Conclusion

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There has been a shift in the historiography dealing with the mid-1940s. The transition from war to Cold War has long been a staple of work on the period, the debate centring on how to apportion responsibility for the breakdown of the Allied coalition into hostile blocs, East and West. The Cold War is now over, which has taken some of the urgency out of the argument. Soviet archives have also become available, prompting a raft of reassessments, which purport to settle the question of who was to blame once and for all. These developments have created space for a fresh look at the mid-forties move from war to ‘peace’ focused less on the old Cold War conundrum and more on other matters.1 But what other matters?

The present volume prompts three sorts of reflections in this connection. The first has to do with seeing the period in its own right, as a moment apart. The Germans capitulated on 8-9 May 1945, bringing an end to major military operations, but this did not mean that all fighting ceased or that the culture of war, bred of many years of the most appalling violence, dissipated at a stroke. Civil war erupted in Greece in 1946, and the Soviets continued to battle nationalist partisans in the Baltic, so-called Forest Brothers, well into the 1950s.2 The Nazis had undertaken massive and brutal programmes of population engineering during the war, decapitating Polish society, exterminating Jews, and promoting German settlement as they went. Nothing so extreme was perpetrated after the war, but that does not mean that large-scale demographic transfers came to a halt. Twelve million German nationals and ethnic Germans were driven westward, in part during the war as they fled before the advancing Red army, but in part afterward as they were forced out by angry locals and renascent East European states, Czechoslovakia foremost among them, intent on creating more homogenous populations.3 The pursuit of ethnic and religious purity remained powerful motivators in the liberated East. Some of this was a matter of persistent

popular prejudice as was the case in Poland where pogroms, grassroots in character though abetted by authorities willing to look the other way, made the reconstitution of Jewish life all but impossible. But some of it was also a matter of high policy. Edvard Beneš’s Czech government in exile had already begun formulating plans in wartime London for the forcible removal of German minorities whose philo-Nazi sympathies had made life so complicated for Czech authorities in the thirties. Once back in office after the war, Beneš negotiated a border settlement with the USSR, in the event favourable to Soviet interests, the better to win Stalin over on the matter of expelling Germans. Stalin, all too conscious of ethnic matters himself, embraced the deal because the new populations acquired were Ukrainian and judged suitable for integration into the Soviet state.

The ongoing violence and ethnic cleansing of the post-war moment went hand in hand with urgent efforts to reconstruct and reassert state authority. The Nazi Occupation had generated resistance movements everywhere in Europe, partisan bands which battled behind enemy lines in the East, maquis fighters who engaged in intelligence work, sabotage, and armed struggle in the West. At the Liberation, there was an explosion of score-settling, an épuration sauvage as the French called it, which targeted quislings and sell-outs. Authorities returning from abroad – General de Gaulle, for example, or Queen Wilhelmina of the Netherlands – confronted upwellings of popular feeling, both organized and spontaneous, that they did not control. The state’s prerogatives were reasserted notwithstanding. Maquis units were pressured into blending themselves into the regular armed forces in the name of carrying on a more effective fight against the Germans. Wild retribution gave way to official purge commissions in the name of carrying out justice in a more non-partisan spirit. This happened in the Soviet East as well. Soviet authorities, of course, grasped the military value of partisan formations but worried that such units enjoyed an autonomy that might turn political, and so care was taken to subject them to regular military authority when the opportunity presented itself and to vet the political reliability of all partisan veterans in the process. The result of such reassertions of constituted authority? The resistance surge


5 Sabine Dullin, ‘How the Soviet Empire Relied on Diversity: Territorial Expansion and National Borders at the End of World War II in Ruthenia’, *supra*.
was blunted, partisan autonomy contained, and established institutions like the army and the judiciary bolstered. By such means, ‘the continuity of the state’ was assured, but a price had to be paid for such an outcome. It’s not just that, from a certain Left perspective, a revolutionary opportunity had been missed but that the soldiers and judges whose authority was reaffirmed did not always boast unblemished wartime records and ended up overseeing a return to order that allowed many deserving of punishment to escape.

