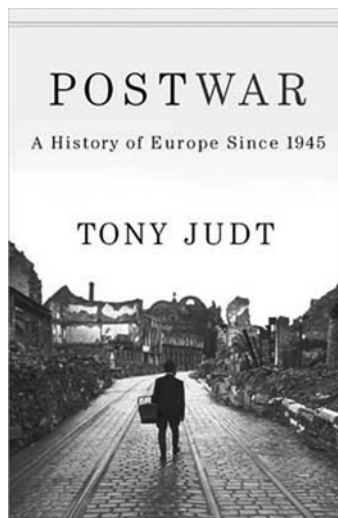


Shaping Europe

Tom Quirk reviews
*Postwar – A history of
 Europe since 1945*
 By Tony Judt
 (Penguin, 2005, 608 pages)



This book is a most remarkable and readable history. Tony Judt has woven a rich, 800-page tapestry of European recovery with an overall pattern of leaders successfully avoiding the mistakes of the interwar years, binding their countries together first by expanded intra-European trading, then to the technocratically conceived European Community and so to the present European Union.

Like any good tapestry, there are asymmetries and errors in the pattern as each country develops. The pile is deep with colour—The Who, the Sex Pistols, ‘brutalism’ in architecture, the cinema and the intelligentsia all make their contribution, as do the dry facts of population and economic statistics. In short—or long—the book is a ‘*tour d’horizon*’ and a fascinating read.

Judt begins at the end of 30 years of ‘civil war’ amongst the nominally Christian states of Europe, where some 60 million citizens met their death as soldiers or civilians. It is extraordinary to those of us born too young to experience these events that societies could be so driven by their leaders.

The central countries are France and Germany, both starting with a troubled body politic. For the Germans, how to deal with the Nazi legacy? The immediate post-War generation ‘never mentioned the war’. It was left to the next generation to confront the issue, as

Germany became the economic powerhouse of Europe.

For the French, the Vichy regime with Nazi collaboration was treated similarly. Paris became the intellectual centre of Europe, and for Jean-Paul Sartre and his colleagues, socialism had historical inevitability.

The remarkable growth of Europe was propelled by the post-War baby boom. This generation grew to adulthood in the 1960s. They were better educated than their parents, had their own independent income and spent it on clothes and their own culture of music and film. The increasing student numbers in the ‘60s put great pressure on universities, which expanded mightily. It was a time of student rebellion which led Isaiah Berlin to write, ‘The rebellion of the unrepentant bourgeoisie against the complacent and oppressive proletariat is one of the queerest phenomena of our time’.

Perhaps the most striking political events had started in the 1956 Hungarian uprising and culminated in the Gorbachev perestroika of 1987. The collapse of the Soviet empire and the Soviet Union finally occurred in a peaceful manner, something that could not have been accomplished from the outside. The evidence of economic and politi-

cal failure destroyed the belief of the intelligentsia that socialism was inevitable. Hardliners in France held on, as did those in Eastern Europe who hoped the collapse of the Soviet Empire would permit the birth of true socialism. They were ignored.

Europeans accomplished the European rebirth. European culture was protected. The French sheltered their film industry and, more particularly, their language. But as the European Union expanded, the role of the French language ceased to be central and English became the universal language of second choice.

This history also touches on the loss of three great empires: the British, French and Russian. The British had some practice at losing parts of their empire, but were greatly troubled by Northern Ireland. The French had the trauma of North Africa, and the Russians suffered the most rapid collapse. These countries, as middle ranking powers, turned back to Europe, with Britain and Russia on the edges and the French at the centre again, as in the nineteenth century.

These events occurred on the far side of the planet and we did not experience them directly. However the events did shape Australia with the waves of immigration that brought our great post-War expansion in people, culture and achievements.

This European story has been brilliantly told. It will be told many times. The Polish saying, ‘The future is certain, only the past is unpredictable’ will no doubt apply.

IPA

Tom Quirk is a member of the board of the IPA.