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THE END OF WHICH EUROPEAN ERA? THE CURRENT CRISIS OF EUROPE IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Far from exclusively challenging Europe's present and future, the current crises are also changing its relations to the past. The analogy with the 1930s has been repeatedly evoked as a key for understanding the current European crises. Nevertheless, history, even the 'history of the present' (as paradoxical as it may seem), is always an essay in comparison and contextualization. The aim of this paper is therefore to re-think today's European crises within a broad historical perspective by proposing a historiographical overview of the crucial transitional periods in the twentieth century, such as post-1989, post-1945, and post-1918. Moreover, it intends to conduct a critical assessment of some master narratives of twentieth-century Europe and their effort to combine in many contradictory ways the post-1914 catastrophes with the post-1945 reconstruction. It is particularly designed to re-frame the 'history of the present' from two points of view: 1. how do some master narratives conceive the both catastrophic and progressive experiences of the twentieth century and the ways in which they still affect and shape the present? 2. in what sense and to what extent is it possible to understand over time the dynamics of both destruction and reconstruction, destabilization and stabilization, disintegration and integration?

Keywords: Twentieth-century Europe, Postwar Transition, Reconstruction, Violence, Stability.

> "The difficulty lies, not in the new ideas, but in escaping from the old ones, which ramify, for those brought up as most of us have been, into every corner of our minds".
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> [Keynes J.M., *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*]

Far from 'ending' in 1989, as a quite common and comfortable post-Cold War wisdom assumed, history, since 2008, seems to have dramatically

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hastened its pace. Multiple crises have arisen within and around Europe, profoundly shaking the political, social, and economic assumptions of the EU institutions and re-shaping functions and claims of the nation-states within new global geopolitical contexts. In a time of destabilizing and often disturbing changes, journalists and politicians are eager to resort to historical analogies, which are supposed immediately to highlight complex and opaque processes by reducing the unknown to the known. Nevertheless, as James Bryce put it in the *American Commonwealth* (1888), "the chief practical use of history is to deliver us from plausible historical analogies". The aim of this paper is therefore to frame the ongoing European crises within a historical perspective, by providing a critical overview of some fundamental historiographical reflections on transitional or transformative periods (postwar periods, in their multiple and extensive meanings) over the course of the twentieth century.

As Marc Bloch famously put it, we have to complement the idea of "understanding the present by the past" with that of "understanding the past by the present". He then specified: "This faculty of understanding the living is, in very truth, the master quality of the historian" (Bloch 1992: 36). However, whereas the different questions of the present help in addressing new questions to the past, the 'history of the present' itself has an uncertain epistemological status. This notion was theorized by Timothy Garton Ash, who tended to concede the absolute privilege of the witness (first of all, the well-informed journalist) in understanding ongoing events (Garton Ash 1999). A much more sophisticated idea of the relationship between history and 'contemporaneity' has been recently theorized by Henry Rousso, who focusses on the structurally paradoxical problem of merging temporal proximity with critical distance. Since the 1980s, especially after 1989, we have lived within what Rousso, following François Hartog, calls a "regime of historicity", based on "presentism", as it tends to identify history with memory. Historians are thus afflicted by the dilemma between the necessity to frame the breaking or turning points of the present in the long-term perspective of the past and the impossibility of completely grasping still ongoing processes and events before they have reached their endpoint (Rousso 2012).

The financial and economic crisis of 2008-2009 and its long-term sociopolitical backlash throughout the Western world, the Greek slump and the EU crisis since 2010-2012 (onwards), the aggressive anti-European role of Putin's Russia, the Ukrainian troubles and the subsequent Russian annexation of Crimea and its military intervention in Donbas in 2014, the refugee crisis in the Mediterranean Sea, in the Balkans and in Central Europe in 2015 as an aftershock of the Syrian civil war, the ascending success of movements claiming to restore national sovereignty in Europe as well in the US in 2016, have induced frequent use of the analogy with the 1930s.

This analogical argument is basically referred to the sequence of financial crackdown, economic depression, social unemployment and unrest, contest over political representation, generating a major 'crisis of democracy' and the ascent of 'fascism'.

The analogy with 1930s' Europe is so commonly evoked in today's comments that it is often reduced to an abused rhetorical device for everyday political and journalist purposes. Nonetheless, the so-called 'Weimar argument' in itself is politically and intellectually challenging, and of especial interest for this paper because it involves a number of historians' reflections. Certainly, the political cultures of the 1930s still provide a wide repertory for today's anti-liberal, anti-democratic, nationalistic, and populist movements and leaders. Some of them seem even to be willing to go back to the 1930s' experiences, considered as a model for radical anti-globalization reactions (Trencsényi 2015: 32-52). Yet it is legitimate to wonder, as Mark Mazower does especially in the wake of the Greek crisis, if the notion of fascism might help in understanding the institutional weaknesses and dysfunctions of democracy today (Mazower 2016: 375-385). Nevertheless, it is even more dubious that the analogical reference to the 1930s *as such* might contribute to a better understanding of the current European and American crises, let alone contribute to their solution.

On the contrary, this is the case of Timothy Snyder, well-known (and controversial) for his work on twentieth-century Eastern Europe, on Hitler's and Stalin's totalitarian regimes (*Bloodlands*) as well as on Shoah *(Black Earth)*. Deeply involved, as a public intellectual, in the struggle for the access of Ukraine to the EU and against Putin's Eurasian project, Snyder, in the aftermath of the ascent of Donald Trump to the American presidency, has published a book (*On Tyranny*) about the "lessons of the twentieth century". One of his main arguments is what he calls "the Reichstag warning", in order to show "how quickly a modern republic can be transformed into an authoritarian regime" (Snyder 2017a). His starting point was a comparison between "the three major democratic moments", after 1918, after 1945, and after 1989 (Snyder 2017b: 11). Snyder then concludes: "Democracy failed in Europe in the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, and it is failing not only in much of Europe but in many parts of the world today. It is that history and experience that reveals to us the dark range of our possible futures" (Snyder 2017b: 114).