It should not be underestimated, however, just how powerful the yearning for a return to ‘normal’ was. The war left tens of millions dead and displaced, housing stock destroyed, and entire cities, like Warsaw, levelled. In the most extreme cases, among Poles in Poland and among Jews everywhere, entire populations were traumatized. The Germans, so arrogant in victory, were now reduced to an obsequious submissiveness before Allied occupation forces. One figure summed up the depth of misery and sense of emasculation among the defeated, the Trümmerfrau, who shouldered for lack of stronger shoulders the task of clearing away the rubble of the Reich’s bombed-out towns. But ongoing misery – food shortages, rationing, black-market manipulations – was just one face of the post-war scene. Allied armed forces were very much present, as victors, liberators and occupiers. In the East, the Red Army soldier was an object of fear, in German eyes a Mongol with the barbarian’s impulse to rape. In the West, there were abuses too, but the Americans and British also came with money to spend and a lot less resentment towards the Germans than their Soviet counterparts. Fraternization, at first forbidden, was allowed, and what resulted was a freewheeling encounter that upset many older Germans who worried about the decline of morals. Indeed, there was plenty of evidence, and not just in Germany, that the war had frayed the social fabric. Homicide rates, delinquency, the incidence of divorce, all were on the rise. There was plenty of talk too about how to set things straight, and the debate was sometimes frank, dealing head-on with the problems, sexual as well as affective, the war had caused between men and women. At the


7 Mazower, Dark Continent, p. 237.

German cinema, it was even possible to see movies – rubble films – that raised troubling questions about who bore responsibility for the nation's current predicament.\(^9\)

These features – the persistence of violence and racism, the state's efforts to reassert its prerogatives, a widespread yearning for normalization amidst a backdrop of hardship and devastation – were pervasive across the continent. They did not recognize the East/West divide that was soon to impose itself, and taken together define a moment that was in-between. The world war was over, and the Cold War, though already simmering, had not yet come to a full boil.

Now, it is tempting to understand this moment in-between as a moment of restoration. The violence of the war spilled over, yes, but then petered out as attentions turned to Cold War politics. The state reconsolidated itself and in due course closed the books on the wartime era, issuing amnesties to all but a handful of collaborators and war criminals. And the social dysfunctions (and liberties) born of the war, receded before a conservative tide fuelled by an exhausted public's desire to get on with the business of life. Rationing came to an end; camps for displaced persons closed; and a pall of moral order descended, muffling the sharp contrasts of late forties life and clearing the way for the homogenized, money-making bustle of the 1950s.

There's a lot to be said for this way of looking at things. France and Italy did indeed return to bad old parliamentarist habits. Civil war era Greek elites exploited the Allied West's anti-communist anxieties to wring out military and financial aid that allowed them, however unreconstructed, to come out on top.\(^10\) But three additional points need making.

First, in Eastern and Central Europe, the war's effects were levelling in ways that altered the political balance of forces.\(^11\) Aristocratic elites and

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the landowning order that had sustained them were swept aside, marking a definitive end at long last to Europe’s ancien régime. Monarchy did not disappear as an institution, but it suffered yet one more round of setbacks, a tide, it might be added, that did not spare the Greek and Italian ruling houses. A continent once ruled by kings and queens became a continent of republics.

Second, there was a reshuffling in the cast of players who dominated political life. In the first decades of the twentieth century, liberal parties had played a preeminent role. France’s Parti radical or England’s Liberal Party may be cited as prime examples. In the post-war, however, they had been demoted to the second rank, with the labour Left – socialists and communists – stepping in to take their place. It would not be right to call Christian Democracy an altogether new phenomenon. It had bumped along on the fringes of European politics in the twenties and thirties and, in Italy, even managed a momentary breakthrough in the aftermath of the Great War. After the Second World War, however, Christian Democracy moved to the very centre of public life in country after country, achieving near hegemonic status in a number of them. It was not just the Allies who won the war but the Catholic Church, whatever compromises it had made with Hitler’s European order. Traumatized populations found solace in the unchanging verities of religious life.\(^{12}\) It helped that women were now enfranchised almost everywhere and that the family and its stabilization, an issue near and dear to the Church, had become such a governing preoccupation for the secular as well as for the observant.\(^{13}\) Not least of all, the Church’s newfound stature owed much to the exceptional position enjoyed by organized interests in the emergent post-war order. What better way to stabilize public life than to include trade unionists and others in the policy-making process? Bring them into the state, draw on their discipline and grassroots organization, and public policy would gain that much more in effectiveness and legitimacy. Socialists, of course, felt this way, but even more so Christian democrats. Christian-democratic parties were anchored in a network of Catholic Action associations that included labour but were yet wider-ranging. They were comfortable with the language and practice of corporatism and, indeed, looked on subsidiarity as not just a handy tool but

