



# Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II

*Keith Lowe*

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## **Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II** Keith Lowe

*The Second World War might have officially ended in May 1945, but in reality it rumbled on for another ten years...*

The end of the Second World War in Europe is one of the twentieth century's most iconic moments. It is fondly remembered as a time when cheering crowds filled the streets, danced, drank and made love until the small hours. These images of victory and celebration are so strong in our minds that the period of anarchy and civil war that followed has been forgotten. Across Europe, landscapes had been ravaged, entire cities razed and more than thirty million people had been killed in the war. The institutions that we now take for granted - such as the police, the media, transport, local and national government - were either entirely absent or hopelessly compromised. Crime rates were soaring, economies collapsing, and the European population was hovering on the brink of starvation.

In *Savage Continent*, Keith Lowe describes a continent still racked by violence, where large sections of the population had yet to accept that the war was over. Individuals, communities and sometimes whole nations sought vengeance for the wrongs that had been done to them during the war. Germans and collaborators everywhere were rounded up, tormented and summarily executed. Concentration camps were reopened and filled with new victims who were tortured and starved. Violent anti-Semitism was reborn, sparking murders and new pogroms across Europe. Massacres were an integral part of the chaos and in some places – particularly Greece, Yugoslavia and Poland, as well as parts of Italy and France – they led to brutal civil wars. In some of the greatest acts of ethnic cleansing the world has ever seen, tens of millions were expelled from their ancestral homelands, often with the implicit blessing of the Allied authorities.

*Savage Continent* is the story of post WWII Europe, in all its ugly detail, from the end of the war right up until the establishment of an uneasy stability across Europe towards the end of the 1940s. Based principally on primary sources from a dozen countries, *Savage Continent* is a frightening and thrilling chronicle of a world gone mad, the standard history of post WWII Europe for years to come.

## **Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II Details**

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**Lowe**

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## From Reader Review Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II for online ebook

### Louise says

This is a stunning portrait of the continent-wide upheaval that followed World War II. The cover itself is vastly different from the American post-war images of cheering crowds and ticker tape parades.

The average European soldier, prisoner of war, or concentration camp survivor did not go home to a GI Bill, a booming economy, or even a welcome. Going home probably meant a new internment in a former death camp where supplies were short. Since most transportation was destroyed travel was by foot with little food, shelter or protection from bandits or partisans along the way. Most likely the home was destroyed, and the community with it.

Keith Howe brings a lot together. He presents statistics along with the human tragedies that define them. He arranges the work by problems (loss of infrastructure, need for revenge, famine, legal breakdown, the frequency and brutality of rape, ethnic hatred, famine, and moral destruction) and by country.

He shows World War II was many wars within one, and how the surrender of the big powers did not settle all the issues. Crowds, in the heat of liberation, meted out more punishment for the perpetrators of the war than the official system. In some counties, the perpetrators were useful to the victors and flourished. In some countries, the war heroes received more punishment for their newly out of fashion views than collaborators or fascists.

Women may have been the most heavily scapegoated for crimes of passion or prostitution. Many had their hair shorn for collaboration and were marched naked (while collaborators who sent others to their deaths skated free). If they had a child with a German father, the child faced discrimination or even expulsion. In the post-war chaos, many were raped, many at very young ages, many multiple times a day.

Putting an end to Hitler, did not put an end to the racism and nationalism. Lowe presents staggering statistics showing how countries closed ranks against "outsiders" as country after country expelled Germans, Jews or any other group it wanted rid of. The citizens took possession of land and goods before the expelled could actually pack.

The last chapters focus on how Russia took advantage of the chaos to implant its brand of communism in the eastern areas its army occupied at the war's end. Each nation was different, but had the brutal, dictatorial result was the same.

This is a stunning work. Lowe has produced not only a readable work but a reference work as well.

Highly recommended.