Snyder re-interprets the best moral and political wisdom of the liberal tradition, with especial regard to the Eastern European dissidents. His appeal for civic mobilization on the basis of the tragic legacies of the twentieth century overflows with admirable civic passion. Nevertheless, the analogy of the present European crises with the 1930s seems to be historically misleading, and politically counterproductive, for three main reasons: a) it presupposes a sort of cyclical conception of history, in which similari-

ties matter more than differences; b) it establishes the highest standard of catastrophic outcomes ('tyranny') which risk downgrading any other experience of violent intolerance, threats to restrict individual liberty or collective action, disruptive chaos, blatant corruption, or simply public indecency; c) above all, it takes for granted a liberal consensus, which is exactly what is under pressure, if not about to collapse today.[1] Put briefly, public opinions do care about the 'Weimar argument' or the 'Reichstag warning', only if they still place their trust in the rule of law and in the liberal-democratic system. Snyder's use of the analogy with the 1930s was fashioned in the post-Cold War order as a source of institutional legitimation of democracy, as a driving force of the European integration, and as a reminder of its structural fragility. Now that the post-1989 settlement is being questioned, and most likely already overthrown by Putin's Russia (but not only), this analogy appears to be out of context.

1. Historical (and Moral) Narratives of the Twentieth Century

In the summer of 1989, even before the fall of the Berlin Wall, Francis Fukuyama predicted "not just the end of the cold war, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history", but "the end of history as such". By referring to the famous neo-Hegelian re-reading of Alexandre Kojève, Fukuyama, then an unknown political scientist, far from claiming that the conflicts would end overnight, meant "the endpoint of the mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government" (Fukuyama 1989: 3-4). Nevertheless, the perspective of the 'end of history' seemed to summarize a mood of the time quite in tune with the 'Washington consensus'. Indeed, the post-1989 years in Europe and in the US were in many ways inspired by liberal complacency about the victory of the West over communism, which gave a new (somehow preposterous) life to Cold War liberalism and anti-totalitarianism. Even the thoughtful liberalism of the East European dissidents (and of their fellows in the West) was polluted by this euphoria, which tended to forge a deterministic vision of the historical process (Isaac 2004: 119-129). For professional duty and moral commitment, some important historians thus questioned the idea of the 'end of history', by elaborating their own balance sheets of the twentieth century as a whole (and of the different postwar periods as well).

In his *Age of Extremes*, published in 1994, Eric J. Hobsbawm famously propounded the idea of the twentieth century as "the Short century", be-

[1] 'Liberal' in this article is used in the European meaning of the term.

gun in 1914/1917 and ended in 1991, marked by highly structural processes opposing 'capitalism' and 'socialism', within a period substantially coinciding with the Soviet experience. The basic argument of the *Age of Extremes* was summed up as follows: "the history of the Short twentieth century cannot be understood without the Russian Revolution and its direct and indirect effects. Not least because it proved to be the saviour of liberal capitalism, both by enabling the West to win the Second World War against Hitler's Germany and by providing the incentive for capitalism to reform itself" (Hobsbawm 1994: 84). Whereas the direct effects of the Russian Revolution applied to the solution of the dramatic conflicts following the crisis of liberal capitalism, the indirect effects of the Russian Revolution applied to the political stability and to the social prosperity of the postwar period. As capitalism was considered in itself as avoidance of self-reforming forces from within, the Soviet Union had provided the transformative pressure for capitalism from without. Postwar capitalism was conceived as "a sort of marriage between economic liberalism and social democracy […], with substantial borrowing from the USSR, which had pioneered the idea of economic planning". The "Golden Age" was thus primarily due "to the overwhelming economic dominance of the US", but also "to the fear of communism" (Hobsbawm 1994: 270, 275). Consistently, Hobsbawm described world history since the early 1970s in terms of "a world which had lost its bearings and slid into instability and crisis". Since the 1980s "the foundations of the Golden Years had crumbled" "irretrievably". In particular, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, "disorder" and "disintegration" emerged from the capitalist world "without convincing alternatives": the economic forces of the free market were "out of control", and the states had lost their capacity to plan and govern society (Hobsbawm 1994: 403). Ironically, the collapse of 'real socialism', and the testified failure of the Soviet utopia of total control and planning brought about – besides the end of the "religious wars" of the Short century – the crisis and decline of the self-proclaimed winner of the Cold War, the "neo-liberal utopia", the idea of a society based on a global completely free market (Hobsbawm 1994: 562, 563).

Although Hobsbawm's *Age of Extremes* was widely praised, it was particularly criticized in a harsh review by Tony Judt, a scholar of the French socialism and intellectuals who in the second half of the 1980s, through his interest in the East European dissidents, progressively shifted from the history of Western to Eastern Europe. Not incidentally, Judt reproached Hobsbawm for not having come to terms with the tragic historical experiences of East-Central Europe.[2]

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[2] Judt 1995. For a comment see Bresciani 2016: 158-170.

