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Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century

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Raymond Pearson

On the cusp of the new millenium, historians of Europe are already having trouble with the twentieth century. Just a few months away from the year 2000, historians are infected with their very own peculiar form of millenium bug, feverishly impelled to jump the chronological gun and produce a retrospective evaluation of the entire twentieth century in the grim hope that nothing too radical will occur in 1999 to overtake their premature rush to fin-de-siecle judgement.

At the time of reviewing, Mark Mazower looks as though he is going to escape the nemesis Lying in wait for all contemporary historians who dare to bring their accounts fully up to date. His chronological cut-off point in reality lies around May 1997, the date of the Labour Party triumph in the most recent British general election. To infer from this that *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* is therefore Britain-orientated or even an offensively British history of Europe would, however, be a mistake. Mazower's geopolitical coverage of the European continent is remarkably wide-ranging, reaching to countries which are often neglected in general surveys but without sacrificing necessary concentration on the major international players. For instance, there is greater concern with such countries as Sweden, Belgium and Holland than one has come to expect in synoptic histories of Europe. On occasion, this can lead to a certain quirkiness of coverage: Macedonia, for example, receives more attention than Norway or Portugal. Greece also gets more than twice the textual coverage of Spain, which may be historiographically provocative but is understandable

(and probably defensible) for a scholar whose best-known publication to date has been *Inside Hitler's Greece_ The Experience of Occupation. 1941-1945*, a winner of the prestigious Longman History Today Book of the Year prize.

If Mazower's closing date is effectively and justifiably 1997, his practical starting date is, more controversially, around 1919. There is no attempt to cover the years 1900-1914 presumably on the grounds that they fundamentally constitute the last phase of the 'long nineteenth century'. This is certainly a tenable historical position, although some introductory impression of the pre-1914 world never comes amiss. More difficult to defend is the deliberate omission of coverage of the First World War. Mazower parachutes in around 1919, hitting the ground running by plunging into the problems of the new post-war Europe with only occasional backward glances at the trauma of the Great War. Even the October Revolution in Russia in October 1917, as epoch-making an historical turning-point as may be imagined, is only grudgingly and therefore sparingly considered. For a book on twentieth century Europe published on the eightieth anniversary of the end of the Great War to omit serious consideration of the years 1914-1918 does seem almost perverse. To spring (unasked) to the author's defence, Mazower may have been persuaded perhaps still unwisely - to complement rather than attempt to compete with the spate of books published on the Great War (headed by Niall Ferguson's *The Pity of War*) which has uncoincidentally greeted that anniversary.

The chronological run of Mazower's twentieth century - from 1919 to 1997 therefore bears comparison with Eric Hobsbawm's recent *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, albeit retarded some five years. Within Mazower's 'shortish' century, the balance of coverage strongly favours the early over the later twentieth century. Two-thirds of the text relates to the period before 1950, one-third to the half-century after 1950. This chronological imbalance is all the more striking in view of the volume's real starting-date of 1919. Mazower is not unaware of what appears to be neglect of the later twentieth century: 'until very recently historians have mostly left the subject of post-war Western Europe to social scientists. It is still hard to see this as a period of history rather than as a series of contemporary social, political and economic issues' (p.478). This quasi-apologetic opinion comes close to suggesting that 'real' history ends in 1945, denying what is conventionally labelled 'contemporary history' unqualified academic respectability. While sharing to some measure Mazower's professional uneasiness with the post 1945 period, the year 2000 is surely the defining psychological moment for extending the cut-off point for 'real history' well into the last fifty years. If A-Level History syllabuses now reach to 1968, it is high time for the full historicisation of (at very least) the establishment of Yalta-Europe and the launching of the Cold War.

To give Mazower his due, his coverage of the decade of the 1940s is the best in the book, indeed the heart of the book. His interpretation of the brief duration but enduring legacy of the Nazi *Neuordnung* across much of Europe is entirely convincing: 'no experience was more crucial to the development of Europe in the twentieth century ... in the space of eight years, a sea-change took place in Europe's political and social attitudes' (p.143). Moreover, the developments of the immediate post-1945 period, many of which were to become institutionalised for some forty years, were direct legatees of the Second World War in general and the Nazi 'New Order' in particular. Aside from identifying Albert Speer as an unwitting progenitor of the future European Union, Mazower could have gone further in demonstrating the continuities between the Nazi *Neuordnung* across eastern Europe and the 'Soviet Reich' or Communist 'Newer Order' which was its almost inevitable successor. Even so, the central emphasis on the pivotal importance of the whole decade following 1939, described as 'the century's watershed' (p. x), is persuasive to the point of being virtually incontestable.

