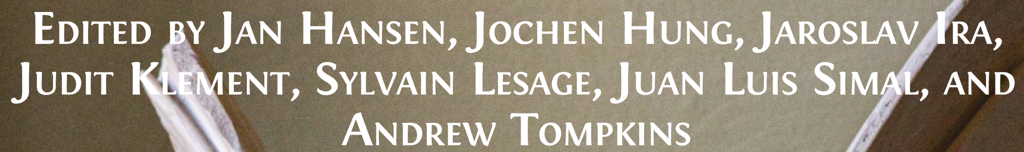
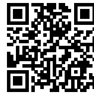


Edited by Jan Hansen, Jochen Hung, Jaroslav Ira, Judit Klement, Sylvain Lesage, Juan Luis Simal, and Andrew Tompkins


# The European Experience

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



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# 3.4.3 Peace and Conflict in Contemporary History (ca. 1900–2000)

*Eirini Karamouzi, Jan Koura, and Stéphane Michonneau*

## Introduction

Eric Hobsbawm wrote in 2003 that "the world as a whole has not been effectively at peace since 1914 and is not at peace now". The two World Wars and the ensuing Cold War dominated most of the century. The previous century saw an unprecedented accumulation of arms, with a dominant rise of the military-industrial complex in order to combat the notion of a perpetual war. The dropping of the nuclear bomb and then the proliferation of nuclear weapons—despite their supposed defensive character—contained the seeds of more violence and destruction. It is not a coincidence that the major publications on Europe of the twentieth century have predominantly focused on the history of war and conflict, paying much less attention to the practices of peace-making. When historians do pay attention to the history and ideas of European peace, the process is undeniably complicated. To begin with, it is almost impossible to write about peace and conflict in a clear, straightforward manner. How people responded to the experiences of total wars had a direct effect on the kind of peace they envisioned. Peace therefore did not emerge automatically, nor can it be understood merely as the absence of war.

## The Puzzle of Peace

Peace is a dynamic and controversial process that takes place in different geographical and political spheres and is infused with different meanings from a multitude of actors: governments, civil servants, non-governmental peace advocacy groups, scientists, anti-colonialists, to name a few. Moreover, extensive use of the term in the public sphere further impedes scholarly

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attempts to properly define it. During the century in question, most militant action took place in the name of peace and fascists, socialists and democrats alike co-opted the language of peace for their own political aims. There was therefore an unprecedented politicisation of peace that sometimes advanced its cause and at other times thwarted its realisation.

Firstly, attempts to realise a non-violent reordering of international affairs took place between governments. In the aftermath of the Great War, there were two opposing ideas for the restructuring of the world. One was pronounced by American President Woodrow Wilson (1856–1924) in his Fourteen Points address and the other was promulgated by Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) in his Decree on Peace, which called for social reform, if not revolution. Often, negotiating peace led to the signing of peace treaties or the creation of international organisations that would guarantee collective security. The League of Nations, founded in 1920, was one result, succeeded by the United Nations following the end of the Second World War. Indeed, a flurry of European organisations were created in the service of peace in the post-war period with the most enduring being the European Economic Community (created in 1957), and the Council of Europe (founded in 1949).

For much of its history, peace was predominantly driven by religious motives. However, it was during the twentieth century that socialists and feminists broadened the agenda to point to issues of social and economic justice, and the unfairness of patriarchal society. The active involvement of women in different pacifist organisations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom created in 1919 were extremely active throughout the century, significantly influencing the peace agenda. The gendering of peace meant more attention was paid to social dimensions. This demand was accentuated in the post-war years of recovery where there was a powerful expectation in Europe that 1945 would herald a new age. In this new era, most nation states in the continent perceived material and social security as a precondition for a peaceful settlement. Prosperity was sought on all fronts, with countries like Britain hosting popular campaigns on the need for a welfare system and investing renewed interest in volunteering, relief work, and humanitarianism.

It was also during this period that mobilisation for peace became more systematic. Large-scale peace movements took place after the end of the First World War, during the interwar years, and peaked in the 1980s. The mobilisation against the deployment of US Pershing and Cruise missiles armed with atomic warheads reinvigorated the peace movements. In Great Britain, 400,000 people turned up at Hyde Park in October 1983 opposing missile deployment while the Federal Republic of Germany was similarly swept up in anti-nuclear fervour, with more than one million joining the anti-missile demonstrations. The

peace movement was a heterogeneous phenomenon encompassing a broad spectrum of autonomous activists and youth movements but also institutions such as political parties, trade unions, and churches.

## Civil Wars

While the advent of the modern nation state changed the nature of war through universal conscription, war also changed nations, for it turned out to be a highly effective instrument for unifying territories and nationalising populations. War nationalises territories and renders national traditions sacred and immaculate. War therefore provides an occasion for accelerated homogenisation of national cultures, thus acting as a crucible for nations. But war may also be a major factor hastening national dissolution. There are two telling illustrations of this in the twentieth century: the dismantling of great empires, and internal conflicts within existing nations.

