



To Hell and Back: Europe 1914–1949 by Ian Kershaw.

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British historian Ian Kershaw, best known for his well regarded two-volume biography of Adolf Hitler,¹ has now produced the first installment in another two-volume opus. This one on Europe’s “Long War,” that is, from the outbreak of the First World War to the implosion of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Though its title (evoking the film about and starring Audie Murphy²) is unfortunate, *To Hell and Back* is for the most part an immensely satisfying book. Kershaw admits that he has done little primary document research (he cites no sources). But he has a gift for finding unfamiliar but telling anecdotes and details. In describing the pre-Great War seeds of the Holocaust, he points to a letter in which D.H. Lawrence “approvingly contemplated the building of a ‘big lethal chamber’³ into which ... ‘all the sick, the halt, the maimed,’ would be gently led” (20). In Kershaw’s telling, the “golden age” of the turn of the twentieth century was distressingly familiar with euthanasia, virulent nationalism, anti-Semitism, pogroms, and the first stirrings of genocide.

To be sure, eugenics of the sort Lawrence envisioned would not have evolved into the Holocaust without two intervening wars.⁴ Kershaw argues that World War I set the tone for all that followed, up to our own day:

As state direction of the economy and intervention in civilian life intensified, the state apparatus grew in size. Bureaucracies expanded. So did levels of surveillance, coercion, and repression.... In some areas, particularly in Eastern Europe, whole populations were displaced. When the Russians retreated from western Poland and Lithuania in 1915, ... they had deported at least 300,000 Lithuanians, 250,000 Latvians, 350,000 Jews (who were notably ill-treated) and 743,000 Poles into the Russian interior. (77)

The Versailles Treaty and the Paris Peace Conference, which were meant to make future wars impossible, did just the opposite. In particular, they stoked resentment in Germany, where few believed their army had actually lost the war, and most of the countries the Allies created soon drifted into authoritarianism. America’s abstention doomed the League of Nations and its high aspirations. Of the treaty of 1919, France’s Marshal Ferdinand Foch asserted that “This is not a peace. It is an armistice for 20 years” (91).

Kershaw uses Foch’s spot-on prediction as the epigraph for his chapter on the immediate postwar years. Indeed, the Peace of Paris did not really provide much of an armistice. For several years after the formal end of the war, German *Freikorps* battled Jews and Communists to the east, Leon Trotsky’s Red Army marched all the way to Warsaw and was then driven back to Kiev, civil war laid waste to much of Russia (with help from British, Japanese, Czech, and American troops), and Irish rebels fought British soldiers and mercenaries before they too descended into civil war. “Paramilitary violence declined

1. Hitler, 1889–1936: *Hubris and Hitler, 1936–1945: Nemesis* (NY: Norton, 1999/2000).

2. Dir. Jesse Hibbs, 1955. The film was based on Murphy’s autobiography of the same title (NY: Holt, 1949).

3. Lawrence’s exact wording is “a lethal chamber as big as the Crystal Palace”—letter to Blanche Jennings (9 Oct. 1908).

4. The word “genocide” was coined by Polish intellectual Raphael Lemkin in 1943; see his *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment, 1944) preface and 79–95.

sharply after 1923. But those who had been at the forefront of the violence did not alter in character or attitude, even if they had to adapt to changed times” (108). They were casualties of the Great War, no less than the fifteen million military and civilian dead, the seven million POW’s, and the countless millions of wounded, widowed, and dispossessed persons.

Kershaw is, no surprise, exceptionally strong on the rise of National Socialism in Germany.⁵ He stresses that the growth of authoritarianism was a nearly universal phenomenon in Europe. In countries that had been victorious or neutral in the Great War, it was fairly well contained. But it flourished in Spain, Italy, and a score of nations that had emerged from the ruins of the German, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. (Czechoslovakia, to be sure, had its democracy extinguished by force.) “By 1939, more Europeans lived under dictatorships than democracies” (160).

