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1945–2025

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This year marks the 80th celebration of the end of World War II. To mark this occasion, we have approached a handful of well-known experts with a request to reflect on the current relevance of that historical moment. Five scholars responded to our invitation by writing essays that draw on a variety of disciplines (history, political philosophy, political economy, Romani Studies, gender studies), through very personal and self-reflective stories and/or deeper examinations of specific topics. We hope this forum will show the scope and depth of the scholarly expertise our journal aims at housing.

Keywords: *World War II; 1945; Ordoliberalism; Romani Studies*

Few years were marked by changes as momentous for Europe as 1945. First the German forces surrendered to the Allies in May, and then the Japanese forces did the same in August. Their representatives met at Yalta and Potsdam to carve out a new balance of forces seeking to end bloodshed, destruction, and exhaustion. For all their faults as expressions of unmitigated "victors' justice," the Nuremberg and Tokyo trials did away with the historical summary killing of the losers of a war and instead demonstrated that punishment could be grounded in, and proportional to, the human rights violations the accused had inflicted. Peace through defeat put an end to years of misery, deprivation, and pure evil. The war effort had taken a toll on the young and the old, women, men and children, soldiers and civilians, people on the front and people behind it. Europe was indeed a "battered, broken, helpless continent" in need of a new direction.[1]

Great failures allow for great renewal, as the saying goes. And renewal it was, leading to the "post-war" world that historian Tony Judt described so aptly in a book with this name published almost two decades ago, six decades after the end of the war.[2] Liberal democracy took hold of an unprecedented number of countries in Western Europe, where people wanted not only to see roads reconstructed and schools opened as soon as possible, but also to have a real input in the political process. With remarkable determination, rubble was turned into recovery in a matter of decades. Free and fair elections, multiparty competition, accountable governments, and inclusive electorates from which women were no longer excluded became the golden standards of representative government, seen as the best protection against backsliding to the rule of one, or few, that had devastated the continent

during the war. In the democratization wave that swept Western Europe after the war, the Spanish, Portuguese, and Greek dictatorships looked like prodigal sons who would have to find their way "home" to democracy sooner or later. They found it, decades later. Together with other Western Europeans, citizens in these countries rallied around the democratic principles promoted by what much later became the European Union.

Within years after the end of the war, the bloodlands of Central and Eastern Europe also got their own flavor of democracy, "people's democracy," with communist parties styled themselves as the vanguard of the proletariat. By the 1950s, all of them had imposed draconian reforms in the name of "the people" without even taking the trouble of asking what they really wanted.[3] Such consultation would have slowed down, even shut down, the great transformation the communists had in mind. What was the point of asking peasants about their relationship to the land, since their possessive clinging to it was nothing but retrograde? Could workers subscribe to political ideas other than revolutionary communism, which called for the complete overhaul of the institutions inherited from pre-war times? Should they? Ideological pluralism risked allowing segments of the proletariat to side with the history's villains, the owners of the means of production. The losers were not only those who once supported the Nazis but also all those reluctant or unwilling to endorse the communists.

After the failed Hungarian revolution of 1956, dissent from party politics took a variety of forms across the Eastern Bloc, from a general retreat from explicit politics into the "grey zone" of institutional life, to cultural movements that defied the communist norms of state-endorsed artistic form, to unofficial organizing that brought a flood of materials, information, and eventually people from the West as well as the larger Second World and Global South.[4] Although these underground and semi-official contact zones were unevenly distributed across the different countries, periods, and social strata of the Bloc, they allowed for space to reconsider the legacy of 1945 and renegotiate its meanings. Andrzej Wajda's film *Ashes and Diamonds* (1958), Bohumil Hrabal's *Closely Watched Trains* (1965), Danilo Kiš's *Garden, Ashes* (1965), András Kovács's film *Cold Days* (1968), and Imre Kertész's novel *Fateless* (1975) are just a few of the best-known examples of how these postwar generations challenged the official Soviet or state-driven narratives of World War II.[5] After the communist regimes collapsed in 1989, the task before the two halves of the continent was to bridge these old divides, and reintegrate the divergent narratives about the significance of 1945.

