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A Companion to Europe since 1945

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Klaus Larres
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Pertti Ahonen

This large edited volume on the history of post-1945 Europe is one of the latest additions to the extensive and steadily growing series of Blackwell Companions to History, whose volumes cover a wide range of fields in British, European, American, and World history. It tackles the daunting task of trying to condense the essentials of Europe?s post-war development ? east and west, north and south ? into a series of overview chapters within the confines of one hardback volume. The result is a success, albeit not a fully unqualified one. While the essays included here do convince in their respective fields, some fairly significant gaps in the volume?s overall coverage make this a somewhat incomplete companion to post-Second World War European history.

The book consists of 22 relatively concise chapters, most of them roughly 20 pages long, divided into four sections. The first and shortest section, composed of just two essays, covers the transition from the Second World War to the Cold War during the latter half of the 1940s. The second section features eight chapters on the broad theme of ?Europe and the Cold War World?. The last two sections, in turn, concentrate on the years since the fall of the Iron Curtain. Section three examines ?political and economic developments? in post-1990 Europe over the course of six chapters, whereas the concluding section?s five essays focus on ?social and cultural developments? in the same period.

Thematically, the book pays particular attention to Cold War and post-Cold War high politics and

international relations on the one hand and to European integration on the other. The story of European integration, from its federalist inter-war roots to ongoing post-Cold War projects, forms the specific focus of five chapters and features prominently in several others. International relations in their different non-EEC/EU manifestations, ranging from the collapse of the Second World War great power alliance to the dynamics of the European Cold War and to the ongoing attempts to build a new basis for trans-Atlantic relations in the transformed post-1990 world, stand at the centre of another five chapters. The rest of the book consists of individual essays on particular themes, including economic developments and globalization, decolonization, political parties, churches and Christianity, terrorism, migration, social movements, welfare policies as well as gender relations and family structures.

Much about this volume works commendably well. The individual chapters are well-organised and clearly presented. Most pack an impressive amount of relevant information into a relatively short space. Many are highly readable, with a strong narrative flow that should make them accessible to a potentially quite wide audience. Another major asset lies in the general approach that the entire volume adopts. All the chapters approach the material in a trans-national fashion, describing and analyzing broad trends, albeit with an eye for national specificities and contrasts, which is a welcome counterpoint to the continuing predominance of the nation-state paradigm in much of the scholarship on post-1945 European history. Each essay contains a bibliography of relevant key works in English, which vary considerably in length ? from a page or two to as many as seven or eight ? but invariably provide a useful point of departure for those in search of further reading on particular topics. Most chapters also feature an additional ?further reading? section, essentially a very brief bibliographical essay about the key secondary literature.

Although the quality of the contributions is high throughout, certain chapters stand out for their ability to crystallize complicated material into concise and informative essay form. Some of the chapters on the history of European integration belong to this category. Klaus Larres, for example, provides an excellent overview of American attitudes and policies towards European integration from1945 to 1990, and Carine Germond lucidly explores the moves towards further unification of Europe sparked by the end of the Cold War. Other stand-out contributions include Dianne Kirby?s far-ranging exploration of the role churches in the European Cold War and Panikos Panayi?s illuminating and multi-faceted discussion of cross-border migration and its impact on post-1945 Europe. Mark Kramer?s analysis of the Cold War from the perspective of the Eastern bloc in general and the Kremlin in particular is also of a characteristically high quality.

Despite its various strengths, this companion to post-Second World War European history also has its weaknesses, which, at least in this reviewer?s opinion, are best categorized as problems of omission rather than commission. In my mind, the particular focus of the contributions featured in the volume raises two broader questions about what a general companion to contemporary European history could ? and ideally should ? cover. One of these question is geographical and the other thematic.

Geographically, this edition is predominantly focused on Western Europe. The core countries of the old EEC receive particularly intensive attention, although other parts of Western Europe also feature relatively prominently from time to time, partly in predictable contexts. The Scandinavian countries, for example, are most prominently represented in the chapters on welfare policies and gender relations. Eastern Europe is covered much less extensively, particularly in the pre-1990 period. Mark Kramer?s chapter on ?The Soviet Bloc and the Cold War in Europe? is the only contribution that deals specifically with the eastern half of the continent during the Cold War, and its primary focus lies on the Soviet Union?s foreign policy. Although a handful of other chapters, including the essays on economic developments by Ian Jackson, on the churches by Dianne Kirby, and on new social movements by Ingolfur Blühdorn also pay some attention to the former Eastern bloc, the East-West balance remains very uneven. Many key developments in Eastern Europe in the post-1945 years remain largely unexplored, particularly from the perspective of the region?s non-hegemonic powers: the establishment and consolidation of Communist regimes, the experience of living under those regimes, the upheavals that shook the Soviet bloc in 1953, 1956, 1968, and the ultimate collapse of East European Communism, to name a few.

Thematically, the book has a rather political focus. International relations and high politics stand at the centre of most of the contributions, and the handful of chapters that stretch beyond this realm into other fields, such as broader social developments, also mostly adopt a primarily top-down approach, typically emphasizing formal institutions and political processes. As a result, some very important themes of post-1945 European history remain either marginalized or absent. Social trends and developments at the grassroots levels receive little attention, particular in the pre-1990 period. Cultural history fares even less well; no chapter addresses European culture at either the high or popular levels or in any period. Some other approaches that have been dominant in recent research on post-1945 European history also remain absent. Questions of memory and identity politics, particularly vis-à-vis the Second World War and its legacies, for example, are not addressed anywhere in the volume. As a result, the coverage of the most recent period of European history provided here is a bit spotty.

To be fair, a single volume on as complex and diffuse a topic as post-1945 Europe cannot cover everything. Arguably, a book with a relatively restricted emphasis on just a handful of key themes can be tighter and more focused than a more far-ranging collection, and this volume does indeed deliver high quality results in the areas on which it concentrates. But as a companion to Europe and European history in general since 1945, it leaves some large gaps. It is a valuable addition to the relevant literature and will undoubtedly prove useful to scholars and students alike. But it is probably best used in combination with other works that pay more attention to themes largely sidelined here, such as developments in social and cultural history.

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