Historians have consistently struggled with the fundamental problem of explaining, both in our writings and teaching, the rise of European “civilization,” which helped to form, for good or ill, the modern world. In the tradition of J. M. Roberts, Paul Kennedy, and Norman Davies, Jonathan Daly’s *The Rise of Western Power* is an attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the rise of “the West” and its perceived achievements that transformed the world. It is an ambitious goal that produces a readable and thoughtful, though sometimes problematic, account of this fundamental question within the broader historiography of world history.

Daly, a historian of Soviet Russia, is no stranger to this topic, having produced several volumes in the last decade focused on this very question of the “rise of the West,” including the first edition of this book in 2015, *Historians Debate the Rise of the West* (2015), and *How Europe Made the Modern World: Creating the Great Divergence* (2020). The well-trodden ground of this topic, Daly argues, has produced the need for this second edition of this volume, including expanded maps and a helpful list of primary sources through the Bloomsbury website. Such changes seem to indicate Daly’s primary audience is less the seasoned historian of this topic and more the undergraduate classroom.

Daly attempts to explain the “rise of the West” as a fundamental byproduct of the unique set of circumstances that contributed to the emergence of European powers as the dominant force on the planet. Unfortunately, in attempting to answer such a critical and broad question in the history of the world, Daly explanations fall sadly in line with a somewhat dated and largely Eurocentric theory based on European exceptionalism and selective information. Daly argues that the key to Europe’s rise centered on the “unusual openness of Europeans to learning from other cultures” largely explained by Europe developing as a kind of “tabula rasa on which cultural and technological borrowings across Eurasia and eventually the wider world could be inscribed” (pp. xiii, xii).

To accomplish this goal, the author breaks his book into broad thematic chapters, beginning with the “Innovation in World Civilization” and moving through “Medieval Transformations” and “Papal” and “Military” revolutions until arriving in the early modern era with chapters dedicated to the rise in printing, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution, along with economic revolutions in commerce, industry, and technology. Finally, he concludes the work with chapters on the “Crises of the West,” including everything from nineteenth-century imperialism to the Cold War, and “Social Revolutions,” broadly covering the
emergence of the middle class and the struggle for equal rights both in Europe and the United States.

Daly’s argument is not particularly groundbreaking, though his broad approach to each chapter provides a much-needed thematic, instead of chronological, approach to this topic. There is no want for information and facts in these six hundred-plus pages. Much of this work relies on secondary sources, summarizing and building upon some of the most famous works on this wider topic. The author also attempts to balance the incredible complexity of economic, social, and military history, which helps to explain the “rise of the West,” while also acknowledging the numerous threats to human civilization, from climate change to COVID-19. Interesting, Daly concludes that China is one of these major obstacles, not necessarily because of its economic strength, but because China “has continued to reject Western values of freedom of speech, inquiry, assembly, and religion,” values Daly claims throughout his book are a unique product of “the West” (p. 418). This is only one example of the theme of European exceptionalism that dominates many pages of this book.

Even more problematically, the tragedy of the rise of the West for the rest of the world is somewhat diminished in this volume. While it is obviously impossible to provide a complete scope to this incredibly expansive topic, the author takes more time to discuss the battles of Crecy and Agincourt than the single paragraph which outlines a few select examples of the “many vicious acts of violence” that permeated the age of imperial expansion across the globe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (p. 346). Moreover, the mention of King Leopold on the previous page gives no indication of some ten million Africans who died in the Congo Free State. Instead, Daly argues that “ironically and tragically, all of the feverish imperialist endeavors brought very little of positive value to the aggressive powers,” emphasizing the 21 percent of Britain’s exports going to its colonial possessions as insignificant compared to other areas of economic interest (p. 347).

This undermining, if not outright dismissal, of the suffering caused by European powers is a problematic theme of this book. For example, when attempting to address the thesis of David Stannard’s American Holocaust, Daly asks: “was it really genocide?,” quoting the definition from the UN Convention on Genocide. Besides the problematic nature of this semantic argument, Daly implies that the decimation of the Native American population was partially the result of natural factors, going so far as to compare it to the chestnut tree blight of the early twentieth century in North America. Even when the author admits that “the point is not to compare the value of trees to human beings,” sadly “the point” has already been made, and the comparison supremely inappropriate in the context of the enormous complexity of this issue confronted by genocide scholarship for decades (p. 131).

Similar problems arise in Daly’s approach to slavery within and in association with Europe. For much of the book, Daly dismisses the presence of slavery in Europe, either in ancient Greece and Rome or in early modern Europe, admitting that “Europeans did not reject slavery in practice, except in Europe itself” when discussing the triumph of Portugal during their voyages of exploration (p. 129). This statement ignores not only the large numbers of enslaved Africans from North Africa seen in southern Italy and Iberia as early as the fifteenth century, but also dismisses the Slavic slave trade that dominated eastern Europe for centuries. Instead, Europe is presented as either a place where slavery did not exist or the epicenter for the idea of antislavery. In the section “Ending Discrimination” in his chapter “Social Revolutions,” Daly argues that the “Christian exhortation to ‘love one another’ and to ‘be a servant to others’ played a crucial role … in the fight against slavery” (p. 393). And while rightly pointing to Quakers, Methodists, and Mennonites as “forming the back-
bone of abolitionism,” such selective interpretation fails to address the slew of religious justifications for slavery which permeated the era, from the Code Noir’s paternalistic dehumanization of African slaves to the critical role missionaries played in the early formation of the Atlantic slave trade along the African coast (p. 394). Daly also implies that slavery was something benevolently given up by Europeans, giving little attention to Black people’s involvement in the abolitionist movements and outright forgetting his own mention of the slave rebellion in Saint-Dominque leading to “the French revolutionaries’ abolition of slavery” when he argues that the French abolished slavery in 1794 “out of purely humanistic concerns” (pp. 272, 394). While potentially dismissed as a semantic mistake, this omission highlights a theme of selective forgetting seen in similar discussions of decolonization, which is presented as simply a side effect of the Cold War, and organized labor, which is only briefly mentioned and given little importance in the wider changes within industrial European society.

Daly claims in the introduction that this second edition corrects some concerns related to gender and other issues. Unfortunately, it seems these concerns have been addressed minimally at best. Ancient Greece and Rome, which Daly gives very little attention to in his larger thesis, are raised up as the vanguard of philosophy and administration. Still, the author fails to include any reference to the women and enslaved people who were instrumental in defining those societies. The first significant mention of women comes in the author’s evaluation of medieval elites, beginning with a discussion of courtly love while attempting to articulate the role of women within leadership positions. Though an appropriate and necessary addition to this edition of book, Daly quickly moves on to discuss Chinese foot binding and the status of women in the Islamic world, again casting Europe as more “advanced,” claiming “European women of the Middle Ages enjoyed high status and extensive legal rights by world historical standard” (p. 44). Similar sections appear throughout the book, including discussions of nineteenth- and twentieth-century suffrage movements, though any reader desiring more information on the role of women in the rise of the West will be left wanting.

Such shortcomings and issues could potentially be understandable in such an expansive volume, but the tone of handwaving and “what-aboutisms” in discussing the dark or understudied elements of Europe’s global connections remains one of the pivotal shortfalls of this book. Daly should be commended for attempting to address this critically important question regarding “the rise of the West” and the history of the world, but it would have been much more successful if he had taken into account the greater nuances of that world in this volume. The Rise of Western Power could serve as an introduction to these issues, but does little more than continue a long tradition of European exceptionalism that remains so problematic in the current debates over the use and misuse of history and how we educate our students in the classroom and the wider community.
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