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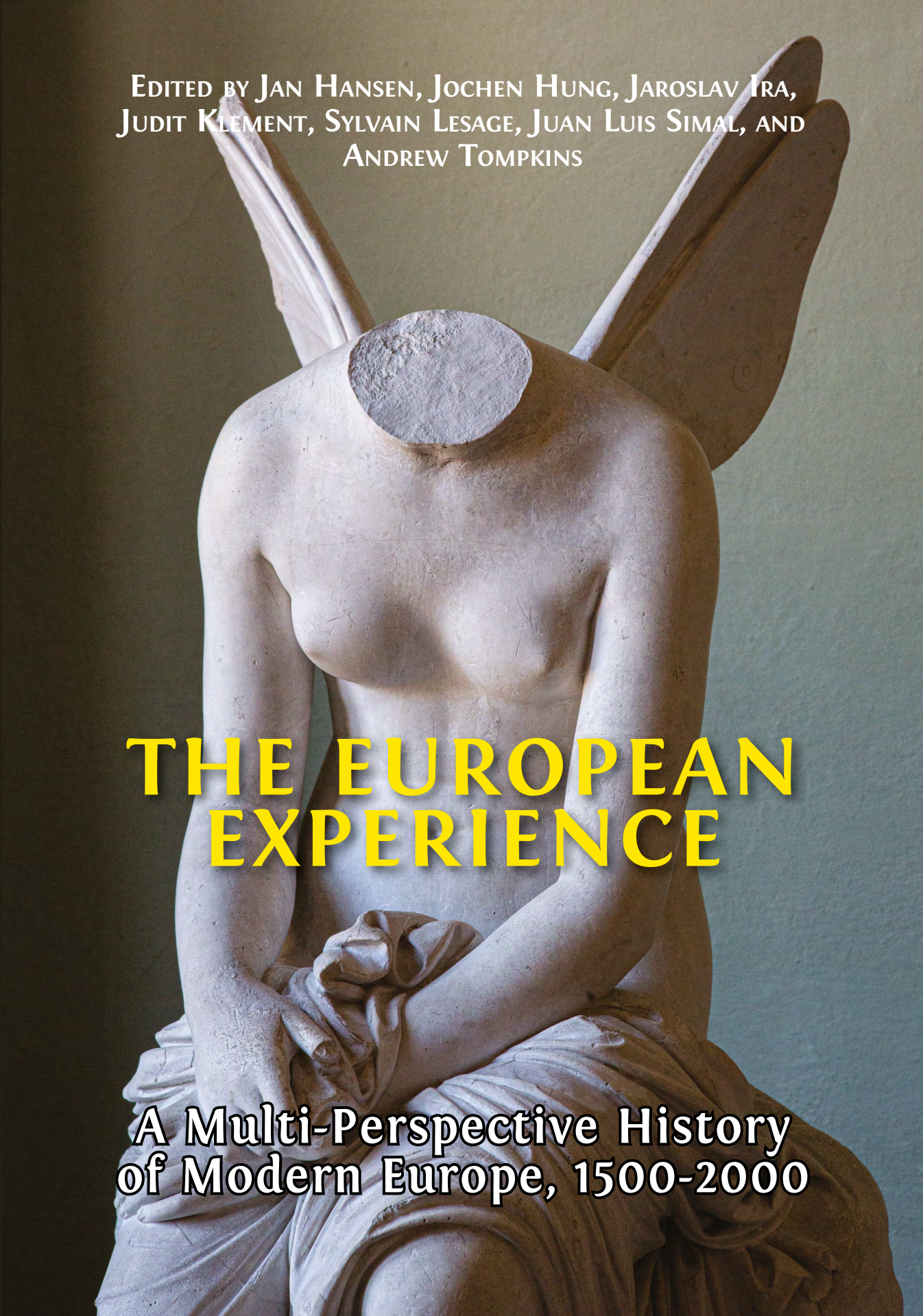

The European Experience

A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal and Andrew Tompkins (eds), *The European Experience: A Multi-Perspective History of Modern Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323#resources

This book is one of the outcomes of the Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership "Teaching European History in the 21st Century", which ran from 2019-2022 and was funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ Key Action 2 (Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices).

ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-870-8
ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-871-5
ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-872-2
ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 978-1-80064-873-9
ISBN Digital ebook (azw3): 978-1-80064-874-6
ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-875-3
ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-876-0
DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0323

Cover image: Wilhelm Gunkel, *Fly Angel Fly* (2019). Cover design by Katy Saunders

3.3.3 Revolutions and Civil Wars in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

Beatrice de Graaf and Mikuláš Pešta

Introduction: The Age of Revolutions as the Defining Moment

The 'long twentieth century' (or the period from the 1910s to the 2010s), began and ended with a series of revolutions—accompanied by violent conflicts and civil wars—from the Russian Revolution (1917), via the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the post-Soviet conflicts (various wars after 1991, up until the Donbas War, 2014-present), and the Yugoslav Wars (1991–2001). To properly understand the significance of revolutions in this period, we must briefly consider how revolution as a defining event and concept was inscribed in history during the Age of Revolutions.

The Age of Revolutions—roughly spanning the era of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the Bonapartist takeover until the end of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in 1815—was the moment that both the history and historiography of revolutions took off. A revolution has since then been understood as a major "change in the way a country was governed, usually to a different political system, and often using violence or war", as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary*. The American Revolution changed the way the American territories were governed from a monarchy (under the British sovereign) to a republic, just as France cast off the Bourbon monarchy in 1789. Since then, pundits, writers, politicians, and historians have tried to make sense of the revolution (Adolphe Thiers), reject it (Edmund Burke), or take it as a blueprint for new rounds of (violent) transformations (Pyotr Kropotkin).

This contested tradition of dealing with revolutions only intensified in the twentieth century. Are revolutions always a precursor to wars, and to civil

https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0323.33

wars in particular? Does revolutionary zeal automatically lead to war and terror, or could such a fallout be averted and transformed into processes of democratisation? For the German historian Thomas Nipperdey, it was Napoleon who completed the transformations that manifested with the revolutionary era, and who, with his Grande Armée unleashing a "total war", would mark the beginning of a disastrous thread of civil wars and revolutions that weaves through German, and European, history. Indeed, civil wars are often a logical outcome or corollary to revolutions, as "wars fought by different groups of people living in the same country" (*Cambridge Dictionary*). Such wars could be driven by the clash of interests that were at stake in the revolution, or that were under threat of being overrun in its course. They would moreover be inspired by the fear or prevention of impending terror, with 'terror' being perceived (since the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon) *both* as the threat of unilateral invasions and hegemonic repression by means of conquering armies and regimes, *and* as the threat posed by non-state groups aiming to overthrow the sitting government and upend the current state of interests and affairs.

Fig. 1: U.S. War Department, "Enemy Activities—Arrests of Alien Enemies—Bolsheviks in Russia—A scene in the Russian Revolution…" (1917–1918), National Archives and Records Administration, https://catalog.archives.gov/id/31477916. In early 1917, civil war broke out in Russia as the left-wing, socialist Bolshevik political party (founded by Vladimir Lenin) revolted against the standing Russian monarchy. This memo, published by the U.S War Department in December, 1918, shows a violent scene from the Bolshevik Revolution that strengthened revolutionary sentiment around the world.

At the same time, from the Age of Revolution onwards, a codification of international public law, of international humanitarian law, and the rules that guide military conduct also took place. From the 1815 Treaties onwards, via

the first official treaty codifying international humanitarian law in 1820, up until the Hague Convention of 1907 and the Nuremberg Tribunals of 1945, a juridification of customary laws of conduct in war, of permissive rights and prohibitive rights was formulated. According to the classic ('Whiggish') viewpoint, this development was the outcome of a process driven by universalist ambitions and human rights ideals. Yet, it could also be considered a contingent and open-ended reconfiguration of imperial interests, of public pressure, of inter-state and inter-empire competition and cooperation—up until the present day, with the definition of terrorism being wielded by authoritarian and populist leaders as a stick with which to hit their domestic opposition.

In short, this process is subject to ongoing contestations. New types of conflict have been codified—small wars, insurgency, and terrorism—and new crimes have been penalised, such as genocide. In the following sections, we will provide a brief argument on how revolution, revolt, small wars, insurgencies, and terrorism characterised the long twentieth century in Europe and beyond.

Revolution, War and Civil War (1914–1948)

For some historians, the chaotic, dynamic, and violent years spanning from the First World War until the Second World War should be conceived of as one long European Civil War. But in fact, when German historian Ernst Nolte made this claim, he was ostracised for seeming to reduce the 'uniqueness' of the Shoah and putting it on the same footing as the war conducted by other countries in the 1910s and 1920s. Yet, with Dirk Moses' recent work on "genocide and permanent security"—on the entanglements and genealogies of overlapping types of genocide and mass murder on an industrial scale since the nineteenth century—the argument made by Nolte has recurred.

