also seeks to break down disciplinary boundaries where appropriate (i.e. not just for the sake of it); between for example economic history and history of ideas. Doing so provides two things: first, a rich picture of the complexity of postwar life; second, a sense of the extraordinary expansion of historiographical approaches as both product and producer of postwar European culture.

6. Throughout the Handbook, strict chronological divisions have been avoided, in order to stress that long-term historical factors were at work after 1945 as much as, if not more than short-term self-contained matters, as well as to suggest the interconnectedness of political, social, economic, cultural, and other factors.

No book on postwar Europe can exclude the Soviet–American rivalry and the way in which it played out in and was in turn affected by developments in Europe. But the Cold War does not provide the only focus or conceptual framework for the Handbook. Silvio Pons and Federico Romero write that

The pervasiveness of the Cold War has often been used as an argument for studying it on its own terms: the bipolar system and its dynamics dominated all the nooks and crannies of the societies involved. But its very pervasiveness means that it was also porous, permeable and subject to myriad influences and transformative trends.20

In other words, one can show how the ubiquitous Cold War context shaped and informed all areas of life, not just politics in the narrow sense of international relations or military strategy. The Cold War, as Joel Isaac reminds us, ‘was more than a high-political drama.’21 Film, television, sport, gender relations, industrial relations, and the development of the social sciences, to name just a few areas, were all affected by the basic fact of the division of Europe into two ideologically-opposed camps. They were affected not only at an institutional level, in terms of funding or status, but also at the level of the imagination, as Cold War fears and insecurities crept, for example, into popular culture or family life. The reverse is also true: the way in which the Cold War was played out in international politics was also affected by gendered tropes, with Khrushchev’s macho posturing and the phallic imagery of the space race being among the obvious ways in which cultural and social mores bled into the big political issues of the day.22 Theodor

Adorno wrote of Hitler’s ‘robot bombs’ that they manifested ‘world spirit’ and, at the same stroke, refuted Hegel’s philosophy of history. It was perhaps even harder to be a Hegelian during the Cold War, in the face of nuclear annihilation.

But if one can show that the Cold War as a phenomenon was porous, one should also note that it did not determine every area of postwar Europeans’ life. Certainly the focus on explaining the origins and course of the Cold War has tended to obscure the significance of the first two or three postwar years, in which the future was open and the formal division of the continent was by no means inevitable. But rock ‘n’ roll, the pill, and foreign holidays were all part of postwar Europe. Indeed, for many people, they were more so than the thought of nuclear destruction, which many preferred to box off in order to remain sane—and can equally validly be the subjects of historical analysis. The many studies that have recently appeared on tourism, consumerism, family life, religion, industry, fashion and design, science and technology, art, architecture, music, film, the press and photography all intersect with conventional narratives of the postwar period that take it as synonymous with the Cold War; but they also offer ways of understanding postwar society, culture, and economics that do not see those spheres of life as overdetermined by the capitalism–communism rivalry.

All of these topics both slot into and cut across a standard chronological account of postwar Europe. The following chapters assume a working knowledge of the series of events of the period, and so I will use the rest of this introduction to provide a basic high political and institutional chronological framework that can help orient the reader.

**Chronology**

It is helpful to break up the postwar period into distinct phases, following Tony Judt and Charles Tilly. Tilly’s periodization is based largely on economic indicators: up to 1950, when all of Europe was engaged in recovering from the war; 1950–65, when robust

---


24 As two famous works that book-end the period attest: Karl Popper’s *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (2 vols, 1944), with its famous condemnation of Hegelianism as the precursor to terror, and Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), which marked the return of Hegelianism, albeit with short-lived enthusiasm.


growth characterized most of the continent; 1965–90, when growth slowed again. This is a useful division, but does little to explain the variation in living standards between east and west, and the reasons why the West outstripped the East despite the end of the postwar boom from 1973 onwards. Here Judt is more helpful, dividing the period into four: 1945–53 (‘postwar’); 1953–71 (‘prosperity and its discontents’); 1971–89 (‘recessional’); 1989–2005 (‘after the fall’). This chronology broadly makes sense, and although the sections of this Handbook are not structured around it, they nevertheless confirm its appositeness.

The first (‘postwar’) phase has been investigated in great detail by historians, mainly with the aim of explicating the origins of the Cold War. But by seeing these immediate postwar years as no more than precursors to the definitive postwar settlement, the radical contestation and openness that characterized them can easily be overlooked. As Geoff Eley writes, the ‘lasting framework of policy, reforms and dominant thinking that eventually solidified out of the intensely contested politics of 1945–46’ has ‘retroactively acquired a much stronger logic of inevitability’, with the arrangements of 1947–48 being ‘projected backwards onto the preceding moment of Liberation’. For Eley, this retroactive determinism means that historians miss the possibility that existed in 1945 of a ‘Third Way’, a social vision ‘situated somewhere between or beyond the starkly polarized options of Stalinism and the anti-Communist consensus of the West’. This is a viewpoint shared by Mazower, who notes that ‘many former partisans and members of the underground were left with the feeling that they and their cause had been betrayed’.

These claims can be tested by taking as an example the communist takeover of Europe, and the way in which that process has been interpreted by historians. One of the longest running debates in Cold War historiography has been the question of Stalin’s role: did he set the pace with his threats of expansionism or merely react to western, especially American aggression? John Lewis Gaddis argues that ‘as long as Stalin was running the Soviet Union a cold war was unavoidable’, a claim that has been the basis of traditionalist Cold War historiography since the beginning of the Cold War itself. Since the partial opening of the Soviet era archives, one can now defend the claim that ‘Stalin had the intention, the means, and the ability to control the overall design, as well as the thrusts and parries of Soviet foreign policy’. But it is also clear that the Soviets did not intend to divide the continent in 1944–45, and that, for the first years after the war, the countries of

what became ‘eastern Europe’ had ‘very different political constellations that, at least from the perspective of the time, might well have indicated diverse futures’.30

Some historians have pointed to Stalin’s policy of building ‘National Fronts’ (i.e. creating communist-dominated coalitions that would gradually dispense with the non-communists) as proof of his intentions to take over the whole of the European area occupied by the Red Army in 1945. Eduard Mark, for example, cites Stalin’s advice to the East Germans in 1948—‘you should advance towards socialism not by taking a straight road but move in zigzags’—as evidence that Stalin’s apparent willingness to accommodate the wartime allies’ and local democratic politicians’ points of view was a sham, and argues that the National Front strategy was a way of taking power for the communists without threatening the wartime Grand Alliance through appearing bellicose.31

