# *Introduction*

## *Violence, Normality, and the Construction of Postwar Europe*

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Works of fiction often express things better than do works of history. At the outset of his remarkably perceptive novel, *Home Fires*: *An Intimate Portrait of One Middle-Class Family in Postwar America*, Donald Katz writes of his protagonist in 1945:

> Sam Goldenberg came back from the war, and now that he had broken the ice with Eve he was able to say that there was only one thing he wanted from the rest of his life: a normal family. That was all a million other guys who'd survived the family degradations of the Depression and the harrowing experiences of the war wanted too.[1]

Hardly a surprising reaction to the horrors of war, and obviously it is a considerable leap from (Jewish) middle-class America to a devastated European continent after the destruction of the "Third Reich." However, this pithy statement points to a major, perhaps *the* major, social and psychological turning point of our century.

The history of the twentieth century revolves around mass death. At its center lies the mass killing and mass murder carried out during the decade roughly from the late 1930s to the late 1940s – during which time more people were killed by their fellow human beings than ever before in the history of humankind. Against the terrible dimensions of the mass death of that decade, the hitherto unimaginable horrors of the First World War and its immediate aftermath appear as merely an antechamber to the house of horrors that arose two decades later. Thus, we find the remarkable contrast between the aftermath of the First World War, when a world profoundly shocked at what it had done found memorable words and cultural expressions with which to describe its shock, and the aftermath of the Second,

1 Donald Katz, *Home Fires: An Intimate Portrait of One Middle-Class Family in Postwar America* (New York, 1993), 14–15.

in which it seemed impossible to depict and interpret the suffering and dying on the battlefields, in the bombed cities, and during deportation and flight, the ordeals of occupation and collaboration, and the Shoah in an all-encompassing manner. Although lasting expressions were found for some of these harrowing experiences, they often resulted in silence and a rush to (re)establish "normality."

The First World War and the terrors of the Russian "people's tragedy" of revolution and civil war shocked a world that had convinced itself during the course of a relatively peaceful long nineteenth century that humanity was becoming more civilized; the Second World War, with its campaigns of mass murder that made the lands in the grip of Nazi and Stalinist tyranny the great slaughterhouses of the short twentieth century, went beyond such shock. One may debate whether or not it was possible to write poetry after Auschwitz or whether there remained words, images, and concepts with which that horror could be described adequately, but it is remarkable that the Second World War did not generate poetry, novels, or artistic reflections in quite the same way as did the First: There was no real second-generation Siegfried Sassoon or Erich Maria Remarque. Nor was the violence of the 1940s commemorated in such profoundly moving memorials as those conceived by Edward Lutyens or Heinrich Tessenow for the Great War of 1914–18; the tombs of the unknown soldier contain dead from the First World War, not the Second. The great Soviet war memorials – one thinks of the Mamayev Kurgan at Volgograd/Stalingrad[2] or the Soviet memorial in Berlin-Treptow – impress us with their enormity (and thus the enormity of what they commemorate), not with their profundity. Primo Levi and Elie Wiesel wrote poignant descriptions of the horrors of the Shoah and the suffering of its victims; Heinrich Böll and others described the soldiers' feelings of loneliness and guilt; but the various experiences of violence during the war proved to be too incompatible to be rendered together in a compelling artistic form.

When attempting to understand the postwar transition after 1945, we need therefore to bear in mind that it was the *second* great postwar transition of this century. It proved even more difficult to give "meaning" to what had happened, not only to construct coherent private biographies encompassing the violence but also to develop comprehensive public forms of commemorating the war – in other words, to create private and public

2 See Sabine Rosemarie Arnold, "'Das Beispiel der Heldenstadt wird ewig die Herzen der Völker erfüllen!' Gedanken zum sowjetischen Titenkult am Beispiel des Gedenkkomplexes in Volgograd," in Reinhard Koselleck and Michael Jeismann, eds., *Der politische Totenkult: Kriegerdenkmäler in der Moderne* (Munich, 1994), 351–74.

