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EUROPE EAST AND WEST

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NORMAN DAVIES



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## FAIR COMPARISONS, FALSE CONTRASTS: EAST AND WEST IN MODERN EUROPEAN HISTORY<sup>1</sup>

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In September 1865, *The Times* of London published a short article on the recent disturbances in Ireland. In its opinion, what it called the 'Fenian sedition' amounted to no more than 'a piece of feeble mischief'.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the injustices of the past, the Irish were no longer judged to possess the slightest grounds for grievance in the present. A week later, a Russian newspaper, the *Journal de Saint-Petersbourg politique et littéraire*, alias the *Sankt-Petersburgski Zhurnal*, reprinted *The Times* article, adding a commentary of its own which drew a parallel between the position of Ireland within the United Kingdom and the position of Poland within the realms of the tsar: 'The analogy is so striking,' it wrote, and, 'the circumstances so identical . . . that we believe it necessary to remind Russian readers of the fact that it is Ireland in 1865, and not Poland in 1863, that is spoken of.'<sup>3</sup> This, in its turn, provoked a fierce riposte from *The Times* on 10 October.

The mid-1860s did indeed witness events in Ireland and Poland which merited comparison. The secret Irish Republican Brotherhood of Fenians was attracting huge support, not least among the Irish in Britain and America; Professor Roy Foster estimates 80,000 supporters in Britain alone.<sup>4</sup> In September 1865, the British authorities had just sentenced a group of Fenians to penal servitude in Australia. The principal Fenian newspaper in Dublin, *The Irish People*, which had openly called for armed rebellion led by Irish-American soldiers from the US army, had just been suppressed. In Poland, the tsarist authorities were mopping up the last

guerrilla fighters of the defeated January rising, and were deporting tens of thousands of Polish prisoners to Siberian servitude. Yet the conspiracies continued. The next year, 1866, would see an abortive Fenian raid on Fort Erie in Canada and the great Polish rising on Lake Baykal in Siberia.

As imperialists, the editors of *The Times* held scant sympathy for either the Polish or the Irish cause. 'The Poles are the Irish of the Continent,' they said, talking of 'their unstable character, their incapacity for self-government, and the futility of their schemes' – 'a very hot-headed and unreasonable people, who have quarrelled with their benefactors, the Russians, without any cause'. In support of their 'Imperial reasoning', as they put it, they accepted that 'Russia is made to govern', that Russia is 'a Power which has been, and always will be, successful', that 'the Poles have nothing left but to submit'. 'Poland,' they concluded, 'is now nothing, and can do nothing.' At the same time, these self-important Victorians were thoroughly outraged by the idea that British rule in Ireland was comparable in any way to tsarist rule in Poland.

How many . . . tens of thousands [of Poles] have been dragged from their homes since 1830 and marched to the depths of Siberia or shut up in dungeons at home! Where is the parallel to this in Ireland? There is not such a being at present as an Irish political convict. Ireland has no religious disabilities . . . Ireland is not governed by military rule; Irishmen are not conscripted into the British armies, nor hunted down in caves and cellars when they seek to evade the service . . . Ireland is as free as England, and its assimilation to the more powerful country proceeds from natural causes, and is in no way the effect of force or of tyrannical laws.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, though Ireland was wonderfully governed, the destiny of the fortunate Irish was to be exactly the same as that of the miserable Poles – and quite right too! There was absolutely no sense that by assimilating Ireland the powerful, liberal, democratic English majority of the United Kingdom might possibly be committing a grave injustice. In the same way, one recalls that it was Russia's allegedly most liberal tsar, Alexander II, who perpetrated the most brutal oppressions in Poland. This



was the time when that 'reactionary liberal', as Marc Raeff called him, Professor Mikhail Katkov, coined the notorious slogan, 'Either Russia, or Poland'.<sup>6</sup> *Polonia delenda est* – for her own good.

Ireland versus Poland is my first example of what I call 'fair comparisons' in modern European history. It is a comparison seen by contemporaries and by historians alike<sup>7</sup> and it could be applied on a much wider front than the national movements of the nineteenth century. Nor is it just a matter, as my senior colleague the late Hugh Seton-Watson once suggested, of a common predilection for potatoes, priests, potens and conspiracy.

On St Patrick's Eve a few years ago, I had the great pleasure of opening an Irish festival in, of all places, Toruń, birthplace of Copernicus. I suspect that the main point of the occasion was to promote the virtues of Guinness in post-communist Europe, but the organisers gave me an hour to range freely over the remarkable resonances of Polish and Irish history. What sticks in my mind from that exercise is the fascinating discrepancy between the objective circumstances of modern Ireland and modern Poland, which are somewhat different, and the subjective psychology of the two nations, which is remarkably congenial. At one level, the modern predicament of the Irish less resembles the Poles than the Czechs – a relatively small nation, with no experience of modern statehood and vastly outnumbered in their lonely struggle against a single, relatively benign empire. And yet the temper of the Irish is indisputably close to the Poles. As I concluded my speech in Toruń: the Irish are distinctly *Polskowaci*, the Poles distinctly *inlandziacy*. I won't attempt to translate.<sup>8</sup>

