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European History

Inside the European Cataclysm

- Features -

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Writing on a century of violence since the Great War, as World War I was once called, could easily turn into a gallery of horrors or an awful, monotonous succession of wars and genocide, from the battle of Verdun to Baghdad, from the Armenian to the Rwanda genocide, passing through Auschwitz and the Gulag.

Many scholars have already accomplished this exercise in anthropological pessimism, illustrating the deep roots of evil in human beings. My approach will be different. I will try to detect and describe some significant features of the violence of the last century starting from one of its matrices: the cataclysms of Europe between 1914 and 1945, with some references to its developments in the following decades.

Between 1914 and 1945, Europe experienced a second Thirty Years War. This age of violence mirrored a global European crisis: a political crisis, shaped by the collapse of the old liberal order and the irruption of the masses into the public sphere, and lasting until the advent of fascism; an economic crisis, shaped by the end of laissez-faire and the introduction in all countries of different forms of state intervention in the economy; and finally a cultural crisis, which put into question the previously dominant idea of Progress.

During this time, new paradigms of science merged with conservative worldviews inherited from the tradition of counter-Enlightenment, creating hybrid and unknown forms of reactionary modernism. After 1914, modernity revealed its most destructive and frightening face, that of total war. A still largely rural continent discovered the laws of a mechanized world, a temporality completely disconnected from the rhythm of nature, and a submission of bodies to the overwhelming impersonal Moloch of mass armies.

Suddenly, the concept of modernity was no longer identified with material progress; it was rather related to an industrial war carried on by gigantic armies organized as Fordist factories that incorporated soldiers transformed into “workers of destruction” (such a definition simultaneously appeared in 1915 in the writings of Henri Barbusse and Arnold Zweig).

Total War became a rationalized and technologized massacre whose result was a death no longer glorified, but serialized: a death “without qualities,” a mass anonymous death. This was, in the terms of the socialist writer Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), a “mechanically reproducible” death, whose “aura” was forever stripped away in the mud of the trenches. Inaugurated with the myth of heroic death, the Great War finished with commemorations of the “unknown soldier.”

During this second Thirty Years War, Europe experienced an extraordinary fusion of conflicts: classical intra-state wars, revolutions, civil wars, national liberation wars, genocide, and violent confrontations arising from class, national, political, ideological and also religious cleavages.

The concept of “European civil war” synthesizes all of these conflicts. The term’s originator seems to have been the German painter Franz Marc, in a letter he wrote from the front shortly before his death at Verdun. He noted that the world war was “a European civil war, a war against the inner invisible enemy of the European spirit.” [\[1\]](#)

According to Ernst Jünger, the war of 1914-18 had simply been an apocalypse showing “Europe struggling against Europe” in a climate of “civil war.” At the beginning of 1943, having returned from a mission to the Caucasus at the moment of the German defeat at Stalingrad, he defined the Second World War in the Eastern front as “absolute, to a

degree that Clausewitz could not have conceived, even after the experiences of 1812: it is a war between states, between peoples, between citizens and between religions, with the object of zoological extinction.” [2]

In the 1930s and the 1940s, the idea of European Civil War appears in the writings of authors as different as Churchill, Keynes, Trotsky, De Gaulle and Benedetto Croce. In spite of their discrepancies, all of them considered the decades between the two world wars as a moment in which, living its own self-destruction, Europe became aware of its common destiny.

Of course, “European Civil War” is a contradictory concept: “civil war” means the breakup of the internal order of a state, and Europe was not a state, nor a federation, either in 1914 nor in 1939. The conflicts it experienced in those years, nonetheless, took the features of civil war.

According to all modern theories of Law, war has its rules concerning both who can decide it (*jus ad bellum*) and the way it is conducted (*jus in bello*). On the one hand, only a legitimate authority, i.e. a sovereign State, can declare a war; on the other hand, war needs a set of rules shared by all belligerents. They must respect the rights of prisoners (above all their right to life) and not strike civilians, avoiding of their transformation into military targets.