In 1914, the Austro-Hungarian authorities feared separatism from the national minorities which resided within the empire, yet loyalty to the dynasty prevailed through to 1916. Even in the Russian Empire, the national representatives at the exceptional sitting of the Duma in August 1914 clearly asserted their loyalty to the Russian state. But over the course of the conflict, the limits to the community of combatants became clear, for army discipline was not based solely on patriotism but also on constraint, obedience, and social pressure. From 1916 onwards, the largest number of defections from the Austro-Hungarian Army were by national minorities: Czechs, Slovaks, and Croats who refused to shoot at Russians or Serbs on the grounds of pan-Slavism. Thus, nationalist demands were strengthened by the war, though still linked to political and social matters.

The emergence of new conflicts within communities which were nominally homogenous in national terms followed a different pattern—conflicts in nations such as Finland (1918), Spain (1936–1939), Italy (1943–1945), and Greece (1946–1949). The battles between liberal democracy and communism in the 1920s (Finland), between democracies and fascism in the 1930s (Spain), and as part of the Cold War after 1947 (Greece), were not fought primarily along ideological, more than national, lines. Each of the various camps claimed to embody national independence, inexorably leading to civil wars with revolutionary tones. These civil wars were the theatre for overt international interventions, such as that of Bolshevik Russia in Finland, of fascist Germany, Italy, and Portugal in Spain, and of Yugoslavia, the United Kingdom, and later the United States in Greece. Rebuilding national unity after these internal wars came at the cost of fierce repression of the defeated camp.

At the front, national dissent could lead to mutiny and revolution. In1917, there were several waves of desertion, including the famous mutiny by about 40,000 French soldiers between April and May of 1917, and by soldiers in Germany who allowed themselves to be taken prisoner without fighting, who voluntarily mutilated themselves, and sometimes undertook acts of collective fraternisation. The phenomenon was most widespread in countries where opposition to the war intersected with calls for political democratisation and social equality: in Russia, about one million soldiers deserted in between September and October of 1917; in Germany, the navy had to quell mutinies at Wilhelmshaven in August 1917 and October 1918. Additionally, in all countries, tensions between the front and the rear threatened to tear the community apart. War gave rise to or reinforced new antagonisms: between towns and the countryside as regulations largely failed to reduce tensions between producers and consumers; in factories, where women were considered mere temporary replacements, and did not win the emancipation they expected from their mobilisation; certain categories of the population felt abandoned or betrayed, such as farmers and retailers who, unlike big companies, were subject to draconian controls.

Wherever the national consensus was weakened, there was increasing surveillance of internal minorities and foreigners, feeding into enthusiastic and widespread xenophobia: war provided an opportunity to resort to racism and reject foreigners. In France, foreigners were insulted and abused during the two World Wars: foreign nationals from enemy countries, even those who were naturalised, were placed in prison camps, including Alsatians and Swiss, who were viewed as Germans. There were numerous instances of violence against minorities in Germany (the Jews) and in Hungary (the Slovaks). War generated violent forms of exclusion for minorities.

## The Cold War

The Cold War was a different kind of war. The nature of the conflict, which never resulted in a direct military confrontation in Europe at least, was fought at the global level using a broad array of political, economic, and diplomatic instruments, as well as new forms of rivalry such as proxy wars or psychological warfare. It largely shaped the history of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century and significantly transformed its role in the international system. The European continent occupied a different position in the newly emerging post-war order, which was heavily influenced by the United States and the Soviet Union. With the help of domestic communist and socialist parties, the Soviet Union created a bloc of 'fraternal states' in East-Central Europe after the Second World War. Eastern bloc countries had only limited control over their foreign

policy and began to adopt features of the Soviet political and economic system. In contrast, Western parts of the European continent welcomed different forms of Americanisation while adapting them to their diverse national contexts. The strong American presence in the reconstruction of Western Europe resulted in the creation of an 'empire by invitation' which gradually resulted in the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1949. By the early 1950s, Europe was divided into two power blocs, representing two different political and economic systems with two different approaches to modernisation, competing with each other in the international arena.

The European states on both sides of the 'Iron Curtain' were instrumental in disseminating the superpowers' global modernisation models, adding legitimacy to the claim that the Cold War was predominantly a war of ideas. The fight against communism meant welcoming even the authoritarian states of Franco's Spain and Salazar's Portugal within the American orbit of influence. The United States also began to replace European countries as the hegemon in the Third World, which began to decolonise intensively from the mid-1950s. The Suez Crisis of 1956 demonstrated the weakness of formerly influential colonial powers like the United Kingdom and France, and publicly showcased the difficulties they faced in advancing their goals in the non-European world without the consent of the United States. Decolonisation also presented an opportunity for the Eastern bloc countries to penetrate areas that had previously been the domain of the Western European colonial powers. East-Central European socialist countries assisted the Soviet Union to transfer the Soviet modernisation model to the newly decolonised states of the Global South. The Third World became an important Cold War battlefield.