A second example of fair comparison relates to the ongoing debate about totalitarianism. What I have in mind here is the fact that, whilst fascism was predominantly a Western phenomenon, communism was predominantly an Eastern one. I strongly suspect that this consideration has influenced the judgement of Westerners, especially of ivory-towered or Ivy League Western theoreticians, who carry the guilt of the West in their consciences but who have never felt the totalitarian lash on their own backs. Hannah Arendt made an allusion to this in a quote on the title page of her study *Totalitarianism*: 'The subterranean stream of Western history has finally come to the surface and usurped the dignity of our tradition.'<sup>9</sup> Fascism was established in Italy in 1922, in Portugal in 1928, in Germany

in 1933–4, and in Spain by 1939. It gained a few independent admirers and imitators in other European countries such as the Hungary of Admiral Horthy, the Austria of Dollfuss and the Romania of the Iron Guard. Oswald Mosley's League of British Fascists dated from 1932. But its main phase of international expansion occurred in 1940–44, in the long list of Axis occupation regimes stretching from the Atlantic to Albania and Ukraine. From its beginnings in Rome in 1922 to its demise in Madrid in 1975 it lasted for fifty-three years. Communism, meaning the Marxist-Leninist system, took hold in Soviet Russia from October 1917, in Soviet Hungary in 1919–20 and even more briefly in Soviet Bavaria in April 1919. It gained a gaggle of activists and fellow travellers among intellectuals and workers in some Western countries, notably France and Italy, but its main phase of international expansion occurred in 1939–45 in the wake of the Red Army's conquests. Between 1917 and 1991, it lasted for seventy-four years. For present purposes, it is relevant to note that there is a broad zone of Central and Eastern Europe, from the vicinity of Magdeburg to the outskirts of Moscow, which was subjected to both fascism and communism in turn. In my experience, the inhabitants of that zone, whose opinions were formed by hard experience, have few doubts about the concept of totalitarianism as the common denominator of the two great evils of our times.

But not to rush to conclusions. My approach to the totalitarian debate has not been to favour either the sceptics or the enthusiasts, but rather to widen the basis for judging the issue. The pioneering analysis of the subject in the 1950s proposed a six-point totalitarian model.<sup>10</sup> Forty years later, political scientists are still arguing the pros and cons of this narrow definition. In *Europe: A History* I proposed eighteen points for comparison. These comprised the original six starting with the dual party-state, the *Führerprinzip* and utopian goals, plus twelve more including genocide, pseudoscience, the psychology of hatred and the aesthetics of power.<sup>11</sup>

One trend within the debate, however, must be resisted. Some scholars seem to have taken the position that the evils of fascism were so extreme that it is not acceptable to compare them with anything else. Some even talk of Hitler's 'crimes' but of Stalin's 'mistakes'. Some are convinced that the Jewish Holocaust, for instance, is not only unique but incomparable. Such an approach is surely misguided. For one can only substantiate the



claim to the uniqueness of the Holocaust – which I personally believe to be eminently possible – by showing how it differed in nature from other horrors of our age. On this, I rest my case with the words of Sir Isaiah Berlin: 'If uniqueness of a phenomenon is examined ... we mustn't rush to the conclusion that it's unique before we have compared it to other events which in some ways resemble it. That's what's happening to the Holocaust ... It has a conspicuously political motive.'<sup>12</sup> One thing, I think, is undeniable. Whether as totalitarian rivals or as ideological opposites, fascism and communism lived off each other in an all-European monster duel. Once fascism was dead, the death of communism was only a matter of time.

My third example is drawn from the history of modern art. Here I must draw attention to the fact that public appreciation of the arts inevitably lags behind the work of artists by several decades. Manet, Monet and Renoir were making their first Impressionist experiments in the 1860s, but Impressionism did not become the most popular artistic movement of all time until the middle of the next century.

This story, too, has an interesting east-west aspect. Modernism in art took flight before the First World War when Europe was far more united than afterwards. Paris served as a mecca for painters from far and wide. On the list of 'great French painters', one finds the Dutchman Van Gogh, the Belgian Vlaminck, the Catalan Picasso and Chagall, who was a Russian Jew from Minsk. More importantly, if one looks at the chronology of modern art, political barriers began to divide and fragment the avant-garde movement long before its achievements were properly disseminated.

The onset of Stalinism suppressed modernism in the Soviet Union from the end of the 1920s. The rise of Hitler had similar effects in Germany in the 1930s. But official philistinism blighted the artistic life of the Soviet Bloc until the 1990s. The consequences were far-reaching. Prominent artists from Central and Eastern Europe were prevented from exhibiting their works, or even from working, for significant stretches in their careers. Museums and galleries hoarded unseen masterworks in their attics and cellars, waiting for better times. Western critics wrote their textbooks of avant-garde painting blissfully unaware of the hidden canvasses, individuals or even schools beyond the Iron Curtain. For instance, the Soviet abstract

painters Casimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin and Alexander Rodchenko made a sensational international debut in exhibitions held in Berlin before 1928, whence their early works passed into the general corpus of the subject. But much of their later works remained in oblivion until the collapse of the Soviet Union long after their deaths. Or again, the Osmia group of early Czech cubists including Antonín Procházka and Bohumil Kúbista, who had been active in Habsburg Prague, did not have time to gain widespread recognition before the arrival of the Nazis and then the communists. They remained virtually unknown, except to specialists, until the fall of communism. The canvasses of the early Lithuanian symbolist, Mikolajus Ciurlionis, who died in 1911, were not seen abroad for eighty or ninety years. Władysław Strzemiński, theorist and practitioner of constructivism, died in his native Poland in 1952 in an official cultural climate profoundly hostile to his activities. Large collections of Jewish paintings, like Chagall's, were never put on show because the post-war cultural commissars did not identify with the Jewish heritage.

All these things came into the open in 1994 when the richness and variety of Eastern Europe's avant-garde was assembled in a joint exhibition organised by the Museums of Modern Art of Łódź and Duisburg in the Bundeskunst- und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn.<sup>13</sup> Here was an artistic treasure trove never assembled in public. Only then could comparisons be made to establish an overall view of Europe's avant-garde art.

