

Tony Judt

Rethinking Post-War Europe

It used to be easy to write contemporary European history. World War II came to an end in 1945, and with it there ended a 30-year crisis in European life. Between 1913 and 1945 relations between European states, domestic relations within most European states, economic and other forms commerce between European states, all suffered traumatic change. Revolutions - radical and reactionary - shifted power away from the old ruling elites. Massive upheaval and collapse within the capitalistic economy brought an end to the stability of 19th century life and introduced radical changes in social relations. Violence in every sphere - war, civil war, domestic instability, state violence against opponents - became endemic. All of this, so the story ran, came to a head in the appalling experience of World War II, itself symbolized by the policies and practices of a genocidal state at the heart of Europe.

In the conventional story as thus told, everything changed after 1945. The rapid shift of allegiance, from the anti-Nazi alliance to the divisions of the Cold War, institutionalized the military division of Europe to the point where, forty years after the death of Hitler, the division of the continent seemed part of the natural order of things. In Eastern Europe, Soviet hegemony seemed to be the logical product of the upheavals of the first half of the century, while in Western Europe progressive moves toward economic and political union - and the two decades of post-war prosperity appeared to have resolved definitively the problems that had seemed so insoluble before 1939. European history, in short, had come to an end and this was all to the good.

In order for history to resolve itself in this convenient way, it was necessary for memory to conform. From 1945 through the mid-1960's at least, the experience of the first half of European 20th century in general and the war years in particular was blurred: it suited almost everyone to forget - to forget what they or their parents did, to forget what was done to them, to forget what they saw and to forget what they knew. This psychologically and politically convenient convergence of historical renewal and collective amnesia was well reflected in the conventional histories of Europe after World War II and as recently as the 1980's. Most histories of post-World War II Europe treated either of Eastern Europe or Western Europe but only very rarely of the two together. Furthermore, most such histories began in 1945, as though the desire on the part of many Europeans to begin afresh in 1945 could also be treated as a rational objective perspective upon their history. Even where the war itself was incorporated into accounts of the reconstruction of Europe in its aftermath, that war was

normally understood as a prelude; the moment of utter collapse preceding the rebirth. The very suggestion that the war might not in certain important ways have ended, or that its aftermath could yet prove fragile or temporary, was unwelcome and usually unrecognized.

In the course of the last decade all of this has changed, in ways which now make the post-war historiography of Europe curiously out-dated almost before the ink has dried. In the first place, and obviously of greatest importance, the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Europe has meant that one crucial pillar of the old story - the permanence of the post war divisions - has crumbled. If the division of Europe into East and West on military, economic and ideological lines was but a temporary (albeit forty year long) hiatus in a longer European story, than the history of the post-war era has to be rethought.

Secondly, and intimately related to the events of 1989 and afterwards, there has been the now widely debated 'revival of memory'. This did not begin in 1989. From the mid-60's in Germany, and a little later in France, Italy and elsewhere, younger generations began to ask not only what happened in the war, but also what happened after the war? Why was so much of the horrific early history of contemporary Europe obscured by the well-meaning amnesia of the 1950's and '60's? The center of gravity of such questioning has understandably been the Shoah, the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews of Europe. But around that fundamental horror there orbit other questions. What was collaboration? Who - in France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, etc. - helped the Nazis achieve their goals and why? What was resistance? What did it mean to resist and how far can we still give credit to the heroic if self-serving tales that came out of the war in much of Western Europe and served as the moral cement with which post-war democracies reconstructed themselves?

A third element in the remaking of recent history has been the related question of justice - or more accurately, retribution. On and off from the 1960's through the 1980's West European jurists and historians have debated the nature and limits of the way in which punishment was meted out after 1945 for wartime crimes. Since 1989 and the pressing need in former communist countries to address analogous questions concerning crimes committed under Stalinist auspices, the debate about post-war, or post-totalitarian retribution has grown. One reason for this is simply the practical difficulty faced in former communist countries in dealing with crimes and criminals from earlier decades; another of course concerns the definition of political crime itself. And these debates in post-1989 Europe not only throw light (sometimes) upon the decisions and actions of 1945-46, they also of course open up a very different order of questions largely neglected before 1989 for political or ideological reasons in East and West alike, these concern the legal, moral and political context in which communism itself

came to power in the aftermath of Nazism. What happened in Eastern Europe between 1944 and 1949, who did what to whom and with whose help; these are hard questions - because they raise for Eastern Europe the same painful issues as those facing West European students of the same period: What did the Nazi era bring in Eastern Europe and who benefited or suffered under it? But they also point to distinctively local dilemmas: was the history of Eastern Europe after 1945 something imported from the East in the baggage train of the Red Army, or does it have its own roots further back in the troubled and insecure history of the region?

