



# Continued Violence and Troublesome Pasts

*Post-war Europe between the Victors after the Second World War*

Edited by Ville Kivimäki and Petri Karonen

**Studia Fennica**  
Historica 22



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Editorial Office

SKS

P.O. Box 259

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PETRI KARONEN

© <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6090-5504>

VILLE KIVIMÄKI

## Suffering, Surviving and Coping: Experiences of Violence and Defeat in Post-War Europe

Seventy years after the end of the Second World War (WWII) and over twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, historical studies on both the ‘short’ and the ‘long’ post-war eras in Europe are flourishing. The perspectives and topics in this field are wide-ranging. At least from the early 2000s onwards, the emphasis has been shifting from the much-studied subjects of Cold War politics and the economic and social history of reconstruction toward cultural historical studies on individual and collective experiences and memory.<sup>1</sup>

A key reason for this change is well expressed by Frank Biess, who has approached the post-war period in Germany from a cultural and social-historical angle, noting that ‘postwar societies needed to face more than just the classical tasks of reintegrating returning soldiers or even of converting a wartime to a peacetime economy.’ There was also the massive effort needed to ‘come to terms with the legacies’ of unprecedented ethnic cleansing and genocide.<sup>2</sup> Understanding and discussing – as well as willfully neglecting – these legacies have been fundamental elements of post-war European identities and politics. In this respect, it is still relevant today to study the after-effects of war in Europe. One crucial task is to map the different spheres and dimensions of the transition from war to peace and to try to find intranational, as well as international connections between them – if there are any – thus slowly gaining a fuller picture of the ‘European aftermath’ from 1945 to the 1990s.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the socio-cultural impacts of WWII have so far not yet attracted the same amount of scholarship as the impacts of the First World War. According to Pieter Lagrou, this is partly due to the broadly shared European experience of violence in 1914–1918, whereas the memories of violence in 1939–1945 were more varied, divisive and contested in different parts of Europe.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, right up until the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, Europe remained very much a post-war continent, scarred as it was by the Iron Curtain. This prolonged acuteness of the aftermath may have made it difficult to write a closing chapter to the era. Finally, sixty years after 1945, the late Tony Judt published his magisterial *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945*, which is so far the most comprehensive account of



the long post-war period. This is largely due to Judt's skill and insight in including the oft-forgotten histories of Central and Eastern European countries in his narrative. Judt powerfully demonstrates the burdens and suffering of the civilian populations and the massive destruction of cities and infrastructure especially in German-occupied countries,<sup>5</sup> where, east of the Elbe, the liberation from the Germans in 1944–1945 brought first the merciless maelstrom of war and then a new form of totalitarian regime under the Soviets. In this area between Berlin and Moscow, which had already suffered the worst of both the Stalinist terror and the Holocaust, the Anglo-American narrative of a 'good war' in 1939–1945 could hardly have been more inappropriate.<sup>6</sup>

### *'Zero Hour' and the Continuation of Violence*

It is partly against this background that the popular concept of 'zero hour' (*die Stunde Null*) should perhaps be criticised. The term has been used to refer to Germany's total defeat and setting the clock back to zero, so that May 1945 would mark a fresh start and a decisive break from the past. There was a dire need to forget the horrors of the past decades and to start a whole new era, both politically and individually. Morally, too, the idea of a 'zero hour' helped to distance the post-war Germans from the Nazi regime and all its crimes. In this sense, the concept captures an essential (German) experience and sentiment at the end of the war.<sup>7</sup> However, Mark Mazower among others has challenged the 'old idea that 1945 had been a kind of Year Zero'.<sup>8</sup> For many in Central and Eastern Europe, the capitulation of Germany did not mean an end to violence and totalitarianism, but its continuation; and the direct consequences of war could not simply be pushed aside. In Germany itself, despite the denazification and re-education programs, many of the former Nazi officials and authorities retained their positions.<sup>9</sup>

After the war, the legitimacy of official authorities was weak everywhere in continental Europe. The reasons for this are obvious in the defeated countries. But also in those countries that had been occupied by Germany during the war, many of the local office-holders had served the occupiers in one way or another. In the Soviet-controlled areas, there was a strong pressure to purge fascist or allegedly fascist-affiliated functionaries.<sup>10</sup> In addition to such systematic campaigns, spontaneous acts of revenge and cleansings by outraged people were also widespread. Tens of thousands of Europeans continued to be killed in this way, just as they had before the end of hostilities; while in Western Europe, too, death sentences were a common occurrence.<sup>11</sup>

The continuation of wartime atrocities, expulsions, and purges well into the post-war period is now a widely recognised aspect of the human history of the aftermath, and there is a growing amount of research on these traumatic topics. The staggering number of refugees and displaced people in Europe threatened further human disaster and required huge and immediate relief efforts. In the area of the former Third Reich, there were over 10 million foreign slave labourers and concentration camp victims that

needed to either return to homes that had been destroyed or find new ones.<sup>12</sup> After the war, as many as 20 million people suffered forced migration and ethnic cleansing; around 13 million of these were Germans from Central Eastern Europe now moved to the new, smaller Germany.<sup>13</sup> The situation of displaced and often also orphaned children was especially grave.<sup>14</sup> In the final stages of the war and in its immediate wake, it has become clear that hundreds of thousands if not over a million girls and women were raped by Soviet soldiers in German areas or in countries allied to Germany.<sup>15</sup> This violent mayhem, which Hitler's murderous regime had brought upon the German people as a whole, is still a source of the troublesome politics of memory and victimisation.<sup>16</sup> Immediately after the war, Germans tended to downplay their concentration and extermination camps as no worse than the Soviet gulags. Frank Biess has categorised the narratives of victimisation in East and West Germany into Christian, social-democratic, and communist: in the West, 'the most influential promoters of narratives of victimisation were the Christian churches'.<sup>17</sup>

