

**Bernard Wasserstein.** *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xxiii + 901 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-873074-3.



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Writing shortly before the appearance of his *Barbarism and Civilization*--a work twenty-five years in the making--Bernard Wasserstein wondered whether it was even "possible to write a history of Europe in our time." [1] If, in the summer of 2007, Wasserstein expressed doubt about the entire endeavor, his far-reaching study of twentieth-century Europe provides an affirmative answer to this question. Of course, any one-volume history of this most recent century will necessarily be incomplete, and, to be sure, *Barbarism and Civilization* is predominantly a work of political, diplomatic, and military history, as Wasserstein readily admits. This book is not based on original archival research; rather, this is a synthetic study aiming to assemble the various events, developments, and analyses constituting the course of contemporary history.

*Barbarism and Civilization* follows a rather traditional narrative structure focusing on the typical movers and shakers, whether of a leftist or rightist bent. However, alternate perspectives are not entirely absent from this work, as Wasserstein

examines cultural, economic, and demographic trends particularly as seen during the early decades of the twentieth century and, then, in more recent years. His is also a true history of "Europe," broadly conceived geographically as well as conceptually. Wasserstein's Europe stretches from West to East, from the Iberian Peninsula to Siberia, and includes Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire and, perhaps most controversially, Turkey. In fact, Russia and Turkey do not appear as sidebars in the course of Western European history but instead function as integral players alongside such nations as Germany and France. Further, the pivotal events of 1989 and 1991, although singled out for extensive discussion, do not conclude this work. Rather, the last two chapters of *Barbarism and Civilization* explore a distinctly more recent past, examining such developments as immigration, sexual behavior, and "the disappearance of God as a living presence in the lives of most Europeans" (p. vii). Along the way to these endpoints, Wasserstein foregrounds the disturbing duality of this long

twentieth century: since 1914, Europeans experienced technological innovations, progress, and “civilization” as never before, but such positive change was accompanied at every turn by untold death, destruction, and barbarism.

*Barbarism and Civilization* opens with a profile of European society, political life, and economic developments as they stood on the eve of World War One in 1914. As he explained in the summer of 2007, Wasserstein chose this starting point quite deliberately when he embarked on this project two decades ago: his twentieth-century history was expected to follow Robert Gildea’s study of nineteenth-century Europe (*Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800-1914* [1987]), which concluded with the outbreak of war in 1914.[2] But twenty years after the publication of Gildea’s work, this periodization appears less natural, as it precludes serious discussion of both fin-de-siècle developments and events transpiring in the European colonies during the early years of the century. The Boer War, the rise of colonial nationalist movements, the Amritsar Massacre of 1919, ongoing French debates concerning the prospects of assimilation versus association—none come in for extensive analysis, and yet all provide evidence of Wasserstein’s central premise: whether in metropolitan Europe or the overseas colonies, civilization and barbarism were two sides of the same coin. And, because Wasserstein examines decolonization in some detail, his omission of early twentieth-century imperialism seems all the more puzzling.

The long gestation period of this book may reveal itself in other ways, too, and to the detriment of Wasserstein’s analysis. For a work intended as a synthesis of well-tread events and analyses, *Barbarism and Civilization* seems to call for a more extensive and up-to-date secondary source basis, coupled with more frequent citations to existent literature. For instance, Wasserstein’s treatment of domestic economies and societies in World War One cites no recent works; in fact, his references

here appear positively outdated (p. 797). Again, *Barbarism and Civilization* does not portend to be a cultural history of twentieth-century Europe, but the import of these recent works, whether examining domestic developments in Great Britain, France, Germany, or the Austro-Hungarian Empire, extends well beyond the realm of cultural studies. So, too, is the presentation of anti-Nazi resistance during World War Two based on long outdated understandings of wartime contingencies and behaviors: Wasserstein focuses solely on military forms of resistance activities, and, yet, at the same time, conflates symbolic gestures with resistance. By contrast, scholarship produced during the last twenty years, while increasingly focused on civilian forms of resistance, has nonetheless sought to establish a more vigorous categorization of resistance activity. Today’s historians would hardly conflate symbolic forms of opposition with organized clandestine activity (pp. 353-356). The scholarship cited in later chapters is of more recent origins, although, here, too, most English-language studies examining political developments and lived experience in Communist Eastern Europe are absent. These are minor points perhaps, but taken together may diminish the value of this book for those scholars already well versed in twentieth-century European history.

This is indeed a masterful work, sure to appeal to students and scholars alike for its graceful and persuasive prose, its geographical reach, and its sweeping analyses. Wasserstein has crafted an epic history of an epic century. Still, the work might prove a bit hefty for teaching purposes, whether on the graduate or undergraduate level. Instructors might well gravitate toward a more manageable synthetic history, such as Mark Mazower’s *Dark Continent* (1999), particularly if they seek a more detailed examination of those topics and perspectives that fall outside the purview of Wasserstein’s impressive work.

Notes

[1]. Bernard Wasserstein, "My Sisyphean Labour," *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, August 24, 2007, 16.

[2]. Ibid.

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Wasserstein, "My Sisyphean Labour," 16

; Robert Gildea, *Barricades and Borders: Europe 1800-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

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