From the very first hours of 1 September 1939, the Great War began to be called by its new and proper name. World War I broke the European mold, as ethnic hatreds and interwar totalitarianism set the stage for a far worse catastrophe:

Unlike the First World War, civilian deaths in the Second greatly outnumbered those of the fighting troops. This was, much more than the earlier great conflict, a war that enveloped whole societies. The high death rate among civilians was not least a consequence of the genocidal nature of the Second World War. For, unlike the war of 1914–18, genocide lay at the heart of the later great conflagration. This war brought an assault on humanity unprecedented in history. It was a descent into the abyss never previously encountered, the devastation of all the ideals of civilization that had arisen from the Enlightenment. It was a war of apocalyptic proportions, Europe’s Armageddon. (347)

Kershaw devotes more space to the events that precipitated or followed them than to the world wars themselves—the toxic political and economic stew of the interwar years and the long aftermath of the Second World War. It is here, however, that his account breaks down, perhaps inevitably: peace is not nearly as interesting as making war. Kershaw follows his chapter on the Second World War, “Hell on Earth,” with a survey of all the things that went right during in the first half of the twentieth century, “Quiet Transitions in the Dark Decades.” Despite the tens of millions who died, he points out, Europe’s population actually increased by a hundred million between 1913 and 1950. Life expectancy rose, as did per capita income—by 25 percent—and even the height (!) of the average European—by four centimeters (410–11, 415). Kershaw also recounts changes in religion, intellectual trends, and popular entertainment. Finally, he describes how much the second peace differed from the first:

The scale of physical destruction of the European continent [in 1945] far outstretched that of 1918. And human losses were at least four times higher than the military dead of the First World War. Yet that war had left a legacy of chronic political and economic turmoil, sowing the seeds of renewed conflict. An even worse catastrophe this time eventually led, in contrast, to a remarkable period of unpredicted stability and, certainly in the western half of the continent, unparalleled prosperity. How was that possible? (471–72)

How was it *not* possible? After 1918 the United States essentially left Europe to its own devices. In 1948, it was there to stay, spending billions of dollars, stationing three hundred thousand troops, and investing considerable intellectual capital in the security and prosperity of western Europe. Having studied at universities in Great Britain and between times having served there in the US military, I saw

5. As in his biography of Hitler, Kershaw consistently refers to him as the “Leader.” This is odd, since “Führer” is a richer term and needs no translation.

firsthand how difficult it was (and is) for Europeans to be grateful for the Marshall Plan, NATO, and US support⁶ for the European economic and political community.⁷

The Marshall Plan had its greatest effect in eastern Europe. Josef Stalin, by forbidding the USSR's satellite nations to accept American aid, widened the chasm between the two halves of Europe, even as it promoted ties between the United States and the nascent European Community. In the end, NATO was more important than the Marshall Plan. In Hastings Ismay's delicious phrasing, NATO was intended to "keep the Russians out, the Americans in, and the Germans down," and it succeeded wonderfully well, at least until the need for any of those things had passed.

Reluctant to condemn the Russians too harshly or to credit the Americans too fulsomely, the author emphasizes the importance of softening the Germans: "A crucial, and destructive, element of continuity running through and scarring European history ... had been Germany's ambitions to become a world power—even the dominant world power.... But they had been smashed once and for all in the total defeat of 1945" (518–19). That places too much blame on the defeated power, but also piques my curiosity about Ian Kershaw's forthcoming reflections on the Cold War.⁸

6. It should not be forgotten that Canada, too, spent generously to help finance Britain's postwar recovery.

7. See Daniel Ford, "The Clayton Theorem (or: Did George Marshall Save the US from Economic Collapse?)" (Fall 2006), available online – www.miwsr.com/rd/1620.htm.

8. In *Fractured Continent: Europe 1950–The Present*, volume 10 in *The Penguin History of Europe*.