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### Bob Mobley says

Keith Lowe has written an interesting, revealing and disturbingly thoughtful book that examines a little known and rarely discussed reality of Europe in the aftermath of World War II. What I find interesting and thought-provoking, is the knowledge and increased awareness that reading "Savage Continent" has put before me from a political as well as cultural perspective. The frightening condition of the European nations,

including Britain, at the end of WWII were disguised, hidden from view, or sanitized out of the news. Reading this history of the horrendous destruction of European fabric, culturally, economically, morally and physically, that was spread across all of Europe and the Soviet Union as a result of WWII, one begins to understand the depth of feelings and prejudicial attitudes that seem to be reappearing as a result of the current European economic crisis. I strongly recommend this book to someone who wants to understand why, just beneath the surface across Europe, lives and breathes the shadows of class warfare, cultural animosity, and tribalism. This book sets in sharp focus reasons why a unified Europe may be a long way off.

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## Gwern says

(~144k words, ~4h) Nonfiction European history by Keith Lowe. *Savage Continent* is a fascinating book on the bloody aftermath of WWII as the destruction wound down, the lingering consequences of anarchy worked themselves out in the sudden peace, and people tried to find a new equilibrium, punishing collaborators and finishing the ethnic cleansings. Quickly summarized on NPR:

"I was used to seeing these wonderful, cozy myths about the way the war ended," he tells Fresh Air's Terry Gross, "and everybody celebrating and sailors grabbing hold of nurses in New York's Times Square and kissing them and all of these sort of things. And I was aware that it hadn't quite ended like that." Europe, he says, was so devastated that "it's difficult for us to quite realize how bad the destruction was."

WWII for Americans remains the good war; while one may be familiar with tarnished aspects of that (the atrocities in the Pacific, the unnecessary atomic bombings of Japan, the domestic censorship, etc), one hears less about the post-war period. Presumably after liberation, things were cleaned up quickly and calmly and a few years later our historical memory turns to the start of the Cold War.

An example of the fluffiness I have in mind is an old movie I watched in August, *Three Coins in the Fountain*, a romantic comedy set in post-war Rome, where while there is still poverty and recovery from the war, things are basically OK. But one might have a better idea from my earlier reading, *Catch-22*'s Italy scenes; or from *Gravity's Rainbow*'s depiction of partitioned Germany's fierce stew of black-marketeering, Communism, corruption, crime, destruction, and prostitution. The end of WWII left much business unfinished: *Wages of Destruction* covers in detail the slave labor forces drawn from conquered Europe which worked in Germany up until defeat, and the parlous food situation of Germany and Europe at large - so what happened *after*? With all these victorious horny occupation forces? With the slave laborers, and the Jews, and the guerrillas or partisans or thieves or black-marketeers? How were morals slowly restored after being corrupted by the exigencies of war and the struggle for survival, and what was seen as now possible after the Holocaust?

The answers are rarely pretty, but Lowe gives a synoptic view. It can be hard to understand the early Cold War: what were the Americans & Europeans thinking when they set up Operation Gladio? What was with the persecution of homosexuals or the "Red Scare" & McCarthy? Or, when reading through Bryne's *The Many Worlds of Hugh Everett* (review), one can see on display his incomprehension of how anyone could plan for nuclear war or be willing to go to the edge or the security mindset. But here we see it put in context: a Europe only just liberated from one despotism, half of which has been handed over to another despot even worse and who has displayed the ruthless techniques of subversion and rewriting society on a grand scale (chapter 25, "Cuckoo in the Nest: Communism in Romania", is a surprisingly lengthy account of the sausage factory of of Communization - first, start with the internal security offices, exploit the electoral process,

destroy opponents in detail, silencing or attacking or killing as necessary, and finally with a captive government take naked control and begin the purges and theft of all private property), in which Communist parties were not a political curiosity but popular, even a plurality sometimes. Without the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see how one might resort to deep states, alliances with the Mafia, and so on.

Throw on top of this the festering ethnic hatreds which all sides struggled to control or exploit, which had independent lives of their own... It's hard to not see the echoes today: the Crimea appears often in *Savage Europe*, as it has in recent news; mentions of 'Novorossiya' would not be out of place; the Ukraine is battered so relentlessly in WWII and afterwards that contemporary events look not like an aberration but a return to business as usual; and can Finland rest very easy about its independence from Russia when it gained its independence not *that* long ago and long memories are so politically profitable, particularly in Eastern Europe & Asia?

An enlightening and timely book.

