Out of the ashes:
Europe's rebirth after the
Second World War, 1945–1949

Raleigh Lecture on History
read 2 July 2015

IAN KERSHAW
Fellow of the Academy

Abstract: This lecture seeks to explain why the Second World War, the most destructive conflict in history, produced such a contrasting outcome to the First. It suggests that the Second World War's maelstrom of destruction replaced a catastrophic matrix left by the First — of heightened ethnic, border and class conflict underpinned by a deep and prolonged crisis of capitalism — by a completely different matrix: the end of Germany's great-power ambitions, the purging of the radical Right and widescale ethnic cleansing, the crystallisation of Europe's division, unprecedented rates of economic growth and the threat of nuclear war. Together, these self-reinforcing components, all rooted in what soon emerged as the Cold War, conditioned what in 1945 had seemed highly improbable: Europe's rise out of the ashes of the ruined continent to lasting stability, peace and prosperity.
Keywords: Cold War, Germany, ethnic cleansing, economic growth, matrix, Europe's division, radical Right, nuclear war.

It is a great honour to deliver this Raleigh Lecture. When invited to do so, I was asked, in the context of the 70th anniversary of the end of the most terrible war in history, to speak on some topic related to the end of the Second World War. As the war recedes into history the recognition has grown that it was the epicentre and determining episode in the 20th century in Europe. It divides that century into two utterly contrasting parts. That prompted me, instead of exploring issues related to the war itself and the astronomical cost in human lives and devastation paid in ensuring the total defeat of Hitler's Germany, to turn to what seems to me a question of considerable importance: why did such a colossally destructive war lead to decades of peace and prosperity in Europe?

'Here is a burial ground. Here is Death', was how the Polish writer, Janina Broniewska, described Warsaw on seeing it for the first time after the war.[1] The celebrated German author, Alfred Döblin, returning to Germany after years of enforced exile, was shocked at the sight of towns 'of which little more than the names exist'.[2] Death and devastation were the hallmarks of Europe in 1945, worst of all in the eastern parts of the continent. This, we should remind ourselves, was no more than a lifetime ago.

People of my generation — I was born in 1943 — have been fortunate enough to experience decades of peace and prosperity. We in western Europe have been blessed. For the people of the eastern half of the continent, disproportionately afflicted by poverty, deprivation, political turmoil and terroristic rule before 1945, then subjected to more than forty years of subjugation and lack of personal freedom, it was a different story. Even they, however, certainly the overwhelming majority of them, could rebuild lives in lasting peace and enjoy greater prosperity, if far behind that in the west, than their forebears had done. The year 1945, arguably the lowest ebb in Europe's long and violent history, proved to be, therefore, an epochal turning-point.

Such an extraordinary transformation was impossible to foresee in the immediate post-war world. How did Europe's remarkable rebirth come about? After all, the first great conflagration between 1914 and 1918 had produced violent upheaval that had sown the seeds of an even more terrible war a generation later. Why did the Second World War, with a death toll in Europe alone four times or so higher than the First and leaving immensely greater swathes of destruction than the earlier war, have such a contrasting, essentially positive, outcome, even if at the high cost of lasting division and lack of personal liberties for the peoples of eastern Europe?

It is one of the most important questions in understanding the history of 20th-century Europe. Usual explanations — those that point, for instance, to general war weariness, the crushing of Germany, the existence of nuclear weapons or unprecedented economic growth — are not as such misguided. But they are partial and limited, at any rate no more than strands of an overarching answer to a complex, structural problem. To look for a more integrated, multi-causal explanation requires first of all an assessment of the baleful legacy left in Europe by the First World War.

Four elements can be singled out from this legacy which, together, blended into a framework for comprehensive crisis in Europe following the First World War. First, there was an explosion of ethnic–racist nationalism (almost invariably including, though usually not confined to, a core hatred of Jews). Secondly, there were new, widespread, bitter and irreconcilable demands for territorial revisionism. Thirdly,

---

[1] Shore (2006), 255.
[2] Döblin (1986), 274, 276, 277–8.

class conflict became more acute than ever and with a new focus since the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. And, fourthly, there was a fundamental crisis of capitalism, first of hyperinflation then of unprecedented deflation, which spanned the interwar years with only a brief interruption in the later 1920s.

Nationalist, ethnic and territorial conflict were of course nothing new to Europe. They had been particularly extreme in the Balkans long before the First World War. The violence and brutality that they spawned now reached, however, unprecedented levels of intensity and over much wider areas. The existence of an alternative model of state and society under Bolshevism gave class conflict a new, dangerous dimension. And, though cyclical ups and downs were immanent to industrial capitalism, the lasting depth and severity of what many thought a terminal capitalist crisis were also novel. The intermeshing of the four elements engendered the comprehensive political, socio-economic and ideological–cultural crisis that led Europe to the verge of self-destruction.