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This year we celebrate the eightieth anniversary of the end of World War II. By 2025, few of those who fought in the war are still with us. Its memory, including the memory of its end, has been reduced to "post-memory," a concept that Marianne Hirsch proposed to describe "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before-to experiences they 'remember' only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which

they grew up."[6] That might explain why, besides armed forces, veteran groups, dedicated museums and some government officials, only a handful of academic journals took the trouble to celebrate the anniversary.[7] Besides the fact that few of us have personal recollections of those times, other factors might dampen our celebratory mood. Domestically, our countries have fallen prey to democratic backsliding. Autocratic rulers grabbed office in free and fair elections only to dismantle the very democracy that brought them to power. In Central and Eastern Europe, "democracy is consuming itself" at the hands of Robert Fico, Viktor Orbán, Aleksandar Vučić, and others.[8] Internationally, the growing instability generated by the erratic statements of U.S. President Donald Trump and the rising body count that followed Russia's military invasion of Ukraine remain matters of serious concern from Riga to Rijeka.

An equally serious matter of concern is whether the anniversary remains relevant for younger generations whose attention the internet has moved from the library to the phone. For most North American students, World War II remains an abstract concept, an event that took place in the very distant past, preceding the world they live in by many, many decades. What they understand, however, from the history materials they must read in school is its unprecedented magnitude; the war was a monumental event on a scale unmatched by any other event that took place since 1945. As one of them put it, World War II was for the generations that lived through it what "the COVID pandemic was for us, with restrictions, policing, and added foreign soldiers and drones coming not from Russia [to Ukraine] but from Germany." In other words, the war was a pandemic of evil that young generations can relate to only if thinking of it as a combo of pandemic restrictions and war crimes. Unsurprisingly, 1945 is the only year in the twentieth century that Canadian students at St. Francis Xavier University know about and can associate with (some) historical events. In Central and Eastern Europe, students are more likely to be aware of the war through family history and postmemory, but their experience will also be mediated through current revisionary narratives, such as the controversial placement of an enormous cross on the pedestal of the Budapest Statue of Liberty (originally honoring the Soviet soldiers who fought in World War II).[9] In fact, that distortion of the historical record has gone so far that international students have expressed confusion about which side of World War II Hungary fought on.

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This forum brings together a stellar cast of scholars whom we asked to reflect on the significance of this anniversary. Drawing on their different personal backgrounds, scholarly expertise, and disciplinary strengths, they approached the topic from various entry points. Collectively, they channel the significance of World War II through the multiple lenses of biography and auto-ethnography (Oates-Indruchová and Grudzińska Gross), archival research (Kramer), disciplinary history (Craiutu), and legal history (Popescu).

Libora Oates-Indruchová explores how the memory politics of 1945—shaped by the narratives promoted in schools by the communist authorities—obscured other histories, including the rich pre-war tradition of the Czech women's movement. Using the life story of her grandmother, she shows that war and postwar political shifts curtailed women's educational and professional opportunities while also erasing an earlier culture of gender progressivism from public memory. Oates-Indruchová's essay argues that this historical rupture still reverberates today, as the loss of women's and gender history remains a gap in Czech cultural literacy despite the growth of contemporary gender studies.

Just as Oates-Indruchová refracts 1945 through her own lived experience, Irena Grudzińska Gross reflects on how the fragility of peace after 1945 shaped both her generation's worldview and her own scholarly work, and how it has always revolved around a persistent anxiety about the recurrence of violence. Through the case of Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski, a distant relative with a fascinating life, she probes how individuals navigated the moral ambiguities and extreme pressures of war and totalitarian states, resulting in a complex interplay of resistance, survival, and compromise. Grudzińska-Gross's essay ultimately argues that the long shadow of 1945 continues to inform the questions scholars ask today, as they attempt both to understand past violence and to prepare for its possible return.

With the flair of an investigative detective, Mark Kramer unpacks the political calculations, personal preferences, and strategic considerations that united and divided the Slovak leaders during the months leading up to 1945 and explains not only the end of independent Slovakia that year, but also the communist takeover of Czechoslovakia that occurred three years later. While other scholars examining the imposition of communism looked at events in the capital, Prague, and relegated Slovakia to the position of a "sideshow," Kramer shows that events in wartime Slovakia were closely bound up with the policies of the Czechoslovak government-in-exile under Edvard Beneš and actions taken by the Slovak Communist Party both inside and outside Slovakia. For Slovakia, 1945 meant the loss of independence, which it regained only half a century later.

