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# *Prologue: Our time*

In a small front room, amid the unfamiliar smells of Gauloise tobacco smoke and strong black coffee, I sit with my French host family staring at a small black-and-white television screen. I am fourteen years old, on a school exchange, and helping to translate. '*Armstrong il dit: un petit pas pour moi, un grand pas pour l'humanité!*' Soon a shadowy figure in a spacesuit is taking weightless leaps across the surface of the moon, a scene entirely familiar to me from the Tintin book *Explorers on the Moon*.

It's hard to recover a sense of just how remote continental Europe was to an English schoolboy in 1969. I won't say that France seemed as far away as the moon, but it was everything the English have traditionally packed into the word 'foreign'. Over there they eat frogs, ride scooters and have oodles of sex. Whatever you do, don't drink the water. Reaching the town of La Rochelle, on the Atlantic coast, had involved a seemingly endless journey by bus, tube, train, ferry (violently seasick), train and bus again. My brand-new, stiff-backed, very dark blue British passport had been closely examined and stamped at the frontier post. In my pocket, I nervously fingered some crisp, enormous French franc notes. To telephone home was a complicated procedure that involved wrestling with an operator down a crackling landline in bad French ('*Peut on reverser les charges?*').

Twenty years later, I was at a dissident rally in Budapest, signing copies of a Hungarian-language edition of my essays about central Europe. It was that year of wonders, 1989. Freedom and Europe – the two political causes closest to my heart – were marching forward arm in arm, to the music of Beethoven's ninth symphony, heralding a peaceful

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revolution that would open a new chapter of European and world history. No part of the continent was 'foreign' to me anymore. Living the paradox that encapsulates what it is to be a contemporary European, I was at home abroad.

So much at home, in fact, that one of my Hungarian friends turned to me, as we walked back through the warm, sensual streets of Budapest, and exclaimed, 'You must be descended from Scholem Asch!'

'No,' I replied, slightly taken aback.

'Then how come you're so interested in central Europe?'

As if a genetic explanation were somehow required for being emotionally involved in another part of Europe.

Our identities are given but also made. We can't choose our parents, but we can choose who we become. 'Basically I'm Chinese,' Franz Kafka wrote in a postcard to his fiancée. If I say 'basically I'm a central European' I'm not literally claiming descent from the central European Yiddish writer Asch, but declaring an elective affinity.

Since my birthplace is Wimbledon, England, I was indubitably born in Europe and therefore, in that rudimentary sense, born a European. Mapmakers, all the way back to Eratosthenes some 2,200 years ago, have always placed Britain in Europe, a region counterposed to Asia and Africa in what is probably the oldest continuous mental subdivision of the world. So long as there has been a geographical notion of Europe, our vaguely triangular islands have been part of it. But I was not 'born a European' in the stronger sense of being brought up to think of myself as one.

The only time my mother referred to herself as a European was when she reminisced about her youth in British-ruled India, where she was born a daughter of the Raj. 'As a European,' she told me, happily recalling some romantic months spent as a young woman in New Delhi at the end of the Second World War, 'one went out riding early in the morning.' In India, the English called themselves Europeans. Only back home do they still often like to deny a truth that seems self-evident to anyone looking at them from Washington, Beijing, Siberia or Tasmania.

I never heard my father talk of himself as a European, even though his formative experience had been landing on a Normandy beach with the first wave of British troops on D-Day and fighting with the liberation

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armies all the way across northern Europe, until he quietly, exhaustedly welcomed VE (Victory in Europe) Day in a tank somewhere on the north German plain. One of his favoured Conservative prime ministers, Harold Macmillan, supposedly remarked of the legendary French president Charles de Gaulle that 'he says Europe and means France'. But that was equally true of Englishmen of my father's ilk. When they said Europe they meant in the first place France, as the English had done for at least six centuries, since the Hundred Years' War shaped the national identities of France and England, each against the other.

For my father, Europe was definitely foreign and the European Union was one of those 'knavish tricks' that our national anthem calls upon patriotic Brits to frustrate. I once gave him a large chocolate euro for Christmas and he promptly devoured it, gnashing his teeth with theatrical delight. A lifelong, active Conservative, in his old age he briefly, to my horror, defected to UKIP, the UK Independence Party. Had he still been alive in 2016, he would undoubtedly have voted for Brexit.

I feel myself blessed by historical luck to have grown up in England, a land that I love; but that geographical fact did not make me a European. I became a conscious European some time between that first schoolboy inhalation of Gauloise tobacco smoke in 1969 and signing books in revolutionary Budapest in 1989. My diary for Friday 12 August 1977 records an evening spent in a West Berlin pizzeria with Karl, an Austrian 'electrician, film guide and taxi driver', whom my toffee-nosed twenty-two-year-old Oxford graduate self describes as 'a recognisably civilised fellow European'. (Wouldn't do to have an uncivilised pizza companion, would it?) Still and all, a *fellow* European.