No part of the continent escaped altogether. Worst affected from the intersection of all four elements were central, south-eastern and eastern Europe. It is no surprise, then, that the critical danger zone before the war was to be found in these regions, nor that they experienced the full brunt of the genocidal horror at the heart of that war. But in one country, the four elements combined in their most extreme and lethal form, explosively reinforcing each other. This was Germany, where the comprehensive crisis paved the way for Hitler to exploit the conditions in masterly fashion, embroiling Europe in a new world war and undermining the very basis of civilisation. The Second World War plumbed new depths of inhumanity, whose effects are felt even today. But it broke the crisis matrix that had taken Europe to the brink of self-destruction. This was crucial. In so doing it opened the path to Europe's rebirth in the second half of the century.

An essential basis for all that followed, of course, was the crushing of Nazi Germany. The ending of German ambitions to dominate Europe, and of the ideological underpinnings of those ambitions, was a key premiss of European recovery. Nazism — in a wider sense fascism — was finished as a major political force, leaving behind a binary contest of capitalist liberal democracy and communism. Totally defeated and occupied by foreign powers, Germany was no longer even a nation-state.

Germany's imperialist drive had been destroyed once and for all, as had Japan's in the Far East. But the war had recast geopolitics more widely and fundamentally. Two of the four victorious Allies, Britain and France, the pre-war 'great powers' in Europe, were nearly on their knees. France's national prestige and standing had been massively tarnished by the defeat in 1940. Britain was victorious but impoverished. Between them, the USA and the USSR now dominated global politics, and the opposition of both to traditional colonial empires helped to foster the decolonisation movements

that swiftly began to challenge imperialist rule. The rivalry and potential for conflict between the European imperialist powers were as a consequence greatly reduced, though their deployment of extensive violence against anti-colonial movements would last until most former colonies attained national independence, a process that reached a climax in the late 1950s and first half of the 1960s.

In Europe itself the emerging great split through the middle of the continent also defused conflict between nation-states since it left national interests gradually but inexorably subordinated to the interests of the superpowers. In a perverse way the path to Europe's recovery ran through the continent's division. The Iron Curtain was its precondition.

That Europe would recover so quickly and strongly was not at all obvious in 1945. The beginnings of recovery could only dimly and gradually be glimpsed in the immediate post-war years, and Europe's rebirth became plainly visible only in the 1950s. Ian Buruma has called 1945 'Year Zero'.[3] In Germany it has become common-place nowadays to reject the notion of a 'zero hour' that the early post-war generation had used, admittedly sometimes in an apologetic way, to stress a clean break with Nazism. Instead, continuities of different kinds across 1945 have come to be emphasised, and rightly so. Not least, the extent to which many with more than shadowy pasts were able to continue their careers in medicine, the judiciary, and business in West Germany is, to put it mildly, morally abhorrent. The continuities even stretched to high offices of state: Hans Globke, the co-author of the commentary on the notorious Nuremberg racial laws of 1935, became Adenauer's leading adviser in the Federal Chancellery; Theodor Oberländer, who before the war been involved in racial planning for a future eastern Europe under Nazi rule, was appointed Minister for Refugees.[4] So the break with the Nazi past was very far from a clean one. Continuities are, however, relative. History never stops and restarts. There are always continuities. What matters is how big the breaks are when they come. And none in European history, not even the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648 or of the Napoleonic era in 1815, was bigger than 1945. 'Year Zero' seems to me, therefore, a good depiction.

Europe in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War was, as Keith Lowe has well demonstrated, a 'savage continent' — chaotic, violent and massively unruly.[5] Germany's capitulation in May 1945 brought formal hostilities in Europe to a halt — in the Far East, of course, they continued until August. But, though war ended, peace did not automatically begin. Around 12,000 people, mainly former fascists,

---

[3] The title of Buruma (2013).
[4] Frei (2002), 217.
[5] The title of Lowe (2012).

were slaughtered in the civil war in northern Italy in the period just before and after the actual war was ended. Around 9,000 former supporters of the Vichy regime were killed following France's liberation and around 20,000 women subjected to ritual degradation for 'horizontal collaboration' — sleeping with the enemy — during the years of German occupation. Greece was soon plunged into civil war which, by the time it subsided three years later, had left around 45,000 dead. And as many as 70,000 people are estimated to have been killed in post-war revenge massacres and ethnic violence in Yugoslavia.[6] A post-war order could not be created overnight out of the ruins of the war.

Revenge against those who had caused the suffering and misery was a common reflex in formerly occupied countries immediately after liberation — an inevitable and perhaps necessary but plainly only partial catharsis. What is surprising is not the scale of reprisal killings, but how quickly almost everywhere the wild violence was brought under control by public authorities — unless, of course, they encouraged it, as was the case with expulsions of ethnic Germans from central and eastern Europe.

