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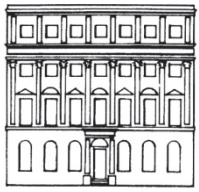

BULLETIN

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WRITING THE HISTORY OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY EUROPE

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My book covers the century from 1815 to 1914.[1] As Tim Blanning says, every history of Europe has to start at some arbitrary date, but some dates are more arbitrary than others.[2] We speak habitually of the nineteenth century or the twentieth century, but of course we all know the period 1801 to 1900 or 1901 to 2000 has no real meaning beyond the merely chronological. History is full of loose ends, and even the outbreak and conclusion of major wars that so often provide start and end dates for histories covering discrete segments of the European past, including mine, of course, leave many issues unresolved. Different aspects of history have different chronologies: a date that has a meaning in political or military or diplomatic history may have very little in social, economic, cultural, or, as feminist historians have passionately argued, women's history. French historians of the *Annales* school have become accustomed to speaking of immobile history, or the *longue durée*, which persisted well into modern times in many parts of Europe. Despite the fall of the *ancien régime* in political systems at the end of the eighteenth century, the *ancien régime économique et social* persisted well into the second half of the nineteenth, and it took until this point for serfdom, for example, to disappear from many parts of Europe. The long-established demographic patterns of high birth and death rates did not begin to change in most parts of Europe until after 1850, just as industrialization was a marginal process confined to small pockets of the European economy until the second half of the nineteenth century. Arno Mayer

This text is based on a lecture given at the German Historical Institute in May 2016, with the addition of footnotes providing the basic bibliographical information. Its source is the Introduction to Richard J. Evans, *The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815–1914* (London: Penguin, 2016) and it is reproduced here by permission of the publisher.

[1] Evans, *The Pursuit of Power*.

[2] Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe, 1648–1815* (London, 2007), p. xxiii.

argued in his book *The Persistence of the Old Regime* that the dominance of traditional aristocratic elites continued until the First World War and not much of significance changed in politics either.[3] Mayer's view has not been widely accepted—change happened in the world of nineteenth-century Europe, not just in politics but in other spheres as well.

Some historians have decided that the most meaningful period to study is the 'age of revolution', to quote the title of the first volume of Eric Hobsbawm's celebrated analysis of the years 1789 to 1848 (1962).[4] Hobsbawm's periodization was followed by Jonathan Sperber in his excellent survey *Revolutionary Europe* (2000), covering the same period.[5] There is a price to pay, I think, for choosing these years, for what came after was a very different Europe, one much less easy to conceptualize in a single framework. Not by chance, Sperber's follow-up volume has a wordy title that conveys, no doubt unconsciously, the difficulty he found in solving the problem of a unifying theme. It is called *Europe 1850–1914: Progress, Participation and Apprehension* (2009).[6] Hobsbawm went on to write two more volumes, *The Age of Capital*, covering the years 1848 to 1875, and *The Age of Empire*, taking the story up to the First World War.[7] Anyone who tries to write a history of nineteenth-century Europe has to confront these three tremendous volumes, which tower over the literature on the era. And with his uncanny gift for conceptual innovation Hobsbawm went on to characterize the whole period covered by his trilogy as 'the long nineteenth century'. That is a model followed by many textbooks and primers, for example, Simpson and Jones's useful *Europe: 1783–1914*.[8] But the long nineteenth century, of course, in terms of political history at least, is a broken-backed century. The first half of the century is dominated by the legacy of the French Revolution and attempts to

[3] Arno J. Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (London, 1981).

[4] E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (London, 1962).

[5] Jonathan Sperber, *Revolutionary Europe: 1780–1850* (Harlow, 2000).

[6] Id., *Europe 1850–1914: Progress, Participation and Apprehension* (Harlow, 2009).

[7] E. J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital 1848–1875* (London, 1975); id., *The Age of Empire 1875–1914* (London, 1987).

[8] William Simpson and Martin Jones, *Europe: 1783–1914* (London, 2000).

suppress it; the second half is characterized by the growth of new political institutions and the advance, however fitful, of democracy. Like Sperber, many historians covering the period from the battle of Waterloo to the outbreak of the First World War, or from the French Revolution to the First World War, have given up on the attempt to find any kind of conceptual unity, and have chosen anodyne titles like R. S. Alexander's *Europe's Uncertain Path*,[9] which gives no clue as to where the path is coming from, or where it is leading to.