At this point, it may be convenient for me to pause and to signal an impression, a hypothesis even, about a set of negative stereotypes of Eastern Europe. These stereotypes were greatly strengthened by the artificial divisions of the Cold War, and they still obscure our understanding of many pan-European issues. Much as Western studies of the Middle East have been said to be distorted by views of the Islamic or Arabic Orient as the alien, exotic and inferior 'other',<sup>14</sup> so, I would argue, studies by Western scholars of the Eastern half of our continent have often been discoloured by deep-seated assumptions about the extent and permanence of Eastern Europe's 'otherness'. This is nothing new. Perhaps 'the alien East' in all its variants is an in-built necessity within the peculiar intellectual construct that is called Western civilisation. At all events, instead of the fair comparisons that I have just been recommending, it is all too easy to find a series



of false, exaggerated or unwarranted contrasts between East and West. Again, I shall render three or four examples, each drawn from a different social science.

The most extreme example that I have encountered comes from the realm of family history. In the 1970s, a group of Cambridge sociologists made their name by establishing a typology of family and household structures in the past. One of their collective studies, published in 1983, put forward a four-region hypothesis for family types across the whole of Europe in the nineteenth century. Based on data from four villages – Elmdon in Essex, Grossemeier in north Germany, Fagagna in Lombardy and Krasnec Sobakino in the depths of Russia – it purported to offer a refinement of an older scheme, said to be ‘universally accepted’, which had divided European families into two simple types, ‘Western’ and ‘Eastern’. This latter scheme had given rise to something called the Leningrad–Trieste Line, to the west of which families were supposed to be relatively modern and increasingly nuclear, to the east of which families were supposed to be traditional and extended. Anything more artificial it would be hard to imagine.<sup>15</sup>

This is not a field which I am inclined to follow closely, and I trust that suitable modifications have been made in recent years. What I do know is that Eastern European social historians, who know their own countries well, often feel affronted by the casual not to say amateurish theorising of their ill-informed Western colleagues. The notion that one serf-bound Russian village could serve as the model for the intensely complex social conditions in countries as different as Latvia, Poland, Ukraine, Romania or Bulgaria is reductionism reduced to absurdity.

A strong sense of indignation of this sort can be discerned in a recent study of the Balkan *zadruga* or ‘joint patrilinear household’ by the Bulgarian scholar, Dr Maria Todorova. Dr Todorova, who once studied at St Antony’s College, Oxford University, tears into the widespread assumption among Western sociologists that the *zadruga* has been the standard form of social organisation among the Balkan Slavs since time immemorial. *Zadruga*, she argues, is a Serbian neologism dating from only 1818. Its relevance to the pattern of family types in the Balkans is extremely patchy. It is common enough in the mountainous, stock-breeding zones

of the Rhodopes, Macedonia, Bosnia, Montenegro and central Albania, and was present in sectors of the Serb Kraina in Croatia and among the non-Slavic Vlachs; but it is virtually unknown in most of Bulgaria, on the Adriatic littoral, in Greece or in Romania. In short, she suggests, the *zadruga* is a worthy partner to that other figment of the Western imagination, ‘the Slav soul’.<sup>16</sup>

Another example of exaggerated contrasts between East and West comes from the field of economic history. Immanuel Wallerstein’s thesis on ‘the origins of a European world-economy’ was published in 1974 at a time when another long-running academic debate over the Brenner thesis on ‘Agrarian Class Structure in Pre-industrial Europe’ was still in progress. Robert Brenner built his theory on a narrow foundation confined to England and France, but Wallerstein took a broader view, identifying a dominant core region in north-west Europe and a dependent periphery in the east. Using the techniques of systems theory, he argued that the core region had possessed only a slight advantage over the periphery, when the dependent relationship came into being in the fifteenth century. With time, however, favourable trading relations enabled Western entrepreneurs to exploit their advantages and to turn the ‘slight edge’ into a yawning gulf. They transformed the feudal nobility of the East into a client class of agrarian capitalists. What is more, they projected their economic power into the New World, where a zone of ‘coercive, cash-crop capitalism’ grew up in parallel to the corresponding zone in Eastern Europe.<sup>17</sup> I trust that is a fair summary.

It is my impression, however, that debates engendered by this sort of grand theorising rapidly degenerate into exchanges of technicalities more designed to keep professional historians amused than to establish a final resolution. Wallerstein substantiated his description of the periphery by examples drawn very largely from Poland, and from the work of communist Poland’s official Marxist historians. Detailed criticism of his observations suggest that if the agrarian capitalists he describes existed at all in early modern Poland, they existed only in very circumscribed localities and for a rather limited period. In short, if the Polish-based foundations are full of holes, the entire theory is bound to leak copiously.



Nonetheless, what concerns me here is not Wallerstein's theory as such but rather the assumption that Eastern Europe as a whole – half the European continent – can be characterised by a small spread of samples from parts of just one country in a limited span of time. Once again, this is reductionism running wild. Personally, though unqualified to judge, I rather like Wallerstein's theory. But surely some of the main implications need stating. One is that the greater part of Eastern Europe in the early modern period lay beyond even the periphery of the world economic system. The second is that most of Western Europe lay well outside it as well. In other words, the areas of backwardness and dependence had very little correlation with either East or West.

Another example of false contrasts comes from political science, in particular from the rich and fashionable field of theories of nationalism. In recent years, a wide consensus has formed, putting modern nationalisms into one of two basic types. I myself chose to call these types state nationalism and popular nationalism, although numerous other labels can be found. As I see it, state nationalism refers to those movements where the ruling elite or establishment of a state seeks to imbue the population at large with the civic values, the political culture and the national identity that the elite prefers. France, the United Kingdom and above all the USA provide clear illustrations of this. Popular nationalism, on the other hand, refers to the opposite: to grass-root movements where the common people, or groups of people within the population, seek to create or to reinforce their culture, values and national identity against the aims and wishes of the state authorities. For this, I cite the instances of the Irish within the nineteenth-century United Kingdom and the Ukrainians within the Russian and Austrian empires.<sup>18</sup>

So far, so good. The trouble begins to arise from the fact that the commonest labels for these two types of nationalism are not 'state' and 'popular' or 'civic' and 'ethnic' (as I would equally approve) but – wait for it – 'western' and 'eastern'. What is more, the political scientists who propagate the dichotomy of western and eastern nationalisms have a marked proclivity for adding their own value judgements. Western or civic nationalism is allegedly constructive, progressive, peaceful and stabilising. Eastern or ethnic nationalism is presented as destructive, regressive,

disruptive, divisive and destabilising, not to say murderous, xenophobic, anti-Semitic, hateful and generally nasty.