To interject what some regard as a 'British dimension' of comment for a moment, Mazower is never in doubt about the central historical importance of both the rise of Fascism and the Second World War. Not for him any sympathy with Bernadetto Croce's assertion that Fascism was a mere parenthesis in the history of Italy - what post-war Italians (and even post-war Germans) might subsequently have described as an ephemeral aberration (or perhaps an uncharacteristic 'moment of madness'). Condemning but not scape-goating Germany, Mazower is also rightly insistent on highlighting the prevalence of consensus and collaboration (at different levels) over resistance and partisanship across the Nazi *Neuordnung*. Nor does Mazower have any truck with contemporary 'de-emphasising' of the impact of the Second World War Michael Naumann, the

German Minister of Culture, may have recently accused the British of an unhealthy cultish obsession with the Second World War, ostensibly an oddity given the relatively low British casualty rate. Mazower would certainly be among the last to subscribe to any future not-mentioning-the-war Basil Fawlty school of twentieth-century history.

To turn abruptly from low farce to high tragedy, the graphic description of the almost Apocalyptic demographic damage and displacement of the crucial decade of the 1940s is a related highpoint of Mazower's narrative. To offer a searing indictment of the Jewish Holocaust is as emotionally shocking as it is historically necessary but Mazower shows commendable restraint and exemplary objectivity: he avoids the 'sole martyr' syndrome, places the appalling Jewish experience in the broader context of deliberate victimisation and fortuitous suffering, and bravely identifies the Jews and Germans jointly as the supreme (if variously innocent and guilty) victims of the physically destructive and psychologically traumatic decade of the 1940s. What may be termed the demographic dimension is invariably superbly covered throughout Mazower's book, with a special regard for the plight of national and religious minorities in an era of ethnic cleansing. It could, nevertheless, be argued that his sensitivity lets him down over the 'gypsies'. To refer to the Rom by their pejorative - if time-dishonoured - exonym is offensive enough; but repeatedly not capitalising 'Gypsy' (as on pages 32, 41, 53, 99 and 100) and therefore implying membership of an inferior national category only adds gratuitous insult to massive (if not quite Jewish-scale) wartime injury.

The book has some failings - but not vices - as well as manifest strengths and virtues. While strong on 'low culture' and prolific in his provision of contemporary quotations illustrating the mentalites of changing European society, Mazower is weak on the 'high' or 'classic' culture of literature, music and art. The diplomatic dimension of international, especially Great Power relations is distinctly low-key. The associated military dimension also figures rarely and meagrely: the First World War is in any case excluded from consideration but even the Second World War comes across as a phenomenon which is bizarrely battle-free.

More generally, the account is long on balance but much shorter on personalities, very far from the sub-Carlyle concept of history as 'the collected biographies of great men'. Such luminaries as Adolf Hitler, Benito Mussolini, Joseph Stalin and Margaret Thatcher are not permitted to strut their stuff on Mazower's historical stage. Similarly, the emphasis is on historical process, not historical events: the March on Rome, the battle of Stalingrad, the Berlin Airlift, the Hungarian Uprising, the Prague Spring and the fall of the Berlin Wall are just samples from a twentieth-century cavalcade of dramatic (and photogenic) episodes which fail to be accorded any high profile in this narrative. Perhaps it is significant that the book contains no illustrations other than the admittedly powerful and rather shocking dust-cover photograph of a woman member of the British Union of Fascists brandishing a swastika-centred Union Jack. Where other histories of the twentieth century make a feature of sets of contemporary photographs (notably Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes*), Mazower's conscious emphasis on the essentially unpictorial and unfilmable, even invisible processes of socio-economic development renders illustrations inappropriate, distracting and even irrelevant.

This point raises the question of the projected readership for the book. *Dark Continent* is not really academic history since it makes no claim to utilise hitherto unavailable sources to illuminate hitherto-neglected historical episodes (unlike Mazower's earlier *Inside Hitler's Greece*). Neither is the book popular history, since it implicitly presupposes at least a basic knowledge of the events and developments of twentieth-century Europe yet plays down the historical elements of personality and drama. In this respect, *Dark Continent* could not, for example, be recommended as a first-year student textbook, though its value to brighter students later in their undergraduate careers is indisputable. Positioned midway between academic and popular history, which do not necessarily represent two stools between which to fall, the book might be most conveniently characterised as accessible 'serious' history.