Even some Soviet reports expressed shock at the ferocity of the revenge against Germans in the former German eastern provinces, now part of the new Poland.[7] Murder, robbery, rape and beatings were commonplace as between half and three quarters of a million ethnic Germans, seen as little more than vermin, were driven out. About 3 million Germans were expelled from the Sudeten region of Czechoslovakia by 1947, again accompanied by horrific violence. Between 19,000 and 30,000 Sudeten Germans were killed in the process. In all at least 12 million Germans were deported from central and eastern Europe into the occupied zones of Germany, hopelessly ill-equipped to receive them. An estimated half a million Germans lost their lives in the flight and brutal expulsions before and after the end of the war. The fate of another 1.5 million is not known.[8] It was part of a huge process of ethnic cleansing, not just confined to the former German population. At least 1.2 million Poles and some half a million Ukrainians were evicted from their homes, again often with great brutality, and resettled in distant destinations as boundaries were redefined. Vast numbers of Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks were also pushed around like pieces on a chess board.[9] The wartime murder of the Jews had, of course, been accompanied by the extinction of Jewish culture in, especially, central and eastern Europe, such a rich component of the fabric of those parts of Europe for centuries. But, remarkably, the terrible torment of the Jews was even now not altogether over. Pogroms in parts of

[6] Lowe (2012), 145, 150, 172, 262, 249–65; Larsen & Hagvet (1998), 540–1, 1329–30, 1398; Clark (1984), 317.
[7] Naimark (2001), 127.
[8] Kossert (2008), 40–1; Naimark (2001), 115–20.
[9] Applebaum (2012), 136, 140–2; Lowe (2012), 219–22, 225–6.

Poland and Hungary, along with exposure to continued discrimination, drove tens of thousands of Jews to flee, most of them to Palestine, finally convinced that they had no future in Europe.[10]

Ethnic minorities were far from totally eliminated in eastern Europe. Russians were a significant component in the composition of the population of the Baltic states — though, of course, not exposed to discrimination. And Yugoslavia retained most of its patchwork quilt of ethnicities. But in general the drastic post-war ethnic cleansing had done its ghastly work in leaving eastern Europe with far fewer sizeable minority populations than had existed before the war.[11] Terrible though the ethnic cleansing had been, it probably contributed to the potential for stabilisation of central and eastern Europe in the regions where ethnic conflict had been so endemic and so poisonous before the war.

The thirst for revenge was converted fairly quickly in most parts of Europe into state-directed purges of former Nazis and fascists. The purges in Soviet-dominated eastern Europe were far more drastic than those in the west, but soon became not much more than an arbitrary way of determining loyalty towards the new rulers. The worst offenders were swiftly executed. Huge numbers, 250,000 from Romania alone, often simply dubbed 'counter-revolutionaries' or 'class enemies' were imprisoned or sent to the Gulag in inhospitable parts of the Soviet Union.[12] Purges in western Europe were less draconian, though in the early stages certainly taken seriously. Hundreds of thousands were arrested and accused of treason, collaboration or war crimes. Mostly, however, they were treated relatively leniently. Of the 405,000 arrested in Belgium, for instance, 241 were executed, but over 80 per cent were in the end not prosecuted and most of the remainder received short sentences.[13] Here and elsewhere the pattern was to amnesty or release early most of those imprisoned. Austria, which had produced some of the worst war criminals but was allowed to portray itself as the first victim of German aggression, was particularly lenient towards the 14 per cent of its adult population that had joined the Nazi Party. Nearly all those sentenced, usually to short periods in prison, were amnestied by 1948. Amnesties even for most who had been serious Nazis followed by the mid-1950s.[14]

In occupied Germany ten major war criminals arraigned by the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg were executed and a few others given lengthy jail sentences. Later trials conducted by the Americans resulted in a further 24 sentences of death and 20 sentences to life-imprisonment for some of the most heinous Nazi

---

[10] Applebaum (2012), 145–53; Gross (2006), 83–4, 87ff, 99, 118–25, 165, 246; Naimark (2001), 132.
[11] Mann (2005), 353–5, 506–7.
[12] Larsen & Hagvet (1998), 748–9, 756, 818; Applebaum (2012), 118.
[13] Larsen & Hagvet (1998), 1270, 1331–9.
[14] Larsen & Hagvet (1998), 365–6, 402–3, 416–19; Lowe (2012), 154–6.

war criminals. But attempts to assess the guilt of much of the population proved a predictable failure in western Germany as the denazification procedures undertaken by the Americans, British and French ran into the sand and descended into little more than farce. By 1951 a judicial system still largely staffed by judges and advocates who had served the Nazis saw all but the worst offenders amnestied.[15]

In the Soviet-run eastern zone it was a different matter. Tens of thousands were dispatched to an unenviable fate in Soviet camps and prisons. Over half a million were dismissed from their posts. Judges, lawyers, academics, teachers and civil servants were special targets, as of course were any former industrialists or members of the landed aristocracy. Doctors were for the most part too indispensable to be dismissed as long as, like many insignificant former members of the Nazi Party, they were prepared to see the error of their ways and recognise the verities of Marxism–Leninism. Red became the new brown.[16]