This book is a personal history of Europe. It's not an autobiography. Rather, this is history illustrated by memoir. I draw on my own journals, notebooks, photographs, memories, reading, watching and listening over the last half-century, but also on the recollections of others. So when I say 'personal' history, I don't just mean 'my own'; I mean history as experienced by individual people and exemplified by their stories. I quote from my conversations with European leaders where this helps to illuminate the story but also from many encounters with so-called ordinary people, who are often more remarkable human beings than their leaders.

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I have visited or revisited some places to see for myself, as journalists do. I have also drawn on the best primary sources and most recent scholarship, as historians do. Unlike in the reportage and commentaries I wrote as things happened, here I make full use of the benefit of hindsight. Hindsight, they say, is 20:20, and although the view from the early 2020s is far from perfect, some things have become clearer.

I always strive to be accurate, truthful and fair, but I make no claim to be comprehensive, impartial or objective. A young Greek writer would paint a different Europe, as would an elderly Finn, a Scottish nationalist, a Swiss environmentalist or a Portuguese feminist. Europeans can have multiple homelands, but no one is equally at home in all parts of Europe.

If our places are different, so are our times. Some of my Polish friends, for example, were operating 'underground' during a period of intense repression in the early 1980s, using assumed names, furtively changing apartments at night and sending coded messages, for all the world like members of the Polish underground resistance to Nazi occupation during the Second World War. On one trip to visit them, I noted in my diary: 'departure from Heathrow: 1984, arrival: 1945'. Different generations may inhabit different times even when they live in the same place. My 2023 is not my students' 2023. Everyone has their own 'our time'.

Thus, if there are today some 850 million Europeans – using a broad geographical definition of Europe, including Russia, Turkey and the Caucasus – then there are 850 million individual Europes. Tell me your Europe and I will tell you who you are. But even that framing is not wide enough. Identity is a mix of the cards we are dealt and what we make of them. It's also a mix of how we view ourselves and how others view us. Europeans, who have a strong tendency to self-congratulation, need also to see themselves through the eyes of non-Europeans, especially in the very large portion of the world that has experienced European colonial rule.

Yet while we all have our own personal eras and our own Europes, they are located within shared timeframes and spaces. Today's Europe cannot be understood without going back to the period that Tony Judt encapsulated in the title of his history of Europe since 1945: *Postwar*. But overlapping and in some important ways superseding that postwar framing is post-Wall Europe – the one that emerged following the

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fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, the demise of the Soviet Union in December 1991 and the end of the Cold War division of our continent into two hostile blocs. In what follows, I offer both a personal account and an interpretation of Europe's history in these overlapping timeframes of post-war and post-Wall.

Europe's post-Wall period was not one of uninterrupted peace. It was punctuated by the bloody disintegration of former Yugoslavia in the 1990s, terrorist atrocities in many European cities, Russia's aggression against Georgia in 2008, its seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent, ongoing armed conflict in eastern Ukraine. Nonetheless, for the majority of Europeans this period could also be described as the Thirty Years' Peace. That came to an end with Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, starting a war on a scale and of a horror not seen in Europe since 1945. And 1945 is where our story must begin.

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## *Destroyed*

*(1945)*

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# Westen

'He came in the late afternoon, the Englishman,' says Heinrich Röpe, a sturdy Lower Saxon farmer with a face the colour of rhubarb. As we walk along the tranquil, grassy banks of the River Aller he shows me the spot next to his family's timber-framed home where British troops threw a temporary metal bridge across the water one day in April 1945. 'Montgomery crossed here!' he exclaims, with more than a hint of local pride. As a five-year-old boy, little Heini stood on tiptoe to peer through the window, watching the khaki army go by.

I have come to the now prosperous village of Westen (the name means West), in the middle of the north German plain, on account of three grainy black-and-white photographs. They show a group of British army officers watching a game of cricket. One of them is my father, aged twenty-six. He has noted on the back, in his characteristic forward-sloping hand, that the photos were taken in June 1945 in Westen, which his gun troop occupied at the end of the Second World War. For Dad, who had spent the best part of a year since D-Day fighting through France, Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany, seeing comrades wounded and killed around him, a quiet game of cricket must have been anything but ordinary. I study the tense face of a young man I never knew who would become the old man I loved. What was going through his mind?

Looking more closely, I notice in the background a woman with a toddler on her knee. Beyond her are several other children in civilian clothes. One boy has bright blond hair and high-waisted trousers held up by braces. Germans. How did it look to them, as they sauntered among the strange foreign soldiers playing this strange foreign game?

