To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949
Ian Kershaw

Fire and Blood: the European Civil War 1914-1945
Enzo Traverso

We have here two very different books utilizing two very different approaches to essentially the same period of history in Europe. And while the differences are enormous, each is excellent in its own way and both are major contributions to the historiography of Europe in the first half of the 20th century.

Ian Kershaw’s To Hell and Back, the first part of a two volume entry in the Penguin History of Europe series, is the more conventional of the two. It is a synthetic chronological ‘bird’s-eye view’ of the ‘forces that shaped the continent as a whole’ suitable for a broad general readership or a course textbook. And, as might be expected from Kershaw as one of the premier historians of Nazi Germany, it is thorough in its coverage, extremely well written, and judicious in its conclusions. While Kershaw aims at a ‘birds-eye view’, it is the view of a bird with an eagle’s eye for details. The book is amazingly comprehensive in paying attention to developments in numerous small countries as well as the larger great powers whose actions dominated developments, which is an especially impressive accomplishment in a book whose text runs just over 500 pages. Not to put too fine a point on it, Kershaw’s firm grounding in German and Nazi history provides him with a fulcrum from which he is able to leverage all of Europe’s history in the period brilliantly.

Kershaw starts out with a thorough analysis of the situation in various European countries just before the outbreak of the First World War, focusing on those aspects which would have the greatest impact in leading to the war and on its consequence: ethno-racist nationalism, demands for territorial revision, class conflicts, and economic crises. In his short summary of the state of pre-1914 Europe, he demolishes notions of a golden age before the war and focuses on the tensions that would not only lead to war, but which would exacerbate its violence and fester in its aftermath. When it comes to the outbreak of the war, Kershaw disagrees with those historians who have argued that it was the fault of leaders simply making mistakes or stumbling into the war without realizing what they were doing. He demonstrates that they went in ‘with eyes wide open’ and were not, in the words of a recent volume on the subject, ‘sleepwalkers’. Still, he ends up with a fairly conventional analysis attributing most of the responsibility for the outbreak of the war to Germany. When it comes to the war itself Kershaw gives the reader a brilliant short description/analysis of the complex development of the war and its effects on different groups over time. There is nothing new or controversial here; it is just extremely well done. He wraps up the war with the revolutions and semi-revolutions that brought down the Russian, German, and Habsburg empires – along with the near revolution in Italy...
and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. He focuses on how these created conditions that set the stage for extended disaster: increased ethno-nationalism, territorial disputes and class conflicts. As a British historian it is no surprise to see that Kershaw’s extensive discussion of domestic post-war developments has a particularly strong emphasis on Britain and its reforms. But he then moves on to focus on revolutionary developments from Ireland to Spain to Turkey, particularly the cockpit of Central and Eastern Europe. Especially consequential for the decades to come, and receiving thorough analysis, was the development of new forms of counter-revolutionary movements and the disparity between Red terror and the much greater violence of the counter-revolutionaries. Last, but not least, he explores the extensive anti-Jewish violence and pogroms that took place in the aftermath of the war and which prefigured that associated with the Second World War. He starts his coverage of the 1920s with a section on ‘Bolshevism triumphant’ from the civil war to NEP, arguing that Stalinism was just a logical consequence of Lenin’s dictatorship. But it is when he moves on to the ten new states carved out in Central and Eastern Europe that we find one of the few slips that even the most knowledgeable historian is likely to make when covering so many different countries. While discussing the ethnic complexity of the new ‘nation states’ he exempts rump Austria as ‘ethnically homogenous’ – seemingly unaware of its Croatian and Slovenian minorities and strangely choosing to exempt its Jewish minority from his analysis of ethnic diversity. He does however provide a refreshing view of the German war guilt and reparations issue –pointing out that it didn’t really have a very large economic impact given the size of the German economy and the fact that most of the reparations were never paid; that it was really a political issue rather than an economic one. His following section on ‘fragile democracies’ provides an excellent survey of Europe’s post-First World War democracies and their weaknesses, along with explanations as to why they survived as long as they did. Here he again shows a weak grasp of Austrian history when he claims that most rural Austrians were ‘patriotically Austrian’ in the early 1920s. However, he then moves on to a pair of brilliant analyses of the success of fascism in Italy and its failure in 1920s Germany (though his analysis of the German left is flawed in my opinion). Unlike many other historians he does not give short shrift to the economic recovery and boom of the late 1920s and he provides a short country-by-country analysis of economic conditions and their implications. His description of economic developments in the USSR in the 1920s is also very good as he avoids the common anti-socialist bias of most other surveys while discussing the real options of the Soviet leaders at the time and how they were reflected in their power struggles. He then shows why Stalin’s horrendous collectivization campaign would have seemed to them to be their best option. At this point Kershaw takes a break from politics and economics to review cultural developments – the rise of pop culture and modernism and the counter currents of fascist anti-modernism and Antisemitism.
The optimistic picture of the late 1920s has of course to be followed by attention to the weakening of democracy in most of the new countries and borderlands of Europe and the potential for real crisis in the face of economic difficulties. His discussion of the onset of the Great Depression and its consequences is excellent, especially regarding Germany, though it adds nothing new. He shows how deep the crisis was, but also how various countries managed to recover, providing real insight into developments in each. This returns him to the allure of fascism and the general move right in politics. Again his analysis is particularly strong on Central Europe, but he doesn’t neglect the right in Ireland, the Low Countries, France, and of course Spain. One of his insights is the way in which the strength of the traditionalist right in East Central Europe generally kept fascism at bay even as democracies failed. His analysis of the developing dictatorships and their different forms is enlightening, as is his distinction between reactionary regimes and the dynamic dictatorships in the Soviet Union, Italy and Germany.