Throughout most of the twentieth century historians regarded the rise of nation-states and the conflicts between them as the central features of European history in the nineteenth. The triumph of nationalism forged new political and cultural entities and inspired revolts against large and, it seemed, outmoded multinational empires, uprisings against oppression by some nationalities, or ambitions to achieve dominance over them by others. And this model of nation-states was exported across the globe in the twentieth century, making its emergence in Europe in the nineteenth seem even more important. Historians once saw this process in positive terms, putting celebratory accounts of the unification of Italy and Germany, the growth of Czech and Polish national consciousness, and other products of the age of nationalism, at the centre of their narratives. As national and ethnic rivalries spilled over into the huge conflict of the Second World War, the rise of nationalism appeared in a darker light, a view underlined by the Balkan wars of 1990s. Since then, we have come increasingly to live in an age of globalization, as the barriers created by the Cold War have crumbled, and international institutions, new global means of communication, multinational companies, and many other influences, have eroded national boundaries and begun to bind us all together as a global human community. And since the turn of the century at the latest, this has altered our vision of the past, which historians have come to see increasingly in a global perspective. The call for the writing of global history is not, in itself, new. It was issued as long ago as the 1970s by the French historian Marc Ferro and was present in the concept of *Universalgeschichte* (universal history), as practised by Ranke in the nineteenth century, and Arnold Toynbee and William McNeill in the twentieth. But a global history that linked

[9] R. S. Alexander, *Europe's Uncertain Path, 1814-1914: State Formation and Civil Society* (Oxford, 2012).

the different parts of the world rather than telling their discrete stories has emerged only recently, as historians have begun to examine subjects such as the effects of empire on European economies, societies, cultures, and political systems, notably but not exclusively those of Britain; the global economic ties that bound Europe to other parts of the world in a nexus of mutual interaction; and the rise of worldwide empires as a common European process rather than one specific to any particular nation. Historians have also been busy rewriting the history of individual European nations in a global context, emphasizing the effects of European diasporas—the millions of Europeans who emigrated to other parts of the globe—on the 'mother-country', the infusion of European nationalism with elements of racial theory derived from the experience of colonization in Africa or Asia, and the emergence of global geopolitics as a key factor in relations between European states.

A particular influence on my own approach has been exerted by Jürgen Osterhammel, whose *Transformation of the World* is, indeed, a truly global history,[10] not a Eurocentric one, such as Hobsbawm's three volumes ultimately were. Covering the nineteenth century, Osterhammel's chapters deal with an amazing variety of topics including memory, self-observation, time, space and mobility, living standards, cities, frontiers, power, revolution, state, energy, work, communications, hierarchies, knowledge, civilization, religion, and so on. And he deliberately picks out common themes, connections in different parts of the globe, shared developments in global processes. Yet the argumentative and effective presence of the author throughout the book generally, I feel, eclipses that of the people who lived at the time he is writing about.

Often historical surveys spend all their time establishing the broad contours of interpretation without attempting to convey how they could be discerned in the lives and experiences of contemporaries. That is perhaps understandable in a brief textbook whose ultimate purpose is to prepare students for examination, but a more extensive work such as Penguin ultimately commissioned from me, aimed in the first place at the general reader, fortunately has the space to provide the detail that conveys the flavour of the period and its mixture

[10] Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century,* trans. Patrick Camiller (Princeton, 2014).

of strangeness and familiarity, and as far as possible to allow contemporaries to speak for themselves. I once wrote a review of Nipperdey's three marvellous volumes on nineteenth-century Germany,[11] in which I complained not only that there were no jokes in them, which made them rather hard to read, but also that we constantly heard just Nipperdey's own voice, with contemporaries never getting to speak.[12] In my own book, I try to remedy this deficit by quoting from contemporary sources as much as I can, in order to give something of the flavour of how people living at the time thought and expressed themselves.