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a matter of principle. Even in Belgium, where welfare-state construction was overseen by a socialist minister, Achille Van Acker, the form of corporatist engagement devised was very much shaped by Christian democrats whose support had to be cultivated to counter more radical left-wing alternatives.14

The word ‘welfare-state’ has now been uttered, which highlights a third way that the post-war order struck out in new directions. State institutions were not just reconstituted at the Liberation but strengthened and extended. In the victor nations – the United States, the USSR, and Great Britain –, the extraordinary military build-up of the war years was not reversed. The ‘warfare-state’, the military-industrial complex invoked by Dwight Eisenhower in his farewell presidential address of 1961, was a creature of the war and did not slink to the sidelines at its ending.15 As for welfare, European governments had been moving towards the provision of cradle-to-grave services for many decades, but the expectations of war-weary publics and the urgency of rebuilding state legitimacy placed the issue front and centre everywhere. The organization and generosity of welfare provision varied from country to country. In some instances, as in the Netherlands, unemployment insurance was not at first part of the package; in some, as in France, family allowances were highlighted. Benefits might be paid out of state tax revenues or out of funds financed by beneficiary contributions. Bureaucrats might run the show or representatives of the beneficiaries themselves. Yet whatever the particular scheme, the fact remained that Europeans now enjoyed a measure of security from the vicissitudes of modern life that they had never known before. And however impressive the scale of this accomplishment, that still doesn’t tell the whole story. The state also became a major player in housing construction, in the subvention of cultural institutions, and in the organization of land use. Land reform was indeed a major feature of the post-war moment in Eastern Europe, though it figured in France too.16 A ballooning state apparatus required manpower to make it work, civil servants to shuffle all the paper, of course, but also higher ups trained in public administration who took a wider view of things. Experts, or technocrats as they were sometimes called, were not an invention of the post-war era, but this was their moment. They came

16 Tony Judt, Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945 (New York, 2005), ch. 3.
into their own, taking charge and, in some cases, like that of Jean Monnet, achieving legendary status.

There is much to debate here. It’s possible first of all to think of the massive state build-up in a longer temporal frame. From this angle, the post-war moment would represent less of a new departure than a lurch forward in a process that had roots in earlier times. Corporatist schemes and family policy, for example, were not new phenomena but ones that had been experimented with before, in the aftermath of the Great War or as a response to the Depression.\(^\text{17}\) And why not include the war experience itself among the post-war state’s progenitors? It is worth taking a moment to think through what such a proposition might entail. It might mean nothing more anodyne than that the state-led mobilizations undertaken to win the war continued on even after victory, but this is to look at the problem just from the Allied side. What about fascist Italy and Nazi Germany; what about states, like France and the Netherlands, subjected to German occupation? Here too, it might be (and has been) argued that policies and programmes were embarked on that did not vanish with defeat or liberation but persisted, leaving an authoritarian legacy that post-war regimes, for whatever reason, did not find expedient to reject out of hand.

This possibility raises the question of how to assess the political valence of post-war reform. In the fall of 1941, after meeting off the Newfoundland coast, Roosevelt and Churchill promulgated a joint declaration of principle, the Atlantic Charter, which outlined their hopes for a future European order once the fighting was over. It has been characterized as the blueprint for a kind of international New Deal.\(^\text{18}\) The French Resistance gestated plans of its own, summed up in a manifesto of March 1944 that sketched out a programme of reform – including nationalizations, social security provision, and economic planning – which might best be characterized as social democratic in character. So, is that what Europe got in the post-war era, some mix of New Deal liberalism and social democracy?

Such a conclusion is too hasty for a couple of reasons. Keep in mind that Christian democrats and a new class of technocrats were major participants in the crafting of the post-war order. Keep in mind too that authoritarian and occupation regimes did not always disappear, leaving no trace behind.