Stalin undoubtedly acted to secure the Soviet Union’s new westward-shifted borders by installing friendly regimes in Poland and Romania. Yet it remains the case that elsewhere, notably Hungary and Czechoslovakia, Stalin was far more relaxed about the progress of communism. Finland was exempted altogether and, as one historian notes, had Stalin been willing to permit the ‘Finlandization’ of the rest of Eastern Europe, ‘then the West would have been much less alarmed’.32 Only in 1947, with the failure of the Conference of Foreign Ministers to agree terms of a German peace treaty, the declaration of the Truman Doctrine in 1947, the announcement of the ERP—which was also offered to the Eastern European countries—and the exclusion of communists from government in France and Italy, was Stalin motivated into initiating the coup in Czechoslovakia in February 1948 which brought the communists to power there and to creating the Cominform in September 1947, in an attempt to imitate the Marshall Plan.33

Stalin, it seems, aimed neither to divide the continent at the end of the war, nor to force all countries in the region into the same straitjacket at the same pace.

Thus, although one can trace its origins back to the Bolshevik Revolution, and tensions between the Allies began shortly after the German invasion of the USSR in June 1941, the Cold War did not begin in earnest until 1948. Following the Prague coup, the French-occupied zone of Germany was merged with the British–American ‘Bizonia’, the Soviets blockaded Berlin’s western sectors, culminating in the Berlin airlift, and within


32 William Taubman, ‘How Much of the Cold War was Inevitable?’, in Francesca Gori and Silvio Pons (eds), The Soviet Union and Europe in the Cold War, 1943–53 (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1996), 192.

a year the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic had been born, ironically normalizing German statehood and permitting Adenauer (though not the SED to the same extent) to act as the head of a sovereign nation. The Treaty of Brussels created a military alliance in Western Europe, aimed at defending the region from the Soviet Union rather than Germany, and within a few years the new Germanies, which lay at the heart of Cold War Europe in all senses, had been relieved of their very short period of denazification purdah and, now functioning as independent states, were willingly incorporated into NATO and the Warsaw Pact.  

The birth of the new German states and the reluctant French agreement to the rearming of West Germany in the context of NATO (after the National Assembly first demanded and then eventually rejected a European Defence Community) also help explain the emergence of another key postwar institution: the European Coal and Steel Community, the forerunner of today’s European Union. Unfortunately, hagiographical narratives that explain the emergence of the Franco–German partnership out of the World War II resistance movements’ plans and blueprints are some way from the truth. Resistors could dream about a world in which the ‘maintenance of freedom and security on the entire continent should be solely in the hands of the European federation and its executive, legislative, and judiciary organs’. Robert Schuman clarified what was really going on in his speech that initiated the ECSC:

> The solidarity in production thus established [by joining coal & steel production] will make it plain that any war between France and Germany becomes not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible…this proposal will build the first concrete foundation of a European federation which is indispensable to the preservation of peace.

With protests from the Communist resistance and the USSR, that moves towards European federation would be tantamount to creating a ‘bourgeois’ anti-Soviet bloc, the USA and Britain backed down to Stalin’s objections in Tehran (November 1943). Hence, when the great powers met in 1945 they, in Lipgens’s words, ‘did nothing more than arrange for the restoration of the system of national states’. The move towards the pooling of resources and the creation of a common market in the Treaties of Rome (European Coal and Steel Community, 1951) and Paris (European Economic Community, Euratom, 1957) was based primarily on national interest. This was a realization that the haughty British came to later. In 1946, Churchill famously called, in a speech in Zurich, for a ‘United States of Europe’, but made it clear that it should be without Britain or its Commonwealth, which, with ‘mighty America’, would be ‘the friends and sponsors of the new Europe’. But, after the failure of Britain’s rival European Free Trade Area (EFTA), a

---

random assortment of states not in the EEC, the country finally applied for membership, only to be twice rebuffed by de Gaulle, until, in response to Willy Brandt’s Ostpolitik, it suited French interests to let Britain join.

It would be strange to explain the readiness of states to enter into this sort of multilateral, international agreement if notions of federalism were wholly irrelevant. Nevertheless, national interest has sustained the EEC/EU ever since, which (despite Schuman’s talk of ‘European federation,’ a phrase that has never appeared since the Treaty of Rome spoke of ‘ever closer union’) is an economic rather than a political union. The key moments of the union’s development, from the creation and renegotiation of the Common Agricultural Policy to the Maastricht Treaty and the post-communist accessions, have been driven by national interests, especially French fear of Germany, far more than by federalism. The ‘found- ing fathers,’ Monnet, Schuman, Spaak, de Gasperi, and so on, might be cheered by the fact that the union has contributed to keeping Europe in a state of peace since World War II (with the admittedly rather significant exception of Yugoslavia in the 1990s), but they would soon see that it is economic interdependence that holds Europe’s nation states together in the EU. Political power in the EU, even in the twenty-first century, resides not in a supranational European ‘state’ but in the context of the Council of Ministers, which means a voluntarily entered into sharing of sovereignty. A ‘state’ that has a toothless parliament and a shared currency but that cannot raise taxes or make war is unlikely to replace the European nation states any time soon.

In the context of the early Cold War, the rearming of West Germany, the establishment of NATO, and the creation of the EEC, what we see in Western Europe is a period in which the glimpse of the radical new political opportunities that briefly shone in the immediate aftermath of the war was gradually but surely snuffed out. The centre-right governments in power and the institutions that took shape in the 1940s and 1950s helped to give a conservative cast to Western European political culture. Stability through parliamentary democracy was certainly one result—though not in southern Europe—especially since it came nicely wrapped in shiny consumer goods. Christian Democrats succeeded where socialist parties did not in creating some cross-class participation. There is nevertheless something remarkable about a situation in which vast numbers of former Nazis could still be working as teachers, judges, and policemen, not to mention become General Secretary of the United Nations, as did the Austrian Kurt Waldheim, or in which representatives of political parties that (in the most charitable reading) had


39 But see Jean Leca, “The Empire Strikes Back!” An Uncanny View of the European Union. Part I—Do We Need a Theory of the European Union?, Government and Opposition 44:3 (2009), 285–340, for a sophisticated analysis, which shows that the dichotomy between federalism and a Europe of nation states is no longer satisfactory for understanding the way the EU works.

failed to prevent the slide into the apocalypse were once again at the helm, not ten years after the war. Adorno was being dramatic, but when he penned his extraordinary essay, ‘The Meaning of Working through the Past’ (1959), it was not entirely hyperbolic to write:

I consider the survival of National Socialism within democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy. Infiltration indicates something objective; ambiguous figures make their comeback and occupy positions of power for the sole reason that conditions favour them.41

Adorno’s warning was startlingly echoed in the writings of anti-colonial thinkers such as Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Albert Memmi. Although many of the overseas colonies, such as Singapore, Malaya, and the Dutch East Indies were occupied during the war, the European powers considered it their right to reassert their rule at the conclusion of the conflict. But the newly empowered colonial subjects disagreed and, in one of the more remarkable phenomena of postwar history, the decolonization process became an unstoppable force. Decolonization had taken place before World War II (Brazil in 1830, for example), but the year 1960 brought European colonial history—barring a few exceptions—to a close, at least in the formal sense (informal empire and exploitative relationships did not end). Here the European self-image was severely tried.