All the wild retribution, ethnic cleansing, political purging, trials and punishment could not, of course, possibly compensate the countless victims of Nazi rule for what they had suffered. Full catharsis was unimaginable. Still, what did take place was a necessary step on the way to a new Europe. Without it a reborn Europe would have been impossible. Naturally, the question remains: could more have been done in the circumstances? Was it right that so many with more than dubious pasts, sometimes with much blood on their hands, could become reintegrated into society, often living long lives in some prosperity before dying peacefully in their beds? Plainly it was not. But morality and politics frequently conflict, or run along different channels. In this case, morality and natural justice pushed one way. Establishing the basis of stable political systems pushed in the other direction. Political reconstruction, east and west, was seen to have top priority. Looking to the future took precedence over prolonged raking over the evils of the past. Collective amnesia was widely welcomed as the way forward — all the more so when the Cold War set in and demanded a line to be drawn under the past in favour of anti-capitalist socialist unity in the east, strident anti-communist liberal democracy in the west.

To give Europe a new start, politics had to be re-formed and re-established — no straightforward task after the ruptures and rancour that accompanied and followed wartime occupation regimes. German conquest had broken continuity nearly everywhere. The bases of pluralist politics had not, however, been eradicated and were, in fact, resuscitated with remarkable speed. The future political constellation was nevertheless completely unclear and uncertain. It looked at first as if the Left, building

---

[15] Frei (2002), 23–4, and 67–9 for further amnesty law of 1954; for denazification, Taylor (2011), 268, 296–312, 321–2; Berghahn (1982), 186.
[16] Taylor (2011), 323–3; Fulbrook (2002), 119–20; Wasserstein (2007), 437.

upon its resolute anti-fascist credentials and its often highly courageous resistance, would emerge triumphant. But it proved a false dawn. Nearly everywhere the conservative Right came to be the dominant political force. This was not in any way clearly foreseeable. After all, the record of pre-war and wartime conservatives had at best been chequered. Why did post-war politics move to the Right rather than to the Left?

The first reason was the lack of unity on the Left. After 1945 anti-fascism was no longer enough to hold the Left together. Already in February 1946 Ruth Andreas-Friedrich, a Berlin Social Democrat who had earlier been connected with the socialist underground resistance to Hitler's regime, noted in her diary that 'people who a year ago had helped each other against the terror of the Gestapo ... attack each other today like the bitterest enemies'.[17] The fundamental split that had existed since the Bolshevik Revolution, and not just in Germany, between communist parties aligned to Moscow and social democratic parties with reformist programmes seeking to improve, not destroy, capitalism quickly resurfaced. Communist parties doubled their strength, compared with pre-war levels, in the first post-war elections in most countries. In western Europe they did particularly well in France (over 26 per cent of the vote), Finland (23 per cent), Iceland and Italy (19 per cent). Scandinavia and the Low Countries registered between 10 and 13 per cent, though in Austria and Switzerland it was only half that level, and in Britain a mere 0.4 per cent. But from the start support for socialist parties for the most part far outstripped that for communists, frequently reaching 30 per cent and in Sweden, Norway, Austria and parts of western Germany over 40 per cent. This disparity, it might be noted, existed *before* the onset of the Cold War. And nowhere, apart from Britain — here as in some other regards an exception to more general European trends — was a socialist party powerful enough to form a government on its own in the post-war years.[18]

The second reason, of course, was the Cold War itself. Communism attracted the support of not much more than about one voter in eight in western Europe even before the ice had formed on the Cold War. Once Europe's great divide hardened, from 1947 onwards, communist parties in western Europe were on the back foot and saw their support levels drain away. As the unsavoury character of communist take-overs in eastern Europe became plainly evident, it was all the easier for conservative parties in the west to play upon anti-Soviet feelings and fears of communist dominance at home. Communists were forced out of government in France and Italy in 1947. American propaganda and papal intervention — Pope Pius XII told Italians

---

[17] Andreas-Friedrich (1962), 225–6.
[18] Larsen & Hagvet (1998) 1802–3; Erdmann (1980), 394–5.

that anyone supporting an anti-Christian party was a traitor — helped, for example, to bring about the big win for Christian Democracy in the Italian elections of 1948.[19]

This already touches on the third reason: a reformed, reconstituted and unified conservative Right. Before the war conservative elites had tried to block change and obstruct democracy, which they saw as a threat to their interests. After the war they took a different approach. With the radical Right discredited, the new political elites — unblemished through fascist association — saw the need to incorporate social change and to make democracy work in their own interest. The main success story was the emergence of Christian Democracy as a revitalised conservatism, supportive of pluralist democracy, widening the support base of the earlier confessional parties and prepared to accommodate significant social reforms. While support for the Left was largely confined to its traditional heartlands in big industrial conurbations, Christian Democracy proved able to maximise support from the extensive anti-socialist sections of the population which could be mobilised by an appeal to reformist politics anchored in Christian principles and cemented by vehement anti-communism. Politics in much of western Europe congealed, therefore, after 1945 essentially into a three-way split between socialism, communism and conservatism. And of these three forces conservativism, mainly in the guise of Christian Democracy, for the most part came out on top.