The law of war was only an aspect of the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*, i.e. the advent of a codified system of relations between states owning the monopoly of legitimate violence on their territories. This conception is implicit in the famous sentence opening Clausewitz’s treaty on war from the first half of the 19th century: “War is only dueling (*Zweikampf*) on a large scale.”

Up until 1914 the social practice of dueling, hugely widespread among aristocratic layers of the time, reveals a growing submission to law and to certain shared norms in the use of violence. Dueling was essentially reserved to social élites, excluding subaltern classes, women and, especially in Germany, stigmatized minorities like Jews.

Dueling was conceived as a ritualized and codified confrontation aiming at repairing an offense, following the principle of *Satisfaktionsfähigkeit*. Its aim was not the death of the adversary (even if this was not excluded) but the respect of a code of honor, mark of belonging to a social élite. Using swords or pistols previously chosen under the control of witnesses, duelists were gentlemen who recognized each other reciprocally as legitimate adversaries, able to fight each other following a tradition of chivalry, with shared norms.

Witnesses played the role of lawyers before the duelers, transforming themselves into judges during the confrontation and finally writing a report that might eventually be exhibited before a tribunal. This growing “legalization” of dueling converted it into a social practice *de facto* recognized by the law. Prussian law considered it as a kind of “customary law,” useful in preserving the sense of honor inside the military caste.

Rather than representing a surviving remnant of feudalism, dueling appears as a mirror of the civilizing process “self-control and normative regulation of conflicts” embodied by the dynastic order throughout the nineteenth century. In other words, its highly formalized code reproduced the norms of war fixed by the *Jus Publicum Europaeum*.

In the summer 1914, these norms seemed still self-evident when the Sarajevo assassination was the detonator of a conflict that burned the continent. Of course, the Great War had its causes, about which historical debates still rumble “scholars prefer to speak of premises or conditions rather than of “causes” in a deterministic way” but it was not foreseen by its actors. According to Christopher Clark, the most reputed among the last historians of the Great War, those responsible for such a conflict “were sleepwalkers, watchful but unseeing, haunted by dreams, yet blind to the reality of the horror they were about to bring into the world.” [3]

Nobody, among those responsible for the conflict, had foreseen armies of millions of men enclosed for years in their trenches; nobody had thought of chemical arms, bombings, destroyed towns and serial killings by machine gun fire.

Their mental habitus and cultural references belonged to the European experience of the 19th century, with their “civilized” wars between Old Regime states mutually respecting each other. The friendship between the French Captain Boeldieu (Pierre Fresnay) and the German officer von Rauffenstein (Erich von Stroheim) romantically depicted by Jean Renoir in *La Grande Illusion* (1937) is the mirror of such a dynastic and aristocratic conception of war that would not survive the First World War.

During the Great War, on the contrary, the confrontation between legitimate enemies was quickly replaced by their “crusade” to destroy each other. At Christmas 1914, combat was suspended for a day. Several photos show German officers and soldiers fraternizing with their British and French homologues in the no man’s land between the enemy lines. This ephemeral brotherhood indicates that they respected each other as legitimate enemies.

In the following years, such events were not to be repeated. *Jus in bello* was rapidly buried. At Ypres, on April 1915, during the first gas attack by the German troops, the law of war was the reminiscence of a finished epoch. Suddenly, the technology of the 20th century troubled the system of values of a dynastic continent. This irruption of modernity merging with old traditions and representations of war is emblematically illustrated by the image of a medieval warrior in an age of chemical warfare — a hybrid figure of non-contemporaneity, of coexistence between different historical temporalities.

Of course, *Jus Publicum Europaeum* had its own ambiguities and hidden ideological purposes. Since its implicit corollary was the vision of non-Western world as a wasteland open to colonization, wars of conquest and massacres were perceived as just wars in the name of natural law. Conceived as invasions and often also as extermination campaigns in which European troops were not confronted with other regular armies but with tribes and combatants without a well-defined status, colonial wars did not distinguish between soldiers and civilians.

Thus the violence of colonialism constituted a model for the total wars of 20th century. Of course, colonial wars were not civil wars, because they opposed forces politically and culturally extremely distant from one another. They were not conflicts opposing members of the same community, and their violence did not stem from a crisis inside a state no longer able to hold the monopoly of force.

