

Land of War, Land of Peace

by Michael Howard

Europe for most of its history has been a land of war. By Europe, I mean that land coextensive with what was once known as “Christendom”: the region over which for a thousand years the Western Christian church held sway, or rather whose rulers were legitimized by the sanction of that church, from about the ninth century until the secularization of European society a hundred years or so ago. This Christendom was a warrior culture, though it may embarrass some Christians to have to recall it. It had to be, if it was to survive. The families who ruled Europe during this millennium justified their power and their privileges by their successful conduct of war. First they defended Christendom against heathen invaders. Then they consolidated their power against one another through the formation of states (which usually involved destroying the autonomy of many distinct cultures, regions, and communities). Finally, from the 15th century until the 20th, they extended European hegemony over the rest of the globe.

Whether this continual Hobbesian struggle for power and survival acted as a motor for European development or as a brake has been a matter of debate among historians, but it has been an existential fact. Regions such as China, where an effective central hegemony made possible eons of at least apparent peace, may have been happier, as romantic Western Sinophiles like to believe; but it was the bellicose and (literally) belligerent Europeans who were at the cutting edge not only of military but of economic and ultimately scientific and intellectual advance. Whether or not this militarism was a necessary condition for the development of Europe’s magnificent high culture, as John Ruskin and others would have us believe, may be debatable, but it certainly did nothing to inhibit it.

The militaristic nature of European society until at least the 18th century is thus hardly in doubt. In his fascinating *History of Warfare* (1993), John Keegan has taken issue with Karl von Clausewitz’s rationalistic definition of war as an instrument of politics by pointing out that, for many societies, war has been an innate and continuous cultural activity. Europe for centuries was certainly one such society. Until the 18th century, the rulers of the continent were looking for excuses to fight wars rather than reasons why they should not. Elizabethan audiences surely understood and applauded Hamlet when he declared:

Rightly to be great,
Is not to stir without great argument,
But greatly to find quarrel in a straw
When honour’s at the stake.

And why not? War, if successful, paid off handsomely in terms of power and territory for those who conducted it, and in loot for those who fought

it. If it was not successful, the burden was borne by people who did not matter very much, the peasants who were unfortunate enough to get in the way. Even so, their villages were rapidly rebuilt and their crops resown, and even for them, war provided almost the only avenue of social mobility. When, in the Thirty Years' War, the damage that war caused to the social environment became too prolonged and widespread, rulers sought ways of waging it more economically rather than of abolishing it.

Then came the great watershed of the Enlightenment and the first stirrings of an "antiwar movement." But that movement was fueled at least as much by practical as by moral considerations. By the end of the 18th century, war—within Europe at least—was becoming counterproductive. Its expense to the taxpayer was mounting, its benefits in terms of territorial acquisition were becoming marginal, and, with the very significant exception of colonial conquests, it did nothing to increase the wealth and status of the rulers. Immanuel Kant and his followers were not wholly at fault when they suggested that war persisted in Europe in the 18th century largely as a way of life among the ruling classes. Where these thinkers were optimistic, however, was in suggesting that once those rulers had been replaced by others more bourgeois and rational, war would come to an end.

Why did it not? For one thing, war remained instrumental even for the most strictly rationalistic societies, if only for self-defense. Democratic leaders found that the skills and values transmitted by the old military culture could not be dispensed with if their own states were to survive. The French revolutionaries discovered this in 1793. So did Prussian liberals in the Jena campaign of 1806—to say nothing of Americans trying to preserve the Union half a century later. For another, war might be necessary if democracies and nation-states were to promote and extend their values, liberating peoples from the oppression of feudalism and, later, forging the new nations of Germany and Italy. In the 19th century, the peoples of Europe were encouraged to transfer or to extend their loyalties from ruling dynasties to national entities which claimed to embody values that were either unique or universal, the defense or extension of which took on a quasireligious significance. So long as wars could be conducted economically, as on the whole they were in Europe during the 19th century, or carried on in the remoter parts of the African or



A detail from the Bayeux Tapestry, an 11th-century depiction of the Norman Conquest of England

Asian continents, the peoples of Europe showed themselves as cheerfully belligerent as their ancestors. It was in this mood that they went to war in 1914.

As we know, it was a mood that barely survived World War I and was totally extinguished by World War II. By 1945, the peoples of Europe wanted only to live in “a land of peace.” But this disenchantment with war had less to do with the spread of “democratic values” than with the development of industrial warfare. This not only brought the huge and inconclusive slaughter of conscript armies on the battlefields but wrecked the

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cities and economies of Europe, bringing untold suffering to civilians on a scale that, even to the victors, did not appear balanced by any comparable gains. But if war could be conducted comparatively cost-free, as Hitler almost

succeeded in doing in Western Europe during 1939–41, it could still command substantial public support. It still can, as the British discovered in the Falklands in 1982 and the Americans in the Persian Gulf War in 1991. If technology can make it possible, there is little indication that this situation will change in the future, democracy or no democracy. But one thing is clear: war can no longer be fought cost-free in Europe itself.

