REVIEW ESSAYS

Changing Trends in the Historiography of Postwar Europe, East and West

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Abstract

This essay explores changing trends in the post-1989 historiography of both eastern and western postwar Europe. It suggests that one major development is a shift toward themes in social and cultural history that see the late 1940s in the context of wartime experience. Another is the wresting of issues such as the imposition of communist power in eastern Europe from political science by historians. Shortcomings visible in these new trends include a tendency to divorce the history of representations and images from older concerns with power and the state. On the whole, however, common issues are emerging in the historiography of the two-halves of the continent that make it easier to envisage a more unified approach to their joint postwar history.

Since 1989, the historiography of the postwar era in Europe has moved in new directions. To generalize, one can say that the period as a whole is in the process of being reclaimed for history from the social sciences. Insofar as historians had already touched on events after the Second World War, it was largely within the rubric of the Cold War and the historiographical concerns this generated—notably, the question of the origins of and responsibility for the Cold War itself and the division of Europe. Originally interpreted in the light of international superpower diplomacy, the debate over Cold War origins broadened later to include international economic policy as well, and has more recently encompassed cultural politics and the impact of Americanization in particular on western European culture. In the process, mostly European scholars took issue with the Washington-based focus of earlier scholarship, and pointed to the real autonomy enjoyed by European policymakers even in the late 1940s over issues such as the implementation of the Marshall Plan, military policy in Greece, and so forth.[1] (There was an echo of this also in the historiography of communist rule in eastern Europe, where some scholars even in the late 1980s were starting to question the prevailing paradigm of an undifferentiated Soviet quest for domination. I shall return to the impact of 1989 upon our understanding of communist eastern Europe later in this essay.)[2]

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In the last ten years, these various approaches have come to look a little limited. In the first place, they rarely offered any explanation of how the experience of total war before 1945 impacted upon the postwar era. Stunde Null seemed to be accepted by historians as completely as by the postwar German public. Jan Gross was among the first to draw attention to the need to yoke wartime and postwar experiences together, to see them as part of the same narrative. This is now increasingly accepted and the periodizations of modern European history are increasingly challenged as a result. The moment of liberation, whenever it took place, starts to look like a stage in a continuum of social processes rather than the decisive break that was underscored in earlier work. As Elizabeth Heineman has recently argued, for example, the German experience of suffering follows a periodization that cuts right across the boundaries separating Nazism from the postwar era. The "crisis years" she has traced in the memories of German women, in particular, began in 1942 or 1943, with the first massive Allied bombing raids; continued through the chaos of defeat and the mass rapes committed by Red Army soldiers; and end with the experience of coping alone or bringing up children without a man's support, which for many stretched through the decade.[3] If Dean Acheson were to rewrite his memoirs of the Cold War today, it is hard to believe that *Present at the Creation* (New York, 1969) would seem as apt a title as it did when he published it in 1969.

This, in turn, reflects the way historians are redefining the central significance of the war itself. Military and diplomatic aspects of the conflict no longer hold center stage. Recent work on the Holocaust has underlined the impossibility of separating ideology from military behavior in understanding the Wehrmacht; it has also focused attention on the war's impact upon civilians and society in general. From Italy, Claudia Pavone's influential rereading of the war as a "civil war" has opened up one entirely new avenue of enquiry: Whether this civil war is identified in terms of class, ethnicity, or simply of rival factions fighting it out in the name of a bankrupt state, it redefines what was at stake in the war in ways that make it nonsensical to assume a clear demarcation before and after the war. The *dopoliberazione* (postliberation) emerges as an episode in the transition from war to peace, a moment of social and political reconfiguration that incorporates elements of continuity as well as change.[4]

Germany stands at the center of this new historiographical effort for the late 1940s much as it has dominated discussion of the earlier part of the decade. Where scholars once saw reconstruction as an issue of occupation military government, or latterly of the Americanization of institutions and culture, they now focus their attention upon that German society, whose basic structures and institutions were largely destroyed in Nazism's collapse. The physical infrastructure of urban life forms the centerpiece of Jeffery Diefendorf's concerns. Reconstruction and rebuilding, he argues, relied heavily upon ideas and personnel from the Nazi era and even earlier. Hence the new urban fabric—modernism and all—looks less and less like the product of "Americanization" and more like part of a longer-run story of German urbanism.[5]