I first encountered this model of nationalism in the works and lectures of Dr John Plamenatz, who taught at Oxford in my student days. I now know that it has a much longer pedigree, traceable, I am told, to Friedrich Meinecke in the 1920s, and elaborated by Hans Kohn, Louis Snyder, Ernest Gellner and Anthony Smith, and others.<sup>19</sup> Plamenatz was born in Montenegro, and I have a sneaking suspicion that his views may have been coloured by a half-remembered and rejected association with the land which he had left. At all events, he recorded his reasons for adopting the label 'eastern nationalism' in these words: 'What I call eastern nationalism has flourished among the Slavs as well as in Africa and Asia, and ... also in Latin America. I could not call it non-European and have thought it best to call it eastern because it first appeared to the east of Western Europe.'<sup>20</sup> What a gem! 'I couldn't call it non-European,' he says. But he would have done if he could possibly have got away with it! 'East European' is classed with African, Asian and Latin American.

Plamenatz, who stressed the culture factor, went on to define his view of western nationalism by reference to Germans and Italians, who, he said, were 'culturally well equipped':

They had languages adapted ... to progressive civilisation. They had universities and schools ... imparting the skills prized by that civilisation. They had ... philosophers, scientists, artists and poets ... of world reputation. They had legal, medical and other professions ... with high ... standards. To put themselves on a level with the English and the French, they had little need to equip themselves culturally by appropriating what was alien to them ...<sup>21</sup>

Is the message clear? 'The case with the Slavs,' concluded Plamenatz, 'as with the Africans and Asians, has been quite different.'<sup>22</sup>

One should not speak ill of the dead, but I know that I can cause Dr Plamenatz no embarrassment. Which Slavs did he have in mind, I wonder – apart, that is, from the Montenegrins. Certainly not the Poles or the Russians. And which languages? Polish was an established literary and governmental language in the sixteenth century, before even German was.



And which universities? Presumably he knew that the universities of Prague (founded 1348) and Cracow (founded 1364) are both senior to Vienna, Heidelberg, Cologne, Leipzig, Freiburg, Tübingen, Göttingen, Berlin or Munich? And which philosophers, scientists, artists and poets? Take Comenius, Copernicus, Chopin and Pushkin for a start. Please excuse me, but a more cockeyed and patronising view of European culture would be hard to find.

The really odd thing, though, if one seriously applies the prevailing typology of nationalism to Europe east and west, is that one finds the best example of eastern-type ethnic nationalism emerged in Ireland, the most westerly of western nations. And the largest example of state-sponsored, western-type nationalism is to be found in Russia. Stalin, after all, considered himself very progressive; and he seduced a distressing number of Western intellectuals into thinking likewise.

The last example comes from ethno-religious studies, and in particular from the field of Christian-Jewish relations. For obvious reasons, anti-Semitism and its history has become a major topic for study and discussion in recent decades. And quite right, too. Yet one can hardly say that it is always discussed in a fair or impartial manner, especially as concerns its geographical distribution. The fact is: anti-Semitism has been rife in Western Europe for centuries, whilst for a long period it hardly existed at all in the east. In Russia, for example, there was no Jewish settlement and hence no anti-Semitism prior to the late eighteenth century. The Jews were unceremoniously expelled from England in the thirteenth century, from Germany in the fourteenth century, from France on several occasions, especially in the early fifteenth century, and from Spain at the turn of the sixteenth century. Throughout this long era, they were invited to settle in Poland-Lithuania, until the old Polish Commonwealth became by far the largest refuge for Jews in the world. Prior to the abolition of the commonwealth, they enjoyed far-reaching autonomy, including their own parliament, and freedom of religious practice. Indeed, this large Polish-Jewish community mainly stayed in place right up to the Second World War, even though it had frequently passed under the rule of the Russian, Austrian or German empires, and in the modern period it largely avoided the mass pogroms that were perpetrated in Russia and Ukraine. It was finally destroyed

during the Holocaust of 1941-5, when the organs of the German Nazi party and of the German state used German-occupied Poland as the site for their genocidal killing fields. Yet which among the nations of Europe is routinely labelled as being 'incorrigibly' or 'historically' or 'traditionally' anti-Semitic? Who, according to an Israeli prime minister, 'imbibes anti-Semitism with their mothers' milk? I can tell you the answer is not the Germans, who perpetrated the Holocaust, or the Russians, who were largely responsible for the worst of the pogroms. What is more, one can state with confidence that this cruel slander obstructs all rational analysis of the subject. No informed person can argue that anti-Semitism has *not* been a stain on modern Poland or that 'Polish anti-Semitism' is somehow the invention of 'anti-Polonites'. At the same time, no one should be allowed to get away with loose talk about 'Polish concentration camps' or of Poles as a 'collaborator nation'. There is a limit to which honest language can be stretched. The facts are: that wartime Poland was an Allied nation, unwaveringly loyal to the struggle against the Third Reich; that the Poles raised the largest anti-Nazi underground army in Europe, which fought the German occupiers, particularly during the Warsaw Rising of 1944, with unparalleled heroism; and finally, that despite the forced segregation of Jews in their Nazi-built ghettos, the Poles supplied a record number of 'Righteous among the Nations', honoured at Yad Vashem for their courage and humanity in rescuing Jews. The balance sheet is not as the stereotypes would have us believe. And fair comparisons in these matters, as in all others, are essential if accurate conclusions are to be reached.<sup>23</sup>

By all accounts, the trend whereby Western social scientists pondered the patterns and sources of the innately retrograde nature of Eastern Europe reached its culmination in a conference held on the beautiful shores of Lake Como at Bellagio in 1985. The conference was dedicated to 'The Origins of Backwardness in Eastern Europe' and its centrepiece was apparently a paper by Hampstead's leading communist luminary, Eric Hobsbawm, which contrasted the development of Switzerland with that of Albania.<sup>24</sup> If ever there was a loaded comparison, this was it. No doubt Good King Zog missed his cue by not launching cuckoo clocks and numbered bank accounts!