In eastern Europe, of course, the development was totally different. There was a façade of pluralism. Liberal, conservative, agrarian and socialist parties existed along-side communist parties. But the pressure in favour of communist parties was overt and relentless, all the more so as it swiftly became plain that communists were not capable of winning a democratic majority in open elections. In Hungary, for instance, the peasant Smallholder Party won 57 per cent of the vote in elections in November 1945 while the Communists gained only 17 per cent. Nevertheless, brutal intimidatory tactics by the Moscow-backed Communist Party succeeded over the following four years in destroying the Smallholder Party and leaving complete power in the hands of the Communists.[20] In the Soviet zone of occupied Germany a forced merger of the Social Democratic and Communist parties in April 1946 created the Socialist Unity Party (SED) which, despite intense pressure on voters, failed to win an absolute majority in any of the regional elections six months later.[21] This did not, however, hinder the inexorable extension and within a short time monopolisation of power by the communists. Those who opposed what was happening were dismissed from their work, many of them imprisoned.

---

[19] Clark (1984), 324–5.
[20] Wasserstein (2007), 429–30; Buchanan (2006), 83–4.
[21] Berghahn (1982), 192–6; Fulbrook (2002), 113–14; Carr (1991), 370; Erdmann (1980), 136–9, 399.

The pattern, broadly speaking, repeated itself in the Soviet-dominated eastern bloc. Czechoslovakia was a partial exception. The Communists won 38.6 per cent of the vote and became the largest party in elections in 1946. But their sharply waning popularity over subsequent months formed the background to the coup of 1948 which gave them control of the state. Another exception was Yugoslavia, where communists had taken power without help from the Red Army. Tito had defied all threats from Moscow in rejecting Stalin's iron embrace. His regime imposed, however, its own rigorous restrictions on political activity and personal liberties.

The ruthlessness with which communist power was asserted and consolidated needs no great emphasis. No price can be put on the loss of freedom suffered by the peoples of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe. But if we are looking for reasons why there was a high level of post-war stability in regions which between the wars had seen little beyond endemic conflict and instability, then the cruel subjugation to political and ideological rigidity has to be seen as a significant factor.

The main stages in the international dimension of the emerging Cold War as animosities hardened over the course of three or so years are well enough known to need no rehearsal here. Crucial moves included the American decision in 1946 to leave troops in Europe indefinitely rather than withdraw them in 1947 as initially envisaged, the declaration of the 'Truman Doctrine' in 1947 to contain the spread of communism (in the first instance by providing military aid to Greece and Turkey) and the communist coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948. The question of who was responsible for the Cold War is otiose. The split in the wartime Alliance was as good as inevitable after Germany's defeat. The division of the continent was unavoidable, and a direct consequence of the outcome of the war.

Probably the most decisive moment in the split was the announcement of Marshall Aid in June 1947. Alan Milward did more than any historian to show that the European Recovery Plan, as it was properly called, was not the cause of the remarkable and lasting economic growth that took off from the later 1940s. The 12.5 billion dollars over four years given to European countries were simply not enough for that.[22] Marshall Aid was of great importance even so. It helped to overcome the 'dollar gap' — shortage of dollars to pay for much needed imports — that was hampering recovery, gave citizens especially in the former enemy countries of Germany, Austria and Italy new hope, boosted already growing economies, and in providing an institutional European framework to coordinate the implementation of the plan pointed towards the need for greater economic cooperation in Europe. This in turn would stimulate the rapid modernisation of agriculture, leading to increased food supplies, availability of cheap labour for industry and an end to the problem of an impoverished peasantry that had bedevilled European politics in the interwar era.

[22] Milward (1984), 90–8.

As Milward in particular demonstrated, economic growth pre-dated the Marshall Plan and stretched back to the darkest days of the last war year. Release of stored-up demand, huge reservoirs of available cheap labour and massive technological advances that could now be put to civilian use all contributed to the explosive growth. By 1948, when Marshall Aid started to flow, only Germany and Italy had a gross national product lower than a decade earlier — in Italy's case marginally lower, in Germany's still massively. By then, too, all European countries except Germany were already registering higher levels of capital formation than in 1938. From 1948 economic recovery practically everywhere started to take off spectacularly. Gross national product increased sharply across western Europe between 1948 and 1950 — especially strongly in West Germany, Austria and Italy which had earlier lagged behind. This fostered a virtuous circle of rising exports — allowing more imports — revival of capital markets, investment in transport and infrastructure and increasing consumer demand.[23] Not least, the high rates of economic growth allowed expanded welfare spending which in turn helped to consolidate support for democracy and stabilise politics.