An even more basic institution, the family, is also brought into question, af-

fected as it had to be by the absence of millions of German prisoners of war (POWs) in Soviet captivity. The striking gender imbalance of the 1940s has allowed us to interrogate the situation of German women during and after the war and changing perceptions of marital status and gender roles. Heineman sees substantial continuities across regimes—Nazi, democratic, and communist—in the status, experiences, and treatment of German single women. Indispensable at the start in both East and West Germany, and increasingly in the 1950s in East Germany, single women—whether unmarried, widowed, or divorced—were used by a society that felt highly ambivalent about their existence and exerted sufficient normative pressure upon them to ensure a high rate of remarriage after the war. Another kind of woman—the "consuming woman"—is the subject of Erica Carter's *How German Is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* (Ann Arbor, 1997). Just as Heineman argues for the importance of gender politics in the era of reconstruction, so Carter suggests that in the 1950s the new consumer culture allowed, or actually required, a new model of "national duty," this time based upon the housewife's duty to consume. Support of new retailing methods, on the one hand, and exposure to advertising and magazines for housewives, on the other hand, mark the emergence of this new kind of consumption politics. But Carter makes wider claims than Heineman; Carter tries to link the new gender history to older preoccupations with reformulations of German nationalism. A similar line of argument is proposed by Frank Biess in a recent article on East German citizenship and the returning POWs. However, the precise links between representations of gender—whether of consuming housewives or emasculated veterans—and national politics remains in need of further elucidation.[6]

Finally, in connection with these new approaches to the social consequences of the war in Germany, one must mention the indications that the long scholarly silence over the issue of German expellees from eastern Europe and former Reich territories is coming to an end. This subject, which suffered a kind of scholarly taboo for many decades, is back on the agenda with a vengeance, as events of the 1990s draw our interest back to the longer-term history of ethnic cleansing and forced population transfer. A recent debate in *Slavic Review* has opened up the problems of moral equivalence that continue to bedevil comparative discussion of this subject. But the new openness is evident in a willingness to bring the discussion of the expulsion of Germans back into a consideration of the founding of communist regimes in postwar eastern Europe. Perhaps the most important aspect of this vast subject is the question of how Konrad Adenauer handled the potentially volatile political consequences of the presence of millions of expellees in West Germany. A recent article by Pertti Ahonen, based on his doctoral dissertation, sheds light on this issue, arguing that the price for the domestic stabilization of a group that was feared at one stage as a focus for revanchist sentiment was a nationalist armlock on West German foreign policy towards eastern Europe that lasted for several decades. The political issue of how and on what terms refugees, expellees, and deportees are incorporated into the nation-state that has received them remains in need of comparative analy-

sis, even though its relevance to the refounding of nation-states in Europe in the late 1940s is evident.[7]

For western Europe, perhaps the major topic remains the nature of reconstruction under a regime of what might be called conservative modernization. The prevailing view tends to see a moment in the immediate *dopoliberazione* (1944–1945) when more radical political options emerged, only to be suppressed by local and foreign forces. Patrick Major's recent study of the decline of the Kommunistische Partei Deutschland (KPD) stresses the power of occupation forces, gripped by fear of communism—the KPD polled fourteen percent in local elections in North Rhein/Westfalia in 1947, and did better in the Ruhr than it had in 1932. But a combination of repressive measures by the occupation goverments, the opposition of the Social-Democratic party (SPD), and home-grown anticommunism successfully drove the KPD to the margins even before it was banned in 1956. (The same argument can, incidentally, be made for Europe under Russian control, too, where the initial antifascist committees ["antifas"] and other expressions of home-grown radicalism were suppressed in favor of foreign-backed proxies who took over, or who continued to dominate, the state apparatus.) Others have told a similar story for countries from Greece—where parliamentary moderation was undercut by late 1946 by the burgeoning civil war—to Belgium and France.[8]

The "continuity of the state" in western Europe meant the persistence of authoritarian impulses—even after the defeat of fascism—that manifested themselves in various ways. Purges of collaborators were partial and incomplete; judicial mechanisms for trying traitors and criminals for wartime violence were wound down or turned against the Left, notably in Italy and Greece. Where the Left was tempted to retaliate, it was smashed by police action, as in Italy, or defeated in full-scale civil war, as in Greece.[9]