In fact, historical writing on East Central Europe had begun to change over the course of the 1980s well before the turning point of 1989-1991: the exhaustion of the Marxist influence and of class language, the growing attention to Europe (or *Mitteleuropa*) as a space beyond the East/West or Cold War divide, and the simultaneous decline of antifascist paradigms in Western Europe, were largely established by the mid-1980s. These new political and cultural coordinates directly or indirectly affected the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the Second World War (especially in the wake of the *Historikerstreit*, but not only). At the height of the celebrations for the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war, Norman Davies, in two influential articles published in 1994 and 1995, sharply questioned the "Allied scheme of history" based on the "black-and-white dialectic of wartime". As a historian of Poland, he could observe the striking divergences between memory paths in Eastern and Western Europe, the partial and selective approach of antifascist historiography, and the still overwhelming Russian myth of the "Great Patriotic War" (Davies 1994; Davies 1995).

After the end of the Cold War, in the aftermath not only of the events in Eastern Europe, but also of the enforcement of the Maastricht Treaty and of the constitution of the (Western) European Community, a number of pathbreaking histories of Europe were written, or at least conceptualized. Davies' criticism of the modern European memory laid the foundations for his major (and much criticized) *Europe. A History*, published in 1996. This was in many ways a first attempt to integrate the history of Europe into a unitary account extending beyond the East/West divide. At the same time, Davies chronologically divided the twentieth century between 1914-1945 and 1945-1991, considering the two World Wars "as separate acts of the same drama": the "European civil war": "By entering into military conflict in 1914, the European states unleashed the mayhem from which were born not one but two revolutionary moment – one of which was crushed in 1945, the other left to crumble in the dramatic events of 1989-91" (Davies 1996: 900).

By contrast, Mazower, developing Hobsbawm's vision, focussed on the difficult relationship between democracy and capitalism in Western Europe; but, differently from his Marxist interlocutor, he ascribed a special place to fascism. In Mazower's opinion, far from being an old continent, Europe was in many respects a brand-new one, "the product of protracted domestic and international experimentation which followed the collapse of the old European order in 1914" (Mazower 1998: IX). From this stemmed the ideological rivalries among liberal democracy, communism, and fascism, in order to invent and re-invent new European orders (especially in the East-Central European regions). As Mazower argued: "Today, it is hard to see the inter-war experiment with democracy for the novelty it was: yet

we should certainly not *assume* that democracy is suited to Europe. Though we may like to think democracy's victory in the Cold War proves its deep roots in Europe's soil, history tells us otherwise" (Mazower 1998: 3). According to Mazower, the failures of Wilson and Lenin to secure "a new world" had paved the way for the crisis of liberal and parliamentary institutions in the 1930s and led to the ascendance of anti-liberal, anti-democratic, nationalistic and fascist groups and parties. By the early 1940s the "Nazi new order" – "the culmination of nearly a century of imperial and national struggles inside and outside the continent" [3] – seemed to be Europe's future, but then the catastrophic collapse of Hitler's empire started a different story which was closely bound up with the previous one. The reconstruction in the aftermath of the Second World War was an achievement completely different from the failures after the First World War, whereas the post-1989 settlement in many respects resembled the post-1918 one. However, the "strange post-1989 triumph of democracy in Europe" put an end to the ideological conflicts that had begun in 1917, but it marked a victory of capitalism more than of democracy (Mazower 1998: 404).

In tune with Mazower's approach, Dan Diner focussed on the East Central European experiences, challenging the centrality of the Western European ones over the course of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, much more than in *Dark Continent*, *Cataclysms* was framed by the "temporal icons of 1917 and 1989 and the historical meaning those dates encapsulate" – first of all, "the profound antagonism between Communism and its opponents". Diner intersected the "universal civil war", opposing communism and capitalism, fascism and antifascism, democracy and totalitarianism, East and West, with conflicts of a completely different nature based on ethnicity, nationality, religion, and culture. According to Diner, this dualistic pattern had come to a sudden end in 1989: "It turned out that the massive weight of principles and ideas, the overwhelming rhetoric of opposing universalisms, had, as it were, merely temporarily neutralized a rhetoric grounded in highly particular legacies – a rhetoric of territory and ethnicity, distinctiveness and memory". In this regard, the 'caesura' of 1989, according to Diner, marked "the apparent return to the Europe of older historical spaces […] accompanied by a return of traditional historical times" (Diner 2008: 4-5).

Interestingly, the master narratives of the twentieth-century Europe, in spite of their different ideological and moral sensitivities, and of their divergent methodological approaches, tend to replicate a basically common underlying pattern founded on the division between the "two halves of the

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[3] Mazower 1998: X-XI.

century" – a period of catastrophe followed by one of progress. Nevertheless, their focus is on the former much more than on the latter. In a review of 1999, Judt praised Mazower's *Dark Continent* as a fundamental reminder of the fragility of democracy (and of its prevailing 'aberration' in European history).[4] Then, in a series of conversations with Snyder, conducted in 2010, Judt advocated a different and more balanced approach aimed at closely linking (rather than opposing) the first tragic half of the century with the second more 'glorious' and progressive one. Notably, he questioned the narratives based on ideological extremism or political violence by stressing the importance of the State and of its different roles over the century (Judt 2012: 393-395).

