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An Epoch of Annihilation Whose Consequences Still Reverberate

by George de Stefano

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In Fire and Blood, *historian Enzo Traverso sets his sights on two concepts: the facile equation of totalitarianisms, and the equally facile belief in the inevitability of historical progress.*

FIRE AND BLOOD

THE EUROPEAN CIVIL WAR

1914-1945

Enzo Traverso

Europe's (Second) Thirty Years' War

Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945

Enzo Traverso; Translated by David Fernbach

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“Some places had been bombarded so heavily that the land was a mass of iron where nothing could ever grow again.”

So observes the narrator of Francois Truffaut’s 1962 film, *Jules et Jim*, as Jim, a former soldier, revisits the sites of World War I battles that left nothing but ruins. The war, a global conflict centered in Europe, resulted in 16 million deaths. It was also a total war that did not spare civilians; nearly half of those who died were noncombatants. Industrial and technological innovations—armored airplanes and tanks, submarines, machine guns, poison gas—made warfare more efficient, and more lethal, than ever before. Just two decades after the war that, according to Woodrow Wilson, was to “end all wars”, another even more devastating conflict broke out in Europe and became a global conflagration.

Some historians have conceptualized the 20th century European wars not as two separate conflicts but as one war with a brief interregnum. As the title of Enzo Traverso’s latest book makes evident, the Italian historian shares that view. In *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945*, he analyzes the thought and actions of a wide range of historical actors to develop an argument not only about the conflicts but also about how they are remembered and interpreted, and their continued impact on European societies and politics.

Traverso, the author of several previous books on Marxism, World War II, and the Nazi regime, teaches political science in France, where *Fire and Blood* was first published, nine years ago. His family had first-hand experience of the second world war’s horrors; Germans occupied Gavi, his hometown in the northern Piedmont region, from 1943 to 1945. During those “two terrible years”, the valley around Gavi “became a microcosm of the civil war that was ravaging” the Italian peninsula and Europe. The Germans perpetrated horrific massacres against civilians, and bands of partisans began to organize in the mountains to fight the occupiers. After the war, Traverso’s father became the town’s first Communist mayor.

A leftist, Traverso wrote *Fire and Blood* partly to understand his own politics, including his youthful involvement with radical, extra-parliamentary movements in Italy in the ‘70s. But the debates that so consumed leftists during the late ‘60s and early ‘70s have been “relegated to the ideological arsenal of a bygone century” by the cataclysmic events of 1989, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. If it’s still imperative, as Marx wrote, not only to understand the world but to change it, “the ways to achieve it have to be radically reconsidered. And this experience needs to be contemplated without either nostalgia or resentment.”

Traverso’s idea of the historian’s role diverges from that of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theoretician, of “organic” intellectuals linked to “a class, a minority, or a party”, because such a commitment might risk “the critical autonomy” essential to the profession. He also rejects the idea of the historian as detached and above the fray. Critical distance is important, but so is “a measure of subjectivity”, an awareness of what connects the historian to the object of his or her research.

Traverso isn’t quite fair to Gramsci and his concept of the organic intellectual, and his downplaying of economics and class struggle leaves some lacunae in his treatment of the European conflicts. Still, he succeeds in his stated aim to “revisit or go beyond historical

controversies regarding the interpretation of fascism, Communism, and the Resistance in order to situate them in a broader perspective, beyond the division into different contexts".

His approach is multidisciplinary, drawing on social and cultural history and political theory. He uses the concept of a "European civil war" to explore what happened in what Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm called "the age of extremes", the period from 1914 to 1945, an epoch of war and revolution in which "the symbiosis between culture, politics, and violence" shaped "the mentalities, ideas, representations and practices of its actors." Though critical of left-wing movements and leaders, he objects more to what he terms "the anachronism so widespread today that projects onto the Europe of the interwar years the categories of our liberal democracy as if these were timeless norms and values. This tendency blithely reduces an age of wars, revolutions and counter-revolutions to the horrors of totalitarianism."

Traverso, although he hardly ignores the suffering of civilian victims, concentrates on "the authors of violence, those who inflict it and those who, when they experience it, accept it as the foreseeable consequence of their choices." "The object, in other words, is to rebalance the historical perspective by restoring visibility to the actors in wars and revolutions, the vanquished as well as the victors." The vanquished in the European civil war include leftists (Rosa Luxemburg, Antonio Gramsci, Walter Benjamin, Leon Trotsky) but also conservatives like Ernst Jünger, an intellectual who fought for Germany in both world wars, and Carl Schmitt, a jurist, influential legal theorist, and Nazi Party member. Traverso considers the ideas of radicals and reactionaries "as the object of critical reflection and analysis" beyond "the sympathies or antipathies that attract me to some and estrange me from others".