Notable in this historiography—even as the focus switches from international to internal determinants of postwar state rebuilding—is a typically oppositional stance to the state itself and those running it that seems to undervalue aspects of the overall mood and perception of the political problems of the time. Hence, the argument that postwar purges were incomplete or biased runs counter to the evidence from public opinion polls that popular desire for a continued settling of accounts with the past dropped sharply after late 1945, as people opted for stability and economic reconstruction instead. This does not mean people wanted persecution of the Left, but it suggests that Christian Democrats who preached "the strength to forget" were not out of tune with their electorates, and not only in Germany. As before the war, the revolutionary impulse did not really run very deep in European society. Christian Democrats and other conservatives were able to tap a potential quietism better than their rivals.

In contrast, the transformation this implied in political Catholic attitudes is often taken for granted or ignored. Socialism appeals to scholars far more than conservatism, and too often the latter is analyzed in terms of its role as a vehicle for scarcely reformed fascists rather than as the successful expression of a mainstream longing for a parliamentary alternative to social democracy. Lately,

however, studies have emerged that chart the distance traveled by the latter in the course of their rapid journey from interwar authoritarianism to a rapprochement with post-1945 democratic institutions. Martin Conway's writings on political Catholicism represent the first, and long overdue, serious historical enquiries into this subject. By documenting the extent of the authoritarian impulse in interwar Catholic thought, Conway underscores the novelty of this force for democracy after 1945. The transition required ideological readjustment and an embrace of materialism and, to some extent, individualism in politics; but the new ties were cemented rather quickly by the new interests generated for these parties through the expansion of patronage and the consolidation of welfare state capitalism.[10]

Memories of prewar instability also explain attitudes towards the economics of reconstruction. There was widespread fear of a return to prewar capitalist crisis and mass unemployment that clashed in unpredictable ways with organized labor's postwar radicalization. The strike wave of the late 1940s and early 1950s awaits comparative historical treatment. However, the history of industrial relations cannot be divorced from the flight to the cities, which for various reasons took place in both eastern and western Europe. One possibility, hinted at in some of the literature, is that the rapid urbanization that was so important a feature of the economic development of southern Europe in particular in the 1950s and 1960s was connected with the political repression of villagers in the late 1940s. Thus, Catia Sonetti shows how the anonymity of the northern cities welcomed peasants who had suffered for their participation in the sit-ins on landed estates at the end of the war. Similarly, in Greece, cities offered anonymity to leftist villagers who wanted protection from the surveillance of village agents and gendarmes.[11]

Perhaps the biggest historiographical changes since 1989 have not occurred in relation to western Europe at all. For the East, it is not only that conceptual categories and scholarly priorities have changed; access to archives is for the first time allowing historians to take over a task previously controlled by political scientists, that of analyzing the character of the imposition of communist power. A landmark in this development was Norman Naimark's study of the Russian occupation of Germany, which analyzed the emergence of a new regime that balanced the Soviet desire to micromanage the administration of German society with opportunities that communist ideology made available—in a way that Nazism never had—for local collaboration in politics, culture, and economic life.[12]

Elsewhere, perhaps because Russian influence worked in different and less obtrusive ways than it did in Germany, the focus has been less on Soviet power and more on local communists. The challenges to communist predominance—despite the backing of the Soviet Union—are emerging more and more clearly in this work. Padraic Kenney has charted the enormous difficulties communists faced in Poland in winning over workers. Despite the latter's evident desire for radical social change, they remained suspicious of the Communist party, especially in towns and cities where prewar traditions of labor organization had sur-

vived the war. By contrast, cities like Wroslaw, which were, in effect, new societies composed of newcomers filling the gap left by the departed Germans, proved much more susceptible to the Communist party's message; again, the linkage between population displacements and political outcomes has become a major theme. Both Kenney and Eric Weitz have also brought gender into the discussion of early communist rule, stressing the way a gendered representation of productive labor came into conflict with the reality of a labor force in which women played a major role.[13]