Kershaw’s next section on the descent towards war is again excellent, especially the parts on the defeat of the left across Europe, including the ‘false dawn in France’ and the disaster of the Spanish Civil War. As usual his analyses here are judicious and excellent – well worth reading even for those very familiar with this history. The same is generally true of his coverage of the pre-Second World War arms race and appeasement. But when it comes to the impact of the rejection of the Soviet Union’s offer to aid Czechoslovakia at the time of the Sudetenland crisis and the Munich sell out, he doesn’t give it much weight, even though he admits that it could have been a game changer if it had been accepted. He concludes this section with an excellent and dramatic account of the final lead up to war.

Kershaw’s discussion of the war itself has generally nicely done battle histories, but nothing special to add, as he is not a military historian. The book could also use some more maps, as there are two for Europe, one from 1914 and another from 1949. However, when he moves onto the home front Kershaw delivers more than the usual superficial coverage, delving into the country-by-country specifics of neutral countries and occupied territories as well as the combatants.

Where this history is especially outstanding is Kershaw’s chapter reviewing the long term transitions of economy and society from 1914-49. Here he takes a broad view that encompasses a great deal of social history as well as economic history and even has a very impressive section on the changing positions and fortunes of the Christian Churches across Europe – a very important aspect of 20th-century European history that is rarely touched in works like this. In his survey of the Churches and the Holocaust Kershaw even provides a partial defense, or at least a balanced evaluation, of Pope Pius XII’s actions and inaction. This is followed by a survey of intellectuals’ engagement with the crisis decades, including those who were attracted to fascism as well as those who opposed it. Finally he turns his attention to popular culture – the real cultural revolution of the 20th century.
Kershaw’s final section on Europe after the war is a mixed bag. When it comes to the description of the ashes of the war and the various sorts of displaced people he is excellent. Purges and trials – popular and official revenge and justice – are also covered very well, including the weaknesses of denazification and the purging of fascists in western Germany and Italy. His attention to the recreation and renewal of democratic politics in Western Europe is also excellent, as is his discussion of the ways in which the foundations were laid for later moves to integrate Europe. All in all he seems to be maintaining his usual level of excellence until he gets to the origins of the Cold War. There he disappoints with a generally uncritical western Cold War perspective that understates or ignores provocative United States actions – especially, but not only, when he deals with the Marshall Plan where he seems to be unaware of the ways it was deliberately structured to insure that the Soviet Union would reject it (and how that rejection was a pre-condition for it to be funded by a congress that had just been taken over by a militantly anti-Communist Republican Party). Kershaw’s figures on the military balance of power in the late 1940s is misleading; he only counts US forces present in Europe while he counts all those under arms in the all of the Soviet Union. He underestimates the extent of the prevailing anti-Communism in the American government, especially after the death of Roosevelt, and he ignores the cutting off of promised German reparations by the US, just saying that the Soviets were ‘economically uncooperative’. This becomes particularly problematical when he gets to the Berlin Blockade and presents it as an attempt to drive the West out of Berlin rather than an attempt to force the western allies to back off on their moves to build up West Germany as an ally against the Soviet Union. Given his earlier exploration of the motives of leaders on all sides, this section is especially disappointing and is not a good start for his volume to come on Europe since 1949. On the other hand, it is just a weak ending to an otherwise brilliant survey and it isn’t enough to prevent the volume as a whole from being an outstanding contribution to the history of Europe in the first half of the 20th century – one which far surpasses all its predecessors.