The British decolonization process was neither as peaceful nor ordained from above as the official (and popular) narrative would have us believe.42 Still, the shameful abandonment of the Belgian Congo (Zaire) in 1960, and the wars in Indochina and, especially, Algeria, were of a different order. When the French army surrendered at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, and lost Indochina, Algeria was the only remaining colony of significance for the French. In fact, it was not formally a colony but part of metropolitan France, split into three departments and returning deputies to the National Assembly. Thus, it was all the more galling that the Algerians rejected the benefits of French civilization. The ‘war’ saw the use of torture—the army was condemned as ‘your Gestapo in Algeria’ as early as 1955 by Claude Bourdet in France-Observateur43—and precipitated a crisis in the Fourth Republic when the OAS (Organisation de l’Armée Secrète) came close to unleashing civil war in France. The generals’ failure did not prevent the massive loss of life in Algeria, the notorious cover up of the killing in Paris during the pro-FLN demonstration of 17 October 1961, or the migration of over one million French settlers (pieds noir) back to mainland France in the wake of Algerian independence a year later. These events help set Fanon’s violent anti-colonial tirades into a meaningful context. When he wrote that

in the colonial context the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when
the latter admits loudly and intelligibly the supremacy of the white man’s values.
In the period of decolonization, the colonized masses mock at these very values,
insult them and vomit them up

Fanon was merely echoing the reality of the decolonization struggle. But if the
decolonization process was traumatic and violent, it soon became apparent that it was
economically beneficial for the Europeans to reap the benefits of trade and other links
with former colonial countries without having the expense of maintaining a military or
civil presence. The exception was Portugal; in a reversal of the experience of the other
colonial powers’ experiences, the military was responsible for forcing the hand of the
authoritarian government in the colonial metropole, Lisbon. Their actions began the
process that saw the end of dictatorship in Portugal as well as independence for the
Portuguese colonies (although, for Angola especially, this would usher in several de-
cades of vicious warfare). In 1960, President Dwight Eisenhower said of the Salazar
regime that: ‘Dictatorships of this type are sometimes necessary in countries whose
political institutions are not so far advanced as ours’. It was therefore all the more sur-
prising that the army—not usually at the vanguard of progressive thought—was the
institution that promoted a new thinking. As Colonel Vasco Gonçalves said in June 1975:

The same forces that oppressed the peoples of the former territories under Portuguese
administration also oppressed the Portuguese people. It is with great modesty and
humility that we must say, without ambiguities, that the struggle of the colonial
peoples against Portuguese fascism also aided our liberation from the same
fascism.

Thus, as well as contributing to European prosperity in general, both economically and
morally, decolonization in Portugal also helped to bring about the passage from dicta-
torship to democracy in that country—though not in Lusophone Africa—at the same
time as the dictatorship in Spain was also coming to its negotiated end.

While the western half of the continent was rebuildi...
The economic and political stagnation of the Brezhnev years could not, however, be foreseen at first. Tilly notes that 'from the West it looked for a while as though the Warsaw Pact would bring off the combination of socialism, authoritarianism, and vigorous economic growth'. But for a time, as Gianni Toniolo reminds us, 'communist regimes commanded a sufficient degree of consensus, not so surprising in light of their early achievements and of eastern Europe's interwar history'. This was not universally true—in Romania, for example, with its tiny Communist Party and interwar and wartime history dominated by ethno-nationalism and fascism, communism was installed by force—but across the continent there was considerable admiration for the victory of anti-fascism and for the economic achievements of the people's republics in the early postwar years.

But if communism managed to sustain a standard of living comparable with the West for the first decade and half after the war, no such comparison can be made in the sphere of politics. It quickly became clear, with the massive seizures of property and land, the purges of 'collaborators' that became excuses to do away with anyone 'bourgeois', and the suppression of alternative opinions, that the overthrow of the Nazi dictatorship had resulted in the ushering in of another one, albeit of a different sort. If, in Western Europe, the postwar atmosphere was fundamentally conservative, this was largely a reflection of popular will; in Eastern Europe, the suppression of national sovereignty, especially in the Baltic States, the Polish kresy, and other regions incorporated directly into the Soviet Union, and the elimination of opposition, at least in the public sphere, was centrally, and violently, imposed. 'There will be a Lithuania,' one apparatchik put it, 'but there will be no Lithuanians.' Post-Cold War disagreements between eastern and western memories of World War II and its aftermath, as I discuss in my chapter below, are direct reflections of these different circumstances. As the Lithuanian poet Tomas Venclova laconically wrote: 'I do not envy the leaders of those days to whom history presented a choice among Hitler, Stalin, and death, each choice not necessarily excluding the other two.'

Despite the efforts of destalinization, following Stalin's death in 1953, the arrest of Beria, and Khrushchev's denunciation in his 'secret speech' at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, these moves were not sufficient to meet the needs and demands of the people. Thus, in the wake of uprisings in Poland, Czechoslovakia, and East Germany in 1953, the Berlin

---

47 Tilly, 'Europe Transformed', 20.
Airlift of 1948, and the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, communism suffered a severe loss of the status it had acquired by virtue of defeating the Third Reich in Europe. When Imre Nagy spoke of the need to ‘develop toward socialism by systematically decreasing the use of force [and] utilizing democratic forms and methods in the interest of close co-operation on the widest possible scale with the masses of working people’, what he actually meant was that Hungary should withdraw from the Warsaw Pact and, as a neutral state, work towards a renewed system of democracy. The year 1956 was the key moment, for it ended with the Warsaw Pact’s invasion of Hungary. The sight of tanks on the streets of Budapest shocked western fellow travellers, whose image of the golden age being realized in the here and now was shattered, and provided an echo of Brecht’s comment on the 1953 uprising: that the leadership should elect a new people.