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Might I find someone in Westen who remembered a few details of that time?

So here I am, on a sunny spring day, sitting in a handsome eighteenth-century redbrick building that now serves as a communal museum and meeting place. Round a large wooden table in front of me are twelve elderly men and women and they remember . . . everything. Everything – and perhaps a little more.

'For me, as a Hitler Youth,' Albert Gödecke begins, arrestingly, 'it was completely clear that Adolf Hitler would win the war.' He believed it right up until the moment he met his first Tommy. (All self-respecting Westeners speak of the British forces in the singular, as 'the Englishman' or 'the Tommy'.) Fortunately, Albert spoke some English, so he said to the Englishman, 'Please sir . . .'

Heinrich Müller, a thickset old farmer with a head like a giant pumpkin, had actually been a Wehrmacht soldier, fighting on the Eastern front, until he was wounded. Now the Tommy stormed into his family farmstead in Westen and demanded, in broken German, '*Warum Du nicht Soldat?*' ('Why you not soldier?'). The Wehrmacht veteran pulled up his trouser leg and showed his wound.

Some thirty young Germans died in a hopeless defence of Hitler's front line on the east bank of the Aller. I walk down the rows of small, rectangular tombstones in the village cemetery, looking at the names and birthdates: Gerd Estemberger, aged seventeen; Wilhelm Braitsch, seventeen; Paul Jungblut, seventeen. Rudyard Kipling's epitaph for a raw recruit springs to mind:

> On the first hour of my first day
> In the front trench I fell.
> (Children in boxes at a play
> Stand up to watch it well.)

Meanwhile, German refugees had doubled the population of Westen from around 600 to more than 1,200. Some had come from Hamburg after the terrifying Anglo-American bombing raids known as Operation Gomorrah, which resulted in at least 900,000 people fleeing the pulverised city. Another group had been moved – 'in Adolf's time', as Albert puts it – from Bessarabia to Pomerania, and subsequently fled before

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the advancing Red Army 'with 140 horses'. I like the farmerly precision of the horse-count. Then there was an even larger trek of Germans fleeing for their lives from Silesia, which Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt had decreed should be given to Poland.

Helga Allerheiligen is one of those refugees from Silesia. A neat, petite woman who looks much younger than her eighty years, she takes up the story, helped by her husband Wilhelm. Yes, she came from Breslau (today Wrocław) 'in a cattle cart, with just three suitcases'. Her family was housed in the neighbouring village of Hülsen, in a camp previously used for Polish forced labourers. 'You should have seen the awful mess the Poles left those barracks in,' she confides in me later, with just a hint of old prejudice.

These German refugees were not welcomed by the locals, and certainly not as partners for their sons: 'Westen men should marry Westen girls.' But fortunately, the British troops organised dance evenings. The British soldiers 'wanted to get together with the German girls', explains Helga. At one such dance, in the pub in Hülsen, she met a fine young Westener called Wilhelm Allerheiligen. Wilhelm's father was appalled: 'She doesn't bring anything with her!' But love will have its way. So here they are, a whole lifetime later, remembering those good old, bad old days.

Her mention of the British troops organising dances 'to get together with the German girls' leads me to another question: did relationships ever develop with British soldiers? A long pause, then one of the men says teasingly: 'Are you looking for relatives in Westen?'

When we break up for coffee and home-made cakes, I show my father's cricket photos to the two Heinrichs. Do they have any idea where these might have been taken? They put their sturdy heads together. Why of course, they exclaim, that's the road to Wahnebergen, and look here, that's the telegraph pole at Nocke.

Could someone show me the place? Jan Osmers, the youngest of the group, volunteers to help. We jump into my rented Volkswagen and in no time there it is: unmistakably the meadow in the photos, with the telegraph pole in the same place. I stand ankle-deep in the sweet-smelling long grass and hear in my mind's ear the sounds of that cricket match on a warm summer afternoon all those years ago: 'Good shot, sir!' 'Howzat!'

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Jan, a slim figure with tousled silver hair and tinted spectacles, is the local historian. The proud inheritor of a windmill that has been in his family for five generations, he has written a detailed, carefully researched chronicle of Westen's history. He is just a couple of years older than me and we hit it off at once.

From the cricket meadow we drive to the *Steinlager,* the camp where forced labourers were housed in the neighbouring village of Döverden. In what is now known as the *Steinsiedlung* (the wartime camp became a post-war estate), solidly constructed barrack huts have been turned into modest, one-family bungalows, with neat lawns and small cars in the driveways. One bungalow flies the Stars and Stripes on a tall flagpole.

