

## A Grand Illusion?

*An Essay on Europe*

*T.Judt*

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Is Europe anything more than a geographical entity, and if so what sense should be made of the European Union? The author addresses those questions a few years after the upheaval brought about by the fall of the wall, when the comforting constraints of the realities of the Cold War were removed and instead there emerged the danger of having to confront the real implications of comfortable rhetorics, which threatened to be taken seriously and literally.

Judt points out that there is indeed a striking continuity of the notion of Europe going back more than a thousand years. In fact the center and the heart of the Western Europe more or less coincides with the extent of the Carolingian Empire of Charlemagne during the 9th century. Furthermore Europe is divided into three. There is the Protestant North, the Catholic South and the Eastern Orthodox, with the first two more or less making up the West. Europe as a geographical entity is undefined, in a sense 'Europeanness' follows a decreasing gradient going east and somehow running flat by the distant Urals. Russia is not part of Europe, even if by language and religion it can make a very strong case, and any discussion of the scope of the European Union leaves considerations of Russia out of discussion, as does Judt.

In 1945 there was not just a 'Stunde Null' for Germany alone but for Europe as a whole. There was a tacit understanding to forget the recent past and start all over again, in contrast to the end of the First World War, which brought resentment and a strong desire to return to a previous stage. Not so after the Second. The enormity of the catastrophe of the war was just too much to fathom and the only way to go ahead was a kind of general amnesia. In this respect the experience of the War was very different in the West and the East. Western countries like France and the Netherlands, to say nothing about Norway and Denmark, were but marginally affected by the German occupation, and only a limited fraction of the civilian population vanished. The situation in the East was very different, a far more traumatic experience, when the Nazi onslaught ruptured the fragile social structures, and the subsequent Soviet occupation (but in name) completed the process. In particular a large part of the intelligentsia had been exterminated<sup>1</sup>.

It is noteworthy that in the immediate years after the war, the recovery of the Eastern Europe kept pace with that of the Western (one may only think of the reconstruction of razed buildings). Then with the aid of the Marshal Plan and liberal economic measures, generally thought of as conducive to growth as opposed to the restrictions imposed by the Soviets, there was a notable divergence, the effect perhaps most noticeable in the parallel case of the BRD and the DDR.

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<sup>1</sup> As in the case of Czechoslovakia, where otherwise the population was largely spared.

It was a matter of survival, and crucial to the survival was the restoration of the German economy. France needed the coal of its eastern neighbor to feed its steel-mills, and the British could hardly support its section of occupation. The onset of the Cold War also greatly facilitated the inclusion of Western Germany into the fold as a reliable and valuable ally, and thus undercut any lingering desire for punitive measures<sup>2</sup>. Although visions of a united Europe had been around for a very long time before the war<sup>3</sup>, most realistically manifested by costume unions<sup>4</sup> it was only the end of the War that made those visions connect with economic and political reality. The first step towards a European Union was the European Coal and Steel Community, which extended by Italy, made for the custom union of EEC (the six), and which prompted the creation of EFTA (the seven) formed by Britain, and the Scandinavian countries along with neutral Austria and Switzerland and with distant Portugal tagged on for good measure. It was an economic necessity and formed around the axis of France and Germany by de Gaulle and Adenauer and implicitly (explicitly in the case of de Gaulle) involved an exclusion of Britain from continental Europe. The union was formed with the tacit understanding that while Germany may increase its wealth and economic power and influence, France would play the leading political role. This was indeed a way for France to play the role of a major power, its political dominance having been in steady decline since the end of the Napoleonic wars culminating in three humiliating military defeats against Germany within the memory of a single lifetime. And too Germany, politically and morally traumatized by the war, a cover to pursue its economic interests and potential without external meddling. The result was the so called German Economic Miracle, which prompted the astute politician Strauss to claim that a people who had performed such a miracle and earned the right to dispense with the memory of Auschwitz.