While Kershaw’s book is a brilliant example of a traditional period history, Enzo Traverso serves up an entirely different kettle of fish. Rather than trying to provide a narrative overview of Europe’s history from 1914–45, Traverso provides an analytic framework for understanding its basic structure and has chosen the formulation civil war because he distinguishes civil wars, which promote the elimination of opponents, from normal wars which simply aim at defeating them. He claims the Thirty Years War and the Napoleonic Wars as precedents, as he argues that all three cases involved international ideologically driven systems at war with each other and aiming to eliminate their ideological opponents, though the first failed to accomplish that and ended in the creation of the modern state system (and, in fact, rarely broke down on purely ideological grounds, but that’s not important here). While the first Thirty Years War ended as more a conflict of states than an ideological war, the second one (1914–45) started as a conflict of states that
morphed into long term ideological conflicts between revolutions and counter-revolutions and ended with the elimination of fascism as the embodiment of counter-revolution. Traverso begins with an ‘Anatomy of civil war’, in which he explores the differences between civil wars and ‘normal’ wars. Civil wars, he argues, are all about eliminating opponents and often involve the breakdown of contemporary standards of wartime behavior, treating enemies not as lawful opponents, but rather as outlaws, something that then leads to engaging in ‘atrocities and horrors’. They may involve ‘hot violence’ with undisciplined carnival-like suspensions of all rules, where rape, murder and theft are widespread and violence takes on symbolic dimensions that go beyond any instrumental considerations, while cruelty and humiliation become major practices just for their own sake. But they may also involve ‘cold violence’, with disciplined mass murder in combat (often taking no prisoners) and genocidal programs implemented by bureaucratic organizations with little emotion involved. The European Civil War under consideration of course notoriously involved both forms of violence, often on unprecedented scales.