Many of the Nazis' forced labourers in this area lived with the farmers for whom they worked, while those farmers' sons went off to kill their labourers' relatives in Hitler's war. But the Poles, Russians, French and Belgians billeted in the *Steinlager* worked in the nearby Eibia gunpowder factory which, among other things, manufactured a primitive chemical weapon. Jan and I drive into a dense, coniferous forest in Barme, where the remains of this death factory can still be glimpsed amid the fir and pine trees. An abandoned works railway line leads directly to the plant and a still operational branch line runs close by. Railway lines – those varicose veins of Nazi evil, carrying poison, slavery and death to every corner of occupied Europe.

In the Barme forest you are already close to the heart of darkness, but you will be closer still if you turn off the main road back to Hanover and follow the signs to Bergen-Belsen. Here, just a few days after crossing the Aller, my father's fellow soldiers were confronted with horrors that few Brits had even dimly imagined. All around them they saw 'living skeletons with haggard yellowish faces' and smelled the 'stench of putrefying flesh'.

Maltreatment, starvation and disease stripped survivors of the last shreds of human dignity. Alan MacAuslan, a medical student working with the British forces, recalled:

> I looked down in the half light, and saw a woman crouching at my feet. She had black matted hair, well populated [with lice], and her ribs stood out as though there were nothing between them . . . She

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> was defecating, but she was so weak that she could not lift her buttocks from the floor, and as she had diarrhoea, the yellow liquid stools bubbled up over her thighs. Her feet were white and podgy from famine oedema, and she had scabies. As she crouched, she scratched her genital parts, which were scabetic too.

A Czech prisoner, Jan Belunek, told his liberators that he had seen corpses with their hearts cut out, and watched another prisoner 'sitting beside one of such corpses . . . eating flesh that I have no doubt was human flesh'.

Dead bodies were now stacked high upon each other displaying, as one British officer recorded, 'every trick that rigor mortis can play with the human countenance, every freakish posture that a sprawling human skeleton, thrown down at random, can assume'. If you visit the Bergen-Belsen memorial today, you can see original documentary film of captured camp guards ordered to wrench those naked, rigid corpses off lorries and drag them into mass graves, while camp survivors shout abuse at them in all the languages of Europe.

In just one day spent driving around what is today a prosperous and peaceful corner of north-western Europe, I have been transported back into our continent's darkest hour. Those ghosts are waiting there for you, just a conversation away. For every Helga, Albert and Heinrich, for every British soldier like my father, for every French, Polish or Russian forced labourer in the *Steinlager,* for every inmate of Bergen-Belsen, there were millions more.

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# Hell

Human beings have never succeeded in building heaven on earth, even – perhaps especially – when they have tried. But they have repeatedly built hell on earth. In the first half of the twentieth century, that is what Europeans did to their own continent, as they had in earlier centuries to other people's continents. No one else did it for us. This was European barbarism, done by Europeans to Europeans – and often in Europe's name. You cannot begin to understand what Europe has tried to do since 1945 unless you know about this hell.

'One death is a tragedy, one million deaths is a statistic.' Even leaving aside the difficulty of establishing precise figures, the mind is soon numbed by the numbers. Shall I tell you that some 18,000 people died in Bergen-Belsen in just one month, March 1945? Or that there were nearly eight million forced labourers in Germany at the end of the war? Or that some ninety-three per cent of living space in Düsseldorf was uninhabitable after the Allied bombing of the city? Or that Belarus lost some two million people out of a pre-war population of around nine million, with another three million or more displaced?

In a book that hauntingly applies to twentieth-century Europe the label that nineteenth-century European imperialists slapped on Africa, *Dark Continent,* Mark Mazower estimates that 'close to 90 million people were either killed or displaced in Europe between 1939 and 1948'. This means that roughly one out of every six Europeans was either killed or displaced. That is before we even get to the further millions who were merely starved, stricken by disease, raped, tortured, crippled, paupered, frozen, reduced to prostitution, orphaned, humiliated,

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degraded, widowed, psychologically scarred for life – let alone the long-term effects on their children and children's children.

As the Old Testament observes, the iniquity of the fathers is visited upon the children 'unto the third and fourth generation'. When I investigated the lives of the Stasi officers who had spied on me in East Germany in the late 1970s and early 80s, first reading their own Stasi personnel files and then interviewing them in depth, I was forcibly struck by the fact that all but one of them had grown up without a father. The fathers had died or disappeared in the war. As I talked to them it became clear to me how this had made them psychologically vulnerable to the appeal of the father state. Tens of millions of children all over Europe grew up without a father after 1945, and their mothers without a husband.