Whereas Heinrich August Winkler's and Ian Kershaw's recent syntheses still insist on the catastrophic dimension of violence and on the dramatic scale of destruction of the 1914-1945 (or 1949) period, Konrad Jarausch accepts the challenge of shifting the narrative of the century *Out of the Ashes* (according to the title of his book published in 2015). At the core of his analysis is the dynamic competition among different (liberal, communist, fascist) "blueprints for political and economic development" (Jarausch 2015: 5). Attention to the "fundamental ambivalences of progress" that constitute the core of the "European paradox" makes it possible to address new questions about "the hopes unleashed by the drive for modernization as well as the resistance to it" (Jarausch 2015: 11, 13). By revising the Cold War notion of modernization, Jarausch's innovative perspective on the "multiple modernities" of Europe leads to an overall re-interpretation of the period between 1900 and 2000 as "a long rather than a short century" (Jarausch 2015: 775). Rejecting both Fukuyama's optimism about the triumph of liberal capitalistic democracy and Hobsbawm's pessimism in the aftermath of the failure of Soviet communism, Jarausch concludes: "Ironically, the victory of democracy in the struggle with fascist and communist alternatives has pluralized capitalist modernity by producing competing interpretations" (Jarausch 2015: 745). Because the twentieth century as a self-contained interpretative unit has not come to "a definitive closure", it is still in many ways shaping the present. Nonetheless, the ambivalence of the "European encounters with modernity", and the intrinsic unity between "the evil potential of murderous modernity" and "the benign side of modernity" is already quite clear (Jarausch 2015: 774).

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[4] Judt 1999.

2. Logics of Conflict, Logics of Stability

From Hobsbawm to Davies, from Mazower to Diner, most of the master narratives of the twentieth century revolved around the idea of an ideological conflict which was (directly or indirectly) indebted to Arno Mayer's interpretative framework. Between the 1950s and 1960s he investigated the advent of the "new diplomacy" as opposed to the "old diplomacy", as part of a clash between "revolution" and "counter-revolution", between "forces of movement" and "forces of order", in the making of the post-1918 settlement at Versailles. In his view, 1917 marked the beginning of a new ideological era, and both the representatives of the "new diplomacy" (Woodrow Wilson and Lenin) were understood as the ideological forerunners of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In Mayer's words, Wilson's and Lenin's opposition against the "old diplomacy" reflected "the intersection of the ending of a gigantic military conflict with the opening of a universal international civil war" (Mayer 1964: VII). Later, Mayer's well-known book, *The Persistence of the Old Regime* (1981), expanding his general vision of the history of Europe to 1914, interpreted the conflict of 1914-1918 and that of 1939-1945 as "the Thirty Years' War of the general crisis of the twentieth century". The Great War was thus envisaged as "an outgrowth of the latter-day remobilization of Europe's *anciens regimes*": "after 1918-1919 the forces of perseverance recovered sufficiently to aggravate Europe's general crisis, sponsor fascism, and contribute to the resumption of total war in 1939" (Mayer 1981: 3-4). Overlapping with his previous visions of "old diplomacy" and "new diplomacy", Mayer's interpretation was basically grounded on the dualistic scheme: modernity versus *ancien régime*.

A different approach to post-1918 Europe was taken by one of Mayer's students, Charles Maier, who published *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* in 1974. Rather than by the ideological divisions of the Cold War, Maier's perspective was informed by the social and political developments of the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to Maier, the structure of the arrangements and agreements between classes, parties, and interests of post-1918 Europe had proved much more resilient than the revolutionaries had supposed it to be. Maier explained: "Despite the intervening depression, fascist successes, and war, the social truces of the 1920s prefigure the more durable internal armistices on which, so far at least, Western capitalism has rested since 1945".[5] By comparing the cases of Italy, France, and Germany, this still inspiring, but somewhat outdated, work argued that the dramatic postwar

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[5] Maier 1975: X. See also Maier (1981: 321-352).

social conflicts, "in good part superficial", had been managed through a set of institutional bargains. What Maier originally defined as 'corporatism' had constituted "a new and precarious equilibrium", one based "less on the revival of traditional ideological prescriptions than upon new interest group compromises or new forms of coercion" (Maier 1975: 3-4). By the end of the 1920s, the work of "restoring the facade of stability required significant institutional change" – first of all, the "bleeding away of the parliamentary authority" (Maier 1975: 580, 353).

Nevertheless, since the 1990s historiography has increasingly taken account of the violent dimension of the First War World, its brutalizing impact on the post-war European societies, and its connections with the Second World War, often emphasising the continuities through the interpretative category of the 'European civil war' or of the 'new Thirty Years' War' (1914-1945). For instance, in the understanding of John Horne and Robert Gerwarth, the chronologies and the geographies of the Great War have become far more complicated than it was long thought, by shifting their analysis from a Western to a Central-Eastern and South-Eastern European focus, and especially by integrating the imperial and post-imperial (Russian, German, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian) territories. Horne and Gerwarth especially adopt an innovative 'zoom' on "paramilitary violence", but they often interpret it through Mayer's traditional pattern of the "counter-revolutionary force". However, in this regard, the First World War unleashed extremely violent and traumatically destabilizing legacies which paved the way to the Second World War, and which in many ways still shape the contemporary world (Horne, Gerwarth 2012; Gerwarth 2016).

Interestingly, in a recent re-reading of *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, Adam Tooze has defined Maier's classic work "a welcome corrective" in order to refute an "increasingly one-dimensional and deterministic stress on violence as a driver of modern European history". What Tooze calls the "Dark continent narrative", ascribing to Mazower a huge historiographical influence, is thus rejected (Tooze 2013: 446). Moreover, the starting point of Tooze's pathbreaking *The Deluge* is a critical review of the mixed narratives between the Cold War approach and the interpretation of the "persistence of the ancien régime" (Mayer), ascribing the driving forces of progress to extra-European powers such as the United States or the Soviet Union and connecting the auto-destructive impact of imperialism in Europe "to the dead weight of the past" (Tooze 2014: 19).