Nevertheless, some features were similar. As in a civil war there are no shared norms and each belligerent tries to destroy its enemy, the colonial war does not know the figure of “legitimate enemy” (*justus hostis*). The internal seditious elements of the civil war as well as the rebellious natives of the colonial war were outlaws to be subordinated or destroyed, and with whom any compromise was impossible.

A civil war without atrocities and horrors does not exist. One of its features is the deep emotional involvement of its actors. The feeling of accomplishing a duty could inspire the volunteers of 1914, but it is not enough for justifying the participation in a civil war. In other words, a civil war is always a mixture of juridical anomie and emotional plenitude, both pushed to the extreme, as if the vacuum created by the fall of norms was filled with a new existential content.

Combat is not regulated by law but by superior ethical and political convictions that one must completely defend, in the most intransigent way, at any cost, eliminating the enemy — a close, known enemy — and also, if necessary, sacrificing one’s own life. The values filling this space of anomie can be the most noble or the most abject, sometimes a mixture of both: liberation, justice, equality, human dignity, freedom from oppression, but also vengeance, racism, exacerbated nationalism, ideological and religious fanaticism.

Civil war does not search for a just peace but rather the destruction of the enemy. At the Casablanca Conference in January 1943, Churchill and Roosevelt declared in a common statement that their allied forces would not accept any compromise with Germany and Japan, but only their “unconditional surrender.”

It is interesting to observe that in such a declaration, one already foreshadowing the tribunals of Nuremberg and Tokyo, the American president and British prime minister did not use the conventional word of the military lexicon: capitulation. They chose to speak of unconditional surrender, adopting the statement that the Unionists had imposed on the Confederates at the end of the American Civil War. [4] Such a formulation “unconditional surrender” did not belong to international law; it was borrowed from commercial law where it indicated a transfer of property.

In a capitulation, soldiers lay down their arms during a public ceremony symbolizing their defeat, but they still belong to the army of a state whose legal existence is recognized by international law (including by the victor). On the other hand, in an unconditional surrender the defeated army becomes a kind of property of the victor that imposes its domination.

General Wilhelm Keitel, who signed the unconditional surrender of Germany at Berlin-Karlhorst on May 9, 1945, was judged at Nuremberg the following year and executed as a war criminal. In 1945, as Hans Kelsen observed in many articles, the Allies occupying Japan and Germany had decided to deprive them of any form of national sovereignty (originally thought for several decades). At Casablanca, Roosevelt and Churchill decided to refuse any negotiations with Germany and Japan and to exclude any international juridical norm that could have “obstructed territorial transfers and boundary changes in enemy countries.”

Unconditional surrender allowed a complete redefinition of the European map. In the second half of the twentieth century, many wars “from the Vietnam War to the last Iraq War” reproduced similar features, both in their military practices and in their conclusions: a change of political regime imposed by the victors on the defeated enemies.

In the inter-war period, Europe rediscovered another figure of civil war: the partisan, an irregular combatant appearing in all theatres of war, sometimes playing a decisive role. Unknown during the First World War, which began as a classic intra-state war, the partisan emerged during the revolutionary crisis that broke out at the end of the conflict, notably in Russia and in Central Europe.

Nevertheless, the apogee of partisans' struggle would be the Second World War. They were many hundreds of thousands, in Europe, waging a parallel war, beside the regular armies mobilizing millions of soldiers. From 1943 onwards, the Resistance took on a mass dimension as an armed movement both in Eastern Europe, the Balkans and in Western societies, from Holland to Belgium, from France to Italy. In China, the communist partisans' army grew enormously under the Japanese occupation until taking power in 1949.

Fascist and Nazi propaganda justified repression, violence, deportation and massacre of civilians under the pretext of the anti-partisan struggle. Posters threatening with death all kinds of Resistance combatants, called “bandits” and “terrorists,” covered the countries occupied by German troops.