By contrast, the ‘Prague Spring’ of 1968 was never such a threat to the system. Although Dubček was an idealistic reformer within the party, whose concern for legality made him hard to deal with, he never sought to withdraw from the Warsaw Pact or to declare Czech neutrality. Once the tanks had cleared the streets there was no opportunity for further reform and the period of gerontocratic stagnation set in. The conditions of 1956—Tito’s and Khrushchev’s anti-Stalinist reformism—were not present in 1968. Thus although Prague 1968 marked the last chance for reform in the Soviet bloc, its real importance lay in its adumbration of Gorbachev. Mazower cites the remarkable prescience of François Fetoj: ‘One may hope that the next Dubček will appear in the nerve centre of the system: Moscow.’

The supreme symbol of communism’s need to hold its people by force, and the greatest symbol of the Cold War, was of course the Berlin Wall, or, as the East Germans called it, the ‘anti-fascist protective rampart.’ In the Brezhnev era, the old men in power—Honecker (GDR), Zhivkov (Bulgaria), Jaruzelski (Poland), and Kádár (Hungary)—did not return to the paranoia of Stalinism. But there were exceptions. Enver Hoxha’s Albania was based on a variety of Maoism (following Albania’s break with the USSR in 1961 and alignment with China), and Nicolae Ceauşescu had turned Romania into a personal fiefdom by the 1980s. In retrospect, life in these regimes could have its funny side, as in the 2009 film Tales from the Golden Age (dir Cristian Mungiu) or György Dragomán’s The

---

54 Miłosz, The Captive Mind, 234: ‘The Western Communist needs a vision of a golden age which is already being realized on earth. The Stalinist of the East does everything in his power to instil this vision in the minds of others, but he never forgets that it is merely a useful lie.’
White King (2008, in English), but the laughter is always tinged with a manic edge. In a country in which the Piteşti ‘re-education camp’ could exist—where people were forced to torture and sexually abuse their family members—the worst excesses of Stalin were by no means over, even if (or rather, because) Romania took an independent line from Moscow and was feted by the West for doing so. In the USSR too, the camp system did not disappear with Stalin’s death, as Avraham Shifrin’s 1980 publication, The First Guidebook to Prisons and Concentration Camps of the Soviet Union, testifies.58

The year 1968 was not only a year of revolt in Eastern Europe. Discontent with prosperity in the West came from critics of consumerism, who believed that the ‘culture industry’ was being cynically employed by elites to ‘buy off’ the masses and keep them politically quiescent, and an anti-Americanism fuelled by the Vietnam war. Conservatives trod a delicate balance between anti-communism (as in the CIA-funded Congress for Cultural Freedom59) and anti-Americanization, with the latter usually losing out, but not without generating a substantial repertoire of distaste for supposed American vulgarity and brashness, as if a continent that had recently destroyed itself had a claim to greater civilization.60 “The idea that after this war life will continue “normally”, wrote Adorno, ‘or even that culture might be “rebuilt”—as if the rebuilding of culture were not already its negation—is idiotic.”61 The rise of the New Left, which rejected orthodox Marxism–Leninism as represented by the USSR and looked instead to third world leaders such as Che Guevara and Fidel Castro for inspiration, and drew its theoretical inspiration from Marcuse and McLuhan rather than from Lenin and Stalin, was predicated on this rejection of postwar culture, which it regarded as a continuation of fascism by other means. Hence student leader Rudi Dutschke could argue that:

Our life is more than money. Our life is thinking and living. It’s about us, and what we could do in this world… It is about how we could use technology and all the other things which at the moment are used against the human being… My question in life is always how we can destroy things that are against the human being, and how we can find a way of life in which the human being is independent of a world of trouble, a world of anxiety, a world of destruction.62

61 Adorno, Minima Moralia, 55.
Thus, student rebellions in France, West Germany, Italy, and even Britain in 1968 were not just protests about poor conditions in universities. They were the revolts of a generation that had never known war and its compromises, attempts to overthrow the mores of their parents’ generation which, they believed, had failed or, worse, collaborated with fascism. The disjunction between the conservative cultural atmosphere of Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s and the burgeoning consumer society, with its unheard-of excess wealth, was no longer sustainable.

Yet the student rebels’ aspirations were inherently unattainable. As one scholar says, ‘power to the imagination’ remained a vital programme that fascinated and mobilized individuals but was unsuccessful in gaining power because power is based on entirely different organizational and decision-making premises than is the mobilization of the imagination. The internal tension and limited effectiveness of the New Left were due to the fact that it could not assume power without destroying itself.63

Hannah Arendt was harsher when she spoke of the ‘theoretical sterility and analytical dullness’ of the student movement, which for her was ‘just as striking and depressing as its joy in action is welcome’.64 But perhaps more important than problems internal to the student movements is the role of the establishment. In France, for example, the revolts certainly shook the Gaullist regime, but it ultimately came out strengthened. Apart from the fact that the radical actions of the extreme left split the left alliance—the Radicals could no longer cooperate with the Communists, and neither could the SFIO (Socialists)—de Gaulle’s appeal to the people to choose between Gaullism and communism brought hundreds of thousands of pro-government demonstrators onto the streets of Paris. The subsequent cleverly timed general election in June provided an opportunity for the shocked middle-classes to register their distaste for street action. One political commentator wrote that ‘each barricade, each burning car brought tens of thousands of votes to the Gaullist party; that’s the truth’.65 In the 1969 presidential election Pompidou scored more votes (57.6 per cent) than even de Gaulle had done in 1964 (54.5 per cent).

Paradoxically, the revolt against postwar ‘fascism’ (as the students saw it) was carried out by a middle-class generation which was wealthier, healthier, and more materially comfortable than any such cohort in history. And while a tiny minority of the rebels went on to careers as terrorists in the paranoid worlds of the RAF, the BR, or the extreme right,66 most successfully negotiated the perils of the recessions and economic challenges that lay only a few years ahead. But if the students could never overthrow the postwar

---


order, they certainly achieved forcing a rethink of its norms, and contributed to bringing about a liberalization of attitudes and laws.