Tooze's main thesis is that after 1916 the violence of the Great War had become "transformative", in 1917-18 it had shattered the empires of Eurasia, and by the early 1920s it had completely redrawn the maps of Eastern Europe and the Middle East. At the same time, the Great War, through the ascent of American capitalist democracy, marked what Tooze calls a "tec-

tonic shift": the dramatic weakening of the European powers and the making of a new liberal global order (Tooze 2014: 4). As the idea of reordering the world around a single power bloc and a common set of liberal, "Western" values seemed like a radical historical departure, "the heartbreaking fiasco of the Wilsonianism" cannot make sense of the "interwar period" as a unitary category linking the 1920s to the 1930s. According to Tooze, within the post-1918 context, rather than being "familiar expressions of the racist, imperialist mainstream of modern European history", fascism, Nazism and Soviet communism represented themselves as "radical insurgents against an oppressive and powerful world order" (Tooze 2014: 7).

Therefore, on rejecting identification of Wilson and Lenin as the ideological forerunners of the Cold War, Tooze contends that the balance of world politics in 1919 resembled the post-Cold War unipolar moment far more than the divided world of 1945. Within this interpretative framework, he has recently put forward the hypothesis that the victory of Trump in 2016 might mark not the collapse of the American power as such, but the end of its claim for moral exceptionalism, leading to the decline of the "American century" (Tooze 2017a; Tooze 2017b).

3. The Long Shadows of the Second World War

The political transformations of 1989-1991, from the transition to post-communist regimes to the dissolution of the USSR and of Yugoslavia (and the civil wars that they entailed), profoundly affected the ways in which historians looked at the past of Europe, and especially at the twentieth-century history of Eastern Europe and its mass violence experiences. Yet, ironically, a mostly Western-focussed perspective in comparing the three postwar eras (1918, 1945, 1989) proved rather resilient, and accordingly avoided to come to terms with the history of the traumatically fractured lands of East Central Europe (Levy 2002: 1-38).

For instance, after the end of the Communist regimes and of the Cold War, Charles Maier's outlook on the post-1945 period widened to an overarching European scale by focussing on the "political foundations of the postwar" and identifying the 1989/1991 cycle of events as "the end of the postwar". However, in his interpretative pattern, the political and ideological divisions of the Cold War had intruded on longer and deeper legacies from the 1920s and the 1930s, such as forms of public redistributive interventions, welfare state policies, strategies of productivity (Maier 1993: 311-372). According to Maier, this corporatist effort for stabilization exhausted itself between 1968 and 1973 ("the major *caesura* of the postwar era"), when economic and political crises led to the destabilization of Keynesian

policies, fragmentation of Left political cultures and of the working-class movement, and the increasing de-territorialization of the state's sovereignty (Maier 2002: 41-66).

As the process of Western European integration progressed further in the 1980s, Alan Milward readdressed the issue of the "reconstruction of Europe" in the aftermath of the Second World War, after it had been mostly absent from the Cold War historiographical research agenda (with the notable exception of Maier). Milward criticized the idea that in 1947 the Marshall Plan had saved the old continent from collapse: it had only helped overcome a temporary crisis in a context of economic recovery which had already begun in 1945 (Milward 1984). His controversial book, *The European Rescue of the Nation-State*, published in 1992, when the debate on the Maastricht Treaty reached its apex and the project for the monetary union took its first formal steps, sharply questioned the idea of a causal connection between the federalist and Europeanist ideals and the concrete institution-building of Europe in the post-1945 period. Milward focussed on the structural linkage between the Economic European Community and "the reassertion of the nation-state as an organizational concept". In this regard, since the 1950s the different forms of European "interdependence" and "integration" had served the national interests better than "a blind insistence on the exclusive prerogative of the nation-states" (Milward 1992: 2).

In many respects, Milward's research agenda belonged among the pre-1989 Western-focussed perspectives, but Tony Judt, in his *Europe: a Grand Illusion?* (1996), merged Milward's argument into a broader historical pattern based on two fundamental points. On the one hand, the special conditions and circumstances that had made the integration of Western Europe possible – the tragic legacy of the Second World War, the Cold War, and the economic "miracle" – were "unrepeatable": "To suppose that it can be projected into the future is an illusion" (Judt 1996: 24). On the other hand, because of war of 1939-1945, the postwar history of Eastern Europe "resembles that of the western half more than it has ever done before, but through a darkened glass" (Judt 1996: 61). Like Milward, despite their different arguments, Judt was rather skeptical regarding the European process of integration of the 1990s:

> The years after World War II saw the dramatic restoration of the social and economic functions of nation-states in Western Europe, and this process was aided by the "Europeanizing" of their problems; the years after 1989 will require a rehabilitation of the nation-state's political and cultural credibility if Europe itself is to remain afloat (Judt 1996: 120-121).

Whereas Milward's approach (like Maier's) was forward-looking, aimed at explaining the future planning of a post-1945 Europe, that of Judt was

essentially backward-looking, insofar as it highlighted the persistent influence of the experiences and memories of the Second World War.