One of the most characteristic features of the 1914–1945 civil war was the extent to which it reversed the long term process of confining wars to military forces. Traverso traces the development of a ‘war against civilians’ that started with German atrocities against Belgian civilians and Austrian atrocities in Serbia in 1914. Bombing campaigns started with attacks on enemy troops, but as early as 1915–6 the Germans began turning to bombing English cities from Zeppelins (to little effect). That was just the opening round in a practice that ended with the massive aerial bombing campaigns of the Second World War that destroyed so many of Europe’s cities – bombing campaigns that went beyond the total war logic of trying to destroy an enemy’s war making potential to targeting cultural centers with no military significance. Civilians were targeted for territorial elimination through ethnic expulsion from occupied territories or to create ethno-national states – a process that began during the First World War but which continued in its aftermath when around 10 million people were displaced in the process of forming new states out of the former empires of Central and Eastern Europe. All of this paled in comparison with the mass displacements of the Second World War when civilian populations became designated targets and made up half the dead, and 40 million were displaced, often deliberately as in the German plans to remake the eastern part of Europe into a greater Germany. The end of the European civil war saw some of the losers not just defeated, but having their states dissolved (Germany) and their surviving leaders simply executed (Mussolini) or subjected to show trials in a symbolic victors’ justice that displaced national guilt onto leaders and thus opened the way for re-establishing the dissolved German state. In the formerly occupied countries there were mass purges of collaborators, spontaneous ‘wild’ purges followed by legal purges, expressions of the internal civil wars that accompanied the broader European Civil war. The purges were then followed by amnesties for the survivors bring the civil wars to an end across Europe.
Exploring the essence of civil war leads Traverso into an extended discussion of the culture of war that developed with and promoted it. The need to mobilize the entire resources of the state led to total war, a transition from war as a field of honor to war as a slaughterhouse justifying all possible measures. Traverso’s ‘imaginaries of violence’ is a brilliant cultural analysis of the literature, art and movies of the period. He goes on to discuss the element of fear, fear leading to trauma and hysteria on the battlefield (PTSD), but also to an ideology of violence as a test of manhood failed by the weak, but passed by strong men, heroes who were transformed into stone killers and fascist shock troops. Fear was used to mobilize hatred against the threat of actual enemies, but was also diverted into deadly hatred directed against Reds, Jews, and etc. Fear led to a desire for safety and order that became a major factor in the support of or acceptance of fascism. A strong demographic increase in young men in the generation before 1914 laid the basis for the development of the ‘front generation’ that not only fought the First World War, but which was the backbone of the ideological forces after the war - both Bolshevik and fascist. All, but especially the Italian fascists, promoted youthful images and were in fact movements largely populated by young men, opposed to effeminate and decadent bourgeois intellectuals, Jews and homosexuals. These were also imbued with a misogyny that required women’s participation in total war effort to be strictly policed along gender lines (at least outside the Soviet Union and Partisan forces) and which made ‘enemy’ women into legitimate targets for male aggression (we attack the enemy by raping, mutilating, and killing ‘their women’).

Civil war meant cultural warfare as political conflict became a major cultural theme post-1919 in art, literature and music. Culture was politicized and politics was aestheticized. While fascist politics and culture focused on contests for racial supremacy, communists and socialists focused on class struggles - both of which were instrumentalized to pursue the civil war where they confronted each other. Long before open warfare resumed, military iconography became predominant on both sides, and both abandoned all constraints of legality (rejecting them as illegitimate hindrances for revolutionary movements) as both communism and fascism grew out of the collapse of political order set off by the First World War and reached for radical solutions. After 1933 most intellectuals were drawn to anti-fascism and it became hegemonic in European culture by 1945 as fascism went down in flames - taking much of Europe down with it. Traverso makes it clear, though, that the anti-fascist alliance of intellectuals was not the result of Communist Party decisions, as was claimed later by both communists and anti-communists, but rather preceded the Popular Fronts promoted by the communists after 1935. Traverso argues that anti-fascism was basically rooted in Enlightenment culture while fascist, Nazi, and Stalinist ideologies were all anti-Enlightenment ideologies. He says it is true that anti-fascism mostly (though not universally) turned a blind eye to Stalinism, but he argues convincingly that the notion of Furet and others that it was just a Stalinist trick is fundamentally ahistorical – that
there was a severe critique of Stalinism, but its critics were unable to follow through by rejecting any alliance with Stalinists until fascism was decisively eliminated after 1945. Traveso’s discussion of the Holocaust points out the failure of anti-Fascist intellectuals to take seriously the role of Antisemitism in the 1930s - and even after 1945 Sartre’s *Anti-semite and Jew* focused on French Antisemitism and Dreyfus rather than Auschwitz. He argues that seeing the fascists and Nazis only as obscuritanist reactionaries missed their revolutionary modernization effects and hence their ability to engineer a high-tech mass extermination campaign. Recognizing that modern reality required abandoning the philosophical premise that humanity was bound to an evolutionary process of enlightenment, something only some members of the Frankfurt School were prepared to do at the time, he concludes that ‘[f]ar from celebrating a new triumph of enlightenment, these isolated figures refused to see the Second World War as a victorious epic of progress. Before the spectacle of a civilization that had transformed modern technology into a gigantic destructive power, the only sentiment possible was one of shame’ (pp. 275–6). Traverso’s attempt to reframe Europe’s history from 1914–45 under the rubric of civil war is not always entirely convincing, but it is full of insights and is well worth reading and considering – and perhaps re-reading and reconsidering several times over.