Historians of contemporary Europe seem to have a difficulty with the present. The project of contemporary history, as it developed in Western Europe across the second half of the twentieth century, always faced backwards. In particular, it asserted the centrality of 1945, and more generally of the experience of the Third Reich and of the maelstrom of international, ideological and ethnic conflicts to which it gave rise, as the central moment of the twentieth century. There were many compelling reasons for this approach. It focused scholarly attention on the dynamics of Nazism, not as the culmination of a specifically German Sonderweg, but as the manifestation of the Europe-wide ascendancy of authoritarian regimes primarily of the Right in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s. As such, its subject and methodology were European, mobilising historians across Europe’s newly porous national boundaries to advance a project of contemporary history in which the exploration of transnational phenomena such as the Holocaust, pro-Nazi collaboration, and the legacies of the fascist past was always accompanied by a wider sense of civic and scientific responsibility. This was a project of history writing which held rulers, but also societies, to account.¹ The purpose of the
historian – and the legitimation for the funding they received, and the teaching in which they engaged, within and outside academic institutions – was to use the errors of the recent past as instructive lessons for the societies of the present. Only by understanding fully the complex history of Europe’s collapse into crisis, so the logic implicitly went, could Europe confirm its recovery from the ruins of 1945.2

The achievements of that wave of historical writing – which stretched from the 1970s to the opening years of the twenty-first century – were transformative, and had a major influence on us, as on many others. But the definition of contemporary history that it advanced has now in many ways become part of the history that formed its subject. It was an explicitly post-1945 school of historical writing, that achieved its fullest expression in the emphatic title of Tony Judt’s magisterial synthesis, Postwar, published in 2005.3 Judt, and the broader school of history which his work embodied, yoked the subsequent history of Europe to its mid-century crisis, and thereby to a German-centred narrative of the descent of Europe from 1914 into continental warfare, political instability, and ultimately the horrors of Nazism. With the defeat of the Third Reich, so the second half of this story could begin: the partition of Germany served as the prelude to the consolidation of Soviet ascendancy in the east through the people’s democracies, while Western Europe discovered the triple benefits of parliamentary democracy, regional integration through the institutions of the EEC, and the incremental social reforms made possible by economic prosperity and pro-active governance. In this way, the formative role played by Germany in the first half of the century was mirrored after 1945 by the priority accorded to the USA. This was an Atlanticist understanding of contemporary history, in which the durable engagement of the USA with Europe after 1945 moulded Western Europe’s political and economic structures – for good or for ill – as well as influencing the way in which its history was studied and written.4

This dominant narrative of the two halves of the twentieth century appeared to find its vindication in the events of 1989 and their aftermath. The collapse of the state-socialist regimes, and the remarkably rapid integration of east-central Europe into the political and economic institutions, and military alliances of the West during the 1990s, endorsed the paradigm of Europe’s recovery from its mid-century nadir. Seventy-five years after the outbreak of war in 1914, Europe had recovered its unity; and, through the successful transplantation of regimes of liberal democracy, economic freedom and human rights across the continent, the demonstration of its new-found maturity. Everything in the new Europe was not perfect; but the sense that the historical narrative of what Hobsbawm promptly termed the ‘short twentieth century’ had reached its dénouement was unavoidable.5
But how then should we study what happened next? To treat the volatile and complex history of Europe during the post-1989 decades as little more than the coda of a symphony written for another age is clearly no longer viable. Many of the changes which have occurred in Europe since 1989 are the product of new dynamics, which serve retrospectively to complicate the ways of writing European history that came to the fore over the preceding decades. To trace the threads of continuity from the ruins of 1945 to the present day risks subordinating the history of twenty-first-century Europe to the mid-twentieth-century past, while at the same time confining the history of the 1930s and 1940s to a monument or museum devoid of real historical character. Yet, as Russia’s war in Ukraine in 2022 has well demonstrated, there is a need to understand the continuing legacies of that era in a way which does not subordinate all narratives to a preoccupation with 1945.