The emergence of the figure of partisan during the Second World War reveals the anomic character of this conflict, its transgression of traditional rules of war and therefore its civil war nature. Carl Schmitt sketched the portrait of the partisan as an “ideal-type,” [5] above all as an irregular combatant who is distinguished from the soldier wearing a uniform. The deep motivation of the partisan's struggle lies in “intensive political involvement” as indicated by the origin of the word, which refers to membership in a party. Partisan activity combines “mobility, rapidity and unexpected alternation of offensive and retreat,” especially when it is coordinated with that of a regular army.

Finally, the partisan has “a telluric character”: in most cases, he is deeply rooted in a territory he wishes to liberate and his action takes advantage from his organic links with local population, in the mountains as well as in the cities. Therefore, the partisan is a central figure in a war claiming a *justa causa* but not recognizing a *justus hostis*. The Second World War exalted both the liberation’s guerrillero and the political combatant: their traits fused into the partisan, sometimes conferring on him an almost mythical aura.

In the countries where a liberation army created by partisans took power against the occupation forces, its charismatic leader became quite naturally the chief of a new state, as with Marshal Tito in Yugoslavia. After the Second World War, the partisan became the hero of innumerable wars and revolutions, from Asia to Africa and Latin America.

In the age of total war, in which wars become anomic conflicts without shared rules, violence spreads and takes the form of crime and transgression. Hate loses its abstract character; it is no more a mental disposition or a feeling nourishing political choices and becomes an active drive. The suspension of law and the breakdown of the state’s monopoly of force create the context allowing the spontaneous outbreak of violence. From this point of view, it is incontestable that civil war implies a regression of the civilizing process. Social and cultural constraints that mold our mental frames and “psychic economy” explode.

In a civil war, violence is never only instrumental. It takes on a strong symbolic dimension and grows following a dynamic that transforms it into its own goal. In other words, extreme violence converts into cruelty. Civil war exhumes and increases old feelings and impulses that are articulate alongside with the contemporary hopes and frustrations. The enemy must not only be killed; he must be publicly humiliated and exhibited as a war trophy. Therefore, Fascists and Nazis hang executed partisans in Poland, Russia, Ukraine, Italy and the Balkans.

This violence inevitably stimulated a counter-violence that sometimes reproduced the same features (even if now it was perpetrated in the name of justice, freedom and democracy). Hence, the corpse of Mussolini was hanged by the mob in Piazzale Loreto in Milan, on April 29, 1945. As historian Sergio Luzzatto pertinently remarks, civil war “is also a bodily tragedy.” [6] It always brings a part of excessive, spectacular, horrible violence, as a kind of anthropological extreme limit.

Twentieth Century’s merger of violence

The 20th century experienced a mixture of total wars, civil wars and genocide. It created a context in which a savage and ancestral violence merged with the modern violence of total war, with the technology of air bombings and the industrial extermination of gas chambers. During this troubled age, one might say borrowing the words of Alain Corbin, the “Dionysian impulses” of avenger crowds coexisted with the “pasteurized massacres” of state violence. [7]

In other words, the violence born from the regression of the civilizing process joined, in an astonishing dialectic of “non-contemporaneity,” with the modern, much more murderous violence of industrial society. Such violence implied the results of the civilizing process: the state monopoly of arms, managerial and productive rationality, the fragmentation of tasks and the division of labor, control over impulses, social neutralization of ethical norms, spatial separation between victims and executors. The image of burned villages belongs to the memory of the Second World War as well as the crematoriums of Auschwitz.

Observed through the lens of anthropology, twentieth century violence “from the Russian Civil War to the Holocaust, from Hiroshima to the Cambodian killing fields” reveals this mixture of archaism and modernity. While

the engineers of Frankfurt Topf factories invented special crematoria able to withstand prolonged use and very high temperature, the Einsatzgruppen carried on their Partisanenkampf on the Eastern front, where the captured combatants were hanged in the central squares of villages.