Other, no less ambitious works of global history written around the same time as Osterhammel's have offered a rather different approach to the nineteenth century, based on the perception that this was the period above all others when Europe led the world and came to exercise dominion over other parts of the globe. Historians such as Chris Bayly, in his *Birth of the Modern World*,[13] and John Darwin in his masterly survey of global empires, *After Tamerlane*,[14] have established, with a wealth of comparative evidence, the rough equality, in almost every respect from living standards to cultural achievements, of a whole range of civilizations across the world in the early modern period. The Mughal Empire in India, the Qing Empire in China, the great pre-colonial empires of Benin and its neighbours in Africa, the Ottoman Empire, and other large states, were roughly on a par with Europe in the early eighteenth century in many respects. By 1815 this was clearly no longer the case. Europe had forged ahead, not, as some historians, notably Niall Ferguson in his book *Civilization*,[15] have maintained, because of its intrinsic superiority, but, I think, because of quite specific historical circumstances. Europe maintained and extended its advantage on many fronts right up to the early

[11] Thomas Nipperdey, *Deutsche Geschichte 1800–1866: Bürgerwelt und starker Staat* (Munich, 1983); id., *Deutsche Geschichte 1866–1918*, i: *Arbeitswelt und Bürgergeist* (Munich, 1990), ii: *Machtstaat vor der Demokratie* (Munich, 1992).

[12] Richard J. Evans, 'Too Quick to Judge', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5–11 Oct. 1990, p. 1079.

[13] C. A. Bayly, *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914: Global Connections and Comparisons* (Malden, Mass., 2004).

[14] John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (London, 2007).

[15] Niall Ferguson, *Civilization: The West and the Rest* (London, 2011).

years of the twentieth century, though towards the end of the period it increasingly came under attack. The First World War put it into question; the Second World War destroyed it, bringing down the global European empires in its aftermath. This global hegemony is an important justification for taking the years 1815 to 1914 as a distinct and meaningful period of European history. What I try to do, therefore, is to emphasize the global context right through the book, bringing events and processes on other continents into the narrative and analyses as a way of helping and trying to explain what was happening in Europe.

A global history also means, to use another fashionable term, transnational history. Many histories of Europe have consisted of largely separate narratives of different national histories. Grant and Temperley's *Europe in the Nineteenth Century*,[16] which held its own for a long time as a standard textbook, falls into this category; Simpson and Jones's *Europe: 1783–1914*, mentioned above, is in the same mould, with separate chapters on France, Germany, Italy, Russia, and the Habsburg Empire. The German historian Michael Salewski's 'History of Europe' (2000) is subtitled 'States and Nations from the Ancient World to the Present',[17] and presents a series of disconnected histories of individual nations and states and the relations between them. That means that ultimately the reader loses sight of what, if anything, bound Europe together as a whole; what these states and nations have in common; or what wider processes affected them. The long-established and still incomplete *Oxford History of Modern Europe* takes a similar approach, with every volume devoted to a single country except for the four that cover the relations between them over different periods. But as well as being an evolving assemblage of individual states, Europe also had a definable existence as a collective entity, not as a geographical area whose eastern boundaries, in particular, were vague and hard to define, and whose confines became blurred in the course of European emigration to other parts of the world, but rather as a social, economic, political, and cultural region sharing many common characteristics and including Russia, the Balkans in the east, Scandinavia, Spain, and Portugal.

[16] A. J. Grant and Harold Temperley, *Europe in the Nineteenth Century, 1789–1914* (London, 1927).

[17] Michael Salewski, *Geschichte Europas: Staaten und Nationen von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 2000).

In taking an approach that, as far as possible, is transnational, I am consciously following in the footsteps of Lord Acton, the founder of the *Cambridge Modern History* at the end of the nineteenth century. In his plan for this enterprise, Acton told his contributors:

> Universal history is not the sum of all particular histories, and ought to be contemplated, first, in its distinctive essence, as Renaissance, Reformation, Religious Wars, Absolute Monarchy, Revolution etc. The several countries may or may not contribute to feed the main stream. . . . But attention ought not to be dispersed, by putting Portugal, Transylvania, Iceland, side by side with France and Germany. . . . My plan is to break through the mere juxtaposition of national histories and to take in, as far as may be, what is extraterritorial and universal.[18]

In the event, of course, Acton died before he could realize this ambitious project, and when it was eventually published under the more efficient but less imaginative editorship of Sir Adolphus Ward, the *Cambridge Modern History* did, indeed, largely adopt a country-by-country approach, reflecting, I think, the nation-based vision of a younger generation of historians in the changed political and cultural atmosphere of the Europe they inhabited.

