Kershaw, Ian: *To Hell and Back. Europe 1914–1949*. London: Penguin Books 2015. ISBN: 978-0-67002-458-2; 624 S.

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We live in interesting times, to adapt the – probably apocryphal – Chinese proverb borrowed by Eric Hobsbawm for the title of his memoir. That text saw the great British Marxist historian look back on a youth lived amidst the battle of ideologies between fascism and communism, in which liberal democracy appeared to activists like Hobsbawm increasingly inert and incapable of responding to the challenges of a new era and in which, in Hobsbawm's telling phrase, 'political innocence was impossible', to be apolitical 'unthinkable'.[1] As this reviewer writes, Britain is poised to vote in the referendum on EU membership, with the two camps in lockstep in the polls and questions of European citizenship and identity as charged as they have been in seventy years, as political extremism capitalizes on popular disquiet.

These are interesting times for the historian too, with a changing of the guard beginning to take place in academe. As the baby-boomer generation of historians move from establishment to retirement, they are emulating previous generations in turning their hands to grand narrative histories, mature works in both senses which resemble, consciously or otherwise, a testament of sorts, drawing together the lessons of a generation of scholarship. Recent examples include the trilogy on Nazi Germany by Richard J. Evans, and his forthcoming contribution of the volume on nineteenth century Europe to Penguin's new 'History of Europe' series, of which David Cannadine is general editor. The Evans volume will shortly join the series contributions already published, non-chronologically, by Tim Blanning, Mark Greengrass, and Chris Wickham, as well as the volume under review, Ian Kershaw's history of Europe between the outbreak of the First World War and the onset of the Cold War.

Uniquely in this series, and a tribute to his stature in the field, Kershaw has been granted two volumes in which to tell the story of Europe since 1914. The second will take the story up to the present day; the present volume concludes in 1949, with Germany and Europe divided by the Iron Curtain. Other reviewers have taken Kershaw to task over coverage of the post-1945 period and of regions east of Germany, notably regarding his discussion of the human element of decision making, and of the Marshall Plan.[2] Yet the decision to incorporate the immediate aftermath of the Second World War is a strength of the book, and, unusually for a broad survey history, sidesteps the Eurocentric tendency to take 1945 as a self-evident cut-off point.

In other regards Kershaw's interpretation is steadfastly traditional. His interpretation of outbreak of the First World War rejects recent trends in its apportioning of blame largely to Germany. The term 'genocide' is studiously avoided in the discussion of the fate of the Armenians in 1915, itself a rare moment when Turkey is discussed here as an actor in European history, as Kershaw himself acknowledges. Kershaw also diverges from recent accounts such as Adam Tooze's The Deluge (itself the subject of much discussion on this network) in seeing the role of the United States as relatively unimportant in European affairs in the interwar period. Setting out his interpretation at the outset, Kershaw identifies 'four interlocking major elements of comprehensive crisis, unique to these decades' (p. 2), not new but newly virulent between the wars: ethnic-racist nationalism, territorial revisionism, class conflict and a crisis of capitalism, of which the first two loom largest across the ensuing 500 pages.

Kershaw's discussion of the USSR reflects current trends, at least in more synthetic works, towards seeing Stalinist terror as a continuation of earlier Leninist violence. In general however his coverage of the Soviet Union seems likely to strike more expert readers than this reviewer as rather more superficial than his handling of Germany. With a career at the forefront of scholarly research

[1] Eric Hobsbawm, Interesting Times. A Twentieth-Century Life, London 2002, p. 57.

[2] See the critique by Robert Gellately, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/books/review-to-hell-and-back-ian-kershaw-allen-lane> (24.06.2016).

on the Third Reich to draw upon, Kershaw is unsurprisingly strongest here, and it is Germany which dominates the narrative. For Kershaw, Weimar was indeed doomed to failure (again confounding some recent interpretations), with economic stagnation and structural problems decisive in the Europe-wide turn to dictatorships in these years. Only rarely do Kershaw's personal views intrude upon his clear, readable prose, but his condemnation of appeasement as a political choice, not a military necessity, is a rare example, with Chamberlain lambasted for his failure to understand the new type of politician he encountered in Hitler at Munich.

Specialists on individual countries in Eastern Europe are more likely to feel short-changed, and the periphery of Europe remains here just that. Kershaw's terse account of military course of the Second World War, running to eight pages and with the conquests of Poland, Benelux, France, and Greece and Yugoslavia dispatched in a sentence apiece, is similarly unlikely to satisfy military history buffs, who will have to turn to Gerhard Weinberg or Max Hastings (both cited in Kershaw's impressively up-to-date bibliography) for more detail in these matters.

Inevitably there are the occasional slips of the non-specialist outside their comfort zone. Kershaw is not the first major historian to reproduce the Balkan Gothic of the 'unspeakable' (p. 440) Ante Pavelić – emblematically, referred to just twice in the entire book – proffering his basket of human eyeballs, an anecdote called into question by recent research.[3] While not new as a concern of such broad surveys – the Cambridge Modern History volumes included chapters on cultural life decades ago – Kershaw's chapter on cultural and social change feels shoehorned in, some engaging anecdotes from the author's own family history nevertheless adding colour. Kershaw has produced here a solid, engaging political history of interwar Europe, placing Germany and the Soviet Union at centre stage as the standard bearers in the ideological battle which defined this period.

It will be interesting to see how the remaining volumes in Penguin's series, penned as they are by representatives of the generation which brought social and cultural history into the historiographical mainstream, manage the task of integrating those themes with the demands of broad brushstroke historical syntheses, weighted as these tend to be towards political narratives. It will be still more intriguing to see how the generation of historians to succeed Kershaw et alii to the professoriat will, in their own time, marry their interests to the needs of the narrative history doorstepper. There is a clue perhaps in some of the criticism of Kershaw's volume for its neglect of empire.[4] Currently modish historiographical perspectives such as transnationalism, the history of emotions and the history of the senses are likewise unrepresented in Kershaw's book. Historians such as Jürgen Osterhammel have demonstrated the advantages of integrating the transnational perspective in survey history; other trends may yet prove more resistant to submergence within broader international narratives. To quote a notable Chinese observer looking back on another interesting age from the perspective of his own, it is too soon to know.

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[3] Alexander Korb, Im Schatten der Weltkrieges. Hamburg 2013, p. 23. The story is also replicated in, among others, Mark Mazower, Hitler's Empire. Nazi Rule in Occupied Europe, London 2009, p. 346; Deborah Dwork / Robert Jan van Pelt, Holocaust. A History, London 2002, p. 185. The anecdote comes from Italian journalist Curzio Malaparte's sensationalistic account of wartime Europe, and adorns Malaparte's Wikipedia page, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curzio_Malaparte#cite_note-4> (24.06.2016). Google Books currently lists the 2005 edition of Malaparte's book as 'fiction'!

[4] For example Susan Pedersen's critique at <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/oct/30/to-hell-and-back-ian-kershaw-review> (24.06.2016).