Excerpts:

Introduction-3

4,5

6-8

9-11

12-14

15-19

20-23

24-Conclusion

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## **Mieczyslaw Kasprzyk says**

I found this a very difficult book to read, not because it was "harrowing" as some reviewers have described it - for me there was nothing new here, just lots of facts and information that filled out the bones a little more. I found this book difficult because it is so dry.

I believe this book is really aimed at an insular English-speaking audience for whom the Second World War (in Europe) ended in May 1945. Europeans, and serving soldiers at the time, will be well aware of the near-chaos and seeking of justice and vengeance that occurred at the end of military hostilities - they are the witnesses who speak to us through the pages.

Lowe divides what happened into a number of smaller topics and in so doing manages to create a distortion. Instead of seeing the events of the post-combat period as a whole we see a fragmented picture. Lowe somehow manages to put small, albeit unsavoury, incidents on isolated, individual stages and then almost equates them with the state-sponsored mass murders of the Nazi state. It is only after he has made his judgemental comments (and I found him very judgemental) that he tries to point out that maybe we need to place these events in some sort of context.

I am a fervent believer in the statement "as you sow so shall you reap". The Germans instigated a war of conquest and extermination in Eastern Europe that was very different to that in the West (and this contrast does emerge - even if it isn't highlighted enough). The Jews were merely at the top of the Nazi German kill list. In Poland ordinary men and women lived in daily fear for their lives. They regularly witnessed murders taking place (my uncle, as a young boy of fifteen was taking his father's cows out to pasture and knew to

instinctively hide when he saw a German military truck appear on the road; as a result he was witness to the execution of dozens of his neighbours, initially by hanging and then by being burnt alive in a nearby barn). Slave labour is commonplace (my mother had the distinction of being taken into forced labour by the Soviets, and then by the Germans in 1941). Polish and Ukrainian labourers were murdered at the whim of the farmer who "owned" them. As you sow...

It is hardly surprising that at the end of the War these people sought justice and vengeance. They dished out just a small part of what they had received. Sometimes this seeking for justice would appear to be as brutal and evil as what had been done by the Germans... but there is a great difference between state-sponsored, racist violence and individual actions of revenge. There is a great difference between a pogrom in some small town that grows out of chaos and ignorance and the trainloads of victims being put on the assembly line of extermination. Somehow, Lowe manages to muddy these waters.

The defeat of Nazi Germany was merely one aspect of the War. Lowe too easily plays the racist card and talks about ethnic cleansing and forgets, once again, to put the events that occurred after the War into the context of what happened during the War, and what was encouraged by the Allies, until long after he has planted his seeds of doubt and condemnation. He informs us, too late, that the Germans exploited local animosity and encouraged internecine fighting (divide and conquer).

There will be many in Eastern Europe who know that the War didn't end but carried on as partisan groups clashed with the Soviet-sponsored government forces and one evil regime was replaced by another - there are many who would say it didn't end in Poland and Czechoslovakia until 1989, and in the Baltic States until 1991, just as there are many in the West who forget that Stalin and Hitler were allies in 1939. At least here, Lowe does a better job.

Occasionally Lowe asks the important question or states the important fact; in instigating a war of terror and bringing Europe almost to the edge of extinction who should really bear the blame for the chaos that ensued? As you sow...

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### **K.M. Weiland says**

An incredibly insightful overview of the continuing horrors post-WWII that most of us tend to overlook. Difficult to read at times, but extremely important.

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### **David Nichols says**

One could fill a fair-sized library with books about the Second World War, a historical event that has something for everyone: exciting battles, great wartyos, Nazis, Captain America, Mrs. Miniver, kamikazes, and the Boogie-Woogie Bugle Boy. Books about the aftermath of the war remain scarce, as most people assume there was no real drama in the postwar period except, perhaps, for the superpower sparring that initiated the Cold War. Author Keith Lowe observes that, in Europe at least, this was far from the truth.