narratives about the war and violence that were consistent in themselves and compatible with each other. Whereas the search for meaning after mass death may have been necessary and may have made some sense after the first great round of twentieth-century horrors, it was much more difficult, if not impossible, to engage in such a search after the second, even more horrific wave of mass death. After the First World War, it may have been necessary to try to find some meaning in the senselessness of mass death, in the private grief shared by millions. After the Second World War, the horrors of Nazism and Communism, the mass bombing of civilians, the attempts at genocide, and the brutal uprooting of millions of refugees, it was perhaps necessary to do just the opposite: to turn one's back on death and seek to rebuild, in a strangely anesthetised state, "normal" life. Looking specifically at Germany, Reinhart Koselleck has pointed to a profound change in how war and mass death came to be commemorated and understood following the bloodbaths of the 1940s: "The concentration camp memorials make especially clear something that in the Federal Republic [of Germany] also is true for the local memorials to the dead after the Second World War: that death no longer is understood as an answer but only as a question, no longer as providing meaning, only calling out for meaning."[3]

The journey through the slaughterhouses of the 1940s perhaps purged the survivors of the belief that there is an identifiable meaning in mass death, a meaning that can be publicly shared and represented. What remains are deeply disturbing questions and fears, and a desperate flight into normality. This, it must be said, was the dominant motif of the lives of millions who survived the First World War as well as the Second; despite all that was written about disturbed types such as those who found refuge in the paramilitary politics of the Freikorps, the overwhelming desire after the Armistice of 1918 was to return to what were perceived as normal patterns of family, work, and community. However, the shock of the 1940s was so profound and so deep that perhaps there simply was no way to deal with it other than to move on and not look back.

If it was not possible to give mass death a clear meaning, people nevertheless could not escape the memory – in terms of private memories and public commemorations – of what had happened in Europe and beyond. Because hardly a single family in those countries on whose territory war had been fought was left untouched by its violence, their members had to come to

3 Reinhart Koselleck, "Der Einfluss der beiden Weltkriege auf das soziale Bewusstsein," in Wolfram Wette, ed., *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes* (Munich, 1992), 336–7.

terms with the losses that they had experienced. Compared with what had happened in the First World War, however, the composition of the groups of victims of the Second was different. Not only were there millions of ordinary soldiers who had fought and fallen on either side; there also were many more civilian victims than ever before, who had suffered from area bombing, occupation policy, and expulsion from their homes, and there were the Jews and the other victims of the murderous racist policies of the Nazi regime. Yet the experiences, and memory, of the violence often were a complex affair, fitting uneasily into publicly acceptable categories of good and evil. In the countries occupied by German troops, not everybody had been a member of a resistance movement; some had been collaborators, while others had tried to survive without getting involved in either resistance or collaboration. This was true, to some degree, for Germany and its allies as well. Many more people than in the First World War had been traumatized both by what they had endured and by what they had done; the violence of the war – of its battles along the vast and constantly shifting front lines, its incessant air attacks, the brutal acts of occupation policy – neither spared nor could go unnoticed. People had to deal with all these experiences in private, but this also left its public mark on the institutions and rituals of mourning and commemoration. If silence was the public reaction to this challenge, it was a silence occasionally broken and mixed with selective appreciations of the suffering of specific groups of victims. In other words, traumata were not simply repressed but dealt with in different ways; as a result, their long-term impact was different as well, depending on how explicitly they became an issue in private and public strategies of normalization.

This, the shock of the mass violence of the 1940s, more than perhaps anything else is what gave the second half of the short twentieth century – the postwar era that came to an abrupt end with the opening of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union – its character: Its story is one of life after death. For nearly half a century after the end of the Second World War, Europe lived under the shadow of mass death. The struggle to create a sense of stability and normality after such terrible events and experiences has been, in a deep psychological sense, a story of life after death – a search for an answer to the unarticulated and unanswerable question of how people can live a normal life after mass death, death that overflowed the bounds of private grief and mourning, and became a central feature of public life because it came to be shared by so many people. The end of the 1940s is the great watershed, not simply because it witnessed the beginning of the Cold War and the division of Europe and the world into two hostile blocs as well as the establishment of a new economic order that brought unprecedented

prosperity to an unprecedented number of people in the wake of war, but also because it marked a profound transformation of social discourse, practice, and behavior. The first half of the twentieth century was the era of violence and death, in which the nineteenth-century dreams of popular and national sovereignty were realized in twentieth-century nightmares of savagery and genocide; the second half of the twentieth century was an era of *relative* peace and order, but a peace and order that existed under the darkest of shadows: the horrible history of mass murder and the threat of nuclear annihilation.