\*



For the historian, the prime question must be to explore how these tendentious attitudes arose. What are the roots and motors of a mindset which seems to distort so much of contemporary thinking? I have found ten headings, best discussed in chronological order.

1. The concept of a gulf dividing the civilised west from the barbarous east in Europe is at least as old as the Greeks and Romans. As Dr Edith Hall has shown so convincingly, the crystallisation of Greek identity in the Persian Wars of the fifth century BC went hand in hand with 'the invention of the barbarian' as the alien outsider.<sup>25</sup> And that alien barbarian could be a refined, sophisticated Persian or Indian, not just a wild Scythian nomad of the early steppes. The same mental divide was set in stone by the Romans when they built the empire's *lines*, with civilisation inside the lines and savage barbarism beyond. It declined and fell no doubt as the empire did, but it was reborn and restored by Renaissance scholars and by the generations of Europeans who, from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century received a classical education. It is hard to deny that for all its glories the classical tradition contained a set of dismissive judgements about non-classical cultures. As a close colleague of mine put it, 'It was this particular encounter [of Greeks and barbarians] that began the idea of "Europe" with all its arrogance, all its implications of superiority, all its assumptions of priority and antiquity, all its pretensions to a natural right to dominate.'<sup>26</sup>

2. When the Roman empire adopted Christianity, the division between civilisation and the barbarian world was supplanted by a new division between Christendom and paganism. The thousand-year process of Christianising pagan Europe, from the fifth to the fifteenth centuries, could not fail to leave a deep imprint. Christianity came from the south and west; the last bastions of paganism lay in the north, in Scandinavia, or in the east. The final pagan stronghold, in Teutonic Lithuania, held out until 1418. One of the curiosities of this story lies in the sleight of hand whereby the modern descendants of pagan, barbarian invaders like the English and the Magyars who had destroyed the Christian civilisation of the countries they invaded, nonetheless appropriated the Romano-Christian tradition as their own. On this point, look carefully at Holman Hunt's painting in the Ashmolean entitled *A Converted British Family Sheltering a Christian Missionary from the Persecution of the Druids* (1850).<sup>27</sup>

3. Yet European Christendom has never been fully united. The separate customs of the Latin and Greek Churches hardened by 1054 into a permanent schism. This 'scandal in Christ' has not yet been healed. Repeated attempts to end the schism, from the Council of Florence onwards, have failed. Militant attitudes towards the East in Counter-Reformation Catholicism have been matched by the xenophobic stance of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was created as a separate patriarchate by Ivan the Terrible in the late sixteenth century as an arm of Muscovite expansion. No strand in this theme is more pitiful than that of the Greek-Catholic Uniates, who chose to combine their non-Russian Orthodox tradition with loyalty to the Roman pope. They were forcibly suppressed at every stage of Russia's advance, from the first Muscovite conquest of Kiev from Poland in 1662 to Stalin's capture of western Ukraine at the end of the Second World War.<sup>28</sup> More recently, nothing better illustrates the persistent bitterness of Europe's ancient religious divide than the war in Bosnia.

4. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century was deeply imbued with a sense of Western superiority over the East. Indeed, a brilliant study by the American scholar Larry Wolff has argued that it is the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment who must be held responsible for inventing the synthetic intellectual construct called Eastern Europe. This construct encapsulates all the West's negative stereotypes of the East and exerts an insidious influence to this day.<sup>29</sup> The Enlightenment coincided with a period of history when one of the largest states of Eastern Europe, Poland-Lithuania, was in terminal decline, when the Ottoman empire still overlaid most of the Balkans, and when serfdom was still in place, even in Prussia and Austria. As a result, the stream of travellers' tales retailed in France or Britain contained a melange of the repulsive and the exotic. 'Swarms of Jews', peasant hovels, dirt, wolves and lice were among the universal complaints.<sup>30</sup> But much of it was sheer prejudice. When the Marquis de Ségur railed bitterly in 1789 over the state of the lavatory in his Warsaw hotel, he did so as if Versailles were fitted with flush toilets. Similarly, the notorious libertine Giovanni Casanova, who bought a slave girl for his pleasure in St Petersburg in 1764 for 100 roubles, complained of the brutality of the Russian knout as if the penal principles of the Marquis Beccaria, newly published in that same year, were somehow the norm back



home. Anyone who has read Michel Foucault's sickening account of the torture and dismemberment of Robert Damians in Paris in 1757 will know that barbaric cruelty was hardly an Eastern monopoly.<sup>31</sup>

No less influential were the widely publicised opinions of the Enlightenment's most representative figures. (Rousseau and Herder, who both expressed interest in and admiration for Eastern Europe, were exceptions to the rule.) Edward Gibbon, who never set foot east of Switzerland, loved to make play of the 'despicable' peoples of the East. Diderot, who travelled once to St Petersburg, used the occasion to flatter the despotism of Catherine the Great. And Voltaire, who never travelled beyond Berlin, fantasised to great effect about the misery and bigotry of the nations in order to justify the depredations of his patrons in Potsdam and the Peterhof.<sup>32</sup> His *History of Charles XII* (1731) presented a detailed and colourful account of the Swedish campaigns in the Baltic, Poland and Ukraine with little attention to verity while his mordant jokes mocked the laws and customs of the region. Yet no one was so unkind or so unfair as Frederick the Great, who joined the mockery of his *philosophe* friends with relish. He once talked of 'that multitude of imbeciles whose names end in —ski'. On the eve of the First Partition of Poland in 1771, he talked of a country 'that has not changed since the Creation':

La même encore qu'à la Création  
Brute, stupide, et sans instruction  
Staroste, juif, serf, palatin ivrogne,  
Tous végétaux qui vivaient sans vergogne.<sup>33</sup>

One does not have to ask with what *ivrogne* and *vergogne* are intended to rhyme.