At the end of WWII, millions of men were either in military service or in foreign captivity. In Europe, the demobilisation of vast armies in different countries is still a relatively little-studied subject.<sup>18</sup> In the United States, on the other hand, the homecoming of 'the greatest generation' and the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (the G.I. Bill of Rights) has gained more attention. Michael D. Gambone has called this act 'arguably the greatest social-welfare program in U.S. history'.<sup>19</sup> After the G.I. Bill, the educational status of American veterans improved greatly, and the number of university students soared – as it did in many European countries, too.<sup>20</sup> In the Soviet Union the demobilisation of over 8.5 million Red Army soldiers posed a gigantic task. All in all, the effort lasted until the end of 1948, and despite the positive tone of the official propaganda, there were serious shortcomings and much corruption involved in providing proper housing and jobs for the veterans.<sup>21</sup>

The brutal treatment of close to six million Soviet prisoners of war by the Germans in 1941–1945 had resulted in over three million deaths, and subsequently those who survived often had to face harsh treatment as 'traitors' from their own Soviet regime.<sup>22</sup> In the case of Germany, the return of approximately two million prisoners of war from Soviet captivity lasted until the 1950s.<sup>23</sup> Of the former German allies, Italy, Finland, Rumania and Bulgaria had changed sides in 1943–1944 and turned their armies against the Germans. Hungary, by contrast, was occupied by Germany in March 1944 and was then made to follow the Nazi regime into the abyss of its final defeat. As a consequence, over half a million Hungarian soldiers and civilians were taken prisoner by the Red Army. Their return to Hungary continued until 1956, while an estimated 100,000–150,000 Hungarians perished in Soviet captivity.<sup>24</sup>



*Gendered Experiences of Reintegration*

So far, according to David A. Gerber, the history of those left disabled by the war has not received enough attention. Their post-war situation was especially troublesome in defeated or occupied countries.<sup>25</sup> In Austria, for instance, the mere presence of war invalids was an unwelcome reminder of the Nazi past, clashing with the cherished myth of Austria as 'the first victim of National Socialism'.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the soldiers' homecoming did not just mean bringing celebrated heroes back into society; indeed, especially where defeated nations, prisoners of war, and serious physical and mental traumas were concerned. Rather, their return could be perceived as a crisis of masculinity;<sup>27</sup> in terms of the concrete wounds in men's bodies and the symbolic wounds in the image of military men. This image had been closely linked to the national identity, had now raised the question of redefining the ideals of manliness. In his fine study of prisoners of war in both Germanies, Frank Biess has studied the figure of a physically and mentally exhausted POW coming home from Soviet captivity and described how this figure contrasted so sharply with the previous wartime image of heroic, martial, and aggressive German soldiers. Especially in West Germany, homecomers were encouraged 'to win back their masculinity' by taking on a strong, even authoritarian, position in their families and becoming the breadwinners, thus allowing (or forcing) women to return to more traditional roles.<sup>28</sup> In the analysis of post-war masculinities and gender roles, the concept of 'remasculinisation' has been used to describe this social, cultural, and political process; one where manly subjectivity and authority is reclaimed in a post-war society and simultaneously regenerates a national self-image of coherence and strength.<sup>29</sup>

Practically all war veteran surveys in different countries have shown that the veterans did not want to share their experiences with anyone else than their former military comrades.<sup>30</sup> For instance, General George S. Patton noted in his diary in the summer of 1945, '[n]one of them [civilians] realizes that one cannot fight for two and a half years and be the same';<sup>31</sup> and there were many young war veterans who had fought much longer. During the past fifteen years, the terms 'shell shock' and 'trauma' have become focal keywords in studies on WWI.<sup>32</sup> This vein of research is now also becoming visible in research on WWII and its aftermath, although the image of a mentally broken soldier is not so iconic here as for 1914–18.<sup>33</sup> There have been attempts to apply the present-day psychiatric diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in interpreting the psychological consequences of WWII, but such an approach poses some serious problems. Born in the wake of the Vietnam War (and thus in a particular societal and cultural context) PTSD as a medical category is perhaps not the best-suited concept for understanding the trauma of war in a historical context.<sup>34</sup>

For a long time now, the study of women and war has been an active field in women's history. Among the key issues has been the question of the significance of war for the women's movement and female emancipation. As a consequence of total mobilisation in both world wars, vast numbers

In most European countries, the legacy of 1939–1945 has made it difficult to remember the war with much glory. The fundamental experience of war for many Europeans was that of immense personal losses and often meaningless hardships. This volume focuses on histories between the victors: Hungary, Estonia, Poland, Austria, Finland, and Germany. The chapters underline the asynchronous transition to peace in individual experiences, when compared to the smoother timelines of national and international historiographies. The role of these ‘in-between’ countries adds to the comparative European history of the aftermath, thereby challenging the conventional dichotomies and periodisations

Editors of the anthology are Dr Ville Kivimäki, Academy of Finland postdoctoral researcher at the University of Tampere, and Dr Petri Karonen, Professor of Finnish history at the University of Jyväskylä.



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