There is thus little point in arguing that Europe has ever been a land of peace. Nor can Europe lay much claim to having been a land of democracy. Democracy as we understand it today was the child of the Enlightenment, with its belief in innate natural rights, the recognition of which should be the fundamental duty and justification for all human government. This movement was certainly initiated as much by European as by American thinkers, and its first stirrings can be traced to religio-political developments in the Netherlands and the British Isles a century or so earlier. But whereas the ideals of the Enlightenment took root and flourished in the United States (genocide and racial subjugation notwithstanding), they had a long, uphill battle in Europe. There, the entire 19th century and the early part of the 20th were taken up with a virtual and, in places, an actual civil war between what became known as the “Party of Movement” and “the Party of Order.” The first espoused the ideals of the French Revolution: secularization, democratization, the rights of “peoples” (however defined) to self-determination and self-government. Supporting the latter were not only the embattled forces of the old order, rooted in the agrarian dominance of the ruling classes and the entire culture that supported them, but the immense power of the Catholic Church, whose influence reached down into every tiny village. It was a conflict that split France into two rival and hostile cultures until the beginning of this century and which has persisted in Spain and Italy into our own day.

North of the Alps, where the Catholic Church held less sway, the values of the Enlightenment were combated by an even more formidable creed.

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It was one still rooted in the authoritarian, hierarchical monarchism of the old regime but strengthened by a populist nationalism, which sought legitimacy in communal values based on concepts of historic group-personalities and ethnic solidarity, and which disdained as alien the egalitarianism, individualism, and trivial materialism which it identified in “Western values.” The genealogy from the Counter-Enlightenment to fascism has often been traced, as has the more paradoxical process whereby the former led, via

Slavophilism, to the Leninist rejection of the Western roots of Marxism. But whether combating clerical authoritarianism or populist irrationalism, democrats in large regions of Europe, West as well as East, remained an embattled minority until World War II, and in places even later than that. During that war the appeal of fascism, or National Socialism, whether in combating the barbaric egalitarianism of the East or the materialistic internationalism of the West, was far greater throughout continental Europe than it has been fashionable, until very recently, to admit.

So let us not deceive ourselves: the “European culture” that we have inherited is not synonymous with the “Western values” of the Enlightenment. It is something far more ambiguous and complex. We do not have to dig very deep into the past that has shaped our societies to strike the hard rock of aristomonalarchical militarism and of authoritarian clericalism: precisely the two targets against which the Enlightenment directed its fire. The third troubling element in our past, irrational populist nationalism, is not specifically European: the Americans have shown themselves to be as prone to it as anyone else. But the fact is that the splendid European cultural heritage on which we pride ourselves

and which has done so much to enrich humanity—the great cathedrals and abbeys, the palaces of ruling dynasties, the chateaux and country houses of aristocrats, together with all the works of art carried out at their commission and now preserved for our enjoyment—are artifacts produced by a society with whose values most of us would not identify ourselves, except in moments of ironic nostalgia.

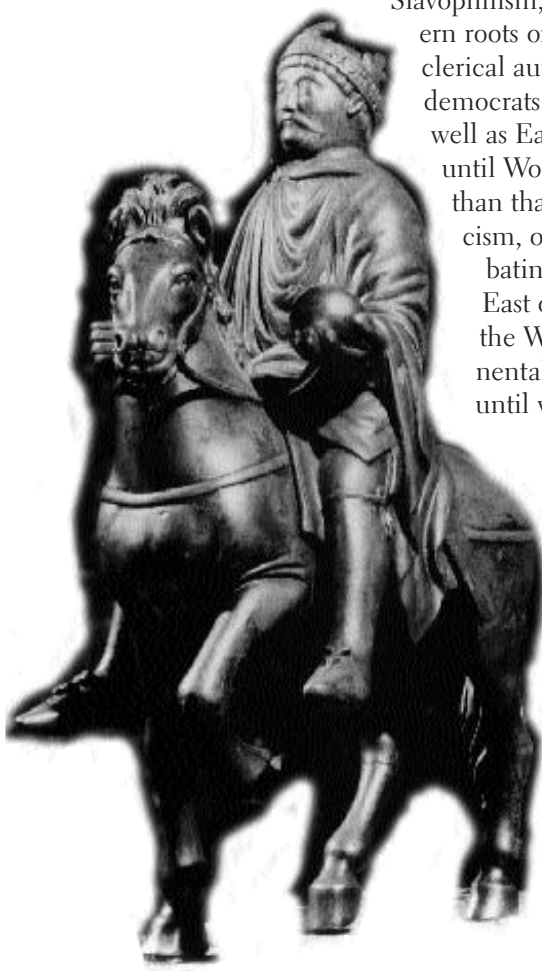
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Now we Europeans want Europe to be a land of peace. Purged by suffering of the habits that made the Europe of our ancestors a “land of war,” we are now left with little if anything to distinguish us from our transatlantic colleagues, who can bring to our



*A ninth-century bronze statuette
of Charlemagne*



Liberty Leading the People (1830), by Eugene Delacroix

problems rationalistic assumptions derived from a past untroubled by such sinister ambiguities. Whether there are specifically “European” values that distinguish us from the Americans and that we should consciously try to salvage from the shipwreck of our continent is an interesting matter for debate. I myself would not like to argue it: the hubristic claim of Harold Macmillan, that we could act as Greeks to the American Romans and guide their naive strength with our superior subtlety and skill, is one that can be recalled today only with acute embarrassment.