In the twenty-first century, this idea of a European Civil War has gained ground. Conceptually speaking, the long ideological clash between socialism and imperialism, between liberalism and conservativism, and between communism and fascism was frequently the fuel of revolutions, insurgencies, coups and all-out wars during the first half of the twentieth century. The roots of this ideological struggle extended back to before the First World War, with the wave of anarchist terrorism, separatist terrorism, anticolonial violence and opposition to imperial expansion and rule in the overseas territories (Indochina, Indonesia) as an indication. The First World War in this respect 'merely' functioned as a catalyst for the further polarisation of conflict across Europe and within European countries. This trend did not stop in 1918: the Bolshevik Revolution, as a breaking point in 1917, assured the outbreak of new civil wars even after the armistice was signed. The endorsement by the

Entente Cordiale of counter-revolutionary violence by the 'Whites' in Russia and Poland served to illustrate this claim.

Robert Gerwarth has demonstrated how the disenchantment, discontent and violent outrage caused by the outcomes of the formal armistice and Paris Treaties of 1918–1919 led to new rounds of civil and small wars. Further attempts at revolution were spreading through Europe. A revolutionary state in Germany was being proclaimed. Attempts to export the revolution to Poland were being made, the *biennio rosso* was announced in Italy, as was the 'Bolshevik Triennium' in Spain. The 'vanquished' parties, who did not want to satisfy themselves with the spoils of the war (or lack thereof) as they were outlined in 1919–1922 by the Allied powers, resorted to political violence. They radicalised themselves and others, established paramilitary units (fascist or proto-fascist, but also left-wing revolutionary ones), and even tried to launch a *coup d'état*, ending in success (Italy), or further disappointment and resentment (Germany).

The stabilisation of the post-war violence and conflict in the 1920s was intermittently supported by an upward economic trend worldwide and with economic prosperity in many countries all over the world. However, a slew of terrorist attacks, the untimely deaths (homicide or natural) of leading politicians, and (on top of these) the financial and economic crisis of 1929, all conspired to carve out the contours of a new stage for global polarisation. Coalitions were formed in and between countries, with popular fronts on one side, and fascist-conservative alliances on the other. The latter rose to defend alleged national interests, ethnic homogeneity, racial purity, or European civilisation that was proclaimed to be under communist threat; the former to defend universal rights, freedom, and democracy. Liberal democracies were under pressure across the world—even in representative and parliamentary democracies, which were passed over by the 'big' crises of legitimacy, 'smaller' crises in representation and participation erupted.

The Spanish Civil War laid bare the destructive, radicalising potential of these simmering and open-ended political conflicts. It served as a proxy conflict for the European Civil War, with international interventions and the transnational organisation of assistance (with international brigades and the Comintern on the one side, and on the other, Francoist *nacionales* side, international units and direct interventions by fascist Italy and Nazi Germany, including weapons and arms supplies). The Spanish Civil War was also witnessed and visualised—the bombings and the executions—in imagery that was exported all over the world in war reporting, in Ernest Hemingway's novels, and in the unveiling of *Guernica* by Picasso at the World Expo in Paris in 1937 (and further still, on tour through Europe and the US). The eyes of Catholics, Progressives, Communists and Fascists were all on Spain and the terror that was being

waged there. Terror waged from both sides: with Catholic, conservative, and fascist publications making extensive, propagandistic use of the '*terror rojo*', the atrocities committed by republicans, communists, and anarchists against, for instance, priests or nuns.

At the same time, international humanitarian law was being further codified, with the third version of the 1864 Convention inaugurated in 1929, and the Geneva Convention for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armies in the Field adopted that same year. The League of Nations tried hard to come up with a universal definition and condemnation of terrorism, and in 1937 adopted the Convention for the Prevention and Punishment of Terrorism, inspired by the murder of the Yugoslav King Alexander and French Foreign Minister Louis Barthou on 9 October 1934 by a Bulgarian separatist terrorist belonging to the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO).