All European countries, including the Soviet Union, were offered Marshall Aid. But Europe's division was sealed when Stalin (as George Marshall himself had hoped) rejected the Aid, compelling countries in the Soviet sphere — Poland and Czechoslovakia with notable reluctance — to follow suit. This determined that the economic trajectories of eastern and western Europe would fundamentally differ. In the west, the path led towards a prosperous consumer society; in the east, growth in production in the Soviet bloc was concentrated in heavy industry with only relatively modest advances in living standards. Was Stalin's refusal to accept Marshall Aid a big mistake? [24]

It certainly cut eastern Europe off from the benefits that could have flowed from the Marshall Plan. Millions of Europeans were as a result excluded from changes that would have contributed to a great improvement in their standard of living. But Stalin, surely correctly, appreciated that to accept economic aid from the USA, whose economy he recognised to be so much stronger than the war-torn economies of the USSR and the Soviet bloc countries, would have opened the door to significant American interference in eastern Europe and, most probably, to an undermining of Soviet political dominance in its sphere of influence. That in turn would have weakened the security of the Soviet Union and its satellites, an outright priority for Stalin. From Stalin's perspective, therefore, rejecting Marshall Aid was a logical necessity, certainly no mistake. Had Marshall Aid gone to the east, the post-war era

---

[23] Milward (1984), 477, 480; Laqueur (1972), 180, 194; Wee (1987), 30, 44.
[24] Judt (2005), 151; Gaddis (2005), 30.

would have been different. How different, and whether Europe's peace would have been better served as a result, is unknowable. In any case it is unthinkable that it could have happened.

The Americans had seen the Marshall Plan as a stepping stone to the eventual economic and political integration of western Europe. The incorporation of Germany, which only three years earlier the Morgenthau Plan put forward by the American administration had proposed turning into a deindustrialised state, was recognition that economic recovery was impossible if the German economic giant was kept prostrate on the ground. The first signs of potential integration seemed promising when 16 countries and representatives from the western zones of occupied Germany formed the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation in April 1948 to implement the Marshall Plan. But national interests immediately surfaced, and American expectations were to be swiftly disappointed. Britain, in particular, saw only disadvantages in a European customs union that was heading towards future integration. 'There is no attraction for us in long-term economic cooperation with Europe', senior British civil servants adjudged.[25] As George Marshall himself commented, Britain wanted to 'benefit fully from a European program[me]' (which incidentally gave it twice as much aid as West Germany) 'while at the same time maintaining the position of not being wholly a European country'.[26]

After the Marshall Plan, the division of Europe swiftly widened to a chasm. Its well-known staging posts were the West German currency reform in June 1948 (prompting the the Soviet Union in January 1949 to integrate east European economies in Comecon), the Soviet blockade of Berlin, broken by the Air Lift of 1948–9, and in quick succession the steps to establish a West German state, founded in September 1949. The foundation of the German Democratic Republic duly followed in October and the division of Germany symbolised the wider division of Europe. In the meantime Germany had been transformed in western eyes from the continuing fundamental threat to the continent's future security to the key bulwark against Soviet expansion, a shift in perspective that had led to the establishment of NATO in April 1949. European security had, however, to be quickly rethought. In August 1949 the Soviet Union exploded its first atomic bomb — a shock to the West since the Americans had reckoned that they would remain the sole nuclear power for far longer. The nuclear arsenal on both sides now swiftly expanded, and the Cold War froze into two great antagonistic power blocs. That is how it would remain for forty years.

[25] Judt (2005), 159.
[26] Hogan (1991), 223; Hogan (1987), 88, 109, 120–4.

Let me try to draw some threads together. Whereas the First World War had produced a negative matrix that guaranteed instability, tension and conflict, leading eventually to a new and even more terrible conflagration, the Second World War broke that constellation and established a contrasting matrix of self-reinforcing component parts which by 1949, though impossible to discern four years earlier, paved the way for stability, peace and economic growth. The interaction of five crucial elements provided the foundation for the unpredictable transformation.

The premiss of all else that followed was the ending of German great-power ambitions, smashed once and for all in the cataclysmic defeat of 1945. These ambitions had plagued Europe since 1890 or so and formed part of the background to the First World War, subsiding though not disappearing in its aftermath to return with unpre-decedented ferocity in the Second World War. The removal of this scourge gave Europe a new chance. The new chance rested, however, on a second basic and highly unappealing premiss: a Europe split into two by the Cold War.

The demolition of fascism and purging of the worst exponents and collaborators in the first post-war years, however imperfect the process was in western Europe especially, and rightly though its crass inadequacies can be criticised on moral grounds, meant that the extreme Right no longer had any platform to poison societies as it had done between the wars. The post-war politics of revenge went hand in hand with the ethnic cleansing of much of central and eastern Europe. Centuries-old German population settlements were now swept away overnight. The Soviet advance through eastern Europe and into Germany itself also led to a major reordering of borders, principally affecting eastern Germany, Poland and Ukraine, which was also accompanied by drastic and forcible population resettlements. All this was under-taken with great brutality and accompanied by huge suffering and extensive loss of life. In human terms it was absolutely repulsive. But in political terms it left more homogenised societies, less subject to the conflicts engendered by the ethnic mix of pre-war Europe.