Somewhat ironically, however, the greatest impact of this liberalizing process was to be felt in the sphere of economics in the years after 1973. The major theme of the period that Judt terms ‘recessional’ was how to deal with the unprecedented challenges that had brought about and sustained economic crisis. It ended only with the ‘restructuring’ of the economies of Europe with the rise of neoliberalism, and the latter’s application to the whole of Europe following the collapse of communism, now in the very different circumstances of a global economy. The postwar economic boom—which was in fact a continuation of interwar economic trends—could not be sustained indefinitely, and not just because of the inevitable loss of market share brought about by the rise to prominence of new capitalist economies, especially in Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. In fact, by the time the oil crisis—brought about by OPEC’s raising the price of a barrel of oil from $2 in mid-1973 to $12 in 1975—took effect, the Western European economies were already suffering from low rates of productivity, outdated industrial plant, and lack of investment. From an average in OECD countries of 4.8 per cent per annum in the 1960s, the growth rate slowed to 3.4 per cent and then, between 1974 and 1976, almost to zero. OPEC’s decision to punish countries it deemed to have supported Israel during the Yom Kippur war simply exacerbated a trend that was already in train. And apart from the economic blows, the unseemly scrabble for oil exemplified the problem of Eurosclerosis that afflicted the EEC in the 1970s, with individual states desperately trying to ensure their own continuity of supply rather than working towards a collective solution.

The response to the oil crisis and to the novel problem of stagflation—which combined the phenomena of high inflation and unemployment, thought to be mutually exclusive in orthodox Keynesianism—was, over a fairly short time frame and with dramatic social consequences, to shut down the industries on which postwar prosperity had been built and to turn the Western European economy into a high-tech service sector. The process was carried through most radically in Britain under Margaret Thatcher, with her monetarist advisors, but applied also to West Germany, France, Italy, and even the Scandinavian countries, where the long-dominant Social Democrats saw their grip on power weaken (and where, in a rare moment of excitement in Swedish politics, Prime Minister Olof Palme was assassinated in 1986).

As well as increasing unemployment, the restructuring also saw conservative retrenchment in the social and cultural sphere: liberalization of the economy but control measures elsewhere. This meant a new liberalism which de-emphasized the social contract that had been accepted in 1945 as a necessary component of reconstruction: guaranteeing health and education, and benefits to those unable to support themselves. This programme was first promoted by Christian Democrat or conservative parties, but was eventually accepted even by the ‘centre-left’, exemplified by Tony Blair, Lionel Jospin, and Gerhard Schröder. But it owed little to traditional conservative values of probity, social order, and economic caution. The extraordinary changes that took place in the European economy in the 1980s and 1990s, which largely did away with heavy industry (exceptions include the industrial belt of the Ruhr and car
manufacturing in Germany and France) came at a very high price in terms of the values that provided the mood music to the postwar Western European consensus. The rise of individualism and the enrichissez-vous mentality reached its fitting conclusion in the early twenty-first century with celebrity culture, misery memoirs, and the stunning mediocrity of television ‘talent’ shows on the one hand, and widening wealth and health disparities, the ‘return of religion’, populism, and social division in the public sphere on the other.

Economics, however, is not in itself the main driving force of historical change. The decisions taken by OPEC reveal that clearly enough. And nowhere is this fact more evident than in the history of the collapse of communism. Although by the 1980s living standards behind the Iron Curtain had fallen way behind those of Western Europe, vanishingly few commentators believed that that meant the end of the communist regimes. Daniel Chirot elegantly notes:

By the 1970s the USSR had the world’s most advanced late nineteenth-century economy, the world’s biggest and best, most inflexible rustbelt. It is as if Andrew Carnegie had taken over the entire United States, forced it into becoming a giant copy of US Steel, and the executives of the same US Steel had continued to run the country into the 1970s and 1980s.

Or, as Ken Jowitt succinctly put it, ‘After 70 years of murderous effort, the Soviet Union had created a German industry of the 1880s in the 1980s’. The Brezhnev Doctrine institutionalized ossification, ‘as if’, philosopher Karl Jaspers had written some years before, ‘a principle were, so to speak, alive and as if everyone, including the dictator of the moment, had become mere functionaries of it’. The ‘hegemony of form’ meant that even if people were only paying lip-service to the reigning ideology, they nevertheless expected the ‘tyrannies of certitude’ to continue to hold on to power. So when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power in 1985, following the interim filled by the living dead Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko, few expected that empty shops and dreadful pollution would by themselves bring about change. And indeed, not economic factors in the narrow sense—appalling though all the indicators were—but political ones hold the key to the collapse.

Much has been written, in the wake of the twentieth anniversary of the fall of communism, to try and explain a sequence of events that almost no one had been able to


70 For a useful analysis of the various factors that contributed to the demise of communism, see Georg Schöpflin, Politics in Eastern Europe 1945–1992 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), ch. 9.
foresee. To a large extent, the collapse is overdetermined, and it is impossible to provide a definitive explanation of such large-scale, continent-wide events. From economic stagnation to the daring of Solidarity in Poland to the bravery of the crowds in taking to the streets in 1989 in Leipzig, Prague, Sofia, and Timișoara, there are many factors that contributed to communism’s demise, not least the role played by political commemorations in mobilizing protest.  

In the US, the end of the Cold War is popularly and erroneously ascribed to Ronald Reagan ‘defeating’ the ‘evil empire’, a narrative that won widespread support before the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the US put the brakes on American liberal triumphalism. All of these factors (Reagan included) did have some bearing on communism’s collapse. But none of them would have mattered were it not for the decisions taken by the CPSU’s new General Secretary, Mikhail Gorbachev, first to initiate reform in the USSR and, second, not to intervene militarily when the reform process took on a life of its own.

As Gorbachev noted, with more prescience than he knew, shortly after initiating the programmes of perestroika and glasnost that were to spiral irretrievably out of his control,

To threaten the socialist order, try to undermine it from outside, and tear one country or another from the socialist community means encroachment not only on the will of the people but also on the entire post-war order and, in the final analysis, on peace.

This threat to communism had been recognized by Hannah Arendt, when she wrote years before Gorbachev’s accession that ‘a new model’ of socialism meant ‘to the Russians, not only a more humane handling of the economic or intellectual questions but also the threat of the decomposition of the Russian empire’. Gorbachev’s experiment was, therefore, a brave one from the point of view of Soviet orthodoxy. But the stagnation of the Warsaw Pact, its ‘backwardness’ in terms of economic indicators, meant that for the vast majority of the population the stability of guaranteed employment could no longer act as sufficient compensation for living in a system of ‘order without life’, as Václav Havel called it.

---


74 Arendt, Crises of the Republic, 179.
The hard-line communists, typified by Nicolae Ceauşescu, the region’s staunchest defender of ‘national Stalinism’, condemned Gorbachev as a ‘right-wing deviationist’:

We must bear in mind that there are a number of theoretical and practical deviations, both on the right and on the left. Of course, both of them are equally dangerous... However, it is my opinion that the main danger today comes from the rightist deviations, which can seriously harm socialist construction and the struggle for disarmament, peace, and mankind’s overall progress.  