It was only with the fall of communism, the extension of the European Union to much of Eastern Europe, and the renewed onward march of globalization, that the possibility of writing a real European history re-emerged. We can no longer equate it, however, as Grant and Temperley and their counterparts and many others have done, with the history of politics and international relations. Since the 1970s at the latest, historical investigation has expanded its field of vision to encompass almost every aspect of human activity in the past. Already in the early 1960s, Hobsbawm's *Age of Revolution*, which drew on the French tradition of writing a broad comprehensive kind of history, owed much to the *Annales* school. It contained chapters on religion, ideology, science, the arts, the economy, and much else. Subsequently, as Osterhammel's work has shown, historical research has extended its range even further, including the history of landscape and the environment. Hobsbawm was able to bind all

[18] Quoted in Roland Hill, *Lord Acton* (London, 2000), 394.

this together across the Age of Revolution—gradually losing coherence as he wrote further into the century—through an overarching master-narrative that placed the development and determining influence of capitalism at its core. His books are Eurocentric because they are about the impact of the industrial revolution and the French Revolution, the dual revolution, on Europe and the world. Historians of the early twenty-first century, the time when the grand master-narratives have fallen into disrepute, do not have this luxury. The most we can do, as Tim Blanning says, is to trace 'lines of development'.[19]

Two of the main lines that Blanning identifies for the years 1648 to 1815 in his book, are what he calls 'the relentless march of the state to hegemony' and 'the emergence of a new kind of cultural space—the public sphere'.[20] These developments continued an expansion and dominance that were almost unthinkable in the previous age. The state structures of Restoration Europe that emerged in 1815 would, in some ways, still have been familiar to the continent's inhabitants of the mid-eighteenth century, even though appearances were often deceptive. The power and intrusiveness of the state were relatively limited, and popular participation in politics was minimal, despite the still-vivid example of the French Revolution. The public sphere was confined mostly to a small stratum of the educated and the literate and their institutions, from periodicals to coffee houses and reading clubs. But by 1914 the state had been transformed by universal male suffrage, and in some parts of the continent even female suffrage, and the direct participation of the people, the masses, in shaping national, regional, and local politics, not least through organized political parties. And the control that the state could exercise over its citizens, in areas ranging from education to health, military service, and social work, had expanded vastly by 1914.

The linked processes of improving communications and a growing economy, described by Blanning, accelerated faster in the nineteenth century than anyone in the eighteenth could have imagined. In 1815 the railway, the telegraph, the steamship, and the photograph were barely visible over the historical horizon. By 1914 Europe was entering the age of the telephone, the motor car, the radio, and the cinema. In 1815 we were still in the age of the Newtonian understanding of the universe, of representational art, and classical music.

[19] Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory*, p. xxiv.

[20] Ibid. pp. xxiv, xxv.

By 1914 Einstein had propounded his theory of relativity, Picasso had painted his Cubist works, and Schoenberg had composed his first atonal pieces. Europe was also, in an even more immediate, more sinister sense, entering the age of the machine gun, the tank, the submarine, barbed wire, and the fighter plane. The first aerial bombardment of an enemy was recorded in 1911, during the Italian invasion of Libya. The first European concentration camps were opened in South Africa by the British and in south-west Africa, in Namibia, by the Germans. Such developments, foreshadowing the immense violence and destructiveness of the first half of the twentieth century, stand as a warning against treating the nineteenth century, as most of its inhabitants did, as an age of linear progress and open-ended development. Progress had its price and in the succeeding period, between 1914 and 1949, as Ian Kershaw shows in *To Hell and Back*,[21] Europe paid it in full measure.

Blanning's volume ends on a gloomy note as far as the conditions of life for the vast majority of Europeans was concerned, with the beginnings of industry and the effects of rapid population growth bringing 'a new kind of poverty', he says, 'not a sudden affliction by famine plague or war but a permanent state of malnutrition and underemployment.'[22] Yet, on the other hand, the nineteenth century, as this suggests, was relatively free of major European wars. The wars that happened before 1914 were all limited in time, with distinct aims, and confined to a small number of countries and usually to a relatively small area, unlike those of the twentieth or the eighteenth century. As in many other aspects of this period, Europe's changed relationship with the rest of the world was an important determining factor. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, European wars did not involve other parts of the globe as they had in the eighteenth century. The reason for this was not only Britain's global hegemony and command of the seas, but also an enormous anxiousness on the part of European states not to repeat the disastrous global conflicts of the eighteenth century. Thus the loss of life in battle between 1815 and 1914 was far smaller than it had been in the previous century.