Even so superficial a listing of the intricately interwoven issues of history, politics and memory in the recent European past will suffice to illustrate how much has changed since the history writing of the pre-1989 decades. Not only do we now pay much more attention to questions about political justice, collective memory, the gray zone between resistance and collaboration, the long-term social and political consequences of war, etc. but we are also and as a result much more sensitive to different chronological perspectives. It is no longer self-evident that European history can be divided into convenient blocks: pre-1913, 1913-1945, post-1945. The decade 1938-1948 in Central and Eastern Europe at least has a historical logic of its own, in the sense that much of what we think of as the important features of Nazi domination began before the outbreak of war between Germany and Poland, and did not end until long after the fall of Hitler.

Similarly, the decade 1945-1956 might usefully be understood now as 'postwar' in the sense that the unresolved business of the war itself - with respect to economic damage, social disruption, political score-settling, etc. was still the dominant feature. And analogously, the turning point of 1989/90 reveals how much of the unfinished business of the pre-1945 era remains, indeed, unfinished; in former Yugoslavia, most obviously, but elsewhere as well. We are now also able to see, in a way which we preferred to ignore before 1989, just how fragile the West European post-war settlement truly was - prosperity and economic unity, to be sure, but both of them fragile and in the case of prosperity at least, not destined to endure indefinitely. None of this suggests that East and West European history have now converged, nor does it require of us as historians that we insist upon a common history from 1945 onwards, where clearly the paths of the two halves of the continent forcefully diverged. Nonetheless, the time for rethinking the whole history of 20th century Europe, and especially the post-war era, is clearly upon us.

Some of the essays in this volume of *Transit* are the product of a project organized since 1993 under the auspices of the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen in Vienna. Led by a team of senior European historians based at the IWM, this project had as its primary purpose the encouragement of new directions in scholarly writings about post-war Europe. With the support of various foundations, notably the Volkswagen Foundation of Germany, younger scholars from East and West Europe, as well as the United States, were brought to Vienna on fellowships and invited to take part in workshops and conferences at which they and more senior historians of the period presented their work.

This project, entitled “Rethinking Post-war Europe”, was centered on three distinct themes, all three of which are echoed in some of the articles published here and which lie at the heart of contemporary debates on the recent European past. Our first concern was to focus on the question of collaboration and resistance in the war itself. What do we now understand by these terms (particularly in the light of their use and abuse in debates about post-1989 Eastern Europe)? How did the experience of collaboration and resistance differ between countries across Europe? In this part of our project, as with everything that followed, it was crucial to our purposes that Europe be understood as a whole, that the history of Western Europe, Eastern Europe and Southeastern Europe be incorporated into a single story; that the experience of countries like France, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and the Netherlands, etc. be compared and contrasted rather than written about in separate, isolated ways.

The second area of emphasis in this project, and like the others this resulted in a conference where original papers were presented (some of which are republished here), concerned the issue of Political Justice. Here we encouraged scholars not only to ask once again, and this time in the light of newly opened archives and other sources, what sort of justice was meted out in different parts of Europe at the end of World War II, but also to reflect upon how we might understand the limits and constraints upon retributive justice in a post-war situation, especially in light of our renewed appreciation of the difficulties of such legal resolutions as observed in post-communist Eastern Europe. Our third concern, and the last of our research emphases, was on the ways in which Europe 'overcame' the experience of war in the decade that followed. Here we were particularly interested in encouraging discussion of the uses that were made of wartime memories and myths in the construction of post-war states, both pluralist and authoritarian.

One striking outcome of this five-year project has been the degree to which the important questions about wartime and post-war European history emerge as fundamentally similar from country to country. The history of Belgium or France looks superficially utterly different

from that of Poland or Czechoslovakia. And certain important respects of course those differences remain the most salient. But it is striking to note how much one may learn from asking questions about resistance and collaboration, about post-war score-settling and forms of punishment, about the use of myths of 'anti-fascism' or small country 'heroism' in the reconstruction of shattered societies. Again and again I have struck by remarks made by historians one country or another to the effect that they had hitherto never realized how much questions that seemed to them uniquely local were in fact universal and part of the broader European wartime and post-war trauma.