Of course the economic boom was not confined to Germany, but was endemic all over Western Europe, and especially striking in Scandinavia. It was a time of increased demand for labor, low unemployment and a healthy population demography. It did involve migration, from the more and more marginalized countryside into the cities<sup>5</sup> as well as letting impoverished peasants outside the region in as immigrants or guest workers. Perhaps most politically significant was the establishment of the well-fare state and the subsequent larger role played by government involving redistributive taxation. Here the Western European road taken differed from the American. The notion of an indefinitely sustained growth became a tacit assumption. However, this was checked by the oil crisis of the early 70's. While most of Europe's energy needs traditionally had been served by an abundance of coal, thirty years after the war, oil had to a large part replaced it.

1989 changed everything. Now suddenly the Eastern European countries were liber-

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<sup>2</sup> There were plans for reducing the German lands to a purely agricultural economy

<sup>3</sup> in a sense one can view the German war ambitions as establishing a united Europe, albeit under exclusive German control.

<sup>4</sup> The German costume union of the mid 19th century can be seen as a preliminary to its unification.

<sup>5</sup> One of the major ideas of the emerging European union was to establish agricultural subsidies to support a suffering agricultural population, who in the inter-war years had electorally supported Fascism. Ultimately the productivity of the land improved dramatically, making the sector engaged in farming marginal in terms of actual employment.

ated, whatever that meant in practice, and desirous to join not only NATO (this crucial aspect is not discussed by the author in his essay) but also the European Union. If ever there was a way to escape their recent past and assume a wider identity, to which most of them felt eminently qualified<sup>6</sup>, it was to join in the charmed circles of the European Union, to seek protection from Russian aggression as well as partake of Western affluence. However, the situation was different than it would have been twenty years earlier. To admit those new members on equal terms would involve costs that the community would not be prepared to accept. Judt argues that in 1971 it might just have been a case similar to that of West Germany assimilating its eastern counterpart, now the task would be beyond its capabilities. Now this was written in 1995 when the admission of the Eastern European countries still was in the future, now more than fifteen years later they have been admitted, whether on equal terms or not, and have the problems envisioned by Judt materialized? As it seems at the moment of writing, the problem countries turn out to be those of the old South, Greece in particular, but Spain and Italy looming more darkly at the horizon. It is always very hard to predict the future, a source of hope as well as of despair. Yet, the most obvious implication of the collapse of the Soviet empire, the unification of Germany and the subsequent domination of Germany on the European continent, a development feared and resented by many French politicians has come true<sup>7</sup>. Without German economic strength there would not be much economic purpose at least to the union. And indeed France has been reduced to that of a regional power, now obvious to everyone, its influence and trade not having expanded as opposed to that of Germany. It did lose the war, but eventually won the peace.

The more principled skepticism expressed by Judt does not concern the economical aspects of the union, but whether an all embracing entity such as a transnational community really is the most optional political solution. According to Judt, Nation states have not yet played out their role, conceived in the 19th century, their time is far from having run its course, on the contrary. A Nation state is a far more manageable unit to address the problems of society, in spite of the recent nostalgia for multi-national empires like that of the Ottoman, the Russian and foremost the Austrian. However, the arguments he propose are not really spelled out and hence do not seem very persuasive nor very original. Countries come in very different sizes, how can you compare Belgium say (not to mention Luxembourg) with Germany? And what makes a nation? A common history (often made up<sup>8</sup>) or a common language? Those are very traditional arguments.

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<sup>6</sup> This is in many ways a spurious identity, that only refers to cultural elite residing in cities like Krakow, Vienna, Prague and Budapest

<sup>7</sup> Judt points out that there is a striking parallel between the case of Prussia versus the Habsburg empire, and Germany versus France. In both cases a senior partner tolerated the economic rise of a junior, not truly predicting that economic power would seed the desire for political as well as realizing them. Soon Austria became marginalized by Prussia, just as France in postwar years became eclipsed by Germany.

<sup>8</sup> One is reminded of Rudbeckius attempt to fashion a glorious past for the Sweden to match its emerging power during the 17th century