We may try to restore and retain traditional cultural environments where we can ourselves live comfortably and which will attract lucrative tourism, but such cultural theme parks are in fact as alien to the mass of our own population as they are to visitors from Japan. They are iridescent shells whose original inhabitants have been swept away by the tide of history and in which only a tiny minority of us are sometimes fortunate enough to be able to make our homes. The huge bulk of the population of Europe, modernized, bureaucratized, and bourgeoisified, lives in conditions indistinguishable from those of the United States and shares similar tastes and interests. The classless and international modernity prophesied and dreaded by Nietzsche, the struggle against which, for some right-wing thinkers, justified the fighting of the two world wars, has now engulfed Western Christendom and is being hungrily embraced by our Eastern cousins. We are now a “land of peace” all right, but many of our ancestors might have been horrified to see it.

Being a land of peace, we need no longer prepare to fight one another.

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er, and barely need prepare to fight anyone else. We no longer face any serious external threat to our survival, and we can still assume that if one were to revive, the United States would take it as seriously as we would ourselves. Today our security problems are those not of war but of peace: not of the military, that is, but of the police. And here again, they are no different from those of any other developed society, anywhere else in the world.

The problems may be universal, but that does not mean that there are any universal solutions. The homogeneity of our peoples is more apparent than real. There is, for example, nothing on the surface to distinguish the Catholic and Protestant populations of Northern Ireland, to say nothing of the Serb and Croat peoples of the former Yugoslavia, but the surface features of their modernized lives conceal profound cultural differences. We are not Americans, a monolingual people with common cultural roots and a government based on explicit principles which, however much they may be reinterpreted, remain fundamentally unquestioned. We are not even “Europeans” except in a geographical sense. We face a fundamental paradox: if we were to become “Europeans” in the sense that some idealists would wish, with single organs of government and justice and above all a common working language, we would cease to be the people, or rather the peoples, that we actually are. (The fact that such a common language would almost certainly have to be English only adds to the paradox.) Some of us are, for understandable reasons, more eager to reject our past than others, but too much has happened to us during the last 500 years to make it possible, even if it were desirable, to restore a Carolingian cultural and political unity on the model of Western Christendom.

Few people today need reminding that societies are held together not by abstract rational principles or convenient administrative arrangements but by deeply held habits of consensus and belief. Nothing has happened over the last 200 years to invalidate the warnings that Edmund Burke issued, during the early months of the French Revolution, of the evils that were likely to follow if abstract principles, however admirable in themselves, were applied to the conduct of human affairs. There is an irrational dimension to all human relationships. Past regimes—whether those held together by religious belief, by dynastic loyalties, or by the sentiment of nationalism—all recognized and exploited this truth, but in exploiting it they also tamed it and made it socially productive. Attempts to ignore it, and lay out society on new, just, and rational principles, have produced only wilder and more terrible outbursts of irrationalism.

So in considering how best to manage our affairs, whether to centralize or decentralize or subsidiarize, whether to create new foci of government or restore old ones, abstract principles of administrative convenience are not enough. When Denis Diderot wrote



In 1953, Jean Monnet (second from right) and other officials of the European Coal and Steel Community—precursor of the EU—celebrate their cooperative agreement.

to Catherine the Great urging on her certain unquestionably necessary, humane, and rational reforms, she replied sadly that it was all very well for him: he had to write only on paper, but she had to do it on human skin.

So we Europeans must understand our past if we are not to repeat it; understand why we have been a land of war if we are successfully to remain a land of peace. That is why I am always uneasy when I hear our American friends talk about “a new European architecture.” Peoples are not building blocks; neither are we building on an open-field site. If there has to be an analogy, let it be that of a garden. The peoples of Europe and their institutions should be regarded as distinct and living organisms, rooted in the peculiar soil of their regions, their communities, and their cultures. Like all plants, their institutions need manuring, training, and sometimes drastic pruning of dead or diseased vegetation. Weeds must be watched for and eradicated. And this must be done not by the modern equivalent of the 18th-century “enlightened despots,” teams of expert consultants with degrees in agronomy, but by the peoples themselves, who know their own soil and have a feel for what will grow there and what will not. And as with all gardens, the work of cultivation is never-ending.