These societies in eastern Europe were now under the yoke of Soviet domination. Disturbing though it is to have to accept it, the stability of Europe was largely achieved on the backs of the peoples of the countries of eastern Europe, left for forty years under Soviet subjugation. Could this have been avoided? It is hard to see how. The western participants at the Yalta Conference, then the later Potsdam Conference, in 1945 accepted a grim reality: the Red Army had won the war in the east and in so doing had established complete Soviet dominance as far as the Elbe and Spree. Short of a 'hot' rather than 'cold' war, impossible anyway on psychological as well as material grounds, there was nothing the western Allies could do about that. But although the price for eastern Europe was an extremely high one, the Iron Curtain itself provided Europe, east and west, with a new basis of stability.

The ease and speed of the transition to stable democratic systems in western Europe should not be exaggerated. In Spain and Portugal, stuck in a time warp, atavistic authoritarian regimes lasted, in fact, until the 1970s. In France the 4th Republic, established in 1946, re-invented many of the weaknesses — most obviously an executive dominated by a strong legislature — that had plagued the 3rd Republic before 1940. The result was chronic governmental instability until the formation of de Gaulle's 5th Republic in 1958 — though without serious challenge to the fundamentals of a democratic state. Italy, too, suffered from lasting governmental instability within an essentially stable democratic state. Given the traumas the country had undergone in the last phase of the war, when there had effectively been civil war in northern Italy, the firm establishment of democracy by the end of the 1940s, despite the continuing deep internal divisions and no small amount of corruption within the system, was remarkable.

The future of the pivotal country, Germany, remained largely open until Adenauer rejected out of hand Stalin's 'offer' in 1952 of a reunified, but neutral, country and committed West Germany irredeemably to the western Alliance. Even then, tension quite specifically over the status of Berlin did not fully subside until the building of the Wall in 1961. But the more determinedly the Soviet Union imposed its control over eastern Europe, the more resolutely the Americans confronted it by exerting their own increasingly strong grip on western Europe. We know now that there were no Soviet plans to take over western Europe. But that was not so obvious at the time. There was, of course, plenty of anti-Americanism in the west, most notably in France, and not just on the political Left, which ran counter to the strong pro-American feeling among the West German, Italian and British political elites. But without the lasting US presence, a direct product of the emerging Cold War, helping to rebuild western economies and bolster fragile political systems, it is difficult to imagine the extent of stability in the West that the ideological cement of anti-communism helped to create. By 1949 the platform for stability had been laid. The consolidation would follow in the 1950s.

What consolidated that stability was the economic growth that was starting to take off stratospherically from 1948 onwards. The post-war growth was worldwide. But the nature of political systems determined its impact. For the West, as the Bretton Woods conference in 1944 had already indicated, learning lessons from the interwar failures and the rebuilding of the international economy based on a reformed capitalism were priorities. Instead of the reparations that had played such a baleful role after the First World War there was the stimulus for western Europe of Marshall Aid which, as a report in 1951 put it, gave European economies the 'strength to work their own

recovery'.[27] State intervention on Keynesian lines, not reliance on budget orthodoxy and market forces, was generally accepted as indispensable to stimulate growth. The closed systems of eastern Europe went their own way. But also in eastern Europe, though lagging far behind the West, extremely high growth rates permitted much impressive progress towards removing the running sores of deep-seated poverty and crass inequalities that had promoted the nationalist, ethnic and class conflicts of the interwar years.

Finally, but not least, both superpowers now possessed atomic bombs and by 1953 had acquired the immeasurably greater destructive capacity of hydrogen bombs. 'Mutually Assured Destruction', though the term was only coined several years later, had arrived. This concentrated minds. Fear of the consequences of using such horrific weapons of mass destruction helped to establish a stable equilibrium in the divided Europe after 1945 that had never been possible following the end of the first great conflagration in 1918.

Each of the five components of Europe's post-war rebirth singled out here had an unmistakably negative side: a divided Germany, widescale ethnic cleansing, Cold War division and confrontation, the exclusion of millions in eastern Europe from the freedoms and economic advantages enjoyed by those in the West, and, most obviously of all, the shadow of the Bomb. But, taken together, they ensured that Europe's future after 1945 was infinitely brighter than it had been after 1918.

The odds against that in the dead and devastated continent of 1945 were high. Yet within four years a new Europe was with remarkable speed taking visible shape, even if the psychological and cultural scars of the collapse of civilisation would last for decades. It was a divided continent, though each half rested on more solid foundations than had ever seemed likely at the end of the war. The very division was, therefore, essential to Europe's rebirth. Out of the ashes, after the most horrific war of all time, possibilities had emerged of a more stable, prosperous and not least peaceful Europe than anyone in the devastated continent of 1945 could possibly have imagined.

REFERENCES

Andreas-Friedrich, R. (1962), *Schauplatz Berlin. Ein deutsches Tagebuch* (Munich, Rheinsberg Verlag).
Applebaum, A. (2012), *Iron Curtain. The Crushing of Eastern Europe 1944–1956* (London, Allen Lane).
Berghahn, V. (1982), *Modern Germany. Society, Economy and Politics in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
Buchanan, T. (2006), *Europe's Troubled Peace 1945–2000* (Oxford, Blackwell Publishing).
Buruma, I. (2013), *Year Zero. A History of 1945* (New York, The Penguin Press).