On the contrary, persons, policies and institutions endured. The mix of influences that went into the making of post-war Europe turns out to be a complicated brew, and the *rapports de force* among them did not always favour the Left, far from it. The post-war moment might best be understood as one of intense political manoeuvring as actors from multiple political families, left and right, jockeyed to get their schemes for reconstruction advanced. I would be inclined to argue that left-wing variants got the short end in the competition, not everywhere but on the whole, with the emergent Cold War and a security-minded America abetting more conservative outcomes.\(^\text{19}\) But, as noted earlier, this is material for debate. What is clear is that the state exited the war and the post-war moment reinforced, its range of activities broadened, its reach extending deeper than ever into the lives of its citizens. This is the second major reflection the present volume prompts, and it points to a trend that has lost little of its momentum since.

It was not just the state, however, that came in for an overhaul in the post-war years, but – and this is my third point – the nation. It has already been noted how Europe’s populations were reshuffled and its borders redrawn, the better to buttress national homogeneity, understood in the most elementary ethnic terms. The war itself was glossed from one nation to the next as a narrative of national heroism or victimization. Britain had stood alone, a small island nation against the concentrated might of Germany’s industrial machine. France had gone down to defeat but then resurrected itself as a nation of Resisters. For the Russians, it had been the Great Patriotic War. Even the vanquished had stories to tell. The Austrians were Hitler’s first victims, and the Germans too found a way to cast themselves as victims, first bullied by a small band of Nazi fanatics and then brutalized by the Soviet Union’s Asiatic hordes.\(^\text{20}\) Not least of all, a number of post-war states made the promotion of a unified, national consciousness a matter of policymaking priority, investing in culture – theatre, cinema, music – as a means of fashioning a deep, common past that would help to melt away the dross of class and regional difference. This is not to say that such efforts achieved their desired end, just that the project of nation-making had become more than ever an institutionalized feature of state activity.\(^\text{21}\)

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\(^{21}\) Nord, *France’s New Deal*, part II.
A couple of objections to this line of thinking come straightaway to mind, the first having to do with the proliferation of international institutions in the post-war era, the second with empire. There were plenty of Europeans and Americans who spent the war years – and beyond – wondering how to prevent such a cataclysm from happening again. French policy-makers concluded that France needed modernizing, their German counterparts that Germany needed democratizing, and well nigh everyone that the Versailles system needed an overhaul. Versailles’s flaws were many and varied: it had proclaimed the principle of national self-determination but then not followed through on its promises; it had created a League of Nations but a League that lacked teeth and that a self-absorbed US had spurned; and it had failed altogether to find a way to resolve the fiscal imbalances created by the Great War, leaving such momentous matters to the catch-as-catch-can of bankers’ diplomacy. Policy-makers were determined not to repeat these errors. The USA stepped up, assuming the mantle of international leadership it had shunned after the First World War. The League gave way in 1942 to an altogether new institution, the United Nations. As for managing the world’s financial affairs, the Bretton Woods agreement of 1944 put an end to the era of bankers’ diplomacy. It created a currency stabilization mechanism, the International Monetary Fund, and a Bank for Reconstruction and Development (later the World Bank) to help prostrate member states get back on their feet. The Bank made a slow start, so the USA acted on its own initiative to furnish Europe the reconstruction financing it needed, launching the Marshall Plan in 1947.

This was internationalism with a vengeance, but a number of additional points need to be kept in mind. First of all, internationalism comes in more than one variety. The International Labour Organization, an agency of the old League of Nations, had practiced a social-democratic variant, according organized labour a critical role in its operations. This was not how the new internationalism was meant to work. Take the case of United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA). It performed extraordinary, praiseworthy service in the post-war years, supplying to millions of displaced persons and concentration camp survivors desperately needed material and moral support. But, though a UN organism, it was in the firm control of Americans who provided the key personnel and financing to make it work. As the example of Greece attests, moreover, UNRRA operations were not always exclusively humanitarian in character. As the Greek civil war raged,

the anti-communist side, in control of the machinery of distribution, steered UNRRA monies away from their enemies and towards themselves. Or take the Marshall Plan. It funnelled huge sums into recovering European economies. It also served America’s interests, shoring up non-communist states and easing them into a world economic order, based on free capital and trade flows, that was congenial to the American way of doing business. And while recipients had to learn to play by American rules, these were not so stringent as to obstruct participants from carving out national models very different from America’s own. France, for example, a major beneficiary of the Marshall programme, deployed American funding to build up a planned economy with a substantial nationalized sector, a far cry from the kind of economy American policy-makers wanted for the US. So, internationalism there was, but of a particular, enlightened sort: one that favoured America’s national interests first but in a way flexible enough to permit associated states to explore distinctive national paths. It was an internationalism, in a word, very well suited to an era of national rebirth.