There were different circles of this hell. The rich generally did not starve, but an aristocratic background was no defence against penury. Depending on the date, it was better to be German or Hungarian than French or Dutch, then vice versa, but usually worse to be a Slav and worse still be Roma or Jewish. The inferno had a distinct geography. If you were in a neutral country, such as Switzerland, Sweden or Ireland, you avoided the worst horrors. Military losses, wartime bombing and post-war austerity imposed great suffering on Britain – my brother's second name, Brian, honours my father's best friend, killed in the war. The most terrible horrors were in the eastern half of the continent, in what Timothy Snyder has memorably called the bloodlands.

In the village cemetery in Westen, next to the small square gravestones of those German child soldiers who died on the banks of the river Aller in April 1945, is a memorial tablet that reads:

> *Ihr Findet Sie*
> *Wo Ihr Nach Ihnen Fragt*
> *Im Osten Gefallen*
> *Im Westen Beklagt*
> (You shall find them
> Where you ask after them
> Fallen in the East
> Lamented in the West)

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Lamented in the West – and in this village called West. Since this was a farming village well supplied with timber for firewood, there was not the famine and cold endured in most big cities, especially in the East. In the course of the liberation of western Europe, some British soldiers committed atrocities, including summary executions and vicious beatings, but there was nothing like the mass rape and brutality that the Red Army wreaked on German civilians. Albert, the former Hitler Youth, kindly assures me that in Westen the English were 'very calm and matter-of-fact'. But then, the British had not suffered what Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians and other east European peoples who served in the Red Army had suffered at German hands.

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# Osten

After an accident of personal history has taken me to the village of Westen I find myself wondering if there was a village called Osten, meaning East. Sure enough, there were three of them in the pre-1914 German Reich, and one is now Przysieczyn in western Poland. So here I am sitting in Przysieczyn, at another wooden table with another group of elderly men and women who, like their German counterparts in Westen, remember everything (and perhaps a little more).

A retired Polish schoolteacher dramatically holds up a battered, blackened French army metal water bottle, a present from a French soldier to his Polish fellow prisoner in a German prisoner-of-war camp. An old farmer remembers seeing the bodies of dead Germans lying around in the woods in early 1945. Red Army Cossack cavalry had gone hunting for them. But before that there had been the murder of 103 Poles by the SS in those same woods, following the German invasion in September 1939. And the mass deportation of Poles to the east.

The squat, yellow-walled building in which we sit in Przysieczyn had been the *Polenschule* (school for Poles) under Nazi occupation. Only German children had been allowed to attend the regular primary and secondary schools in the local town, Wągrowiec. Polish kids were compelled to travel out to primitive schools like this in the surrounding villages, where they were not allowed to speak Polish and received only elementary education in German until the age of twelve, when they had to go to work. After all, they were to be a subject race.

I meet Zbigniew Orywał, a hale and hearty former Olympic athlete in his nineties, who was a pupil at that Nazi 'school for Poles'. He recalls that no more than two Poles were allowed to walk together on

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the street under the German occupation. His father used to slip out at night, despite the curfew, to buy food from local farmers. If the Germans had caught him, he would have been shot on sight. Most of the Germans fled as the Red Army drew near in early 1945, taking the wagons and the horses. (Here, as in Westen, horses figure prominently in the conversation.) And he, too, remembers Red Army soldiers finishing off the few Germans who remained.

The Wągrowiec area illustrates the madness of those years, in which not just millions of men, women and children but whole countries were shunted around against their will like cattle. The region had been Polish for centuries until Prussia took it over by force in the first partition of Poland in 1772. As a result, it became part of united Germany after 1871. After the First World War, it became Poland again; in 1939, Germany again; in 1945, back to Poland. At the end of our conversation round the table in Przysieczyn, the former village mayor, a delightful, sturdy countryman called Jan Kaniewski, presents me with a large cardboard roll. Opening it, I find a wartime German map of the region preserved by his father, with every place name given in German: Wągrowiec is Eichenbrück and Przysieczyn, Osten. He tells me his father never mentioned the existence of this map until after the end of communist rule in 1989.

During the German occupation, nearly half the Polish population of Wągrowiec was deported, mainly to Nazi-occupied Polish territory to the east but also to do forced labour in places like Westen. The Poles' businesses and farms were usually taken over by Germans, many of them from the eastern parts of the German Reich. Adam Mesjasz, for example, a loquacious old farmer's son, recalls that when he was three years old, on 11 February 1941, his entire family was kicked out of their farmstead and loaded onto a freezing train to be transported to the east. Their farm was taken over by a 'Baltic German'. When Adam's family came back on Easter Day 1945, the Baltic Germans had fled westward – taking all the *horses*, he emphasises.