The subject of this book therefore is pivotal to the history of Europe in the twentieth century: the relationship between the enormous outbursts of violence during the 1940s and the strange conservative normality that characterized so many aspects of life in European societies during the decade that followed. That the 1940s and 1950s form the hinge on which the history of Europe in the twentieth century turns has been most obvious in the political and military spheres. After the defeat of the Axis powers, the political instability that had characterized the European continent after 1914 was replaced by an international system of two competing blocs and remarkably stable political formations for nearly four decades – under the shadow of a nuclear cloud that first appeared in 1945 (announced to President Harry S Truman, who was attending the Potsdam Conference when the first atomic bomb was tested in New Mexico, with a coded message bizarrely appropriate for the dawn of the postwar era: "babies successfully born"). The importance of the 1940s and 1950s as a caesura is scarcely less obvious in the economic sphere. Instead of the expected postwar depression and a return to the economic crises of the interwar period, the post–Second World War period saw the greatest, most sustained economic boom that the world has ever seen, a boom that transformed the lives of millions of people across the European continent, that constituted a social revolution, and that constitutes the background of much of what is discussed in the chapters in this book. That is to say, in many respects the environment surrounding the return to normality in the 1950s was quite extraordinary.

Invoking "normality," however, is not to say that it is easy to define this normality, in terms either of contemporary experience or of historical perspective. For contemporaries, the absence of war and violence was one necessary precondition for establishing normal lives again, but there was no clear-cut model for the normality at which this process was aimed. Most obviously, Germans did not want to rebuild the Germany of the Nazis, although quite a few were ready to admit in the 1950s that until 1939 they had fared fairly well under a regime that had provided them with

full employment, *Autobahnen*, and some notion of a consumer society.[4] In France, it did not seem wise simply to re-establish the Third Republic, which had turned out to be so feeble in the face of the German onslaught. Italy could not go back to the Mussolini regime, which was overthrown when defeat as a German ally had become inevitable. This was all the more true for the countries of Eastern Europe, where the victorious Soviet Union soon left no doubt about its determination to prevent the reconstruction of prewar political and social structures. For people in Europe, the shaky world of the interwar years was not something they wanted to get back. Was America the model for rebuilding their societies? The United States had been admired as the beacon of political liberty and economic prosperity by many since the beginning of the century, but it had also been perceived as a country where material values stood above moral ones and where social and racial cleavages deeply divided the society. Many Europeans wished to become consumers as their American counterparts already were, but they wanted to preserve their national traditions, however defined in light of the experiences of war and occupation, and they wanted a smooth transition. A common model of a new society emerged that placed the emphasis on an economic prosperity that was to remove the class conflicts that had marked the late nineteenth century and much of the first half of the twentieth. However, as the wave of youth unrest that occurred in most European countries during the late 1950s made clear, this model did not go uncontested. It was here that the general conservatism of the period proved to be far from universally accepted.

From a historical perspective, the normality of the postwar years also could be gauged in another way. In the 1950s, countries in noncommunist Europe resumed general trends that had marked the three decades before 1914 and had been interrupted by the economic depression and political turmoil of most of the 1920s and early 1930s, and, of course, the Second World War. This was true not only for the return to steady economic growth but also for the democratization of political regimes and the emancipation of women. The extent to which people perceived these trends, according to their generational position, is another matter. However, when contrasting these positive trends of modernization with the enormous violence that occurred in between, it becomes all the more difficult to explain the causes and effects of that violence on the people involved.

4 See Elisabeth Noelle and Erich Peter Neumann, eds., *Jahrbuch der öffentlichen Meinung 1958–1964* (Allensbach, 1965), 230, 233. In October 1951, 42 percent of those interviewed saw the period between 1933 and 1939 as the best Germany had ever had; in May 1959, 41 percent called Hitler until 1939 one of the greatest German statesmen.

