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Ian Buruma, *Year Zero: A History of 1945*. New York: Penguin, 2013. Pp. 368. ISBN 978-1-59420-436-4.

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Once upon a time, World War II ended with V-J Day, 15 August 1945. The whole world celebrated, the soldiers came home, and all was well. The reality was hardly so simple, or pleasant. As Ian Buruma explains in his brilliant, kaleidoscopic *Year Zero*, millions of people were about to die, millions more would be uprooted, and hundreds of millions would end up living under tyrannies imposed not just by Josef Stalin, but by the supposedly more liberal Western allies.

The author organizes his story thematically within broad, more or less chronological phases, treated in the book's three parts: "Liberation Complex," "Clearing the Rubble," and "Never Again." The first section, on the immediate aftermath of the war, concerns such emotions as exultation—among the victors and the liberated—and the desire for vengeance. Buruma's technique is to present a series of illustrative vignettes from different countries, even different continents. Among the most notorious and vicious brutalities of a brutal time was the rape of Europe, literally and figuratively, by the Red Army. A well known diary by an anonymous author, *A Woman in Berlin*¹ (used by Buruma), depicts the wholesale, relentless rape of German women by Russian soldiers specifically in the German capital, but the grotesque savagery of the Red Army's rampage extended across Eastern Europe.

Buruma goes well beyond most other treatments of this subject. First, he discusses rapes of German and other European women by American, British, and French troops, explaining that they were far fewer than those perpetrated by Soviet soldiers. The Russians, after all, were purportedly motivated by revenge, having witnessed the destruction the Wehrmacht had inflicted on their own soil. The author then shifts to northern China, where two million Japanese civilians were marooned in their erstwhile colony of Manchuria. Here, too, an invading Red Army raped and pillaged, but without the excuse of any thirst for vengeance—Japan's soldiers had not occupied the Soviet Union for years, much less committed any atrocities there, although its record in China was terrible. Yet Japanese accounts claim that the Russians were much worse than the Chinese in their treatment of Japanese civilians in 1945. The exposure of such awkward facts that challenge the traditional narratives of postwar historiography is a great strength of *Year Zero*.

In "Clearing the Rubble," Buruma addresses the issue of "going home," which proved to be far harder than many survivors ever dreamed. Buruma himself is Dutch, and at the end of the war his father, who had served as a forced laborer, was stranded in Germany. He eventually made it home to be reunited with his entire family. Not so lucky were the few Dutch Jews who had survived the camps. Non-Jewish Netherlanders, anxious to commemorate their own suffering and construct a heroic narrative of their courage under Nazi occupation, had no inclination to tell the Jews' story until many years later. But the most painful and shameful story in this section takes place in Carinthia, a picturesque region where today Italy, Austria, and Slovenia meet. In 1945, it was vast refugee camp, full of the war's losers, such as Cossacks who had fought Stalin, and Slovenians who had opposed Marshal Tito. British troops drove them—at gunpoint—into the arms of their enemies, and thousands were slain. Such massacres are seldom mentioned outside of histories of the unfortunate ethnic groups that suffered and died.

Buruma deals at length with the major issues of trying war criminals and constructing new governments. He ventures beyond the better known cases of Germany and France to Greece and Hungary as well. In Greece, the events of 1945 foreshadowed the violent lurches from left to right in the next seventy years of the nation's political history.

1. Subtitle: *Eight Weeks in the Conquered City*, tr. Philip Boehm (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2005).

Turning to Japan, Buruma—who can read Japanese and has written previously about how Japan has coped with its wartime record of aggressive imperialism²—reflects on what the war changed, and what it did not. The American occupation under Gen. Douglas MacArthur did make some fundamental, and lasting, changes, such as dismantling the military and giving women the vote. But Kishi Nobusuke, Buruma points out, though arrested as a Class A war criminal, was never brought to trial, unlike like so many other Japanese civil and military officials. Kishi later served as prime minister (1957–60). Regarding the Philippines, Buruma brings history up to date, observing that the members of the Filipino elite who served in the Japanese puppet government established in 1943 did not suffer for their complicity. The grandfather of Benigno Aquino III, the current president of the Philippines, served as speaker of the house in the collaborationist regime.

Year Zero has its flaws. While it usefully illuminates events in Korea, Indonesia, and the Philippines for a Western audience, Buruma does not shine his light into every neglected corner of the postwar world. Norway, for example, is mentioned just once in passing, Denmark and Finland not at all. Yet the Nordic experience of the war is not well known: Norway and Denmark endured very soft occupations and Finland was an ally of Nazi Germany; all three had to come to grips with such facts as they created new governments after the war. Buruma's coverage of Eastern Europe, especially Poland and Czechoslovakia, is better. But Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia are not mentioned at all. Nor does the big story of the violent transition to communist rule in all of Eastern Europe have a place in the book.

One theme that clearly interests Buruma is the persistence in power of ruling elites, despite radical changes that might have swept them off the stage. The same landowning families that dominated Filipino politics in the 1940s still dominate it today, regardless of their collaboration with the hated, and defeated, Japanese. In Greece, too, politicians and military officers who cooperated with the Nazis held on to power after the war, though it took a civil war (1946-49) and American and British backing to make it possible.

Many questions remain. Apart from the anti-communist tide of the early Cold War, were other factors at work in the Philippines and Greece? How were they similar, and different? And why did Red Army men rape and loot with such barbaric zeal in Germany and Manchuria, while their Western counterparts were comparatively restrained? Were the Russian soldiers culturally different, or were their officers unable or unwilling to restrain them?

Ian Buruma is an excellent, perceptive reporter and he provides an abundance of fascinating information. But he leaves his readers to fathom for themselves the whys and wherefores.

2. *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994).