The Nazi Partisanenkampf perpetuated a tradition of “manhunt” which, invented in the Middle Age and adopted by the aristocracy under Absolutism, was anything but modern. The Red Army, for its part, practiced rape on a mass scale. With its colonial imagination, American state secretary George Kennan described the advance of the Red Army in Eastern Prussia in 1944 as the pillage of an “Asiatic horde.” [8]

A similar “non-simultaneity” or “non-synchronism” of violence practices belonging to different ages also distinguished the war in the Pacific. While the scholars gathered in Los Alamos created the first atomic bomb, in the Asiatic jungle the marines decorated their vehicles with the skulls of killed Japanese soldiers, exhuming customs of the Indian wars of the 19th century. [9] The Japanese army pushed the coexistence of technological rationality and the code of honor inherited from the Samurai ethics to paroxysm, acquainting its officers and soldiers with both the use of chemical weapons and the practice of ritual suicide (seppuku) in the name of emperor.

These different forms of violence “hot” and “cold,” archaic and modern “coexisted in the same war. Civilization and barbarism are not two absolutely antagonistic terms but two linked aspects of the same historical process, carrying both emancipatory and destructive tendencies. In spite of the sociologist Norbert Elias’ naïve thoughts on the civilizing process, these tendencies belong to all modern wars: during the last Iraq War, the most sophisticated arms coexisted with the most primitive forms of torture in the military prison of Abu Ghraib.

In the perspective of World History, the Second World War appears as the traumatic condensation of many transformations that prefigure the modern concept of globalization. All the elements of such a process “growing economic interdependence, mass population displacements, exile and diaspora, technological and scientific transfers, cultural hybridity between nations and continents” developed and accelerated through the prism of war.

When thousands of persecuted European scholars emigrated to the United States (many historians define this phenomenon as a cultural and scientific exodus from one coast to the other of the Atlantic Ocean) and millions of American, Asian, African and Australian soldiers fought in Europe, a new perception of the planet, a new imagination and a new mental landscape suddenly emerged and came into sight.

The Second World War was also a powerful accelerator for research as well as applied science. During this conflict, the distinction between science and engineering, between science as knowledge and technology as mastering of nature, objects and human beings, became an increasingly porous border. The war experienced the birth of a new technocratic elite encompassing political and military actors “engineers, industrial managers, systems inventors (computers, lasers, radars, aeronautics and missiles) as well as a great number of scholars (physicians, mathematicians, biologists, economists, geographers, etc.) formed by both European and American universities.

According to Dominique Pestre, war offered almost inexhaustible opportunities to invent and create, without any economic constraints, engendering the durable illusion of the unlimited power of science. [10] In other words, the war experienced the secularization of science “a descent of science from its ivory tower into a profane world in which it became intrinsically technical and practical” that found its emblematic illustration in the fabrication (and use) of the atomic bomb.

Aerial warfare clearly illustrates this technological change. The First World War experienced some primitive forms of aerial warfare, mostly concerning border cities and whose casualties were extremely limited in number. During the Second World War aerial bombing turned into the systematic and planned destruction of the civil societies of the

enemy countries (Coventry, Dresden, Hamburg, Tokyo and Hiroshima remain the symbol of this “hubris” of devastation).

According to the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, the Second World War engendered a new, eminently modern form of “atmo-terrorism:” the target of aerial bombing was not only the enemy army but also its civil society, whose natural habitat (in the biological meaning of the word) had to be destroyed. [11] The technological advances of aerial warfare in the postwar decades did not change this conception of war; they simply improved it, leading to the recent invention of drones that seem to realize the dream of a war without human casualties (on the side of the aggressor).

The “brutalization” of European societies deeply affected culture as a whole, from the children of primary schools to the intellectual elites. [12] According to George Orwell, in 1930s Europe politics irrupted into culture. Writers were no longer able to shut themselves up in a universe of esthetic values, sheltered from the conflicts that were lacerating the society [13] It was the golden age of intellectual commitment. From this point of view, the great turning point wasn't 1917, the October Revolution, but 1933, when Hitler came to power in Germany.

In this context, the Spanish Civil War takes an enormous symbolic dimension tracing new divisions and clarifying political attitudes. The triangle between liberalism, communism and fascism, which had polarized the political scene after the end of the First World War, seems to be replaced by a unique confrontation between fascism and antifascism. This political opposition transcends into a military one and generates a deep metamorphosis in the field of culture: the transition from cleric to soldier. I mean the transformation of intellectual from a cleric to a soldier.