By focussing on East-Central European experiences, some historians writing in the post-1989 period increasingly marginalized the Western European experiences in the overall interpretation of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, important revisions in the conventional narratives of the Second World War had already taken place even before the fall of 1989. Particularly, the clear-cut division before and after 1945 tended to be blurred, as the experiences and legacies of the Second World War came under intense scrutiny. Above all, Jan T. Gross, starting from study of Polish society during the Second World War (both in areas under German and under Soviet occupation), paved the way for a more general reassessment of the relationship – of the continuities – between the devastating war experiences and the postwar social transformations. In a seminal article, published in the spring of 1989, Gross explained in what ways and to what extent the postwar establishment of the Stalinist rule was shaped by the previous Nazi rule in terms of mass violence, national homogenization, property destruction and transfer. From this point of view, war had to be understood as a revolution (Gross 1989: 198-214). In the late 1980s this approach influenced also Judt's edited work *Resistance and Revolution in Mediterranean*, contrasting the Cold War visions of Europe in terms of East and West. Judt argued that re-asserting the importance of the North/South axis was necessary to understand within a unitary perspective the war and postwar experiences in the Mediterranean space, between France, Italy, Greece and Yugoslavia. According to Judt, the different paths of the Communist forces to power were less the outcomes of different political programs than byproducts of the revolutionary impact of the total war in the Balkans, as in East-Central Europe (Judt 1989: 7-8).

A group led by Judt, Gross and István Deák established a new research agenda during the 1990s. Its main purpose was to diminish the idea of 1945 as a "Zero Hour" marking a radical caesura in European history. This project especially analyzed the long-lasting myths of Resistance and Liberation as the major disclaimers for the European societies (except for the German one), the postwar policies of retribution, which hit limited categories of "traitors" vis-à-vis the "antifascist people", and the building of public memories, which erased the traumatic impact of the wartime experiences and the magnitude of the human and material destruction. This new set of problems was in many ways established by a seminal article by Judt, published in 1992 and entitled *The Past is Another Country*. He focused on "the ways in which the memory of that experience was distorted, sublimated, and appropriated, bequeathed to the postwar era an identity that was fundamentally false, dependent upon the erection of an unnatural and unsus-

tainable frontier between past and present in European public memory" (Judt 2002: 293). Nevertheless, as Milward later reminded Judt in a critical reassessment of the collective volume *Politics of Retribution* (2000), "myth is not belief", in spite of the "political usefulness of the myth": the obsessive attention to memory in many ways reflected the success of the post-1945 reconstruction and the unprecedented period of wealth, but it did not account for them (Milward 2000).

Following the example provided by Gross's books on occupied Poland, Mark Mazower worked on the Nazi Empire's occupation of Greek society between 1941 and 1944. His purpose was to make sense of the "chaos of the New Order" as "a catalyst for a series of unpredictable social and political reactions", which were connected to the dictatorial experiences of the 1930s and which led to the civil war and Cold War polarization of the 1940s (Mazower 1993: XIII). Mazower then coordinated studies on the long-term impact of the wartime social disintegration, political and institutional collapse, and mass violence, which kept on shaping post-1945 Greece until the 1960s. He thus helped pave the way for re-appreciating "the European crisis of the 1940s generally as a profound shock to nations and states, weakened by the humiliation of defeat and foreign occupation, riven by deep ideological and ethnic divisions over the shape of the political and social order" (Mazower 2000: 8).

This overall rethinking of the Second World War and of its legacies and memories led to two major books. Mazower's *Hitler's Empire* (2008) stressed the colonial nature of the Nazi "new order" by recalling the authoritarian and violent dimension of the European ideal and its deep roots in pan-Germanism. The New Order was built as a ruthless form of European integration, based on the racial supremacy of Germany, which proved to be particularly devastating in Eastern Europe, but which involved the whole continent. Mazower contended that "postwar Europe – so keen to proclaim its break with the past – was bound to it in more ways than it liked to admit" (Mazower 2008: 575). On the other hand, Deák's *Europe on Trial* (2015) has recently constituted a unique effort in synchronic interpretation of wartime societies both in the East and the West, focussing on the subtle moral dilemmas of loyalty or resistance to the Nazi order and on individuals' perspective about Europe's future. According to Deák,

> There was no consensus on such issues as Europe's future role in the world, the possible unification of the continent, and the nature of the necessary social, economic, and political reforms. Millions of Europeans, more in Eastern than in Western Europe, agreed, however, on the necessity of ridding their respective countries of alien elements, be they foreign occupiers, immigrants, refugees, or domestic minorities (Deák 2015: 10).

The most encompassing book on post-1945 Europe, Judt's *Postwar*, was published in 2005. In the mid-1990s, in regard to the wars in former Yugoslavia and the great difficulties in the reconstruction of Eastern Europe, he had expressed his skepticism concerning European integration. Ten years later, in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, of the American wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003), and the contemporaneous (albeit partial) recovery of Eastern Europe and of the accession of some of the former Communist countries in the EU in 2004, he changed his mind on the future of European integration. However, he acknowledged that the causes of the post-1945 political stabilization, social reconstruction and economic modernization were complex and multiple throughout Europe, but they tended to configure quite different societies in Western and Eastern Europe. As Judt put it,

> The Second World War transformed both the role of the modern state and the expectations placed upon it […]: for the generation of 1945 some workable balance between political freedoms and the rational, equitable distributive function of the administrative state seemed the only sensible route out of the abyss (Judt 2005: 73-74).

The pre-1914 elaboration of liberal, socialist, Christian democratic reformism, the traumatic lesson of the Great Depression of 1929 and its social backlash, the cogent need for reconstruction after the Second World War, and economic development had intertwined in unprecedented ways. Since the early 1970s, "the end of the most prosperous decade in recorded history" – the 1960s – provoked "an economic slowdown" which had entailed "diminished expectations" and "a new realism" (as the precondition or background for the new different forms of liberalism in the 1980s).[6] While the 'old order' faded away through the 'revolutions of 1989' in Eastern Europe, the Keynesian consensus was increasingly questioned in Western Europe: in a deep sense, the period 1945-1989, understood both as 'a postwar parenthesis' and as 'an epilogue' to the European civil wars, was over (Judt 2005: 2).