The importance of the 1940s and 1950s as a social and psychological turning point is only beginning to be considered seriously. In any attempt to come to grips with the social, psychological, and political history of this century, the terrible violence at its center – and in Europe – cannot be ignored. Of course, not all developments that unfolded after the war were direct results of the conflict. As recent studies of the First World War and its aftermath demonstrate, the continuities of prewar trends and mentalities often were greater than previously assumed. However, there can be little doubt that the social and cultural effects of the mass experience of violence and death during the 1940s were profound and colored all aspects of life during the postwar decades, even when this was not necessarily articulated explicitly. But what precisely these effects may have been, what exactly the connections were between the violence of the 1940s and the normality of the 1950s, remains extremely speculative. Examining these subjects requires the exploration of very difficult historical terrain and involves questions that cannot be addressed solely by reference to the apparently "hard" evidence provided by political and/or economic documentation. It presents a challenging agenda historically, methodologically, and personally.

It is challenging not least because the profound importance and deep consequences of this violence can hardly be grasped if one's vision remains fixed on the cold calculus that has become so familiar a feature of the histories of the "dark continent" during the "age of extremes,"[5] on those terrible abstract numbers of the millions of human beings who were cut down in the killing fields of Eastern Europe and in the extermination camps of the Nazi empire, of the millions who were killed, maimed, or scarred for life on the battlefield or in bombed-out cities, of the millions who were brutally uprooted from their homes and forced to rebuild their lives in new and often strange and even hostile surroundings, of the millions who were subjected to sexual violence, of the millions who would have to lead the rest of their lives without fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers, and children whose lives had brutally ended in the greatest human slaughter ever.

For a long time research on the late 1940s and 1950s was concentrated on the reconstruction of political and economic structures, especially in Germany. It was centered on the question of how the mistakes made in the treaties of 1919 were avoided after 1945. How were economic and financial structures established that compelled the countries in Central Europe to cooperate, brought the United States into the frame, and provided a

5 This criticism, it should be made clear, cannot be levelled at those fine general texts which have put these phrases into common usage: Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century* (London, 1994); and Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (London, 1998).

firm basis for economic growth? How were political systems (re)created that were based on a number of democratic parties while not adopting the severe tensions of the interwar period? Questions such as these did not have as their focus individual experiences, collective memories, or other cultural phenomena such as lifestyles. Research on the victims of the Nazi persecution of the European Jews has demonstrated how difficult it was for them to remember their traumatic experiences and to communicate this to their respective societies. Research on how "ordinary" citizens survived the war and came to terms with it has only begun, reflecting growing interest in the emerging consumer society of the 1950s and its gendered aspects, as well as in the rituals of the public commemoration during the 1950s of war and occupation.

The chapters in this book are therefore situated in a new field of research and attempt to break new ground. Their perspective is interdisciplinary, international, and comparative; together they combine the most recent approaches to the history of the late 1940s and 1950s in Europe. Obviously, not all of them deal with their subjects in the same manner. Some are primarily case studies, asking rather specific questions and drawing on rich source material; others take a broader, more explicitly comparative approach or place particular emphasis on more theoretical questions. It is therefore not surprising that some focus more on the issues related to violence whereas others concentrate more on those related to normality. We would like to have seen all parts of Europe that had been involved in the Second World War fairly equally represented in this book; however, despite our hopes and efforts this proved impossible. Western and Central Europe are overrepresented, whereas Eastern Europe is underrepresented. Nevertheless, we hope that the essays gathered here will stimulate further research in this part of the European continent as well.

As satisfactory methodological concepts have not yet been developed to describe the effects of the large-scale experience of violence on individuals and on whole societies, this book begins with a first, suggestive attempt at filling that gap by linking psychiatric approaches with the social history of the war and early postwar years. In their chapter, Alice Förster and Birgit Beck outline the main features of the psychiatric concept of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and then probe how it may be applied to the subject of this book. Originally developed for veterans of the Vietnam War, this concept covers a wide range of symptoms that can be found in many people involved in violence, both as perpetrators and victims. Taking the German society of the 1940s and 1950s as their example, Förster and Beck pose new questions for a number of issues. From this perspective, mental and medical

problems become tracers for different degrees of involvement in violence, as silence not only serves as an expression of guilt but also as a strategy of coping in private and public when other paths are not taken.