The Spanish Civil War was a prelude to the Second World War, as partisan movements in Italy, France and Greece launched their own struggles against ascendant fascist regimes. This was also the case in Yugoslavia, where the complexities of the radicalisation process between communists and Chetniks transitioned into the civil war on the Eastern front between the Red Army and the Russian Liberation Army, for example in Ukraine. The combination of ideological struggle, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary warfare, small wars and insurgencies, and imperial strategies of isolated and ethnicised warfare (as practised in Africa during the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, for example) reached its apex in the ethnic and ideological cleansing and the industrial destruction processes carried out by the national-socialist regime.

After the war, with the Nuremberg Tribunals, genocide and crimes against humanity were codified and laid down in international and humanitarian law. But the cleansing itself did not stop and continued in the pogroms, colonial interventions, and other theatres of small wars and conflicts after 1945, such as in Indochina, Indonesia and North Africa.

Revolt, Terrorism and Democracy (1950–1989)

1945 sealed the victory of the unitary nation-state, which secured the monopoly of violence in post-war Europe (including the implementation of many newer national security agencies and provisions), but also became the key component in the emerging Cold War configuration of the international system. This east-west divide into spheres of influence prevented large scale, international, conventional wars from breaking out, with the threat of the nuclear Third World War hovering over the globe. Yet, it also gave free

reign to nation-states within their respective blocks to allow internal conflicts, revolutions, rebellions, terrorism to foster and thrive—including the escalation of many of these internal conflicts by applying repressive and brute force.

At the same time, a plethora of non-parliamentary action groups, student movements, and social organisations launched their assault on the institutions of representative and parliamentary democracy, and on the Western, US-dominated capitalist system as such. Concerns and protests were voiced by anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian movements in the West (protesting the war in Vietnam for example); anti-bureaucratic, radical socialist or human rights movements in the East (protesting the suppression of the Prague Spring); and in anti-imperialist, anticolonial movements worldwide. Many of them were engaged in mobilising their societies, sometimes even renewing attempts to carry out revolutions, such as the student movement-inspired revolts in the 1960s in the West, or the urban guerrillas in the Americas. For some, the logical outcome of the anticolonial movement was the radical type of revolutionary violence that erupted in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Colombia, and throughout the South American continent, or the revolutionary terrorism that manifested from the early 1970s in Italy (*Brigate Rosse*), West Germany (*Rote Armee Fraktion*), the United States (Weather Underground) or Japan (Japanese Red Army). For others, this type of revolutionary violence had nothing to do with the global rise of the left, and should instead be considered its aberration.

Separatist groups in Spain (ETA), Ireland (IRA), Corsica (National Liberation Front), Cyprus (EOKA), and the Netherlands (the Moluccan Youths) each appropriated symbols, style, and ideology from left-wing radical groups and staged attacks and hijackings of their own. Against this global tide of left-wing revolutionary activism, extremism, and terrorism, an upsurge of neo-fascist radicalisation also bred terrorist attacks from the right, while forging transnational ties between extreme right-wing activists and terrorists in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, and the United States. Were these instances of separatist and right-wing terrorism equally a part of national liberation movements, or rather their opposite?

The result of this upsurge in terrorist attacks and radical violence was an expansion of state security, with aggressive, covert intelligence programmes like the FBI's COINTELPRO and the CIA's Operation CHAOS at the helm, staging activities against (alleged) extremist domestic organisations. In West Germany, the Federal Criminal Agency's (*Bundeskriminalamt*) computer-engineered profiling programmes followed suit. The transnational policing of terrorism and dissent went into overdrive with the creation of the Club de Berne in 1971, an intelligence-sharing forum of European countries, and with a renewed focus on the definition, prosecution and securitisation of radical activism and extremism as a consequence. In 1989, the collapse of socialism

in the countries in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in the ideological bankruptcy of left-wing revolutionary terrorism (and blew away the cover of many fugitive *Rote Armee Fraktion* terrorists hiding in East Germany).

Yet, while this so-called third wave of modern terrorism (the first one being the anarchist wave, the second the anticolonial wave) was waning, a new wave of 'holy terrorism' was already waxing in Afghanistan, under the cover of the Soviet-Afghan War that was waged between 1979 and 1989.