It is possible to distinguish different meanings and chronologies of 'postwar' in Judt: the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, marked by the direct impact of the destruction and by the early processes of reconstruction (1945-1953); a longer period to the transformations and transitions of 1989-1991, shaped by the long-lasting inheritances of the war (1945-1989); the period started in the 1990s, characterized by the slow and contradictory overcoming of the postwar period (1989-2005). In his recent *Goodbye to All That?* (2014), Dan Stone has developed the idea of a "post-

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[6] Judt 2005: 453.

war aberration" in European history, profoundly shaped by the legacies and memories of the Second World War. Furthermore, he maintains, following one of Judt's lines of argument, that the post-1989 period constituted a new 'postwar', or more precisely the first real 'postwar', as only the complete conclusion of the Second World War might have allowed public discussion of some of its most controversial memories, hitherto marginalized, overlooked or even unspoken (Stone 2014: 1-11). Conversely, Charles Maier and Geoff Eley formulated one of the most important objections to Judt's *Postwar*, reproaching him for a lack of emphasis on progress and future, and especially on the will to leave the past behind in post-1945 Europe (Maier 2005; Eley 2008: 195-212).

A research group led by Mazower, Jessica Reinisch, and David Feldman has recently focused on the multi-sided aspects of post-1945 social and economic reconstruction in a special issue of *Past and Present* (2011). Mazower rightly argues that the end of the Cold War led to a new historiographical rubric, tracing the origins of the post-war order across the 1945 watershed into the war experiences themselves and widening the spatial frames beyond the East/West divide (Mazower 2011: 17-28). In turn, Holly Case contends that it is impossible to speak "in strictly regional terms" of the diversity of East Central European states' experience of both the war and the period of reconstruction, thus questioning the very same category of 'Eastern Europe' as such. However, some structural factors may link the region through the two post-war periods:

> The specific aims of post-World War I reconstruction encompassed widespread social and economic reforms and consolidation of nation-states to replace the collapsed Habsburg, Ottoman, and Russian empires. The emphasis on nation-building in the process of reconstruction after the First World War was destined to remain a central feature of the rhetoric after World War II (Case 2011: 71, 84-85).

As we have seen, some master narratives describe the years between 1945 and 1971 (or 1973) in the quite retrospective (and subjective) terms of the "golden age" (Hobsbawm, Mazower) or the "age of affluence" and "the social democratic moment" (Judt). As a consequence, the 1970s and their aftermath were conceived as a "landslide" or "recessional", marked by the "social contract in crisis" and by "politics in a new key". In these dualistic interpretations, the close links between the impact of the tragedies of the world wars, and their huge scale of destruction, on the great postwar equalities, as well as the economic exceptionality of the post-1945 boom, were quite overlooked.[7] In his re-reading of *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*,

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[7] See, for instance, Piketty 2014 [2013]; Levinson 2016.

Tooze argues that Maier's "optimistic view about the bourgeois stabilization" depended on the typically 1970s conception of inflation as "the path of least resistance"; then over the course of the 1990s this view was revised (Tooze 2013: 444-445). In a paper written with Stefan Eich, Tooze suggests that increasingly high inflation in the 1970s fueled redistributive conflicts, but the inflationary threat had been conquered by the mid-1980s, appeasing capitalism and democracy at the end of the Cold War. The "conquest of inflation" of the 1970s was legitimized through a misleading analogy with the dramatic hyperinflation of the 1920s, often confused with the deflation of the early 1930s, which led Hitler to power. However, according to Tooze and Eich, this transition from inflation set the stage for "resolutely conservative, free-market, anti-labour" policies, "destabilizing financialization, a huge surge in inequality, and a form of globalization that threatens […] a new era of long-run deflation" (Eich and Tooze 2016: 173-196).

An overall historical account of Europe since the crisis of the 1970s to date is offered by Philipp Ther's recent book *Die neue Ordnung auf dem alten Kontinent. Eine Geschichte des neoliberalen Europa* (misleadingly translated into English as *Europe Since 1989*). He explicitly claims a link of continuity with Judt's *Postwar*, even though he focuses on the 1979-2014 period and pays particular attention to socio-economic developments. According to Ther, the "neo-liberal train", put on track in Margaret Thatcher's Britain and Ronald Reagan's United States, began "to cross Europe since 1989" (Ther 2016: 3). In this regard "the sudden collapse of the old order" in 1989 was in no way a "zero hour". Rather than "transition", which implies some teleological perspective, Ther prefers the more encompassing term "transformation" in order to describe the affirmation of the "neoliberal hegemony" in 1989-1990. Instead of considering Eastern Europe as "a territorial container and an enclosed system", Ther shows how the transformation of the former Communist country, pushed further by the project of "catch-up modernization", affected a "co-transformation" of Western Europe in the 2000s, fueling forms of "East/West transfer" and involving Southern Europe as well (Ther 2016: 6-8). The agenda of neoliberal reforms, including mass-scale, fast privatization of key economic sectors, reduction of public investments and services, cutbacks in welfare state, implied and at the same time boosted a harsh criticism of the Keynesian legacy, justified by the well-known TINA argument: "there is no alternative".