Savage Continent reminds readers of something Eastern Europeans have known for many years: Europe remained a land of violence and misery until the early 1950s. Frenchmen ritually humiliated and sometimes killed collaborators; northern Italians slaughtered them by the hundreds. Allied soldiers routinely neglected and abused German POWs, resulting in the deaths of thousands of prisoners in Western custody – and over a million in Soviet custody. Poles and Czechs expelled and murdered ethnic Germans, victorious Yugoslav Partisans gunned down Chetnik prisoners, Greeks killed one another in a bloody civil war, and Baltic and Ukrainian "forest brothers" killed several thousand Soviet soldiers and civilians into the 1950s. If nothing else, Lowe's detailed and fast-paced account should help demonstrate that war breeds more violence, just as the American Civil War led to the political warfare of the Reconstruction era and World War One led (ultimately) to World War Two. In his conclusion, however, the author gives some small cause for hope,

observing that the two countries who started the war, Germany and Poland, were able to reconcile their differences through diplomacy and education in the early 1970s. War isn't necessarily followed by peace, but it doesn't have to lead to more war, either.

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### **Jakob says**

This book is a revelation, as other reviewers have pointed out, for those of us whose view of history was that WWII led to the Cold War, and events in between didn't matter much because we knew what happened in the end. I at least learned that I knew nothing. Ignoring the forced cultural shifts and anarchy that occurred after WWII is to ignore the underpinnings of most of the Euro-centric conflicts that have occurred and are ongoing today.

Another milestone--I've never read a book that has given rise in to such disgust at the deplorable lows that humans can be brought to by years of mental anguish. Frequently reading this book gave way to raw emotion, but also speculation at how the political and cultural demonizations that occurred post-WWII are still visible in my own prejudices.

This book is the most important read for anybody interested not only WWII's aftermath, but in comprehending the undercurrents of many modern political movements--especially in Europe and America--and perhaps being able to see through the more "modern" forms of racism, prejudice, and lies that fill our airwaves and fuel our hatreds.

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### **Mikey B. says**

A Polish partisan (page 218, my book)

*"The Ukrainians in turn took their revenge by destroying a village of 500 Poles and torturing and killing all who fell in their hands. We responded by destroying two of their larger villages... This was how the fighting escalated. Each time more people were killed, more houses burnt, more women raped. Men become desensitised very quickly and kill as if they know nothing else."*

Page 365

*It was virtually impossible to emerge from the Second World War without enemies....virtually every person on the continent had suffered some kind of loss or injustice.*

We often think of the Second World War in Europe as ending in May of 1945. We have plentiful images of happiness in the U.S. and England – but such was not the case on the continent.

The author points out that the six long years of war had virtually destroyed all things civilized. Chaos was the norm. Transportation was non-existent; cities lay in ruins, and civil society (police, government) had evaporated. There was a constant struggle for food and shelter. There were millions of slave labourers on the roads. Some wanted to go back to a "home" that no longer existed; others, particularly Russians and Poles, did not want to go "home". In all cases "home" would be something vastly different than it was in 1939.

The overall feeling was of vengeance – to the German, to the collaborator, other ethnic groups, and even to the few remaining Jews left. Mob violence was the norm. The war unleashed all the hidden ethnic and geographical tensions – particularly in Yugoslavia – and Poland and Ukraine. Each group played the victim card. And all was much worse in Eastern Europe where Stalin encouraged ethnic cleansing, where his troops raped and pillaged on a massive scale. Stalin's goal was not merely to defeat Nazi Germany, but to subjugate

all the conquered territories with his own puppet regimes.

As the author mentions, for the millions of soldiers, of slave labourers, of resistance fighters – brutality had become a way of life and it did not abruptly end in May 1945. It went on until the early 1950's – more so in Eastern Europe. We often think of the Marshall Plan as re-invigorating Western Europe but this was implemented starting in 1947 because of Europe's overall predicament.

This is an excellent book that describes the gruesome conditions that existed in Europe in the post-war years. It is not a book of mere statistics, but of personal and harrowing examples – as in women and children forced to prostitute themselves to get cans of food from Allied soldiers, of soldiers sickened and saddened by the daily scenes of mob violence.

In a way, what is positive is we can see how far Europe has progressed since the early 1950's – and has re-established itself as a center of civilization.

To close off here is just one example of the residual effects of the war. There were hundred of thousands of women who had children from German soldiers. These children were discriminated and ostracized in all communities.