The final word must rest with an American visitor, John Ledyard, who in 1788 compared Poland favourably with Russia only to contrast it mercilessly with 'those Angels of Civilisation in the Godlike regions of the West'.<sup>34</sup> Much of this crude Western bias stuck. The East was the defenceless outsider against which the Enlightenment defined its own achievements. And the influence of the Enlightenment is still alive today.

5. The prejudices of the Enlightenment were greatly reinforced by two

interlinked developments of the nineteenth century, industrialisation and imperialism. It is indisputable that socio-economic modernisation proceeded faster and further in certain parts of north-western Europe than anywhere in the east, so for those who think that economics constitutes the main criterion of civilised life, the countries of Eastern Europe can easily be dismissed as incurably backward. It is also indisputable that, with the exception of Russia, all the great colonial empires of the nineteenth century were based in Western Europe. This fact served to propagate the notion of historic and unhistoric nations, some of them, mainly in the west, born to rule, and others, mainly in the east, born, like the Irish, to be assimilated. Europe's empires may have passed away, but many of the entrenched attitudes of the imperial legacy are still with us. The greater the empire, the longer its aftershadows.

6. Throughout modern Europe, misguided concepts of race have exercised a powerful influence on the way Europeans think about themselves and others. Although the old pseudoscientific racial theories have been discredited for good by the excesses of fascist racism during the Second World War and by the rise of modern genetics since the discovery of DNA in 1953, nonetheless I suspect that popular attitudes can often lag behind scientific advances and that a residue of racial and ethnic prejudice still operates. After 200 years of misinformation it could hardly be otherwise. In the United States it appears that the pseudo-racial classifications of Professor Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, first presented in Göttingen in 1792, are still alive and well. One has to remember that the racial ravings of the Nazis were solidly grounded in long-standing Western scholarship and in widespread eugenic theories. Their repellent association of Jews with dirt and disease, for example, follows that long line of travellers' tales demystified by Professor Wolff. Their false identification of the Slavs as a racial group, classed as a sub-category of *Untermenschen*, had many antecedents from the Enlightenment onwards. Even the great Gibbon could not resist that one. His description of the Slavs living 'like beavers' in the wintry wastes of the east<sup>35</sup> is a nice parallel to the phoney contention, still found in *The Times Atlas of World History*, that the Slavs originated in the Arctic Marshes,<sup>36</sup> or to the English habit of thinking of the Irish as 'hogswillers'.

Two quotations almost 200 years apart will make the point. One



opinion, published by a Frenchman dismissed from the Polish army in 1780, described the Poles as 'the orang-utans of Europe': 'The Pole', he opined, is 'the worst, the most contemptible, the vilest, the most hateful, the most dishonourable, the dumbest, the fifthiest, the falsest, the most cowardly creation *among the apes*.'<sup>37</sup> A second, from the leader of Germany, was uttered in October 1939: 'The Führer's verdict on the Poles,' reported Goebbels, 'is damning. More like animals than human beings, completely primitive and amorphous. And a ruling class that is an unsatisfactory result of mingling between the lower orders and the Aryan master-race. The Poles' dirtiness is unimaginable. Their capacity for intelligent judgement... absolutely nil.'<sup>38</sup> This drivel can best be countered by the famous Polish observation about the Aryan master race – 'as tall as Goebbels, as slim as Göring, as blond as Hitler'.

7. Unfortunately, one has to admit that many East Europeans, especially the intelligentsia, have often adopted Western prejudices for themselves. It has long been the fashion for Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and Romanians to look to Paris, London, Berlin or New York for their models of excellence, whilst despising or ignoring their neighbours in the east. Here again west was automatically equated with best.

8. These habits of thought have been greatly magnified by the huge waves of migration from Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Successful migrants tended to cultivate the culture, language and values of their adopted countries with enthusiasm, whilst keeping no more than a mythological memory about their countries of origin. One fascinating study about immigrants to North America, for instance, explains how America's immigrant society set up the East European as a stereotype of 'the alien other'.<sup>39</sup> This finding coincides very much with my own observations of numerous American books and academic courses on so-called Western civilisation, which are almost totally lacking in an East European element. The point here is, whilst the starving Irish or Sicilian peasants who flocked to America in the mid-nineteenth century differed little from the subsequent wave of starving Poles and Ukrainians, Britain and Italy have not been struck off the American syllabus as countries about which contemporary students may remain uninformed. Another study, this time of Jewish immigrants to imperial Germany, shows not only how Central European Jews assimilated with

great alacrity into German language and culture, but also how assimilated German Jews turned their backs with distaste on the traditional, ultra-religious *Ostjuden* of Poland, Russia and Ukraine.<sup>40</sup>

9. The Allied victory in 1945 clearly affected attitudes to Eastern Europe in a major way. On the one hand, it reconfirmed the pre-war impression that the smaller nations of the East were too weak and fractious to stand on their own feet. Few people in the West drew the concomitant conclusion that the Western powers had proved too weak to defend their East European partners and clients. At the same time, in the euphoria of victory the Western powers had no interest in advertising the salient facts of the war in Europe – namely that the great bulk of the fighting against Hitler had been shouldered by the Soviet army (which inflicted 75 per cent of the *Wehrmacht's* casualties) and that the great Stalin, the ally to whom in large measure we owed our victory, was implicated in mass crimes on a scale not inferior to those of the defeated enemy. The military and moral dilemmas posed by Soviet conduct were so acute that the line of least resistance for the West in 1945 was to write Eastern Europe off as a hopeless case.