'Serious' is not the same as 'dark' and, in following Mazower's decade by decade progression through the twentieth century, one becomes increasingly uneasy about the overall title of the book. It has already been remarked that the last fifty years receive significantly less coverage than the pre-1950 period. The quality of the coverage for the later twentieth century also lacks the authority and verve of the earlier chapters. The decolonisation of overseas empire, surely a grand theme of post-war western Europe rates barely a mention.

Mazower promises much with such early sardonic remarks as 'communism turned out to be the last, and perhaps the highest, stage of imperialism' (p. 51) but he fails to deliver on the Soviet Empire. After making some tantalisingly laconic observations comparing the Soviet and western imperial experiences (p. 383), the momentous developments across eastern Europe over the 1980s and 1990s are lightly, sometimes almost perfunctorily treated. Even major events in the evolution of the European Union are skimmed: neither the Treaty of Rome nor the Maastricht Treaty are considered in the text (and accordingly merit no entry in the index).

Is Mazower running out of steam as he moves further away from his specialist period of the 1940s? Is this deteriorating coverage the product of embarrassment at the declining 'darkness' of post-war Europe? In what way is Europe in the twentieth century the (or possibly just _) 'dark continent', a phrase conventionally associated with nineteenth-century European perceptions of Africa? Is Europe in the twentieth century 'darker' than Europe in the nineteenth century? Is Europe any 'darker' than the other four continents over the twentieth century?

To restrict discussion to the European continent alone, the dilemma may well lie in attempting to concoct a phrase which has equal and appropriate application to the entire century. Hobsbawm was probably in a similar quandary coming up with his title *Age of Extremes*, defensively choosing to insert such period subtitles as 'Age of Catastrophe' and 'Golden Age'. Without denying for one nano-second the intimate relationship between the pre-1945 and post-1945 Europes, to attempt to bolt together two very different half-centuries in the interests of chronological neatness or commercial convenience may be held to affront the historical realities.

Twentieth-century Europe is surely not uniformly 'dark'. It may be argued that inter-war Europe gets progressively 'darker', culminating in the 1940s, unarguably the 'darkest decade' of the twentieth century. After the era of 'darkness at noon', things surely lighten up, dispelling at least some of the all-encircling gloom. Europe since 1950 has certainly not been all light (still less sweetness) but there has certainly been substantial improvement over the pre-1950 period. As Mazower himself so tellingly remarks, the first half-century claimed over sixty million European lives, the second half-century less than one million lives (p. 405). Nearing his conclusion, Mazower notes of the decade of the 1990s that 'in general eastern Europe, and therefore Europe as a whole, was a far more stable place than at any time earlier in the century' (p. 400). To inject briefly a frivolous ad hominem dimension into the argument, the cheerful face of the author on the dust-jacket photograph is seriously at odds with the title - but not the substance and argument of *Dark Continent*. The title does a disservice to Mazower by implying black-and-white judgements on a uniformly benighted history, not the sophisticated and balanced interpretation of a lightening, even brightening history that he so conscientiously delivers. The title is a mistake, sending the wrong monochrome message regarding both twentieth-century Europe and the author's professionally polychromatic treatment of its richly-textured history.

The cover blurb is also misleading. There is, for example, a significant difference between saying that 'eastern Europe has been the unfortunate laboratory for all three of the century's ideological experiments' (p. 253) and the cover claim that Europe has been 'a nightmarish laboratory for social and political engineering, inventing and re-inventing itself through war, revolution and ideological competition'. If Mazower himself penned (or keyed in) both statements, one can only regret the contrast between the aphoristic judgement of the former and the sensationalist hype of the latter. If, however, Mazower did not contribute the copy for the cover blurb, it would seem that the reputation of his formidable scholarship has not been well served by his publisher.

Just as Mazower ends his account on a beguilingly upbeat note for a volume with so downbeat a title, so this review must close on an admiring and congratulatory note after what may seem a catalogue of complaints and niggles. *Dark Continent* is neither an introductory survey, a comprehensive text-book nor an ingratiating 'good read'. Rather, it is a deeply serious - yet often witty - and consummately professional - but never hermetic - interpretative account of Europe since the First World War which represents an outstanding and - one is tempted to say - enlightening addition to the existing historiography. The millennium bug may well be

just a dark and distant memory before a more original and thought-provoking retrospective reading of twentieth-century Europe sees the light of day.

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