Public mourning was one way to help individuals come to terms with their experiences of war. Sabine Behrenbeck describes how in both postwar German states, despite their differences, the dead members of the former *Volksgemeinschaft* (national ethnic community) were commemorated in public ceremonies. Whereas in the German Democratic Republic a commemoration calendar emerged that placed the victory of the Soviet troops and the Communist victims of Nazi persecution at center stage, in the Federal Republic public mourning concentrated on the *Volkstrauertag* in November and blurred the distinctions between soldiers and civilians, perpetrators and victims, by eventually including even the German prisoners of war. However, the principal victims of Nazi persecution, the Jews, were not explicitly mentioned, and only after the mid-1960s were they given their own place in the public memory of both German states. To the West German reflections (or lack thereof) on the murder of the Jews, Ido de Haan adds the Dutch and French experiences and concludes that in these countries, too, there was no specific place in public memory for the victims of the Holocaust. In the Netherlands, public discourse focused on the history of occupation and resistance, whereas the persecution of Jews was regarded as a German affair. In France, Jews were defined as part of the republican nation and thus became indistinguishable as part of the resistance movement (although, unlike their counterparts in the Netherlands, they were entitled to receive compensation for the persecution they suffered). De Haan also asserts, however, that public mourning did not progress gradually from silence to memory but rather shifted between the two, depending on the political context.

During the 1940s, women had been affected by wartime violence more than ever before. Atina Grossmann, focusing on Germany, looks at their efforts to reclaim a sense of identity and agency. In doing so, she contrasts the relative unwillingness of German women, who saw themselves as victims of war and occupation, to bear children, with the tremendous upsurge in births among Jewish women survivors in the displaced-persons camps in Germany. For German women, many of whom had been raped, not having children allowed them to re-create the material conditions of normality; for Jewish women survivors, by contrast, bearing children both offered an opportunity to be and feel "normal" and fostered a kind of "productive forgetting" after the horrors of the recent past. Shifting the geographic focus farther east, Andrea Petö discusses the traumatic experience of Hungarian and Austrian women who had been raped by Soviet soldiers at the end

of the war. Whereas a public "conspiracy of silence" developed after 1945 owing to the political circumstances, the victims themselves developed an "economy of emotions" that enabled them to distance themselves from the acts of rape. In Hungary, the rapes helped to create a myth of national victimhood, which minimized the Hungarian contribution to Nazi rule in Europe and helped shape an anti-Soviet identity.

In her chapter, Joanna Bourke shifts the attention to men's agency and men's experiences generally, and to the act of killing specifically, and asserts that the evidence testifies not to breakdown but to resilience. Focusing on British (and American) soldiers, she contrasts contemporary fears revolving around the stereotypical figure of the "veteran" – which suggests that returning soldiers, brutalized by their experiences, would pose a serious threat to public order – and the ways soldiers found to distance themselves from the horrors of war and their own behavior by creating out of the chaos and the violence they had inflicted and endured narratives that were both ordered and sensible.

It was in marriage and family that men's and women's experiences and ways to cope with them met. Dagmar Herzog presents the thesis that the 1950s in Germany were less sexually repressed than often portrayed and that the same could be said for the Nazi period. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including marriage counseling texts and opinion polls, Herzog demonstrates that during the late 1940s and early 1950s there was a high level of consent to nonmarital sex, that information on sex practices was easily available, and that the first mail-order service for pornographic material was a great success. This changed only in the mid-1950s, when the influence of conservative forces increased, particularly of the Catholic Church, which had denounced Nazism as too permissive in sexual matters. Pat Thane, setting developments in family life in postwar Europe within a broad social and economic perspective, confirms Herzog's thesis for Britain. There, too, the 1950s brought about a further loosening of the codes of sexual conduct, whereas other features of social life – such as demographic changes and very low unemployment rates after the war – marked a break with prewar experience. Class also mattered: The postwar economic boom and the changes it generated affected the working class most of all, where for the first time parents could expect that their children would have better lives than they did and where working-class families in particular saw a trend toward greater stability in their lives. Michael Wildt, focusing on postwar consumption in West Germany, places his findings in a similar perspective and points to the ruptures as well as the continuities with war and prewar experiences. Anxieties about a possible third world war were ever-present