One East European country, significantly, was *not* written off. It has been well argued that the Western leaders were preconditioned to abandon Eastern Europe to Stalin at Yalta and Potsdam because 200 years of cultural propaganda had desensitised Western opinion to the loss of Warsaw, Budapest or Sofia. But Athens was a different matter. The mythology of Western civilisation insisted that Greece was 'ours'. Greece was not seen as Eastern, alien, exotic or backward, and she had to be saved at all costs. In the Percentages Agreement of 1944, Churchill made Greece the sole exception. In his Fulton Speech in 1946, where he warned of the Iron Curtain, he also boasted that 'Greece with its immortal glories is free'.<sup>41</sup> Similar sentiments were expressed forty years later to support Greece's entry to the European Community.

10. Nonetheless, nothing reinforced the negative image of Eastern Europe so effectively as the Cold War. For four long decades, a new 'Western world' developed under American hegemony in direct confrontation with the Soviet Bloc on the other side of the Iron Curtain. Two whole generations of westerners grew up with little direct contact and still less understanding of Europe's eastern half. For these were the generations



when west Europeans were taught to believe that they alone were the true Europeans, when they basked complacently in their new-found affluence, and when in common parlance 'Europe' was taken to refer exclusively to the (west European) Common Market, to the (west) European Economic Community or to a narrow, parochial (west) European Union. Still worse, these were the generations when the social sciences rose to a prominent position in the study and analysis of European affairs, and when, as a result, the ephemeral political, social and economic systems imposed on Eastern Europe were made to look and to feel permanent. I may be wrong but, for all its virtues, my strong impression is that the social science approach was lacking in two important dimensions. One of the deficiencies relates to a weak sense of history, the other to a limited awareness of the independent, self-perpetuating power of culture – including religion, literature and national traditions. In varying degrees, in different countries it is these cultural traditions which pre-dated, resisted, undermined and in the end outlived the artificial grafts of communism.

Yet these were exactly the cultures pushed into the backwaters of Western consciousness. Any number of prestigious, well-funded 'schools of European studies' grew up with no interest beyond the principal languages and cultures of Western Europe. Any number of history graduates were produced who had immersed themselves deeply in courses of so-called European history but who could not tell you the first thing about the histories of the Baltic States, Poland, Bohemia, Hungary or the Balkans. Where Eastern Europe was studied at all, it was studied in small, overspecialised and above all separate institutions which lived behind an intellectual Iron Curtain of their own. Every Western country has had its 'Slavic departments', its 'Slavonic schools' and its *instituts de langues-O'* – where Eastern Europe was put on a par with the Orient, where experts laboured not only in isolation from European studies as a whole, but also in danger of ingestion by the dominant Russian interest. Many are the so-called Slavic departments, especially in the United States, where Russian and Russian alone is taught and where the dictates of tsarist pan-Slavism are still observed. It is only the most enlightened universities, like Oxford, where the title 'Professor of European History' can be bestowed on a distinguished scholar of Hungarian and Habsburg history, who is given to conversing in Welsh.<sup>42</sup>

Not surprisingly, therefore, it was left to intellectuals from the half-forgotten cultures of the Soviet Bloc to insist that 'Europe' had a wider and deeper meaning than the West imagined. The revival of the concept of Central Europe was launched by the Czech writer Milan Kundera in the mid-1980s as an antidote to the ethos of the Soviet Bloc. And it was an English writer now in Oxford, Timothy Garton Ash, who publicised the event most effectively.<sup>43</sup>

If I may, I will interpose a brief personal anecdote to illustrate the entanglement which grew up between Western social scientists and the realities of Eastern Europe. In 1986 I guided a large group of students from Stanford University in California on a month's visit to Cracow in Poland. All the students had been thoroughly briefed by the Political Science Department on the 'communist system', and all had to write up a project paper. One eager young woman had chosen a project which involved interviewing members of the ruling communist party on their beliefs. After a week, she complained to me that she couldn't find anyone in Cracow who would admit to being a communist. I told her to keep looking. At the end of the month, she actually cornered a member of the Polish politburo and cabinet minister, and she put the question to him direct: 'Sir, are you a communist or not?' There was a deathly silence before he replied, '*Proszę Pani, ja jestem pragmatykiem*' – Dear lady, I'm a pragmatist.

At all events, the net result of our experiences during the Cold War was something close to a black hole in the east which was known only superficially and which all too often was simply avoided. If anything was more damaging than the hostile image of Eastern Europe, it was the well-established convention of ignoring Eastern Europe completely. I have likened this convention to that of writing a textbook of human anatomy which makes no mention of the right leg. Any number of textbooks and courses gave themselves the label 'European history' whilst bypassing one half of the subject in its entirety. I can see no justification for this policy. I can't decide whether to call it one-legged, one-sided or one-eyed.

I shall confine myself to one of the most blatant examples – written by a Frenchman, subsidised by the European Commission and published in 1989, Jean-Baptiste Duroselle's *Europe: A History of Its Peoples* took the twelve members of the then EEC as the basis of his study and projected



his selection back into the past. Fortunately, the Cold War ended just as the book was published; the political division of Europe collapsed; and this strange, one-eyed, Western perception of Europe collapsed with it.<sup>44</sup>

In discussing East and West in modern European history, I have presented you, magpie-fashion, with numerous specific, shiny examples. But an attempt should be made to outline a number of general conclusions.