Page 178

*One can only applaud the bravery of the French mother who confronted a school teacher who had called her daughter a "batard du Boche" with the words: "Madame, it was not my daughter who slept with the German, but me. When you want to insult someone, save it for me rather than taking it out on an innocent child."*

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## **Peter says**

Much of this book is extraordinarily horrifying, disturbing, and depressing. After describing the destruction of the second world war, mind-boggling in itself, we move on to the scarcity, the vengeance, and even the continuing conflict that went on after the war is conventionally seen to be over. (But Lowe argues that the defeat of Germany was only the ending of the main war--there were many civil wars that had been a part of the conflict, and locally were sometimes more important than the overarching conflict.)

And for long stretches, I wondered why write and why read this terrible history, which serves, quickly and devastatingly, to undermine any sense of the essential goodness of people. But Lowe answers that question terrifically himself. If memories of atrocities only served to stir up ethnic and national hatreds, he concludes, then indeed this history should not be written. But where competing histories can be evaluated, told alongside each other, and myths laid bare, this can actually help lessen such hatreds.

So for example he takes issue with attempts to suggest that the suffering of Germans in the wake of the war could possibly be considered equivalent in size and nature to the suffering of Jews during, and even after the war and the Holocaust. But at the same time, he does acknowledge the immense suffering that many Germans, both within Germany and outside, did in fact go through. And emphasizes that it is important to acknowledge faults on all sides, including even to some extent in the Americans' treatment of German prisoners of war, for example, bearing in mind the widely differing degrees of maltreatment, partly in order to understand what happened in context. For one thing, this serves to combat far-right claims that bring up atrocities out of context so as to suggest everyone suffered equally and all were to blame equally (or worse). And even our own myths of the "greatest generation" take a bit of a beating--without ever any suggestion that the Allies did not do better than the Soviets or the fascists.

Lowe's own sober, painstaking, complex and comprehensive efforts to put various conflicts and atrocities in context lend authority to his own assessment of the period. And although various images of unspeakable violence and cruelty on an unimaginable scale will stay with me, however I'd prefer to shake them, so, I hope, will his concluding hope that a complex history, in disposing of the excesses and dangers of nationalist mythmaking, can provide a way forward.

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## AC says

I will give this one 3.5 stars. I think it's somewhat overrated.

I listened to this book on audible - term is starting again, and lots of driving...to work, kids, etc... and so I'm going to be listening to a lot more audiobooks.

This book, in fact, was well suited to audible, because it is long (quite long) on anecdote, and rather short (and superficial) on analysis.

Hence, 3-stars.

An interesting topic, though.

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## Jill Hutchinson says

The war was over.....hooray and let's celebrate! Of course, that was not the case at all but historians often give short shrift to the horrors of the years in Europe immediately following WWII. The end of that conflagration only initiated the start of others.....displaced persons, prisoners, war crimes, nationalism giving way to violence, continued "ethnic cleansing", the rise of Communism, etc. Governments were gone as well as economies and physical infrastructure. Europe was a hell on earth and the author delves deep into those problems in this excellent book. He points the finger when and where it is appropriate as he posits that some of the total breakdown of eastern Europe could have been prevented but for the bullying of the United States and Britain by the Soviet Union.

It is not enough to portray the war as a simple conflict between the Axis and the Allies over territory. Some of the worst atrocities had nothing to do with territory, but with race or nationality and some of the most vicious fighting was not between the Axis and the Allies at all but between local people who took the opportunity of the wider war to give vent to much older frustrations.

This is an eye-opening book, graphic, and disturbing but one that should be read by any fan of the history of WWII. It only got a little bit lower rating because it tended to drag just a bit toward the end....but that doesn't keep it from being a block buster! Highly recommended.

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## Anastasia Fitzgerald-Beaumont says

A Tale Unfolds

Keith Lowe's *Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II* is an important book. Yes, yes, I

know; you've heard it all before, the special pleading on behalf of some new publication or other, but believe me, it is.

