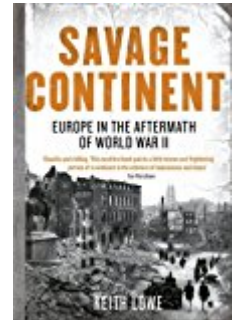


Keith Lowe. *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II.* London: Penguin Books, 2012. 480 S. ISBN 978-0-670-91746-4.



Reviewed by Jan-Henrik Meyer

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Keith Lowe's "Savage Continent" makes an important contribution to the historiography of Europe. The book covers a period of time that normally gets short shrift in conventional overviews of European 20th century history, as the author rightly notes. With the recent exception of Ben Shephard, *The Long Road Home. The Aftermath of the Second World War*, London 2010. Despite what the title seems to promise, Shephard focuses largely on the aspect of forced migration and the fate of various kinds of displaced persons. The British historian and writer zooms in on the period between the last days of World War II and the onset of the Cold War, i.e. the years between 1944 and 1949. The book presents an overview of the entire continent – including East and West, North and South, centre and periphery. This enables the author to compare across the various countries and regions of the war-torn continent. Even if Lowe strives hard to be representative, Western, Central and Southern Europe are somewhat more comprehensively covered than Northern Europe and the Soviet Union. Lowe deliberately focuses on the experience of common people. At the same time, he carefully links high poli-

tics decisions about the territorial division of the continent to their consequences for people on the ground. His narrative is frequently based on eyewitness accounts and a wealth of secondary literature. In a – laudable – attempt to overcome a predominantly Western perspective, Lowe relied on a large number of academic texts and documents from central Europe that were specifically translated for him. The book is written for a general audience, which is reflected in its accessible style. The book includes a number of helpful – and accurate – maps, a few tables of statistics, the odd caricature and two sections of rather graphic images in black and white. While most of the photos depict and illustrate what has been described in the text, this could have been done in a more systematic manner.

Lowe's central argument is that the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany that marked the end of World War II in Europe in 1945 did not put an end to violence, despair and destitution. The end of the inter-state war rather marked the beginning of a period of chaos and anarchy and in many cases the continuation of a variety of con-

licts unleashed by the war. In many places, conflicts of class, political ideology, religion and ethnicity continued in a struggle about the postwar order – a fight in which the Allies quickly set the rules of the game. Providing an account of this time period is important, he holds, for at least three reasons. First, these events crucially shaped the conditions for postwar reconstruction. Secondly, this period has not received the attention it deserves in the historiography of Europe. At face value, this is of course not true: popular, official and academic histories of the postwar period have never outright ignored the lasting impact of the war, including violence, rape, expulsion and the fate of displaced persons. E.g. Bundesministerium für Vertriebene, Dokumentation der Vertreibung der Deutschen aus Ost-Mitteleuropa, 8 volumes, Munich 1954–61; Richard Bessel / Dirk Schumann, *Life After Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*, Cambridge 2003, (Jan-Henrik Meyer: Rezension zu: Bessel, Richard; Schumann, Dirk (Hrsg.): *Life After Death. Approaches to a Cultural and Social History of Europe During the 1940s and 1950s*. Cambridge 2003, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 14.07.2004, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2004-3-037>>, 01.03.2013); Gerard Daniel Cohen, *In War's Wake. Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order*. Oxford 2011, (Michael G. Esch: Rezension zu: Cohen, Gerard Daniel: *In War's Wake. Europe's Displaced Persons in the Postwar Order*. Oxford 2011, in: H-Soz-u-Kult, 19.07.2012, <<http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/2012-3-045>>, 01.03.2013). However, as Lowe rightly criticises, most of the existing narratives about this period have long served the purpose of national – and deeply political – myth-making. Public memory is full of stories about the heroism of the *résistance*, the suffering of the refugees, or the various “lessons learnt” from the war. Adopting a comparative European point of view, thus, thirdly, Lowe aims at ousting such myths. He encourages the reader to question the conventional narra-

tives of national – and European – reconstruction. Clearly, Lowe is not the first person to advance such a critique. Nevertheless, his carefully composed and reflexive narrative – including a thorough critique of the number-games of the statistics about victims of vengeance and violence – prepares the non-specialist reader for a critical engagement with the ongoing politics of memory in Europe.