Numerically, of course, the crucial sector of the labor force everywhere in eastern Europe was the peasantry. In Yugoslavia, the war itself had brought the Communist party and the peasantry together through the partisan struggle. The war also forced urban communists to find ways of overcoming rural suspicions of armed radicals and to wean peasants away from their longstanding affiliations with the prewar Peasant party. A new study suggests that peasants were able to succeed where Josef Stalin and the Allies had failed: in forcing domestic policy changes on Marshal Tito's regime by their resistance to the Communist party's efforts at collectivization. There was similar resistance elsewhere, although not always so successful. David Kideckel, in his study of Romanian villagers, illuminates the way the Communist party tried to impose collectivization upon the countryside, and suggests that what transformed agrarian relations was less governmental policy or doctrine than sustained labor-intensive industrialization. In Bulgaria, the villagers were no happier with imposed change from above; yet some welcomed the founding of cooperatives and could even recognize that communist dogma offered one solution to the land shortage and fragmentation that had driven the countryside to hunger by the time the Second World War began. All the above studies emphasize the limits to the communist ability to force change on the countryside, and suggest that villager responses often had the effect of forcing modification, change, or even abandonment of the Communist party's original ideas. Whether there may be other, less obviously political factors at work as well is a possibility raised below.[14]

Perhaps the most intellectually exciting and demanding effect of 1989 is the challenge it poses to historians to search out commonalities in the postwar development of the two halves of the continent. The difficulty is obvious: how to do this without overlooking major differences between East and West, whether of prior experience, ideology, or the differing concrete impact of communist and capitalist state forms. How, too, can one do this without appearing to equate two basically unequal experiences? Nevertheless, certain fundamental symmetries exist that it may be worth pointing out. Politically, both East and West saw broad, national coalition governments give way between 1945 and 1948 to single party administrations or narrower and more politically focused coalitions. To what extent then—and this must at present be left an open question—should the so-called "salami tactics" adopted by communists in eastern Europe be explained in tactical or structural terms? Economically, both halves of Europe saw high savings and investment ratios, austerity programs, and heavy investment in capital goods industries as means of moving from immediate postwar reconstruc-

tion to longer-term development in ways that—despite international transfers through Marshall Plan aid—were fundamentally based upon internally generated sources of funds organized by national governments in closed economies. Both, therefore, automatically faced economic and political tensions in their handling of the peasantry, on the one hand, and the industrial working class, on the other hand. Industrial unrest hit *both* halves of the continent before the postwar economic miracle took hold in the mid-1950s. But what threatened the ruling system in eastern Europe—and would eventually bring it crashing down thirty or so years later—only threatened the governing party in western Europe.

If we are still some distance from a genuinely unified history of the divided continent, we are getting closer as historians increasingly give Europe's history back to the Europeans. The postwar era no longer looks like the "end of the European era." Rather, it looks like the second half of the century's central decade. This shook the nation-state to its foundations, exposing deep-seated dilemmas and tensions within national societies that ran across class, gender, ethnic, and regional lines. The effort to overcome these took place in a world dominated by two superpowers, but it was largely an effort managed by the Europeans themselves, and as such it forms part of a longer-run history of nation-state formation in the modern era.

NOTES

1. A. Milward's *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945–1951* (London, 1984), offers a very different view to M. Hogan's *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain and the Reconstruction of Europe, 1947–1952* (Cambridge, 1987). This debate is usefully summarized by D. Ellwood's *Rebuilding Europe: Western Europe, America and Postwar Reconstruction* (London, 1992). On new views of Greece, see D. Close, *The Origins of the Greek Civil War* (London, 1995), emphasizing the indigenous Greek rightwing roots of civil war violence rather than British or American diplomacy.

2. M. Myant's *Socialism and Democracy in Czechoslovakia, 1945–1948* (Cambridge, 1981), and C. Gati's *Hungary and the Soviet Bloc* (Durham, 1986) exemplify the trend.

3. J. Gross, "Social Consequences of War: Preliminaries to the Study of Imposition of Communist Regimes in East Central Europe," *East European Politics and Society* 3 (1989): 198–214; E. Heineman, "The Hour of the Woman: Memories of Germany's 'Crisis Years' and West German National Identity," *American Historical Review* 1996 (101):354–395.