Actually, no, don't believe me; don't take my word for it; read it and find out for yourself. If you think that the Second World War in Europe ended abruptly in May, 1945; if you think that VE Day brought peace then you are in for a surprise. I was reminded of some words from the Book of Jeremiah;

*They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people lightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace.*

Considering the important weighting I'm giving here it's a book that I almost did not read. A few years ago I read Giles Macdonogh's *After the Reich: From the Liberation of Vienna to the Berlin Airlift*. I rather assumed that *Savage Continent* was essentially covering the same territory, namely the post-war trauma of Germany. It does; it touches on the savage expulsion of millions of Germans from the eastern territories handed over to the Poles at Potsdam and Yalta, and from their former homes in the Czech Sudetenland. But Lowe deals with so much more, not just a traumatised people but a traumatised Continent; he deals with the traumas of places as far apart and as diverse as Estonia and Greece.

We are dealing here with political, social, economic and moral chaos; we are dealing with the abyss, the nadir of human civilization. We are dealing with starvation, lawlessness, disruption, homelessness, rootlessness, alienation, murder and rape on an unprecedented scale in all of history. We are dealing with racial wars and ethnic cleansing that did not end with the Nazis. We are dealing with an ugliness of unbelievable intensity.

In some places the hatred and violence that emerged in the war and immediate post-war period never really went away. The former Yugoslavia is a case in point, where ethnic and racial tensions engendered by the conflict were submerged for decades, only to break out once more with unrestrained ferocity in the 1990s, a reminder of how difficult it is to escape from the past.

It's not all about statistics and numbers, not all about mass suffering; there are also some sobering personal anecdotes. There is the story of an eighteen-year-old Polish Jew by the name of Roman Halter. He had survived Auschwitz. It's May 1945; the war is over; the danger is past; he is free, emaciated, but free. He began a long walk east, leaving from Dresden, hoping to find others of his family who had survived the Holocaust.

On the way he met a Russian soldier, whom he greeted as a comrade and a liberator. The friendly gesture was not returned. Instead the Russian ordered him to take his trousers down. Having ascertained that he was a Jew he put his revolver to Halter's head and pulled the trigger. The gun misfired. The memory of this incident stayed with Halter for the rest of his life. Anti-Semitism had not died with Hitler.

The sad truth is, as Lowe shows, that hatred of the Jews actually increased after the war, leading to murderous pogroms in Hungary and Poland. It wasn't the industrial scale, biology-based mass murder of the Nazis, but rather a return to more atavistic and medieval forms of Jew-hatred. It was this, perhaps even more than the Holocaust, which led many Jews to conclude that they had no future in Europe.

There are other stories which, in their own way, are just as shocking, because they are less expected. There is the story of the Norwegian children, some three thousand of whom were born to women who had relationships with German soldiers during the occupation. Afterwards the assumption was that the women must have been mentally sub-normal and the soldiers they attracted also mentally sub-normal. For years afterwards the children born to these people were subject to levels of ostracism and discrimination that had a severe impact on their life chances. Compared with some of the other horror stories detailed in this book it amounts to little, though it tends to undermine one's view of the seemingly limitless nature of Scandinavian

tolerance.

There was so much in Lowe's account of *Stunde Null* (wrongly given as *Stunde nul*) – Zero Hour – , as the German referred to the end of the war, that I had no knowledge of at all. I knew nothing of the vicious racial war between the Poles and the Ukrainians, pursued both during and after the war, with consequences even so far as today. I knew nothing about the struggles of the Forest Brotherhood, the freedom fighters in the Baltic States, who went on to resist the Soviet occupiers for years after the war, people who were still being killed as late as 1978.

The author's whole account is tremendously illuminating, as the dust settled and the great post-war divisions between the communist east and the free west began to take shape. It's as well to remember that for many in the east the story of oppression and occupation did not end in 1945; rather one tyranny simply took the place of another.

Communism has gone now. We have a Brave New Europe that has such free peoples in it. Ah, but that's just the thing. Our Europe, the Europe of the European Community, is driven more by fear of the past than hope for the future. Recently we have had all sorts of dire warnings over what might happen if the euro collapses. Hence we have a bureaucratic, post-democratic New Order. It is the architects of this New Order, in their distrust of the people, who are paradoxically recreating forms of popular discontent that led to disaster in the first place.

So, yes, this is an important book, important if you want to understand the European present as well as the European past. It is cogent, well-written and well-argued account, if over-reliant at points on anecdotal evidence. The only thing that irritates me is the author's tendency to drop into the first person singular. It is as if he is a tour guide taking us on a journey, a technique which for me is wholly out of place in a sober historical narrative. But if it is a journey we have come far. If you want to know how far, come and see; come and read.