The author writes that the European civil war of the 20th century had "two ancestors", the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) and the French Revolution; both events "changed the face of the continent". Marx's collaborator Frederich Engels was prescient enough to envision a parallel between the 17th century war and a future world war, predicting that the depredations of the Thirty Years' War would "be compressed into three to four years and extended over the entire continent". Such a war would destroy economies and bring about the collapse of existing states, as well as trigger a "universal lapse into barbarism".

The European wars of the 17th and 20th centuries were "total wars" that were deadly not only for combatants but also for civilians, who died in the millions, whether from hunger and disease in the earlier wars, or by bombing, massacres, and genocide in the 20th century. The first represented a conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism, between feudalism and absolutism. World War I emerged from "a classical conflict between great powers for continental hegemony" and, after 1917 and the Bolshevik revolution, between revolution and counter-revolution, culminating in World War II, "an irreducible war between hostile visions of the world." The conflicts combined wars between states with civil wars, resulting in changes in national borders and political changes in state structures, and religious and ideological confrontations. Further, Traverso notes, both "thirty years' wars" had Germany at their center, with both ending, "in 1945 as in 1648, by its division".

Traverso examines cultural currents during and between the war years, elucidating themes of fear, gender and masculinity, and youth. Fascism, in both its Italian and German forms,

embodied a cult of virility and misogyny. Fascism deplored what it saw as weakness and degeneracy—commonly attributed to Jews and homosexuals—and, as Mussolini said, regarded war as a form of “national hygiene”, a way to clean up the so-called dregs of society and to demonstrate manliness. Fascist culture glorified the soldier and combat, exalting physical courage and expressing contempt for death. Natalist ideology, conveyed in state policy and propaganda, glorified women as mothers whose role was to bring new fascists into the world. Soviet Russian propaganda relied upon similar themes and imagery, often depicting women as helpmeets to heroic male revolutionaries.

Traverso strongly rejects the “post-totalitarian wisdom” that posits an equivalency between fascism and the Communist antifascist left. In this thinking, only “humanitarianism” is a legitimate commitment, which, as Traverso observes, leads to the valorization of Oskar Schindler, a German businessman who also was a Nazi party member, because he rescued his Jewish employees, rather than “the immigrants in France (Jews and Armenians, Italians and Spaniards) who fought against Nazism in a movement linked to the Communist Party”. If the anti-fascist combatants are mentioned, “it is to emphasize that they took the wrong path, that their cause no longer has any significance for our contemporaries, and that they should now reconcile themselves with their former enemies”. In today’s Italy, he notes, one consequence has been that both fascists and anti-fascist partisans are commemorated as patriots.

Traverso sets his sights on two concepts: the facile equation of totalitarianisms, and the equally facile belief in the inevitability of historical progress. Particularly good is his treatment of the “complexity of the relationship between antifascism and Stalinism”, which has been reduced to an approach “that sees the former as simply a creature and byproduct of the latter”. In his book’s last and best chapter, “The Antinomies of Antifascism”, Traverso reclaims antifascism from liberal and conservative attempts to assimilate it to Stalinism. Antifascism, he says, was not due to the force of a seductive ideology or a propaganda campaign; rather, it was “a collective ethos” of those fighting the Mussolini, Hitler, and Franco dictatorships. Moreover, antifascism never was the sole property of the Communists and, in fact, when Communism adopted the Popular Front strategy to combat fascism, it “did no more than adapt to a turn that had already begun” among leftists and intellectuals shocked by the rise of Hitler.

Antifascism, says Traverso, had many currents—“Marxist, Christian, liberal, republican” (and also anarchist)—but all of its components claimed the Enlightenment as their heritage. Antifascism “opposed the principles of equality, democracy, liberty and citizenship to the reactionary values of authority, hierarchy and race.” That shared ethos made it possible for a diverse movement to hold together its various strands.