However, both superpowers' hegemonic position in Europe was not entirely stable and was constantly in flux throughout the Cold War. While Soviet leader Joseph Stalin kept his empire close, his successor Nikita Khrushchev inaugurated a process of destalinisation that sent unintended signals which encouraged Poland and Hungary to go their own way in building socialism. But the bloody suppression of the Hungarian Uprising in 1956, as well as the Prague Spring twelve years later, showed that the Soviet Union was not about to give up influence in its 'satellites'. It was only a combination of several factors, notably economic problems and the change in Soviet leadership in the mid-1980s, that caused a loosening of ties between the USSR and its 'satellite' countries, resulting—ultimately—in the collapse of Soviet hegemony over East-Central Europe.

The United States initially supported the European integration process after the Second World War, but some of the Western European countries began to increasingly define themselves politically and economically against US influence from the 1960s onward. The European Communities (EC)

became a competing economic project for the United States and the promotion of a different agenda by the EC was evident during the negotiations of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), negotiations which led to the 1975 Helsinki Accords. By the 1970s, the American 'empire by invitation' came to an end, although through NATO, Western Europe was still dependent on the United States' security umbrella, a situation that persisted even after the end of the Cold War.

The Cold War, even though it lasted for decades, remained cold partly due to the arrival of nuclear weapons. Their eventual use could have resulted in global Armageddon, which discouraged both superpowers from using them. In contrast to bloody proxy wars and conflicts outside Europe, the Cold War in Europe itself brought a certain degree of stability, peace, and predictability to the international order.

Fig. 1: Unknown, "Burial of an unknown soldier", 11 November 1921, Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2016845783/. Under the symbolic Arc de Triomphe in Paris (1919), an unknown soldier was laid to rest in a beautiful casket with a patriotic ceremony.

## Memories of Wars

Memories of war often underpin national identity. The way combatants understand war is bound up with pre-existing cultural considerations: mobilisation draws on pre-existing narrative structures appealing to heroism or historical figures magnified by the 'national story'. In France, the cult of citizens who died at war gained particular impetus after the French defeat

against Germany in 1870, following rituals far removed from the triumphalist monuments and ceremonies of the Napoleonic Wars. Immediately after the First World War, countless memorials were erected in towns and villages to represent the multifaceted memories of war and to bind these memories to the experience of combatants on the home front. This was taken a step further with the cult of the unknown soldier, whose tomb was placed beneath the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in January 1921, imitating the initiative at Westminster Abbey (London) in 1919. Managing the memories of war became vital in the process of reconciliation for a mourning nation, and thus became an issue for both state and society.

In Germany after the First World War, there were an increasing number of military parades by Steel Helmets. Denial of the defeat and—even more importantly—of responsibility for the war prevented the construction of a minimal consensus around memory of the war. The tomb of the unknown soldier was only erected in 1931, in the courtyard of the *Neue Wache* building in Berlin. In 1927, a memorial to the Battle of Tannenberg was erected in Eastern Prussia, providing a substitute narrative to defeat on the Western Front. It became a monument for those nostalgic for empire, and a site where paramilitary groups maintained a heroic and positive vision of the war. With worship of the dead thus monopolised by a few groups, the only place left to pay homage to the dead was within the church.

In addition to political instrumentalisation of war memory by different regimes, populations themselves also have their own, multiple memories of the experience of war. Thus, in post-1945 France, various memories co-existed simultaneously: the Resistance, deportation, the first liberated colonies, combatants, civilians, supporters of the Vichy regime, Nazi collaborators. These multiple memories were not all expressed equally within society, nor through the same channels. Overall, victimisation nevertheless provided a way of unifying the population around a set of coherent memories. Through to the 1970s, Gaullism and communism deployed a '*resistancialist*' vision of the war, which presented the majority of the French as resisting Nazism.

Yet memories of the traumas of war may long remain dormant. They erupted in Western Europe in the 1980s and in Central Europe after the Berlin Wall came down. Memories of the Shoah provoked numerous conflicts in the following decades, with marked contrasts between the West and the East of the continent. Equally, memories of the aerial bombing in Germany during the Second World War re-emerged at a later date, not triggering debate until the 2000s once the country had been reunified. Lastly, memories of colonial wars are still painful, and remain largely undealt with by states: in France, memories of the Algerian War (1954–1962) fuel a feeling of unease which undermines national cohesion. In 2021, recognising the abuses committed in

the colonies motivated Germany's acknowledgement, for example, that the 1904 Herero massacre in Namibia was a 'genocide'.

## Conclusion

The European conflicts of the twentieth century took many forms—from civil armed conflicts to ideological, cultural, and propaganda rivalries during the Cold War. Compared to previous centuries, however, the main European wars of the twentieth century took on a global character with significant consequences for non-European territories. European civil wars of the last century were always subject to foreign intervention, of varying degrees of explicitness, in some cases calling into question the underpinnings of the nation and the coherence of the imagined community. Memories of war still evoke controversies and occupy an important place in national narratives, public discourses, and the foreign policy orientations of today's European states. Peace-building processes and the peace movements belong to modern European history just as much as the conflicts, however they were often abused for political or ideological purposes or culminated in more division and disagreement.

## Discussion questions

1. Which role did political ideologies play in conflicts in twentieth-century Europe?
2. Why did memories of war become so important during this time?
3. In which ways was the Cold War different to other conflicts in twentieth-century Europe?

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