Following the introduction of perestroika, Vasil Bilak, Gustav Husák’s hard-line lieutenant in charge of ideological affairs in Czechoslovakia, sought to offer reassurance to those who needed it of the clear difference between Gorbachev’s aims and those of the ‘right-wing opportunists’ of the 1968 Prague Spring:

Nothing is identical. The CPSU leadership is striving to strengthen socialism and the unity of the socialist community, whereas our ‘fighters for socialism with a human face’ strove in 1968 to dismantle socialism and to break up the socialist community... Certain posthumous children of right wing opportunists, who are striving to ‘rehabilitate’ those who were politically shipwrecked... are pursuing the same goal as in 1968—to return Czechoslovakia to the lap of capitalism.

It must be said that Ceauşescu had a point—he was never taken in by naive reformers who believed that communism could be made more acceptable, and would never have tolerated a loss of nerve or confidence among the leadership, which is why he had to be violently ejected from power. In the cases of revolution and reform (1956 and 1968) the aspirations of the reformers ended in the attainment of the exact opposite of what was intended: renewed Stalinism in post-1956 Hungary and post-1968 Czechoslovakia, and the demise of the communist system in the Soviet Union in 1991. Ironically, the drive to free countries from communist rule (1953, 1956, 1968) ended by tightening it, while the desire to reform and improve communist rule (Gorbachev’s accession in 1985) ended in its collapse. In fact, one could go so far as to say that it was precisely because the signals emanating from Moscow were for limited and gradual reform rather than for a complete overhaul of the system that major change could take place. Only because the impetus for reform came from the heart of the system itself could the dreams of the 1956 and 1968 reformers finally be realized, even if that was the opposite of what Gorbachev set out to achieve.

On 8 December 1991, two years after the unplanned collapse of the Berlin Wall, following the renunciation of a treaty preventing East German tourists holidaying in Hungary from crossing the border into Austria (and thence to West Germany), the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus conspired against Gorbachev’s wishes and signed the Belovezha Accord, which abolished the superpower and replaced it with the CIS. The Supreme Soviet was powerless to prevent the break-up of the Soviet Union, and

75 Nicolae Ceauşescu in Scînteia, 4 May 1988, cited in Tismaneanu, Stalinism for All Seasons, 32.
recognized that fact by dissolving itself on 26 December.\textsuperscript{77} Despite some feeble attempts to hold on to the Baltic States in 1991, the end was remarkably free of violence.\textsuperscript{78} The role played by Russian President Boris Yeltsin, in preventing the August 1991 coup of hard-line Soviet ministers from succeeding in toppling Gorbachev, was key both to the success of ‘reform’ and to undermining Gorbachev’s authority. Who could have predicted that communism would die not with a bang but with a whimper?\textsuperscript{79}

At this point, the postwar histories of Eastern and Western Europe converged in a way that had not been true for forty years. For that reason, the post-communist years (‘after the fall’) deserve separate treatment.

**Post-1989**

Twenty years is insufficient time for a meaningful historicization process to have occurred, if only because many of the sources that historians will need remain inaccessible.\textsuperscript{80} Nevertheless, the post-1989 years are becoming history; for example the twentieth anniversary of the revolutions in 2009 saw a slew of academic and popular studies devoted to rethinking the meaning of ‘1989’ or ‘telling the unknown story’ of what happened to bring about the collapse of communism.\textsuperscript{81} Much of what has happened in Eastern Europe since then has been the preserve of political scientists (discussing issues

---


\textsuperscript{80} On the problem of dealing with the recent past, see Hayden White’s thoughtful comments in ‘The Metaphysics of (Western) Historiography’, *Taiwan Journal of East Asian Studies* 1:1 (2004), 1–16. The recent past ‘is becoming something that will have been’, as White puts it (5).

of democratic legitimization, elections, party structures, transitional justice, and so on); economists (discussing the varieties of capitalism being developed in Eastern Europe); and ‘transitologists’ of all sorts, who are starting to learn that there is no preordained path towards western-style democratic, predictable stability. Rather, ‘post-totalitarian blues’, as Jacques Rupnik names it, is not just a theoretical possibility.\(^{82}\) Indeed, since postwar stability has been threatened by the rise of populism in the western half of the continent, there should be no surprise that it exists—and is growing—in the eastern half.\(^{83}\) But many properly historical questions, especially concerning what transpired in 1989 and why the course of events followed the shape it did, are being asked. What is abundantly clear is that the postwar consensus is, if not dead, semi-comatose. Both west and east failed to live up to the fundamental premises that underpinned them, as Susan Buck-Morss points out:

Thus: the Communist Party, the self-proclaimed vanguard of history, attempted to sustain power within an economic system that by its own definition repeatedly fell behind industrial development in the West. Thus: the nation-state system attempted to maintain its hegemony within a capitalist global economy that increasingly threatened to escape the control of nation-state political units.\(^{84}\)

Probably the most pressing concern from a Western European point of view following the end of the Cold War was German unification. This was a process driven by Chancellor Kohl, who promised the East Germans ‘flourishing landscapes’; their enthusiasm for the project is encapsulated in the switch in their rally slogan from ‘Wir sind das Volk’ (‘we are the people’) to ‘Wir sind ein Volk’ (‘we are one people’). The number of Germans who agreed with Günter Grass that the Germanies should be left as ‘two states, one nation’ was vanishingly small.\(^{85}\) Like Grass, but for rather different reasons, western leaders were less sure that unifying the two Germanies and making Germany the most populous country and the largest economy in Europe was in their interest. Giulio Andreotti, Italy’s ‘experienced and enigmatic’ Christian Democrat prime minister, had as early as 1984 let slip a remark about the coming ‘pan-Germanismus’ and, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, reputedly remarked: ‘We love the Germans so much that the more Germanies there are the better.’\(^{86}\)

---


\(^{83}\) Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (eds), Twenty-First Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).