Mesjasz also has something to show me, a large book wrapped in brown paper. It turns out to be a photo album called 'Adolf Hitler: Photos from the Life of The Führer' – the Führer reading the newspaper, the Führer patting delightful blond children on the head, the Führer mobbed by adoring women – each photo carefully collected from some

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kind of subscriber serial and glued into the intended place in the printed volume by a local German farmer. Adam and his colleagues had found it hidden under the floorboards of a farmhouse when they were doing renovation work in the 1970s. A household ghost.

Those local Germans, some of whose families had lived there for generations, also fled in early 1945 and most of them settled in the Lüneburg area of north Germany, not far from Westen. Many of their farms in what was now again the Wągrowiec area were taken over by Poles who had, in their turn, been forcibly removed from Poland's eastern territories, now incorporated into Stalin's Soviet Union. Some of the Poles who drove Helga Allerheiligen, the old lady in Westen, out of the formerly German city of Breslau (today's Wrocław) had themselves been expelled 'with just three suitcases' from their equally long-settled and beloved homelands in what is now Ukraine or Belarus. Here was Europe's mad carousel of involuntary displacement.

The vengeance wreaked by advancing Soviet troops on Germans, guilty and innocent alike, was not confined to summary executions and plunder. An eyewitness reported that when the Red Army reached the Baltic port of Danzig (today's Gdańsk), 'Nearly all the women were raped – among the victims were old women of sixty and seventy-five and girls of fifteen or even twelve. Many were raped ten, twenty or thirty times.' The men were often forced to watch. 'Men nowadays all seem to have shrunk,' says Maria in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's film *The Marriage of Maria Braun*. German men, that is.

In Immanuel Kant's home town of Königsberg, then being forcibly transformed into the Soviet city of Kaliningrad, a young doctor, Hans von Lehndorff, heard women who were being subjected to endless brutal rapes cry out to the Red Army soldiers: 'Shoot me! Just shoot me!' 'Oh,' Lehndorff exclaims, 'how many envious looks the dead must endure!' All across devastated Europe there were innumerable suicides.

When Lehndorff and his remaining compatriots were finally driven out of their nearby East Prussian homeland by the new Polish authorities, the noble doctor told his fellow Germans, 'the [Polish] local councillor here says he's sorry we have to leave our homeland in this way. But he can't change it, because our people earlier did the same thing to the Poles – and that is unfortunately true.'

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It is futile to try to reckon these sufferings off against each other, in a kind of moral double-entry bookkeeping. The poet W. H. Auden captures the essential truth:

> I and the public know
> What all schoolchildren learn,
> Those to whom evil is done
> Do evil in return.

In all this panorama of horror, with its endless variations of torment resembling nothing so much as Hieronymus Bosch's depictions of hell, what most pierces the heart is the children: orphaned, abandoned, abused, traumatised. In the neighbourhood of Westen, the babies of forced labourers were taken from their mothers during the war and kept in crude orphanages – two of them converted pigsties and another a stables. Many of the infants died. Those who survived were psychologically scarred for life. Immediately after the war, English nurses were astonished at the behaviour of Jewish children who had survived the concentration camps. If a child went missing from the group, the others would say quite matter-of-factly: 'Oh, he's dead'. To them, that was normality.

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# Zero, recurring

The idea that 1945 was Year Zero for Europe contains a truth and two traps. The important truth is that for most Europeans there was some moment when they said: 'That horror is at last over; let's now start to rebuild a better place from the rubble.'

The first trap is to take this as a starting point without regard to Year -1 or Year -10, the years that led to this point. You cannot understand the horrors inflicted on innocent Germans in 1945 unless you know what was done by Germans to other Germans, starting in 1933, and then to other Europeans, starting with the annexation of Austria and parts of Czechoslovakia in 1938. For the peoples of the Soviet Union, the brutality was there from the very beginning of Soviet rule, in 1917. At least eight million people died in the Russian civil war, which lasted into the early 1920s, and close to four million more in the Ukrainian famine at the beginning of the 1930s. To understand these developments, in turn, you need to go back at least to 1914, and the causes, course and legacy of the First World War. Some of the disputes between states and peoples that re-emerged in the period after 1989 had origins that can be traced back to the dissolution of the pre-1914 Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires and the peace settlement imposed by the victorious Allies at the end of that war.

The second trap is to assume that all Europeans had the same Year Zero – that is, 1945. For southern Italy, Year Zero was 1943, following the Allied invasion. For much of eastern Europe, it began in 1944, as the Red Army swept forward, but definitely did not end in 1945. In Ukraine and Poland there was fierce fighting between communist and anti-communist forces, and between Poles and Ukrainians, well into the

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late 1940s. Yugoslavia and Greece saw equally ferocious struggles, with British forces supporting communist partisans in Yugoslavia while other British forces suppressed communist partisans in Greece.