From Global Cold War to New Chaos (1989–2020)

The revolutions of 1989–1991 seemed to lay bare the innate contradictions of communism and socialism, and also 'prove' that the West and its liberal, democratic system had 'won' the day. Yet, the failure of the Western-dominated, US-propelled global order to secure the 'peace dividend' quickly became apparent in post-Soviet conflicts in the Balkans, Chechnya, Armenia and elsewhere—a half-crescent of conflict surrounding Europe. The Yugoslav Wars that broke out in 1991, centred around the break-up of the communist Yugoslav Federation in 1992, were especially shocking, since they brought home ethnic conflict, ethnic cleansing, and the genocide of Bosnian Muslims to a European continent that had not witnessed anything similar since the Second World War. Only US assistance and NATO bombing brought an end to the war in 1995, although violent conflicts persisted until 2001. Since then, separatist and irrendentist armed conflict has continued, leading to significant numbers of casualties and destabilisation across the region: along the borders of Europe, the Caucasus, Georgia—and in 2014, after the Ukrainian revolution in the Donbas and the annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation. The downing of the MH17 passenger flight over eastern Ukraine by pro-Russian separatists on 17 July 2014, in which all 283 passengers and 15 crew members were killed, catapulted the terror of war into the heart of Europe as well.

The centrifugal powers of international anarchy, the increasing multipolarity of the international states system, and the global spread of discontent and ethnic-nationalist conflict simmered throughout the 1990s. The 9/11 terrorist attacks in the USA (2001) proved to be the boiling point, with the subsequent War on Terror creating new extra-legal categories of combatants. The wars in Afghanistan (since 2001) and the invasion of Iraq by a US-led coalition in 2003, with their unilateral, pre-emptive strikes, 'black sites' and 'dark prisons', further undermined the feeble post-Cold War order. The rise of the Internet via Facebook (public in 2006), Twitter (2011), and other social media platforms has raised global patterns of polarisation, radicalisation, and terrorism to a whole new dimension. Populism propelled new-authoritarian leaders to

power in Brazil (Jair Bolsonaro), the US (Donald Trump), and Hungary (Viktor Orbán)—or kept them there, as in certain post-Soviet states and Russia (Nursultan Nazarbayev, Alexander Lukashenko and Vladimir Putin).

At the same time, these authoritarians who came to power by promising security and prosperity to their supporters also unleashed new rounds of escalating violence, crisis, and mayhem in their own countries and worldwide. Once more, as in the 1970s and 1980s, right-wing terrorism seems to be piggy-backing on the alleged fourth wave of holy terrorism (mainly jihadism), parasitising on supposed fears for immigration, 'Islamisation', the 'end of European civilisation', and the alleged 'selling out' of middle-class, 'white' interests. With the threat of the classic, French-style or communist revolution receded into the corridors of history, the most recent revolutions of the Arab Spring in 2011 so far only seemed to have brought forth greater authoritarian backlash and repression in the Middle East and Asia, along with the European populist fallout mentioned above.

Conclusion

The historic and historiographic notions of revolution and civil war can be traced back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when the concepts of the international legal system and the unitary state were established. In the twentieth century, the First World War served as a catalyst of the evolving, long-term ideological struggle between revolution and counter-revolution, as some interpretations contend. The afterwar turmoil, nourished by the Bolshevik Revolution and by the sentiments of those whose ideas were not fulfilled during the war, somewhat stabilised around 1923. The 1930s Depression, however, intensified the crisis of legitimacy in the liberal democratic system and strengthened calls for alternatives, both right and left. Traces of these clashes can be found in the international dimensions of the Spanish Civil War and in intra-national conflicts within the Second World War.

The strengthening of the state in post-war Europe, along with the new Cold War division, led to the elimination of inter-state warfare as a tool of politics. But at the same time, it gave way to a new wave of politically motivated revolutionary violence. Even though the goals and ideologies of newly emerged terrorist groups were very different, their shared imagery and discourse led to the interpretation framing them as part of a single wave.

After 1989, the re-emergence of nationalism provoked several local conflicts. The globalised world became the main opponent of various insurgent movements, many of which could be classified as religious. The new era after 2001 led to reconceptualisation of the notions of terror and asymmetric conflict.

Discussion questions

1. Explain the idea of a 'European Civil War.' Do you agree with this interpretation of the twentieth century in Europe?
2. Is this 'European Civil War' over? And if so, what are its legacies?
3. The text above makes a difference between 'small wars' and large-scale conflicts such as the First World War and the Second World War. How are these types of war related in contemporary European history?

Suggested reading

Gerwarth, Robert, *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End* (London: Allen Lane, 2016).

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