Firstly, in exploring a subject which the Enlightenment called 'philosophical geography', one has to put aside the physical map of Europe, or at least to treat it with considerable elasticity. For on the mental map which people carry in their heads Western Europe and Eastern Europe are not just determined by points of the compass. They are terms of orientation in a shifting intellectual landscape, where all bearings are relative and paradoxes abound. In this vein, I once heard a Pole trying to explain why 'Poland was a Western country which happened to be in Eastern Europe'.

In the last analysis, a great deal turns on one's definition of 'backwardness'. If one takes the materialist view, in which civilisation is measured in terms of GNP, technology or standards of living, then most parts of Europe east of the Elbe have undoubtedly trailed many (though not all) parts of Western Europe. It is exactly in this economic sphere that the Soviet east imposed its own ideology of historical materialism and failed utterly in its own terms. Yet I see no good reason why economic or materialist criteria should be accepted as the main, let alone the sole mark of success. Surely, civilisation, enlightenment and human well-being have to be gauged against a much wider spectrum of values. Societies which have been led to believe that 'lifestyle' or the economic 'feel-good factor' constitute the ultimate goal are sorely mistaken. The European Union, if it continues to give priority to economic and monetary matters, is heading nowhere. It is a nice irony, but sixty years of deprivation under fascism and communism gave the peoples of the former Soviet Bloc not just a taste for the good life but also a more rounded vision of the Europe to which they wish to return.

Secondly, to compare and to contrast is an essential part of the historian's craft. It is only by gauging differences and similarities that we can

put our judgements into focus. I have talked elsewhere of overspecialisation as the *déformation professionnelle* of contemporary historians, and geographical parochialism is one aspect of that failing. Nor is it a sin confined to specialists in Western Europe. There is nothing more parochial than the outlook of that substantial cohort of the Sovietological or Russianist confraternity which rarely learned any language other than Russian, which takes no interest in the rich plurality of cultures within Russia itself and which never lifts its gaze beyond the gilded roofs of the Kremlin.

In this regard, historians of the so-called small nations or minor cultures possess a distinct advantage. They have no choice but to study the affairs of the great powers, which dominate neighbouring peoples. Historians of the great powers, however, like the statesmen of great powers, don't always feel the need to reciprocate and to interest themselves in the goings-on of the lesser fry. Yet it is a simple fact that within the great diversity of Europe the throng of less powerful nations is more numerous, and in that sense more representative, than the small circle of the high and mighty. And to comprehend diversity, comparisons are essential.

Thirdly, by insisting on the eastern component of European history, one is not necessarily making a value judgement. One is not saying that east European music is more or less melodious, that east European literature is more or less profound, or that east European agriculture is more or less perfumed. The contention is very simple: that the east European component exists and cannot be ignored.

For ignorance takes its toll. One of the more unpleasant consequences of the low public awareness of Eastern Europe is that numerous demeaning collective stereotypes can circulate with impunity, even in academic work. Just as not so very long ago all Welshmen were thieves and all Jews swindlers, so one still hears collective slurs go unchallenged about east Europeans being peasants or anti-Semites, about Poles being work-shy, Romanians vagrants, or Ukrainians being wartime collaborators. If only the truth were known, what is remarkable is how few of the forty million-plus Ukrainians actively collaborated with the Nazis, compared with, say, the Danes, the Dutch or the Belgians. On this score, the full list of volunteer Waffen SS divisions is a good starting-point for discussion.<sup>45</sup>



In reviewing *Europe: A History*, one critic started a hare by claiming that I had equated East with West.<sup>46</sup> That is not so. There is no such equation. All there is, is juxtaposition, where appropriate, and comparison. The instance given proves my point, I think. It was said that I had equated the events surrounding the Polish constitution of 1791 with the events of the French Revolution. Well, I hadn't. All I did was to indicate that events in Warsaw, like those in Brussels and Amsterdam and indeed in the Dauphiné were, alongside the events in Versailles and Paris, part of the terminal, continent-wide crisis of the *ancien régime*. Proportions here are important. The Polish constitution of 1791, with Burke's eulogy of it, was allotted forty-five lines in a chapter of eighty-two pages on the French Revolution – in other words, 1.22 per cent.<sup>47</sup> That is probably about right.

Finally, I should stress that by expounding the resonances of east and west in modern Europe, I do not discount the reverberations of other axes or of other geographical patterns – the relationship between north and south, for instance, or that between the margins and the centre, between various cores and peripheries. Thanks to the particular layout of the European peninsula and its contiguity with Eurasia, I do hold that the dynamics of the east–west axis are particularly important. But it is not the only one. Here, I would give the last word to the great Goethe. I mentioned earlier that derogatory Western attitudes to Eastern Europe have sometimes been likened to similar Western attitudes to the Islamic or Arabic Orient. So a few cautionary lines from Goethe's *Orientalische Divan* may be specially fitting:

Gottes ist der Orient!

Gottes ist der Okzident!

Nord- und südliches Gelände

Ruht im Frieden seiner Hände.<sup>48</sup>

God's is the east!

God's is the west!

Northerly and southerly lands

All of them rest in the peace of his hands.

The intellectual construct of 'Eastern Europe' has been present throughout modern times. Invented by the ancients and elaborated by the Enlightenment, it saw its greatest revival during the late and unlamented Cold War. To echo the sentiments of Churchill's Fulton speech once again, 'The dark line of the Iron Curtain was drawn on the maps of the mind.'<sup>49</sup> 'The shadowed lands of backwardness, even barbarism' were conjured up like *chiaroscuro* to highlight those 'godlike regions of the West'. But today the Iron Curtain has collapsed, and the shadows are shortening. At last, there is reason to hope that the mental divisions of Europe can now dissolve, that the pernicious perceptual chasm between East and West will soon become a mere historical curiosity.