There was no bright line separating hot war from cold war. Austria only became securely part of the West with its state treaty in 1955. In Estonia, the extraordinary 'Forest Brothers' went on fighting the Russian occupation from their camouflaged woodland hideouts well into the 1950s. The last surviving Forest Brother, August Sabbe, died when the KGB tried to arrest him in 1978. Across the Soviet Union, the vast network of camps that came to be known as the Gulag (from the Russian acronym for Main Administration of Camps) continued to inflict the torments described by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in *The Gulag Archipelago*. The Gulag was officially closed in 1960 but special detention centres for political prisoners survived well into the 1980s.

From the mid-1950s onwards, the oppression and brutality endured by most people in the Soviet bloc was less extreme than it had been in the 1930s and 40s. But as the Czech dissident playwright Václav Havel kept pointing out, the 'peace' experienced by people living in a country like Czechoslovakia was not comparable with the peace enjoyed by citizens of France, the Netherlands or Belgium. It was punctuated by the Soviet invasions of Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, as well as the declaration of a 'state of war' in Poland in 1981, and it was pockmarked by everyday police repression.

Nor was this simply an east–west divide. Portugal and Spain continued to live under fascist dictatorships, so their Year Zero only came with the end of those dictatorships in the mid-1970s. Perhaps more accurately, they had two Year Zeros. Greece fell under the military rule of the Colonels in 1967 and only re-emerged in 1974.

Walking up the East German part of Friedrichstrasse a couple of days after the Berlin Wall was breached on 9 November 1989, I met a man who declared euphorically '28 years and 91 days!' – the exact time his family had been stuck behind the Wall. He told me he'd just seen a handwritten poster that declared: 'Only today is the war really over'. For the societies of the Soviet-dominated eastern half of Europe, 1989 was their second Year Zero.

No sooner had we said 'goodbye to all that' than all that came back

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with a vengeance in former Yugoslavia. War. Ethnic cleansing. Rape as a weapon. Concentration camps. Terror and lies. I will never forget sitting in Sarajevo in 1995 with a magazine editor who talked expansively about the time 'after the war', occasionally turning away to feed a primitive stove with sawn-off chunks of old furniture. For a moment, I thought he was referring to post-1945; then I realised that for him 'after the war' meant post-1995.

As I write, a major land war continues in Ukraine, launched by Vladimir Putin with a full-scale invasion in February 2022 and prosecuted by Russian armed forces with indiscriminate brutality. When people there can eventually say 'after the war' they will mean post-2023, or whenever the war finally ends. That will be yet another Year Zero. In Europe, zero is a recurring number.

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# Of fathers and fatherlands

While we drive from the cricket field in Westen to the forest of Barme, Jan and I talk about our fathers. Jan's father served in the Waffen-SS, the combat arm of the Nazis' dreaded SS. Afterwards, Hartmut Osmers hardly ever talked about the war, except to say 'it was a hard time'. He loathed the British, who had interned him for more than two years after 1945, in a camp where he was not kindly treated. Tragicomically, his antipathy to all things British extended even to the Beatles. Years later, he had been appalled when, in one of the great gestures of post-war Europe, West German Chancellor Willy Brandt fell to his knees in Warsaw in 1970, at the monument to the heroes of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. 'That he bows down before the *Poles*!' the old Waffen-SS man had exclaimed.

After fighting on the Eastern front, Hartmut Osmers had been stationed in Normandy with the 10th SS Panzer Division, which fought fiercely to stall the British advance following the D-Day landings. He once told his son that of 120 men in his company, only thirty had survived. So Jan's father might easily have killed my father, or mine his. A veteran of the ferocious hand-to-hand fighting in the bocage, the densely wooded and hedgerowed Normandy countryside, recalled seeing the corpse of a British soldier who had been

> run through the middle of his body by a German rifle and bayonet which had pinned him to a tree. At the same time, [the bayoneted British soldier] had reached over . . . and plunged his dagger into the middle of his opponent's back. The two had died at some time during the night but in daylight could be seen propping each other up.

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It could have been our fathers. One of Dad's wartime anecdotes was of how, somewhere in the bocage not far from Bayeux, he found himself just the other side of a thick, high hedge from a German tank. He could distinctly hear the tank commander barking orders in German, but fortunately neither of them could see through the hedge. He always remembered that near-death moment.

My father had what in the Britain of my childhood was referred to as 'a good war'. (Is there any other European country where people would talk of 'a good war'?) At about 7.30 a.m. on D-Day, 6 June 1944, Captain John Garton Ash landed with the first assault wave of the Green Howards on King section of Gold Beach and scrambled up towards a landmark in the small Normandy town of Ver-sur-Mer that they knew as 'lavatory pan house', because of the shape of its driveway on the aerial reconnaissance photos, and then on to take the German artillery emplacement beyond. Months of hard fighting followed. Corpses and dead cows lay scattered in the fields.