*I could a tale unfold whose lightest word  
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,  
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,  
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,  
And each particular hair to stand on end  
Like quills upon the fretful porpentine.  
But this eternal blazon must not be  
To ears of flesh and blood.*

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## Paul Bryant says

This is the third in my series of great books on World War Two. First, Max Hastings in *All Hell Let Loose* gives the whole story, and brilliantly simplifies it too. He explains, and I'm convinced, that WW2 was essentially between Germany and the USSR, or between Hitler and Stalin if you wish. Everything else was a side show. He goes further – the result was never in doubt. If Hitler and Stalin were equally ruthless, Stalin always had more men at his disposal, and Russia always had its vast size and epic winters; it was never going to be defeated by Germany. Proving this was, as we know, ferociously, murderously, inhumanly difficult and accounted for most of the war dead. (Hastings goes further still – the second major theatre of war, USA vs Japan, was likewise never in doubt. Although the Japanese had run through Indo-China like a knife through butter their industrial strength was tiny compared to the USA, so within a couple of years they were bound to run out of material – ships, tanks, guns. Likewise, proving that foregone conclusion was deathly.)

So that was the big picture. The next two books gave the detail of two parts which I knew little or nothing about – Ian Kershaw's *The End* gives a gruesomely detailed description of the final year of the war in Europe, the Gotterdammerung catastrophe of Germany itself, which, as you contemplate its massive, thorough ruination, puts you in mind of a nation-sized suicide-by-police some criminals prefer to prison.

Now, finally, *Savage Continent* gives a forensic portrait of the hideousness of the aftermath of this European lunacy. Popular historians have mostly steered clear of this period (1945-48) and understandably so – it presents a horrible vista of misery and viciousness, of physical destruction and moral collapse, and of where there was enough food to eat and enough men left standing who were not too busy raping the women who were still alive, of ethnic cleansing, untrammelled vengeance and further civil wars. It takes a historian with a very strong stomach to write in detail about this period. And us readers need to be able to distance ourselves emotionally from what we are reading here, otherwise we would never pick up a book like this. But readers of history are very familiar with that kind of mental discipline.

*History is indeed little more than the register of the crimes, follies, and misfortunes of mankind.* (Edward Gibbon)

## **WORLD WAR TWO AND A HALF**

World War Two ended at different times in different places – autumn 1943 in Italy, a year later for France, but in parts of eastern Europe, Greece and Poland, for instance, it morphed into local civil wars and continued into the 1950s. There was one over-arching conflict between the Allies and the Nazi regime. But parallel to that, weaving all the way through it, was a war between the left (the communists) and the right (the nationalists, for want of a better word). Then, separate to those two, but closely entwined, so it was often hard to see a difference, were many local wars between the ethnicities in a given area – Ukrainians versus Poles, Croats versus Serbs, Germans versus Poles, these wars went on and on, and only intensified after May 1945.

The way these were dealt with by the occupying Allied forces was lamentable. But Keith Lowe firmly says :

*In a straight choice between Stalinist communism and the flawed mix of democracy and authoritarianism espoused by the West, the latter was undoubtedly the lesser of the two evils.*

## **STATISTICS OF CHAOS IN THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH**

There's a table on page 122 – DEATHS AMONGST PRISONERS OF WAR which records that the USA captured 3,097,000 prisoners, of whom 4537 died; and Britain captured 3,635,000 of whom 1254 died. There is a discussion of why more POWs died in American camps than in British. But this all becomes rather academic when, even before presenting the stats table, Keith Lowe says :

*We must remember that these are conservative figures: even official historians concede that thousands of deaths probably went unrecorded.*

And later, after more gruesome revenge stories :

*The validity of accounts like this is impossible to verify, and it is quite likely that some aspects have been greatly exaggerated.*

Underneath another stats table (THE JUDICIAL PUNISHMENT OF COLLABORATORS IN WESTERN

EUROPE) he says

*Despite the precise nature of some of the figures above, they should be considered estimates only, as many of the absolute numbers are disputed.*

This entire book is strewn with statistical data, big numbers everywhere, and all are disputed, all may be wrong. But this does not stop the author. Acknowledging the immense difficulties, he ploughs on. He covers topic after topic – whole chapters on, for example, the fate of the “horizontal collaborators”, the women who had intimate relations with occupying German forces – maybe we should say the women who became sex slaves of one or more soldiers. They were hated and reviled, such is to be expected, however unfair.