The “intellectual” changes with respect to the time of the Dreyfus Affair (1890s), when a writer like Emile Zola embodied the defense of universal values like equality and justice. Now, the intellectual becomes a fighter in a context of war. Among his attributes are not only pencils and typewriters, but also arms. From Henri Barbusse to George Orwell, from Noam Chomsky to Tariq Ali on the left, but also from Ernst Jünger to Robert Kagan and Bernard-Henry Levy on the militarist right wing, the 20th century intellectuals have defined their role and legitimacy through supporting or denouncing wars.

This context of war, in which politics often took a military paradigm “the confrontation between friend and enemy, in Schmittean terms “is the main explanation of the so irresistible attraction for both fascism and communism that for decades deeply shaped the intellectuals of almost all continents.

Eric Hobsbawm wrote that National Socialism did not prevail because of the persistence of the legacy of the Enlightenment. The forces of the Axis “whose desire to banish a universal idea of humanity was clearly proclaimed “had been defeated by a coalition of liberalism and communism, the inheritors of the Enlightenment in the twentieth century. Nonetheless, this conflict was not reducible to a titanic clash between Enlightenment and anti-Enlightenment; it also revealed the antinomies of modernity, which is instrumental rationalism that was unable use technical progress as a “key to happiness” but instead transformed it into a “fetish of doom.” [Walter Benjamin, “Theories of German Fascism” (1930), Selected Writings Vol. 2/1 1927-1930 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 321.

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On March 11, 1942, the German philosopher emigrant to the United States Günther Anders wrote some critical remarks in his notebook inspired by the visit to a scientific exhibition in Los Angeles. In front of many displayed modern machines, he discovered a new form of pudendum, a kind of “Promethean Shame.” [14]

With such a concept, he designated the feeling of humiliation proved by human beings in front of their own technical inventions. In the modern world, the capacity of technical creation (Herstellung) by human beings hugely overlapped

their capacity to represent it (Vorstellung); thus, human beings turned into a new category of “inverted utopists” unable to imagine the reality they were able to create.

Later scholars who had conceived the atomic bomb were shocked by the images of Hiroshima and Nagasaki devastated by atomic radiations. For a chemistry scholar, there is no mystery in a simple object like a box of Zyklon B, but nobody could imagine the industrial extermination of millions of human beings during the Second World War.

Such a “Promethean Shame” – the recognition of the ontological “superiority” of the technical products against human beings – destroyed the idea of Progress and paradoxically realized, in a purely negative form, an old Faustian dream: human beings became equal to Gods, but they could not create ex nihilo, they could only destroy ad nihil. According to Anders, August 8th 1945 opened a new age in which humanity achieved the capacity of its own self-destruction.

The First World War had revealed modernity as denaturalization of violence, a violence confiscated and monopolized by anonymous, mechanical apparatus; the Second World War pushed many currents of critical thought to recognize a link between technical modernity and the dehumanization of the world. Suddenly, the famous “iron cage” described by Max Weber as the destiny of Western rationalism seemed to be taking a concrete, awful form.

In the same days of August 1945, Albert Camus wrote that science had turned into “organized murder:” the world had to choose between “collective suicide and an intelligent use of scientific conquests.” [15] This alternative still remains a major question mark at the beginning of the 21st century.

[Against the Current](#)

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[5] Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political* (Candor, NY: Telos Press, 2007), 35.

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[10] Dominique Pestre, “Le nouvel univers des sciences et des techniques: une proposition générale,” in Amy Dahn, Dominique Pestre (eds), *Les Sciences pour la guerre, 1940-1960* (Paris: Editions du CNRS, 2004), 11-43.

[11] Peter Sloterdijk, *Terror From the Air* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009).

[12] On the “brutalization” of war, see George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 159-180.

[13] George Orwell, “Writers and Leviathan,” *Collected Essays*, vol. 4 (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 409.

[14] Günther Anders, *Die Antiquiertheit des Menschen. I. Äoer die Seele im Zeitalter der zweiten industriellen Revolution* (1956), Munich: C. H. Beck, 1985, 23.

[15] Albert Camus, “Combat, 8 August 1945,” *Writings 1944-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 326.