One common element in much recent work on contemporary European history is the fascinating account of the freezing and unfreezing of national and political identities. We are familiar with the notion that from 1949 to 1989 Eastern Europe was 'frozen' into place, forced to tell itself a story of fraternal relations, common and heroic resistance to fascism, and the successful overcoming of ethnic and other forms of interstate and intrastate division. What is perhaps less readily recognized is the degree to which Western Europe experienced an analogous glacial process. The story of Western Europe from 1945 through the 1980's is after all also a story of overcoming the past - overcoming Franco-German conflict, overcoming extreme political movements and their disruptive effects, and overcoming war and civil war.

Yet in Western Europe, too, the most important development of the last two decades has been not the growing movement for European unity, but the escalating collapse of old established national states. Just as Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia have imploded after 1989, so Belgium, Italy, and in less dramatic ways Spain and the United Kingdom have seen sectional and geographically defined efforts to break up or deny the authority of the unitary state. Here too, the myth and memory of World War Two and the need for post-war stability and tranquility - facilitated by unparalleled prosperity - tended to obscure this process until quite recently. But looking back we can now see that the breakup of 19th century European states into smaller units, a process set in motion before World War I and escalated in the aftermath of imperial collapse, has begun again.

This reference to long-term processes is a reminder that one of the defects of European historiography, as it reflected the post-World War II settlement, was a marked inclination to separate the past from the present, as though 1945 was a true Year Zero and nothing that had gone before counted in the experience of what would come after. We can now see that this was patently false, albeit convenient and perhaps even helpful in the rebuilding of the continent. One might debate interminably about the longer and shorter term causes of the breakup of various European states, just as it is a matter of scholarly argument whether the

divisions between East and West Europe or the Stalinist imposition of communist after 1945 in the Eastern half were inscribed in longer historical processes.

What is clear, however, is that nothing started altogether from zero in 1945. Even the curious 'memory hole' into which collective awareness of the crimes of the past was to fall in the post-war decades has its own, longer history. The conflicts of World War II which we too easily package as 'collaboration' and 'resistance' were themselves echoes and transpositions of political, ideological, religious, local and ethnic disagreements and disputes whose roots lay variously in inter-war politics, post-World War I state making, pre-World War I small wars, and even (e.g. in the Italian or Belgian cases) the imperfect and incomplete forms of state-making of the earlier 19th century.

These European pasts lie folded over one another like tectonic plates. Some move frequently and violently. Others in longer waves and with less obvious disruptive impact. But none of them came to a stop in 1945 or first came into being then. What Henry Rousso in France has called the "Vichy Syndrome" - the way in which post-war France denied, mis-remembered, incorporated, rejected, accepted or abused the memory of the wartime regime - only makes sense if we set it in a larger and longer context, the history of French political and social conflict.

Every country has its "Vichy syndrome". In Poland it concerns Polish-Jewish relations, whose wartime apotheosis and post-war nemesis make no sense when divorced for the history that preceded them. The same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the subterranean histories of Czechoslovakia, Belgium, Hungary, etc. And in each case these conjoined stories - what happened before 1939, what happened between 1939 (or 1938) and 1945, and how the memory of those events was adapted or distorted or occluded after 1945 - have only recently begun to be unravelled and interwoven by scholars. In formerly-Communist lands the availability of newly-released archives has played a major role in this renewal of national historiographies, but in West and East alike it is the revised public perspective brought to bear upon the post-war decades that has played the most important role.

*

We are a very long way from being able to propose a tidy alternative narrative to replace the story with which we grew up. At the present moment, it seems to me that the most important goal is to train a new generation of historians of Europe, freed from old constraints, old habits, old sources. Although this new generation of historians will inevitably and properly

consist of people who work on separate national histories in most cases, the most important question that they will learn to ask is this: how was it elsewhere? How distinctive or peculiar are the history of my country/my period/my subjects? With such questions constantly in mind, we shall in time bridge not only the divide between East and West Europe, or the divide between pre- and post-1945, but also the most damaging chasm of all. This is the canyon of ignorance between national histories that works against the emergence of any new common understanding of the shared European past. In time, we may hope for a new account of the recent European past that is both faithful to the distinctive stories of separate countries and regions, while fully grasping the ways in which they share certain common pasts.

Just what this new history will look like is unclear. We cannot say with any certainty even of what its chronology will consist. The questions which occupy us just now and which can be typically addressed in the various articles that follow, by Norman Naimark, Mark Mazower, Pieter Lagrou, and others, will not always be at the center of our attention. European history, even in our era, does not consist only of collaboration, resistance, mass murder, retribution, political justice and the memory of all of these. But until we have successfully incorporated these and related questions into our understanding of the recent European past we shall not be able to move on. The history of Europe from 1945 to the present begins with this rethinking of the war and its consequences, and we are still at the beginning.

First published in: *Transit. Europaeische Revue*, Nr. 15 (Fall 1998).