**Liberating the History of the Present**

There is therefore a need to liberate the history of the present. The concept of a *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, or an *histoire du temps présent* in its different linguistic and cultural variants has become visible in various ways in recent years; but, if this is to be more than a convenient slogan, then we need to articulate what such a concept might mean. One obvious starting-point is the radically changed geographical shape of Europe. Put rather crudely, Western Europe thought it had acquired an annexe in 1989, but instead discovered that it had become absorbed into entirely different histories. The primarily western-oriented narratives of contemporary history developed in the final decades of the twentieth century no longer seem adequate to describe the much more contested and expanded Europe of the twenty-first century. The complexity of the eastern borderlands of Europe demand research skills and archives different from those of the west, but also an awareness of the shadows of other histories: of the Romanov and Ottoman empires, of an eastern Jewish history, and of the complexities of long-standing ethnic conflicts in which – as in Ukraine – the Second World War was only one episode. Above all, it also requires western historians to recognise that not all history can be written from their perspective. In the immediate aftermath of 1989, there was something of a colonising narrative to the writing of contemporary history in east-central Europe, as former institutes were closed down, scholars associated with the previous regimes were moved aside, and a new generation of western or western-educated historians took their place. But over the subsequent decades this initial period of transformation has given way to a much more complex picture, in which the lively culture of contemporary history that developed in central and eastern Europe,
often outside of official institutions, prior to 1989 has been supplemented – and also challenged – by the energetic efforts of new state authorities to develop narratives of the recent past, which deviate markedly from those of Western Europe.

The essential starting point of the history of the present therefore has to be the recognition of this plurality and of the new challenges to Western narratives. The self-definition of Europe as a tightly-knit entity, defined notably by the borders to its east and south, formed part of the ways of thinking that emerged under the twin impacts of the Cold War and of decolonization in Europe after 1945. But, as the vain attempts by rulers to build ever higher border fences eloquently demonstrate, today’s Europe is deeply entwined with the histories of other regions: of North Africa, of the Middle East, and through processes of global migration with West Africa and Asia. As a consequence, the very concept of a European history – initially conceived as a riposte to the myopia of national narratives – risks becoming a monument to an outmoded Euro-centric narrative. The centripetal forces that pulled European states of the late twentieth century towards the centres of Brussels and Frankfurt have been replaced by a much more centrifugal continent. The political structures of European integration have lost momentum, the resurgence of the Russian state has pressed in on the history of eastern Europe, and the pervasive influence of an Asian-oriented global economy has removed the confidence that Europe has assumed control of its own history.

The history of the present in Europe must therefore convey this decentred reality; but, more than that, the prism through which historians study these plural histories need to be devolved and decolonised. The largely male and overwhelmingly white demographic of past generations of historians of contemporary Europe is inadequate; and there is a need to enrich the historiography by foregrounding the perspectives of those for whom Europe is not “their” history, and for whom the central elements of their identity are a challenge to European definitions. This requires, in short, a global approach; but one that goes beyond simply a more critical perspective on projects of European empire, or a recognition of the profound impact that other regions of the world have always had on Europe. Globalisation begins at home: in the investigation of the emergence of global lives within Europe, and the recruitment of a historical profession that is open to those histories.

Finally, then, the history of the present also demands new subject-matters. Histories of race and gender need to transcend the binary constructs – black and white, heterosexual and homosexual – that characterised the second half of the twentieth century to understand the much more fluid and multi-storied identities of many present-day Europeans. The narratives of nations, too, must be relativised through
greater attention to the wider imperial entities – including that of pervasive market forces – that transcend borders, as well as the more localised communities of regions, cities, and neighbourhoods that over recent decades have eroded the formal sovereignty of the nation-state. This awareness of larger but also more specific histories requires, too, a recognition of the centrality that the environment – in all its varied dimensions, physical and human – has acquired in the history of the present. For much of the last century, the dominant template of European history was the conquest of the environment: the extraction of mineral resources, the taming of rivers through the construction of hydro-electric dams, and the splitting of atoms to produce bombs for warfare and electric power for peace. This technological narrative has, however, been transformed in the present by processes of climate change that prove the limits to human ability to control the environment, while demonstrating the ways in which the damage inflicted in the past now defines our present.

