

History the Victors Left Unwritten

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World War II continues, in nearly innumerable ways, to reverberate across East Asia, the United States, and Europe. The war and its reminders—from the monuments and gravestones marking the war's battles and commemorating its dead to the political, economic, and security institutions that rose in its aftermath—remain a presence that, visibly or invisibly, governs how we think about the world and how the international system functions.

After 1945, the cold war was said to have frozen in place various enmities and consequences of political miscalculations made during World War II. Over the past 20 years, they have thawed into life again—but remarkably, this has led to only limited armed conflict and realignment of borders and national allegiances (and even so, mainly just in Eastern Europe). To say this is not to minimize the death and destruction that accompanied the breakup of Yugoslavia, but that example does not compare to the human and economic costs incurred by the Second World War.

Germany's war on the Soviet Union alone consumed the lives of between 23 million and 26 million Soviet citizens. Of these, William I. Hitchcock notes in *The Bitter Road to Freedom*, nearly 9 million “were soldiers; the rest, civilians: women, old men, children.” The dead amounted to nearly 14 percent of the entire prewar population of the Soviet Union.

Hitchcock's book captures all this in human terms. The author, a history professor at Temple University, interlaces the horror of the war's numbers with evocative personal stories that illustrate the pain and suffering that numbers often can cloak. In doing so, he achieves a reversal of Stalin's dictate that the death of one man is a tragedy while the death of a thousand is a statistic.

Hitchcock also—and this is the book's main theme—reveals the cost of liberation. In the Unit-

ed States, the story of the Allies overpowering the Axis on the European continent has always been presented as heroic narrative; it has never included a full appreciation of the costs borne by civilians living in countries liberated from German occupation. For Americans, a focal point of attention is that 4,000 US troops died at Omaha Beach. Yet the nearly 20,000 French who were killed during the Allied invasion of France have

disappeared from the history books. The utter destruction of French cities like Caen astounded American soldiers who saw for the first time what total war meant. Slowly, they began to understand the sullen

welcome that they received from French peasants whose homes and farms had been demolished in Allied artillery and bombing attacks. In contrast, US troops entering Paris, which the Germans had abandoned without a fight, were greeted by happy, smiling civilians.

Hitchcock condemns neither the United States nor the other Allies for their prosecution of the war in Western Europe. He declines to indict the ethics of the kind of warfare that the Allies carried out, for example, in firebombing German cities. Hitchcock does, however, point out where basic morality was violated by troops' actions, especially in the raping and looting that Soviet forces practiced as they moved through Eastern Europe and Germany itself. Although this aspect of the war has been the subject of other volumes, Hitchcock makes it all vividly new: Moscow took the official line that Germany must be taught a lesson, and stood by while its soldiers taught that lesson in brutal and criminal fashion.

Hitchcock also captures the enormous dislocations caused by the war. The second half of his book offers a detailed overview of efforts by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) to deal with the nearly 11 million impressed foreign workers and prisoners of war in Germany who were freed by Germany's defeat.

The Bitter Road to Freedom: A New History of the Liberation of Europe
by William I. Hitchcock.
Free Press, 2008.

This mass of humanity, starved and brutalized, lacked any sense of whether distant hometowns remained intact or whether family members were alive. Hitchcock demonstrates that a host of official organizations like UNRRA, along with private groups, treated the men, women, and children medically and materially—then tried as best they could to oversee their dispersal. UNRRA, Hitchcock says, “helped transform the end of the war into genuine liberation.”

WHAT TO FORGET

Given this background, it is all the more remarkable that “revenge” and “retribution” are not words one associates with Europe today. Hitchcock argues that many European governments freed from German occupation, in their effort to construct a history of those who lived through the war—their resistance and resilience—created a collective memory that enabled a sense of willing sacrifice. Individual citizens of France, Belgium, or Holland, for example, were instrumental in bringing freedom—not just the Allies and their invasions. This sense of active sacrifice and collective purpose enabled nation building, which in turn defused the desire for revenge and retribution. Hitchcock’s explanation, if placed alongside the Marshall Plan’s accomplishments in helping to

put Europe back on track economically, appears to make sense. The rehabilitation of national consciousness would seem to depend on how to remember—and what to forget.

The Bitter Road to Freedom is in some ways a rough volume. It has the feel of a first draft, a narrative that could have been more compelling if the author had better integrated the voices of those he so much wants to make heard and not seen as statistics. The book also lacks a strongly voiced narrator. Too often, in relating facts and figures and events, Hitchcock becomes documentarian rather than historian. Part of the problem is Hitchcock’s evident desire for inclusiveness, as when he fully sketches the hallowed ground of the Normandy invasion rather than—as would have been more appropriate—merely tracing it.

In the United States, the historiography of World War II has recently been one of veneration of “the greatest generation.” *The Bitter Road to Freedom* is an important reminder that war is indeed hell, and that heroic retellings of liberation should not overshadow the stories of those who suffer most through modern war’s torments. “There is,” writes Hitchcock, “surely room enough in our histories of World War II for introspection, for humility, and for an abiding awareness of the ugliness of war.”

Can Europe and China Shape a New World Order?

by Charles Grant with Katinka Barysch.
Center for European Reform, 2008.

The authors of *Can Europe and China Shape a New World Order?* work from the premise that, while the United States remains the world’s pre-eminent military power, it no longer sets the terms of international diplomacy. The European Union and the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—are now important players in global politics too, and their voices will be heard.

What can Europe do to ensure that the multipolar future is cooperative rather than confrontational? This monograph, in trying to answer the question, focuses on how the EU can work with China. That country, at least until the recent international financial meltdown, was on track by some measures to become the world’s largest

economy by 2030. As a result, the report argues, China “is a swing power that will tilt the international system one way or the other”—toward greater cooperation or greater competition.

The authors contend that the EU, because multilateralism is “in its DNA,” is ideally suited for the task of helping to guide China toward cooperation. However, dealing with Beijing will require that the EU speak with one foreign policy voice. At the book’s core is the question of how to achieve a single vision of relations with China in order to create a strategic partnership. Trade and economic issues were critical to this discussion last year, when the book was published, and they are even more salient today. Indeed, for the time being, what will tilt the international order more than anything else toward greater cooperation or competition may be the responses that Europe, China, and the United States mount to a dysfunctional global financial system. ■