As a forward observation officer for the artillery, he would advance with the front line of the infantry and climb up to the highest observation point – often a church tower – in order to radio back the most accurate firing instructions to the guns behind. The enemy would soon guess that someone was up there. In November 1944, after some especially fierce fighting, he wrote home to his parents:

> I know when we used to go on holiday we always looked round lots of churches, but one thing in the future, never ask me to look at a church tower. They have an unfortunate way of being knocked down violently and frequently.

This unfortunate habit of church towers was even mentioned in the citation for his Military Cross.

The war was the defining experience of Dad's life. Like the veterans of Agincourt invoked by Shakespeare's King Henry V ('This story shall the good man teach his son'), he would often tell us anecdotes of his wartime service: the one about the German tank, for example, or how, while occupying the little village of Westen, his troop received orders to search for and confiscate all uniforms. Next morning a delegation from the village knocked on his door: Could they please have the local

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firemen's uniforms back? Perhaps my father was the officer who ordered Jan's father – in summer 1945, Hartmut Osmers was hiding in the family windmill in Westen, having burned the SS tattoo off his upper arm with hydrochloric acid – to be detained and sent to a British internment camp, generating his lifelong Anglophobia. But Dad never told me that story.

The British gunners whiled away the dreary months in Westen, as they waited impatiently to begin the rest of their lives, by refashioning 25-pounder artillery shells into heavy metal ashtrays. Dad carefully preserved his and it now has a place of honour on the mantelpiece in my study. 'Artillery shells into ashtrays!' may be less poetic than 'Swords into ploughshares!' but this ashtray has the untrumpable advantage of reality.

My father's anecdotes remained firmly within a very English vein of semi-humorous understatement. As with most Englishmen of his generation, there was so much he just never talked about, even when I sat down to interview him about his wartime experience near the end of his life. Yet occasionally, in those last years, when he was well into his nineties, he would mention that he had slept badly.

Why?

'Oh, you know, thinking about things I saw in the war.'

What were those 'things' exactly? Being English, old school, stiff upper lip, he would never say. But among the personal papers I found when he died in 2014 was a flimsy carbon copy sheet, one of many reminiscences of shared actions written by former comrades-in-arms. 'Snow – blood red snow –,' begins this report by an Irish officer, 'a Company and a half of the 13th Para Battalion, obliterated on the start line . . .' Dead friends. Corpses in the fields. Mangled body parts stuck in the hedges. Perhaps there were also split-second decisions for which my father still rebuked himself? Why didn't I help that man there? If only. In the same folder, he prayerfully preserved his correspondence with the widows and mothers of soldiers who had fallen while serving in his gun troop.

Nearly seventy years on, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, those memories still kept him from his sleep. As Dad lay awake at night in Roehampton, a leafy corner of south-west London, so surely did old men of other nations lie awake in Naples, Marseille, Kraków and Dresden, afflicted by cognate memories and cousin ghosts. Like radiation, evil has such a long half-life.

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# The memory engine

Personal memories, starting with those from the hell that Europeans made for themselves on earth, are among the strongest drivers of everything that Europe has done and become since 1945. I call it the memory engine. Take Bronisław Geremek, for example, a key figure in Poland's struggle for freedom in the last decades of the twentieth century and one of the great Europeans of our time. He carried deep inside him enough memories for three lifetimes, including early experience of the lowest circles of hell. Towards the end of his life, Bronek – as close friends knew him – recalled in filmic detail the following scene from his early life.

It is 1942. In a tram rattling through Nazi-occupied Warsaw sits an emaciated, half-starved ten-year-old boy. Bronek. He is wearing four sweaters, yet still he shivers despite the August heat. Everyone looks at him curiously. Everyone, he is sure, sees that he is a Jewish kid who has slipped out of the Warsaw ghetto through a hole in the wall. Luckily, no one denounces him, and a Polish passenger warns him to watch out for a German sitting in the section marked *'Nur für Deutsche'* ('Germans only'). Amazingly, after recovering his health in the care of family friends, he returns to his parents inside the ghetto, then escapes a second time by slipping away from a funeral procession to the Jewish burial ground. So Bronek survived, while his father was murdered in a Nazi extermination camp and his brother sent to Bergen-Belsen, the camp liberated by British soldiers.

Having escaped the horrors of the ghetto ('the world burned before my eyes'), he was brought up by his mother, who had also managed to escape, and a Polish Catholic stepfather, whose surname he took – Geremek, instead of the Jewish Lewertow. The teenage Bronek served as an altar boy and was taught by an inspiring priest in the Sodality of

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