Mitterand and Thatcher were notoriously twitchy about the idea, and were dragged along by Kohl’s influence over George Bush Sr, and the latter’s desire for a US–German axis in foreign policy. So too was Gorbachev, though Russia was in no position really to influence the course of events. Following so-called 2+4 talks (the two German states and the four allied states—Berlin was still officially under allied control at this point), the 2+4 Treaty of 12 September 1990 formally ended the division of Germany and restored full German sovereignty, including ending the special status of Berlin. Although international authorization was formally required for this process, Bonn set the pace, backed by overwhelming popular support in both Germanies. After the CDU’s Alliance for Germany won 48.1 per cent of the East German election of 18 March 1990—a victory for Kohl’s promise of money—monetary union at 1:1 took place on 1 July, and unification officially followed on 3 October. The CDU victory on 2 December, the date of the first all-German election, was massive, saving Kohl’s chancellorship after dwindling support in the FRG.87

The two countries were unified according to article 23 of the West German constitution, which did not require a new constitution to be written, unlike article 46—in other words, East Germany would essentially be ‘colonized’. At the time, no one cared. The Cold War in Germany had always been about the national question—which is why ‘the “German question” was always too important to leave to the Germans’88—and the end of the Cold War saw the national question reassert its primacy. Hence, the unification of Germany was one of those key moments in the history of the EU when further integration—in this case, the Maastricht Treaty on European Union—was precipitated by the ‘German question’. Indeed, following the remarkable incorporation of the ‘new Länder’ (the former GDR) into West Germany, an economic feat that would have brought any other European economy to its knees, Germany lost none of its enthusiasm for the European project, at least not until it was called on to rescue the Greek and Irish economies in 2010.

In the former Soviet Bloc, the USSR was replaced by the CIS, headed by Yeltsin, which kept the Eurasian border states within Russia’s orbit. With respect to international communist structures, it was only once Gorbachev had signalled his unwillingness to use force to hold on to the East European satellite states that the communist bloc discovered a sense of unity of purpose. As Mastny says with respect to the Warsaw Pact, it is ironic that the end of the cold war gave the alliance a new lease on life by making it serve for the first time a clear and constructive purpose—namely, the dismantling of the oversized conventional forces and armaments that remained the cold war’s legacy.89


88 Jost Düff er, ‘Cold War History in Germany’, *Cold War History* 8:2 (2008), 135.

In former communist Eastern Europe, 'round-table talks' were generally the method used to smooth the passage of the 'velvet revolution,' to prevent bloodshed, and to allow the communist apparatchiks to disappear into obscurity as parliamentary democracy gradually took control. More vigorous attacks on communism, including threats of legal action, only came in the first decade of the twenty-first century, when they became a useful instrument of social and moral control, as in Hungary, the Baltic States, or the Kaczyński brothers' Poland.

Certainly, there were many problems: economic liberalization was a terrible shock to people who had had their economically unviable jobs protected by the state (albeit at the cost of low productivity, waste, shortages, and environmental degradation) and who now faced a future of unemployment coupled with a loss of services such as free childcare. In the communist countries, such services were provided by the state less out of solidarity with the working class than as a stick with which to force people (especially women) into work. But still, exposure to the harsh realities of western capitalism, especially in its short-lived robber–capitalist variant, sent many running to the illusory warmth of Ostalgie (nostalgia for the east). And politically, the vacuum opened up by the collapse of the Party and its dominant narrative left plenty of room for populists with 'fantasies of salvation'. In cases such as Romania, it was not even clear whether a genuine sweeping away of the old order had taken place at all; one scholar talks about 'quasi-democratic communism' lasting there until after the December 2004 elections.

But if there has been a 'general deterioration of memory discourses after 2000', the remarkable nature of what happened in 1989 should not be forgotten. Adam Michnik says that for him and his colleagues at Gazeta Wyborcza, 'manna did fall from

---


heaven...the democratic opposition won everything there was to gain at the bargaining table." Given the lack of democratic traditions in much of Eastern Europe—with the exception of Czechoslovakia between the wars—and given the underhand strategies that ordinary people had to develop to outwit the authorities in order to survive, especially in the most authoritarian cases of Albania and Romania, not to mention the impact of the credit crisis of the last few years, which has hit Hungary, Latvia, and Ukraine especially hard, we do not need to wonder at the existence of challenges to liberal democracy. And if in some instances—Russia, most obviously—we see democratic structures without democratic practice, it is still stability, albeit wobbly, rather than disintegration or rising radicalism that is the most striking characteristic of 1989's aftermath. The 'ethnic rivalries, unsavoury political bickering, rampant political and economic corruption, and the rise of illiberal parties and movements' are all deplorable, but should not lead one to diminish the revolutions' 'generous message and colossal impact' or to question the validity of change per se.94

The exception, of course, is the break-up of Yugoslavia and the series of wars that engulfed it. It is often forgotten that Slobodan Milošević emerged out of a communist context, gradually developing his ultra-nationalist message in the period of Yugoslavia's fragmentation following Tito's death in 1980. Yugoslavia is the prime example of 'memory' being mobilized in the name of violent ideologies, with Milošević's 1989 speech commemorating the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo Polje regularly cited as a key moment in the mobilization of nationalist fear and hatred. Recalling the vicious history of World War II, in which Serbs had been victims of Croatian-perpetrated genocide, Milošević and his allies set out to impose Serb domination on the Yugoslav republics that were seceding from the state.95

Yugoslavia was a remarkable creation, in both its monarchical and republican forms. During the 1960s and 1970s, with its independence from Moscow, relative openness to the West, and a standard of living higher than most of its communist counterparts, Yugoslavia appeared to have brought an impressive degree of harmony to the various South Slav nations that made up the federation, with increasing numbers identifying as 'Yugoslav' in preference to one of the constituent national groups. The extraordinary 'success' of Serb ultra-nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s was that it convinced

---

93 Adam Michnik, 'Independence Reborn and the Demons of the Velvet Revolution', in Antohi and Tismaneanu (eds), Between Past and Future, 85.

94 Vladimir Tismaneanu, 'The Revolutions of 1989: Causes, Meanings, Consequences', Contemporary European History 18:3 (2009), 272. See also, in the same issue (253–69), Charles S. Maier, 'What Have We Learned since 1989?' On the radical right in post-communist Eastern Europe, see the special issue of Communist and Post-Communist Studies 42:4 (2009), and on Western Europe, see Paul Hainsworth, The Extreme Right in Western Europe (London: Routledge, 2008).

people that the past would always invade the present, and forced people to drop their multiple identities and to identify wholly as one thing or another.96

In terms of events, the facts are both complex and straightforward. They are complex because the disintegration of Yugoslavia took place over a decade and because in reality the ‘war’ was made up of several discrete but related conflicts. But it was straightforward too, because the driving force was the same throughout: a Serb ultra-nationalist drive to create a Greater Serbia. Certainly Croatian Serbs were being mistreated in Croatia, and there is no room either for trying to make Franjo Tudjman, the head of independent Croatia, look like a respectable politician (he was a Holocaust denying admirer of the Nazi-backed NDH). The mistreatment of Serbs and Romanies by ethnic Albanian Kosovars following the Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo in 1999 was a shabby reminder that victimhood does not make people nicer. Nor does the western demonization of Serbia—which many Serbs and their friends in the region (in Romania and Greece, for example) found inexplicable—necessitate the condemnation of an entire people, for this would be to think in the same ethnic pigeonholing terms as a Milošević, Karadzic, or Mladic.97 But the evidence suggests that, under the guise of defending Yugoslav territorial integrity (a claim that bamboozled the US and the EU with their memories of German-sponsored Croatian fascism), Milošević set out not to reassert the legitimacy of Yugoslav federalism but to impose Serbian hegemony over the region.98