As environmental change well demonstrates, the histories of the latter twentieth century and of the present are not self-contained vessels. The continuities are substantial, and the frontier between the two will always be ill-defined. Where the history of the twentieth century ended, and that of the present begins depends in large part on where one is standing in Europe, as well as the nature of the question being addressed. While the events of 1989, and their immediate aftermath, provide an obvious moment of transition in terms of political structures, social and economic changes require a longer and more flexible chronology that stretches back into the 1960s and 1970s. This reflects the wider ways in which a series of economic and technological forces – often summarised a little inadequately as globalization – destabilised the political and social hierarchies of Europe during the final decades of the twentieth century. Some of these changes were abrupt, while others were more incremental or occurred in ways which rendered them invisible. In all cases, however, they contributed to a pervasive sense of insecurity at the end of the twentieth century. State institutions, and structures of transnational collaboration, were undermined by these changes; but, equally importantly, so too were the movements and languages of social and cultural contestation. This is well demonstrated by the evolving connections between gender and identities. In the decades following 1945, the achievement of women’s rights, and a generalised regime of gender equality, was the dominant narrative. But by the end of the century, this had been replaced by more complex histories. Concepts of equality came to seem more elusive, and the focus on the emancipation of women had been replaced by a more plural range of gendered identities that themselves are articulated within a wider discourse of intersecting rights.
European history in a new key

In sum, this is European history in a new key – as Carl Schorske once famously commented of the Europe of the 1890s – and it demands a new history. As one contribution to this process, we have recently created with Cambridge University Press a new series entitled *European Histories of the Present*, that is intended to provide a space within current historiography for works that will explore the new agendas suggested by a history of the present. But the process of redefining that history will go much wider than a book series. Historians need to bridge the divide that has emerged, almost unconsciously, between the present and the practice of the study of the past. That will require a change in ways of thinking, but also more subtly in the social situation of the historian. Much of the project of contemporary history, as it developed in Western Europe across the second half of the twentieth century, distanced historians from the society which they inhabited. Operating in a well-resourced world of archives, research institutes, and conferences, their role was to study in an objective – dispassionate – manner the dark places from which European society had emerged, and thereby to provide implicitly an alibi for the imperfections of the post-1945 world. Little of this, however, remains relevant to a history of the present. The optimism that European societies, individually and collectively, have moved beyond the conflicts of the mid-twentieth century has been challenged by the resurgence of ethnic and political conflicts in the Balkans and most recently in Ukraine. Everywhere, too, economic conflicts, the consequences of global processes of migration, and the emergence of new populist politics on left and right, have heightened awareness of the inequalities of wealth, region and race which are inscribed in European societies of the twenty-first century.

Historians cannot remain aloof from these processes. The carefully crafted Olympian stance of the contemporary historian, located au dessus de la mêlée, has lost its relevance. In particular, the hierarchies of intellectual knowledge, institutional prestige, and of social status, that characterised the academic writing of contemporary history across the latter decades of the twentieth century need to be replaced by a more pluralist and simply open-minded engagement with the uncertainties and conflicts of the present. That also implies having a modesty about the perspective of the historian. Writing immediately after the disintegration of the state-socialist regimes in east-central Europe, Francis Fukuyama provided from North America a lucid and nuanced account of the crisis of state planning and political authoritarianism which had left the practice, and more especially the idea, of liberal democracy as the only valid form of
government. The ideological and regime conflicts of the twentieth century had culminated in a situation where, he wrote, ‘we have trouble imagining a world that is radically better than our own, or a future that is not essentially democratic and capitalist.’ Those are words that it is difficult to imagine being written in Europe today. It is not just the confidence of the final phrase which appears outmoded, but perhaps more especially Fukuyama’s deployment of the first-person plural. European History has lost its sense of a democratic terminus, and the history of the present is emphatically incomplete.

June 2022

Download as PDF

1. This was perhaps most clearly evident in France in the debates surrounding the legacies of the Vichy Regime: Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France Since 1945*, Cambridge (Mass.)/ London 1991.


7. See, for example, https://geschichtederegenwart.ch. See also the US-based journal, *History of the Present*, published from 2011 to 2016, which reflects the rather different relationship between present and past in North American historical writing.


10. See, for example, the fashion for “global” histories of European states that tend unconsciously to reinforce national paradigms: see, for example, Pierre Boucheron et al. (eds.), Histoire mondiale de la France, Paris 2017.


12. But on the enduring conflicts over equality and cultural as well as sexual difference see Joan Scott, Parité: Sexual Equality and the Crisis of French Universalism, Chicago 2005.


14. We would of course be pleased to hear from authors interested in contributing to this new project.