Aurelian Craiutu's essay should bear the title "Why Not Moderation?" but that phrase already graces the front cover of one of his recent books.[10] This is why he sent us a piece which only obliquely drives home the point that moderation remains an option today, in a world marked by radicalization, fragmentation, and polarization. While some economists advocated for a free-market economy and others believed that only a centrally planned one would serve the common good, the Freiburg School of the 1950s proposed the moderate solution of Ordoliberalism. As Craiutu explains, Walter Eucken, Alexander Rüstow, Wilhelm Röpke and Alfred Müller-Armack argued in defense of a social market economy where a strong state made the free market possible. While after 1945 the debate centered around economic considerations, it had important spillover effects in political analysis, since it commented on the role, and scope, of state action.

Despite expectations for radical change, 1945 did not mark a significant rupture in the way Central and Eastern European countries treated the Roma. In her essay, Delia Popescu argues that successive regimes on both sides of the political spectrum continued to exclude the Roma socially and politically. Institutional changes were not sufficient to impose new "norms of social coexistence" and inclusion, or to suppress racialized vocabularies and police brutality against these minority communities. In spite of the expectations of the Roma, legal recognition did not lead to substantive political inclusion but rather showed the persistence of conditional citizenship undermined by entrenched discrimination and outright persecution.

Collectively, these five essays show that 1945 marked not only a rupture with the destruction of the war but also continuities which, in many ways, have remained relevant to date. This mixture of continuity and break characterizes not only states like Slovakia, but also economic models that propose moderate solutions to the state–private balance, academic research, as well as women's movements and Roma recognition. The essays show that the present is not far from the past.

Notes

1. Werner D. Lippert, "Lippert on Judt, Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945," H-German, February 2008, https://networks.h-net.org/node/35008/reviews/45329/lippert-judt-postwar-history-europe-1945 (accessed 27 October 2025).

2. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).

3. Timothy Schneider, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2021).

4. Balász Apor, Péter Apor, and Sándor Horvath, eds., *The Handbook of COURAGE: Cultural Opposition and its Heritage in Eastern Europe* (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2018); James Mark and Paul Betts, *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

5. Andrzej Wajda, dir., *Popiół i Diament* (Warsaw: Studio Filmowego Kadr, 1958); Bohumil Hrabal, *Ostře sledované vlaky* (Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1965); Danilo Kiš, *Башта, пепео* [Bašta, pepeo] (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1970); András Kovács, dir., *Hideg Napok* (Budapest: Mafilm, 1966); Imre Kertész, *Sortalanságot* (Budapest: Magvető, 1975).

6. Marianne Hirsch, "Postmemory," Postmemory.net, https://postmemory.net (accessed 27 October 2025); Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

7. Although the *Asia-Pacific Journal* did publish a collection of "Critical Reflections on the 80th Anniversary of the End of World War II," https://apjjf.org/80th-anniversary (accessed 27 October 2025). Two medical journals published articles on the anniversary. See Sophie Walter, Jane M. Grant-Kels, Leonard J. Hoenig, David Elbaum, and Lawrence C. Parish, "Reflections on World War II and the Holocaust on the 80th Anniversary of Their Conclusion," *Clinics in Dermatology* 43 (2025): 401–14, doi:10.1016/j.clindermatol.2024.10.007; and Jonathan M. Samet, Preetha Rajaraman, Sharon R. Pine, and Tatsuhiro Shibata, "Eighty Years of Cancer Research after the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki," *Carcinogenesis* 46, no. 3 (2025): bgaf071, doi:10.1093/carcin/bgaf071.

8. Stephan Haggard and Robert R. Kaufman, "The Anatomy of Backsliding: Why Is Democracy Consuming Itself?" IGCC, 21 March 2021, https://igcc.ucsd.edu/blog/the-anatomy-of-backsliding-why-is-democracy-consuming-itself/ (accessed 27 October 2025).

9. Judit Presinszky, "Budapest Liberty Statue Gets Huge Cross as Renovation Nears End," trans. Andrea Horváth Kávai, Telex.hu, 16 July 2025, https://telex.hu/english/2025/07/14/budapest-liberty-statue-gets-huge-cross-as-renovation-nears-end (accessed 16 November 2025).

10. Aurelian Crăiuțu, *Why Not Moderation? Letters to Young Radicals* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

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