Following Tudjman's victory in Croatia's first post-communist election in April 1990 and Croatia's declaration of independence from Yugoslavia on 25 June 1991, the JNA (Yugoslav National Army), which was largely in Serbian hands, was used to step up the level of violence in Croatia. Air raids on Zagreb suggested that the Serbs were engaged in more than merely protecting ethnic Serbs in Croatia, but it was only once Vucovar, Eastern Slavonia, and the Krajina had been taken, and the UNESCO world heritage site of Dubrovnik was besieged, that the West realized that Serbia was overrunning Croatia. By the time of the deal brokered by Lord Carrington, Milošević was in control of more than a quarter of Croatian territory.

But it was Bosnia where the real conflict would take place, and where the term 'ethnic cleansing' took on a relevance that it had not had in Europe since World War II.


Following Muslim President Izetbegović’s declaration of Bosnian independence on 3 March 1992, the Bosnian Serbs, under Radovan Karadzic, announced the establishment of the Serbian Republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina, later renamed the Republika Srpska, based in Banja Luka. Within weeks of fighting, the Bosnian Serbs controlled 70 per cent of Bosnian territory. Of Bosnia’s 4.4 million inhabitants, almost all were displaced: 3 million were internally displaced, and 1.3 million fled as refugees abroad. The massacre at Srebrenica in July 1995, after the UN had declared it a ‘safe area’, was the single worst massacre of the war, and has prompted many, including the ICTY, to talk of genocide in Bosnia.\(^9\) The Muslim–Croat Federation’s fight back in April 1995 therefore took the Serbs and the international community by surprise, and succeeded in pushing the Serbs out of most of the Krajina. The Dayton Agreement, it has been argued, froze events before they could take their natural course; it would have been preferable, so this version of events goes, to allow the Muslim–Croat Federation to defeat the Serbs completely. But no doubt Dayton also saved further large-scale bloodshed.\(^1\)

The Serbs’ last stab at victory was in Kosovo, in some ways the most significant of all the wars of Yugoslav succession, for Kosovo was part of Serbia (albeit autonomous until 1981) and the ‘heartland’ of Serb national identity. The movement of Bosnian Serb refugees into Kosovo was a deliberate strategy to counter the ethnic balance, which was heavily in the favour of the Albanians. But Kosovo, and unofficial President Ibrahim Rugova, were ignored by Dayton, and this gave Serbia its chance to impose its will on the territory. The ensuing massacres, particularly at Račak on 15 January 1999, gave rise to large-scale refugee movements into Macedonia and Montenegro, and feverish international talks aimed at solving the crisis at Rambouillet, near Paris. When the talks broke down, NATO bombed Serbia from 24 March for 78 days, until the country’s infrastructure was ruined, and the state was turned into an international pariah. Although the bombing seemed at first to harden nationalist resolve, Milošević was deposed late in 2000. But if, a decade later, noises are being made that will gradually rehabilitate Serbia, and eventually permit it to join the EU, many across Europe think that NATO and the EU lost prestige by using their military might to smash a small country.

The wars in Yugoslavia revived the frightening World War II memories of Chetniks and Ustashe, and showed how rapidly alternatives could be eliminated if circumstances permitted. Europe still lives with the consequences of the wars, with stability in Kosovo and Bosnia now extremely fragile, and guaranteed only by large international peacekeeping forces.\(^1\) They also confirm what Tony Judt says about memory. Reinforcing the


claim that the initial postwar years hold the key to much of what subsequently occurred, Judt argues that the years 1945–48 ‘were the moment not only of the division of Europe and the first stage of its postwar reconstruction but also, and in an intimately related manner, the period during which Europe’s postwar memory was molded’. Even if, following the end of the Cold War, the politics of memory does not always follow predictable paths, Judt’s point still holds.

Indeed, the focus on memory reminds us that even if historians like to break time up into neatly packaged periods to ease the process of analysis and comprehension, reality is not so accommodating. It is of course still possible to provide overarching narratives for the postwar period, as has most commonly been done in a triumphalist mode by the likes of Francis Fukuyama, who saw the end of the Cold War in Hegelian terms as the victory for a certain philosophy of history—the unfolding of liberal reason in the shape of the parliamentary democratic state. In the years since 1989, Fukuyama’s pleasing telos has been somewhat shaken, with war in Yugoslavia, the so-called ‘war on terror’, and the infantilization of politics that has taken over much of the current European scene, with sexual antics (Italy and France), MPs’ expenses (Britain), ‘reality’ TV, nostalgia for pasts that never existed, and scaremongering over Islam (Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, and everywhere else) taking up more time in parliaments and the press than global warming, growing social divisions, and economic crisis.

Tony Judt recently argued that we should be far angrier than we are that the achievements of a century of social democracy have been so substantially dismantled in the last three decades. Europe may have become a rich and privileged corner of the world, but the manner of its survival of the 1970s recession and its transformation into a service-sector paradise has come at a high cost—of social cohesion, respect for the worth of individuals, and deepening socio-economic divisions, with all the attendant ills of poverty, crime, and violence that highly unequal societies suffer. Today’s problem, according to Judt, is how to return to social democratic values in an age that still uses a social democratic vocabulary (of fairness, liberalism, tolerance) but which acts in ways that scorn those values. Whatever one thinks of Judt’s argument, the challenge that faces contemporary Europe is that in the post-Cold War, ‘war on terror’ age in which we now live, the legacies of World War II are acquiring meanings that fundamentally shake what are usually supposed to be ‘European values’.

From their study of revolution, anti-communist intellectuals such as Adam Michnik learned that ‘those who start by storming Bastille will end up building Bastille’. Much
of recent European history is about what shape the new Bastille in the guise of Fortress Europe will take. When one examines the ‘return of memories’ that could not be articulated in the public sphere during the Cold War—when the anti-fascist narrative was imposed on the East and prevailed in the West, albeit in a conservative, anti-communist form—one can see that the years since 1989 are intimately connected to World War II and its aftermath. In many ways, we are only now living through the postwar period.