4. O. Bartov, *Hitler's Army* (Oxford, 1993); H. Heer and K. Naumann, eds., *Vernichtungskrieg: Verbrechen der Wehrmacht, 1941–1944* (Hamburg, 1995), 157–90; *War Crimes of the Wehrmacht* (New York, 2000); and C. Pavone, *Una Guerra Civile: Saggio sulla Moralita nella Resistenza* (Turin, 1995). An important study in this spirit, which sees the violence of the *dopoliberazione* as part of a longer story of agrarian relations dating back to the nineteenth century, is G. Crainz, *Padania: il mondo dei braccianti dall'Ottocento alla fuga dalle campagne* (Rome, 1994).

5. J. Diefendorf, *In the Wake of War: The Reconstruction of German Cities after World War II* (New York, 1993). Also see *Krieg-Zerstoerung-Aufbau. Architektur und Stadtplaung, 1940–1960* (Berlin, 1995).

6. E. D. Heineman, *What Difference Does a Husband Make? Women and Marital Status in Nazi and Postwar Germany* (California, 1999); E. Carter, *How German is She? Postwar West German Reconstruction and the Consuming Woman* (Ann Arbor, 1997); and F. Biess, "'Pioneers of a New Germany': Returning POWs from the Soviet Union and the Making of East German Citizens, 1945–1950," *Central European History* 32 (1999):143–180. See also R. Moeller, ed., *West Germany Under Construction: Politics, Society and Culture in the Adenauer Era* (Ann Arbor, 1997).

7. R. Hayden, “Schindler’s Fate: Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing and Population Transfers,” *Slavic Review* 55 (1996):727–48; J. Chuminski and E. Kaszuba, “The Breslau Germans Under Polish Rule, 1945–46: Conditions of Life, Political Attitudes,” *Studia Historiae Oeconomicae* 22 (1997): 87–101; P. Ahonen, “Domestic Constraints on West German Ostpolitik: The Role of the Expellee Organizations in the Adenauer Era,” *Central European History* 31 (1998):31–64.

8. P. Major, *Death of the KPD: Communism and Anti-Communism in West Germany, 1945–1956* (Oxford, 1998).

9. C. Pavone, “The General Problem of the Continuity of the State and the Legacy of Fascism,” in *After the War: Violence, Justice, Continuity and Renewal in Italian Society*, ed. J. Dunnage (Hull, 1999), 5–21. On failed purges, see R. Palmer Domenico, *Italian Fascists on Trial, 1943–1948* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1991); J. Dunnage, “Policing and Politics in the Southern Italian Community, 1943–1948,” in *After the War*, 32–48; and G. Neppi Modona, “Postwar Trials Against Fascist Collaborationists and Partisans: The Piedmont Experience,” in *After the War*, 48–59.

10. T. Buchanan and M. Conway, eds., *Political Catholicism in Europe, 1918–1965* (Oxford, 1996); M. Mitchell, “Materialism and Secularism: CDU Politicians and National Socialism, 1945–1949,” *Journal of Modern History* 67 (1995):278–308; K. van Kersbergen, *Social Capitalism: A Study of Christian Democracy and the Welfare State* (London, 1995); and F. Traniello, “Political Catholicism, Catholic Organisation and Catholic Laity in the Reconstruction Years,” in *The Formation of the Italian Republic*, ed. F. Coppa and M. Repetto-Alaia (Frankfurt, 1993), 27–55.

11. C. Sonetti,”The Family in Tuscany Between Fascism and the Cold War,” in *After the War*, 75–89; M. Dalianis, “Children in the Greek Civil War, Today’s Adults,” in *After the War was Over: Reconstructing the Family, Society and the Nation in Greece, 1944–1960*, ed. M. Mazower (Princeton, 2000 forthcoming).

12. N. Naimark, *The Russians in Germany, 1945–1949* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).

13. P. Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945–1950* (Ithaca, NY, 1997); P. Kenney, “The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland,” *American Historical Review* 104 (1999):399–426; and E. Weitz, *Creating German Communism, 1890–1990: From Popular Protests to Socialist State* (Princeton, 1997).

14. M. Bokovoy, *Peasants and Communists: Politics and Ideology in the Yugoslav Countryside, 1941–1953* (Pittsburgh, 1998); D. Kideckel, *The Solitude of Collectivism: Romanian Villagers to the Revolution and Beyond* (Ithaca, NY, 1993); and G. Creed, *Domesticating Revolution: From Socialist Reform to Ambivalent Transition in a Bulgarian Village* (University Park, PA, 1998).