There was loss of life on a large scale in other respects during the nineteenth century, of course. There were famines, notably in Ireland, Scandinavia, and Russia, and plagues, too, in the form of periodic out-

[21] Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914–1949* (London, 2015).

[22] Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory*, p. xxvii.

breaks of cholera that swept the continent, but these were neither as frequent nor as devastating as plagues had been in previous eras. By the end of the century they had largely vanished from Europe. This did not mean, of course, that social, economic, and other forms of inequality vanished along with them. An important part of what I want to do is to describe the shifting contours of inequality in the nineteenth century, with older forms, such as serfdom on the land, giving way to newer ones, such as wage labour in the factory. And here, among many other areas, I take issue with Hobsbawm, who sees the rise of industry as an unadulterated, unalloyed descent into worse and graver forms of oppression. I think it is important to look at the nineteenth century in a broader perspective. It was the age, *par excellence*, of emancipation, with millions of people—serfs, women, and religious minorities, notably the Jews—being given greater equality of status. These were enormous changes that should not be underestimated. But, of course, equality and emancipation were only ever partial and conditional, as the years after 1914 were to show.

Arguments and disputes about inequality were at the centre of nineteenth-century European politics. Building on a legacy of ideas bequeathed by the French Revolution, increasing numbers of political thinkers and actors began to conceive of and implement ways of overcoming the inequalities they witnessed. The spectrum of solutions ranged from aristocratic paternalism and a sense of *noblesse oblige* at one extreme to the anarchist attempt to destroy the state at the other. Socialism, liberalism, communism, nationalism, and many other doctrines prioritized one method or another of freeing people from the yoke of oppression and exploitation according to how they defined it. Most of those who put stability and hierarchy first recognized that they could not survive simply by clinging to the old order; and so they too became participants in the great debate on inequality. Religions offered a variety of answers to problems rooted in the temporal world, or advocated escape from it altogether. What all of these many strands of thought had in common was a desire to acquire and wield power so they could put their ideas into action. While Tim Blanning calls his history of Europe from 1648 to 1815 *The Pursuit of Glory*, signifying the priorities of the dominant political elites of the age, I decided to give my book the title *The Pursuit of Power*.

The Pursuit of Power, of course, is not simply political, at least if politics is defined in a narrow way: states grasped for world power,

governments reached out for imperial power, armies built up their military power, revolutionaries plotted to grab power, political parties campaigned to come to power, bankers and industrialists strove for economic power, serfs and sharecroppers were gradually liberated from the arbitrary power exercised over them by landowning aristocrats. The central process of the century, the emancipation of vast sections of the oppressed from the power of their oppressors, found its most widespread manifestation in the emancipation of women from their imprisonment to the nexus of laws, customs, and conventions that subordinated them to the power of men. Just as feminists fought for equality before the law so, too, in a new world of industry, labour unions went on strike for more power, wages, and better conditions of work. Modernist artists challenged the power of the Academies, and novelists organized their work around struggles of power in the family, the locality, or other social institutions.

Nineteenth-century society increased its power over nature: governments gained the power to avert or alleviate hunger and natural disasters, such as fires and floods; medical researchers reached out in their laboratories for power over disease; engineers and planners extended humankind's power over nature; and, in a different sense, scientists and mechanics devised and exploited new sources of power, from steam to electricity and the power loom to the internal combustion engine. Power could be formal or informal; it could be exercised through violence or persuasion, it could be consensual or majoritarian, it might take economic, cultural, social, political, religious, organizational, or many other forms. But as the nineteenth century progressed, people increasingly prioritized power over glory, honour, and comparable values that had been dominant previously. By the end of the century, power had been reconceptualized in racial terms as Europeans came to regard their hegemony over much of the rest of the world as evidence of their superiority over its inhabitants. And, of course, in the end this racialized form of nationalism came back to devastate Europe in the conflicts of the Balkan wars and then the First World War.

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