[27] Laqueur (1972), 180.

Carr, W. (1991), *A History of Germany 1815–1990* (London, Edward Arnold).

Clark, M. (1984), *Modern Italy 1871–1982* (London and New York, Longman).

Döblin, A. (1986), *Schicksalsreise. Bericht und Bekenntnis. Flucht und Exil 1940–1946*, (Munich and Zurich, Piper-Verlag).

Erdmann, K.D. (1980), *Das Ende des Reiches und die Neubildung deutscher Staaten* (Munich, Deutscher Taschenbuch-Verlag).

Frei, N. (2002), *Adenauer's Germany and the Nazi Past. The Politics of Amnesty and Integration* (New York, Columbia University Press).

Fulbrook, M. (2002), *History of Germany: 1918–2000. The Divided Nation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Gaddis, J.L. (2005), *The Cold War* (London, Allen Lane).

Gross, J. (2006), *Fear: Anti-Semitism in Poland after Auschwitz* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).

Hogan, M.J. (1987), *The Marshall Plan: America, Britain, and the Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1947–1952* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).
   http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511583728

Hogan, M.J. (1991), 'The Marshall Plan', in Charles S. Maier (ed.), *The Cold War in Europe. Era of a Divided Continent* (New York, Markus Wiener Publishing).

Judt, T. (2005), *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London, William Heinemann).

Kossert, A. (2008), *Kalte Heimat. Die Geschichte der deutschen Vertriebenen nach 1945* (Berlin, Siedler Verlag).

Laqueur, W. (1972), *Europe since Fascism* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books).

Larsen, S.U. & Hagvet, B. (eds) (1998), *Modern Europe after Fascism 1943–1980s*, 2 vols. (New York, Columbia University Press).

Lowe, K. (2012), *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* (London, Penguin Books).

Mann, M. (2005), *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press).

Milward, A.S. (1984), *The Reconstruction of Western Europe 1945–51* (London, Methuen).
   http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9780203393130

Naimark, N.M. (2001), *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press).

Shore, M. (2006), *Caviar and Ashes. A Warsaw Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918–1968* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press).

Taylor, F. (2011), *Exorcising Hitler: The Occupation and Denazificaion of Germany* (London, Bloomsbury).

Wasserstein, B. (2007), *Barbarisation and Civilisation: A History of Europe in Our Time* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).

Wee, H. van der (1987), *Prosperity and Upheaval: the World Economy 1945–1980* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books).

Note on the author: Ian Kershaw was, until his retirement in 2008, Professor of Modern History at the University of Sheffield. He is the author of a two-volumed biography of *Hitler* (1998, 2000), *Fateful Choices* (2008) and *The End* (2012), all published by Penguin Books, London. He is currently writing two volumes on Europe in the 20th century for the *Penguin History of Europe* series, the first of which, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914–1949*, was published in September 2015.

i.kershaw@sheffield.ac.uk

While 2 September 1945 is generally recognised as the final, official end of the Second World War, in many parts of the world fighting continued long beyond that date. And, given the vast scale of the war, which involved troops from every part of the world, it did not simultaneously come to an end everywhere. Instead, it ended in stages. Historian Keith Lowe explains how and when the war officially concluded, and asks – how important were the atomic bombs dropped over Japan in ending WW2? Out of the ashes: Europe's rebirth after the Second World War, 1945–1949. Ian Kershaw, Janet Carsten, Simon Frith. Published: 4 February 2016. by British Academy. in British Academy Lectures 2014-15. British Academy Lectures 2014-15 pp 167-184; doi:10.5871/bacad/9780197265987.003.0006. Publisher Website. Google Scholar. Europe's post-war welfare states wrought an authentic social revolution, dramatically improving the life-chances of middle and working classes alike. i f. WÃŠ. Marshall Aid i). The first delivery of Marshall Plan sugar from the Caribbean arrives at London's docks on February 3rd 1949 (greeted by the Labour Minister John Strachey, left, and Elmer Holmgreen, the Marshall Plan representative, center). j. Marshall Aid ii). Portraits of Dutch governors being moved out of the palace in Jakarta on December 26th 1949—the day before the inauguration of the Indonesian Republic. The loss of their 'Indies' was traumatic for the Dutch, who had now to settle for a reduced role back in Europe. Vietminh troops escorting French soldiers into captivity after the battle of Dien Bien Phu, May 1954. The treaty recognised the Post-War map of Central Europe. It recognised status quo in Eastern Europe. Both West Germany and the Soviet Union agreed to recognise the Post-War frontiers of Poland, Czechoslovakia and the frontier between East and West Germany. They agreed not to challenge those frontiers in the future. They agreed to support the entry of the two German states into the United Nations. On 8 May, 1945, the United States' forces were deep in the territory designated as the Russian zone, while Russians were in possession of the whole of Berlin. The Russians would not permit Allied entry into Berlin unless the Allies withdrew to their respective zones.