It may be questioned, as Timothy Garton Ash does, if Ther consistently uses "neo-liberalism" as "a neutral, analytical term", or if his analysis is able to encompass Western and Southern Europe as it does for Eastern Europe (Garton Ash 2017). However, Ther's broad framework provides the first overview of the post-1989 neoliberal order, which has increasingly come under pressure since the stock market crisis of 2008, revealing its

vulnerability and volatility. According to Ther, the victory of the Brexit campaign (June 2016) and the election of Trump as president of the United States (November 2016) have contributed to undermining the very foundations of the liberal globalization which started in Margaret Thatcher's Great Britain in the late 1970s and in the Ronald Reagan's United States in the early 1980s. Meanwhile, the "political endpoint of the transformation period", begun in 1989, was marked by the Russian annexation of Crimea. In this way Vladimir Putin broke with a major consensus in the post-1989 period: respect for the post-1945 European borders and for those of the post-Soviet successor states (Ther 2016: 79).

4. Time of Tyranny or Time of Uncertainty?

Any situation of crisis, far from exclusively challenging a society's present and future, changes its relationship with the past, thus questioning both the legitimacy and the utility of history itself. Famously, on the very day that the Nazi troops entered Paris in June 1940, Marc Bloch, while "ruminating over the causes of the disaster" in a Norman garden, overheard an anguished and bitter cry: "Are we to believe that history has betrayed us?" (Bloch 1992: 5).

In recent decades, the belief in the 'end of history' has received different, sometimes even opposite, interpretations, and likewise it has legitimized different forms of policy-making in Europe. The European Union has been increasingly justified as the only available set of institutions able to prevent and banish any form of military conflict in the old continent: in this regard the EU embodies the end of a long and bloody history. In his challenging *On Tyranny*, Snyder rightly defines the belief in the "end of history" as the "politics of inevitability", as "the sense that history can move only in one direction: liberal democracy". Opposed to this teleology is the "politics of eternity", "the seduction of a mythicized past" in which the nation is defined "by its inherent virtue rather than by its future potential". Nevertheless, both of these positions are "antihistorical" because they prevent us from conceiving history as individual responsibility in the face of collective processes. According to Snyder, the real current risk is that of shifting from the politics of inevitability to the politics of eternity, creating the conditions for the advent of tyrannies as in the 1930s (Snyder 2017b: 117-126).

To be sure, any historical analogy, by establishing a static and predictable relationship between past and present, implies a subtle antihistorical attitude. The analogy with the 1930s is a shortcut between past and present which is based on memory much more than on history. In 2005, in the epilogue to *Postwar* (*From the House of the Dead. An Essay on Modern European*

Memory), Judt concluded that the first postwar Europe had shifted from "deliberate *mis*-memory" to a "compensatory surplus of memory". Nevertheless, with the passing of generations, against the limits and flaws of institutionalized memory "history does need to be learned – and periodically re-learned". According to Judt, even the European Union might be "a response to history", but it could never be "a substitute". And today this response is more uncertain than ever (Judt 2005: 829-831).

As this paper has tried to demonstrate, comparisons between transitional or transformative periods over the course of twentieth-century Europe can help critically to assess the complicated and multi-layered relationships between past and present, in which continuities and discontinuities tend to overlap and intermingle with each other. To be sure, the post-1918, post-1945, and post-1989 transitions triggered transformations which were tightly related to differentiated and unevenly violent processes of destruction, destabilization, and disintegration. The 'reconstruction of Europe' in these transitional stages thus constituted dynamics of both construction and reconstruction of new orders intent on establishing new forms of stabilization and integration by refashioning in many ways the legacies of the past into the present and the future.

In this regard, a different historical lesson from the past century comes from the late Judt and his *Ill Fares the Land*, published in 2010. In light of the financial and economic crisis of 2007-2009, he tried to rethink the social-democratic tradition by emphasizing the "social-democratic moment" in the historical experience of post-1945 Europe and connecting it with the liberal legacy of the East European dissidents. However, more interesting than this quite subjective "politics of nostalgia" was his reflection on insecurity and uncertainty, considered as the core problems of the literary imagination of Stefan Zweig and of the economic thought of John M. Keynes. As *The World of Yesterday* testified, "few in 1914 predicted the utter collapse of their world and the economic and political catastrophes that followed", but the Great War had brought to a dramatic end the "golden age of security" (in Zweig's words). Insecurity, now like then, breeds fear: "And fear – fear of change, fear of decline, fear of strangers and an unfamiliar world – is corroding the trust and interdependence on which civil societies rest".[8] From the same experience of insecurity, which had shattered Keynes' native world of pre-1914 Britain, stemmed the essential theoretical bulk of his thought.

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[8] Judt 2010: 8-9. See also Judt 2010: 24-27 and the more recent Krastev 2017, with special regard to the conclusion ("Perhapsburg. On the fragility and resilience of Europe"), based on a comparison between the current European crisis and the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire.

Understandably, Keynes focused his economic writings upon the problem of *uncertainty*: in contrast to the confident nostrums of classical and neoclassical economics, he would insist henceforth upon the essential unpredictability of human affairs. To be sure, there were many lessons to be drawn from economic depression, fascist repression and wars of extermination. But more than anything else, as it seemed to Keynes, it was the new-found insecurity in which men and women were forced to live – uncertainty elevated to paroxysms of collective fear – which had corroded the confidence and institutions of liberalism (Judt 2010: 44-45).

However, this tragic historical memory has to be complemented with a fundamental methodological reminder that Maier and Judt drew from a work by John Plumb on eighteenth-century England; a work questioning the common idea of stabilization as a long-term, slow process. As Plumb wrote: "Political stability, when it comes, often happens to a society quite quickly, as suddenly as water becomes ice".[9]

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[9] Plumb 1967: XVII. See also Maier 1987: 154; Judt 2005: 241.

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