Yet what about imperial policy? European states wanted to recover properties lost during the war and seemed as intent as ever on projecting power beyond the continent’s borders through the exertion of formal, imperial rule. War-time Japan’s own expansionist ambitions had overturned the imperial order in the Far East, but a concerted effort was made after Japan’s defeat to resurrect the status quo ante. The French went to war to get back Indochina. The British did the same in Malaysia as did the Dutch in Indonesia. Not just that, imperial powers took great care when negotiating international agreements to guarantee non-interference with their own reassertions of imperial control. Conventions on warfare were rethought in the light of Nazi crimes but in such a way as not to delegitimize counter-insurgency tactics. The UN itself was structured so that its operations would not impinge on imperial prerogatives provided they were exercised with the developmental interests of subjects in mind. The post-war world was supposed to be one safe for empire.

Yet, it didn’t work out that way. It proved impossible to cram the genie of Third-World nationalism back into the bottle. The British retreated from

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India in 1947 and from Palestine the next year. The Dutch after prolonged fighting conceded defeat, and Indonesia became independent in 1949. The proliferation of independent, ex-imperial states altered the character of the UN, which became less of a victor’s club (with major imperial powers counted among the victors) and more of a society of nations. Even where empire persisted, an effort was made to give it more of a national look.\textsuperscript{25} France had maintained a separate legal code for indigenous peoples, which was abolished in the war’s immediate aftermath. Native populations were also accorded voting rights and representation in France’s national parliament, though not on a one person, one vote basis. The idea was to portray inhabitants of the empire as citizens like any other and France as a nation, not just bounded by the hexagon, but made up of a hundred million men, women and children scattered across the globe. Such schemes foundered, to be sure. Policy-makers hesitated to pursue the citizenship option to its logical conclusion, to extend full welfare benefits and an equal vote to Third World peoples; ‘colons’ did not want imperial reform at all, except in the most watered-down form; and the imperial peoples themselves, in the end, chose independence over the halfway houses proposed and made increasing use of international bodies like the UN to rally world opinion. Europe overall did not want to abandon its imperial vocation, trying hard to squash national liberation movements or to put forward alternatives that promised imperial subjects a more equal citizenship, but Europe failed. What resulted was a world more nation-based in design than ever before in human history.

How much of this was foreordained? There were certain clear trends in the post-war years. National reconstruction was the order of the day with the state taking the lead, and both state and nation were sure to emerge the stronger for it. People talked, not just about reviving democratic institutions but about building a new kind of democratic order. New players were also on the scene who were not about to go away: organized interests, women, experts. And whatever else got decided, it was a near certainty that housing and welfare provision would receive top priority. But how all these pieces would end up getting put together was a good deal less clear. What kind of state, what kind of nation, what kind of welfare, what kind of internationalism: these were questions subject to intense political debate and manoeuvre, and it was hard to predict who the winners would be. Was

it a matter of self-evidence that Christian Democracy, rather than social democracy or communism, would turn out to be the dominant force in much of continental Western Europe in the 1950s? There were powerful voices calling for a moralization of public life and the reinforcement of family values, but there were countervailing voices too, engaged in sex-talk or petitioning for a deeper look into the abyss of Europe's recent past. No doubt, Cold War tensions had already started to heat up. Winston Churchill as early as 1946 could foresee a Europe divided down the middle, but who could tell that Germany itself would end up split in two? It was clear as well that European empire was in serious trouble, but who knew that it would all go by the boards, Britain's white commonwealth excepted, in the next decade and a half? That in fact is the point about the post-war moment. It was a period when politics mattered, when momentous issues were at stake and outcomes uncertain. The fifties would bring answers and prosperity too. It was a cocktail potent enough to close the parenthesis on that mixture of war-born misery and open-ended aspiration that gave the post-war years their particular savour.