Traverso does identify a “complex (and perverse) dialectic between fascism and Communism” that he feels explains the “culpable silence” about Stalin’s crimes among many intellectuals. The fascist threat itself, plus the prestige the USSR gained during World War II, led them to “ignore, underestimate, excuse or legitimize Soviet totalitarianism”. However, he argues, if one did not have to adhere to the “cult of Stalin” to defend the Soviet Union in the ‘30s, it also is true that “in Western Europe it was impossible to combat fascism without the contribution of the Communists and the Soviet Union”. Traverso cites a few Italian leftists, such as Gaetano Salvemini and Carlo

Rosselli, to prove that it indeed was possible to be both antifascist and anti-Stalinist. They, however, were exceptions.

If Traverso deplores silence about or acquiescence to Stalinism among leftist antifascists, he is equally scornful of liberals who “oppose the beneficent virtues of a historically innocent and politically clairvoyant liberalism … to the antifascism of the 1930s intellectuals”. He points out that liberalism and its institutions, “exhausted and shaken” by World War I, were incapable of fighting fascism; not only that, it actually was the collapse of liberalism that led to fascism. Moreover, leaders of liberal democracies, like Winston Churchill, welcomed fascism as a bulwark against Bolshevism. “In Germany, between 1930 and 1933”, Traverso notes, “the elites shed their liberal face and dismantled Weimar democracy for the advent of Hitler”. With liberalism “evaporating”, the Soviet Union seemed far more prepared to fight and destroy fascism.

Traverso observes that antifascism needed hope and a message of “universal emancipation”, which it seemed only the homeland of the October Revolution could offer. “If a totalitarian dictatorship like that of Stalin became the embodiment of these values in the eyes of millions of men and women, which is indeed the tragedy of twentieth-century Communism, this is precisely because its origins and its nature were completely different from those of fascism. That is what liberal anti-totalitarianism seems incapable of understanding.”

For the author, the silence about the Holocaust among antifascist intellectuals is a bit harder to comprehend. Although no one foresaw Hitler’s plan as the total extermination of European Jewry, “a heavy threat hung over the Jews from 1933, even if its catastrophic culmination could not yet be grasped”. Antifascists, he argues, didn’t see anti-Semitism as a key component of Nazism but rather as “a propagandist corollary” of an anti-democratic, anti-worker movemen”. “An industrial and bureaucratic genocide was an absolute novelty whose possibility did not figure among the categories of antifascist culture.”

Traverso argues that “complacency” about Stalinism and “involuntary blindness” towards exterminationist anti-Semitism had a common thread: a “bitter and uncritical defense of the idea of progress, inherited from the European culture of the nineteenth century”. Regarding Nazism, Traverso opposes to this view that of the exiled German intellectual Theodor Adorno, who saw German fascism not as a temporary detour on the road of inevitable historical progress but as “a product of civilization itself, with its technical and instrumental rationality now released from an emancipatory aim and reduced to a project of domination”. In Adorno’s view, Auschwitz was “an authentic product of the West: the emergence of its destructive side”.

When the temporary unity among antifascist forces ended after World War II, the antifascist legacy split into divergent streams: those who refused to choose between the Soviet Union and the US and its allies were marginalized, while liberals abandoned antifascism to become anti-Communists. In Europe and America, antifascism came to be associated ideologically with Communism, and Communism and fascism came to be seen as mirror-image totalitarianisms.

Although Traverso, who keeps a tight focus on Europe, doesn’t say so, this Cold War ideology governed US policy and behavior for decades, with disastrous results at home and abroad. I wish

that Traverso had ended his book by making that point; or by more explicitly discussing the implications of his analysis for contemporary politics. Instead, he concludes with a sigh of despair and European self-loathing, as he shares the conviction of Adorno and his associate, the philosopher Max Horkheimer, that the only possible sentiment that Europeans should feel over their bloody history is shame.

Fire and Blood has other shortcomings. The English translation, by the British leftist scholar David Fernbach, is not always felicitous. The book also should have been better edited; sometimes it repeats ideas and arguments rather than develops them. In one section, Traverso notes that World War I was "neither foreseen nor wished for by its actors"; just two sentences later, he tells us that although the war had its causes, "it was neither foreseen nor intended by its actors". Such lapses are distracting and regrettable. Ultimately, though, they don't significantly detract from the author's incisive, challenging, and compelling interpretation of the European wars of annihilation, whose consequences still reverberate, and not only on that ravaged, still-divided continent.

Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945

Rating: 7

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