The author starts out by describing “The Legacy of the War”. He draws an adequately grim picture of this situation, with chapters on “Physical Destruction”, e.g., of cities, farms and infrastructure, the “Absence” of individuals and entire communities – such as the Jews in central Europe – and the widespread “Displacement” of people. “Famine” – long eradicated from Europe – returned as one of the horrible consequences of an economy bombed to a halt. “Moral Destruction”, namely, the spread of rape, theft and violent crimes, prostitution for food, and the black market all reflected the undoing of civilized society. But even within these “Landscapes of Chaos” – as Lowe summarises the situation, he observes signs of “Hope”: “The removal of dictatorships had left the continent freer, safer and fairer than it had been before the war.” (p. 60) This is undoubtedly true, but whether rationing really meant new equality, as he argues – or rather gave rise to new inequalities through the black market As notes e.g.: Hartmut Kaelble, *Kalter Krieg und Wohlfahrtsstaat. Europa 1945–1989*, Munich 2011, pp. 18–19. , is debatable. Furthermore, Lowe comprehends the outburst of political and cultural activities as a reflection of people’s hope. The flurry of tales, movies and propaganda about “heroism” (p. 61) and “brotherhood and unity” (p. 63) – between and across nations – was intended to put a positive spin on the horrors experienced and to encourage people to move towards a better future, and undoubtedly shaped the way we remember this period.

Against this backdrop Lowe's narrative is thematically structured, focusing on three phenomena: vengeance, ethnic cleansing and civil war. Possibly as a concession to the genre of popular history-writing, Lowe does not present any theoretical or conceptual reflection about his choice of issues. Ethnic cleansing, for instance, is not a contemporary concept, but a euphemism of sorts that only emerged in the context of the Yugoslav wars in the early 1990s. However, in the concluding sections of each of the three parts, Lowe reflects on the logic and the consequences of the three phenomena in a thoughtful manner.

The chapters on vengeance provide an overview of the different ways in which the survivors took revenge: Not only did soldiers and former victims kill and torture in spontaneous outbursts of violence. Vengeance also took place in more organized campaigns, for instance against the former mistresses of German soldiers. Lowe explores various functions of vengeance, such as the reintegration of society by common action – including those with dubious wartime records – and the restoration of national pride and humiliated masculinity.

The section on ethnic cleansing provides a very useful overview of the forced population exchange after the war, which concluded a process Nazi Germany had started during the war. The eradication of ethnic diversity in Central and Eastern Europe went hand in hand with the imposition of the new territorial borders, and the exodus of surviving Jews, who realised that they were no longer welcome in their native countries.

Civil war took different shapes and guises in Southern, Western and Eastern Europe. The outbreak of the Cold War meant the slow imposition of a Soviet style regime in Eastern Europe and the eradication of traditional elites, but also the suppression of communist forces in the West. Contrasting cases of Romania and Greece illustrate how the Soviets and the Americans ruthlessly intervened in their spheres of influence to ensure

loyal regimes. Lowe does not hesitate to point to some striking similarities – notably in the rather extreme case of Greece, where former collaborators were propped up against the communist partisans in a brutal manner. Usually, the strategy of the Americans relied on the carrot of economic aid, while the Soviets did not hesitate to resort to the stick of coercion.

All in all, Lowe's book is a well-written, insightful and comprehensive history of what he rightly emphasises as crucial years of postwar history. He includes important experiences – such as the civil war in Greece or ethnic cleansing in Ukraine, Poland and Yugoslavia – that are indeed frequently missing in histories of Europe, but continued to shape important parts of European society, with lingering effects for politics (of memory) and political structures until the present. Against this backdrop, this book should be recommended reading not only for students of contemporary history, European studies or international relations.

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