The author then gives us seven pages about the attitudes to and experiences of the *children* of such unions, and how they were despised and ostracized, for decades. E.g., in Norway

*Every year, right up until the start of the 1960s, these children and their guardians had to undergo the annual humiliation of applying to the local police for permission to remain in the country.*

## **FINISHING THE JOB THE NAZIS STARTED**

If you thought the Holocaust of European Jews ended when the camps were liberated Keith Lowe brings you bad news. Killings of Jews continued. Antisemitism was nearly universal in eastern Europe (although Poland easily won the contest for Most Antisemitic Post-War Country, which I found not surprising. Between 500 and 1500 Jews were murdered by Poles in the 12 months after May 1945.

*Jews of all nationalities would discover that the end of German rule did not mean the end of persecution. Far from it. Despite all that the Jews had suffered, in many areas anti-Semitism would increase after the war. Violence against Jews would resurface everywhere – even in places that had never been occupied, such as Britain. In some parts of Europe this violence would be final and definitive : the task of permanently clearing their communities of Jews, which even the Nazis failed to do, would be finished off by local people.... By 1948 much of the region had become, even more than in Hitler’s time, Judenfrei*

Where did this anti-Semitism come from? Lowe reports that in the vicious right-left nationalist-communist struggle which was now surfacing all over Europe, the nationalists characterized the Communist Party as Jewish; and the Communist counter-propaganda was to label the Jews as capitalists, hoarders and black marketeers.

So the Jews fled from Eastern Europe – how ironic that Germany, Austria and Italy were now safer than Poland, Ukraine or Yugoslavia! And Britain argued passionately that these fleeing Jews should NOT be allowed to emigrate to Palestine. The British Foreign Office said that would be admitting that the Nazis “were right in holding that there was no place for the Jews in Europe”.

There are so many issues described in this awesome book. Keith Lowe has fused together so much material and so many stories into something resembling coherence, and he deserves a big fat history book prize. There is nothing too difficult or too obscure or too detailed for him. His prose has almost no flair or flavor but it gets the job done with unflagging humanity. It’s devastating.

## Kevin Cole says

A Goodreads friend of mine recently asked why I've been reading and reviewing so many history books of late. I told him I like history. "Then why don't you write history books?" he asked, rather than coming-of-age novels obsessed with, as one reviewer discovered, "sucking dick."

Once upon a time, I did want to be a historian. As a kid, I inhaled history. I knew about events and places at an age when most kids barely knew about the world beyond their town. To this day, adult friends ask me when such-and-such happened. They're invariably amused when I tell them exact dates. In the distant past, I liked history so much I started college intending to make it my major, even though it meant laughable job prospects.

Something happened in university, though. While I had a few interesting history professors, I also had to read textbooks that were thick, heavy, and about as fascinating as reading phone books. These bricks were written by pedants with no talent and self-satisfied profundity and all my passion for history was killed by them. A passion that didn't return until recently, beginning with Thomas Fleming's *Illusion of Victory* and continuing furiously until who knows when.

As for this book, let me just say: This is how history books should be written. It's perfect. The subject is a good one, explored fully and explained clearly. The point of view is divinely fair, taking no sides while at the same time judging all.

*Savage Continent* is about what happened in Europe after the Second World War officially ended in May, 1945. Popular history has it that, for the most part, peace prevailed and people went about the long process of piecing their lives back together and building back up their cities. But nothing could have been further from the truth. Years after the war, Europe saw quite a bit of fighting - ugly fighting. For as Keith Lowe points out, WWII wasn't just a war about megalomaniacs with imperial obsessions, it was also a race war, a war for political control, and finally, a war of revenge.

Examples are too many to list here. What's really good about this book is that it tears up what we're told about the war and the people involved. For example, the Nazis hated Slavs, and they hated the Jews more. But just because they hated Jews more doesn't mean the Slavs of Eastern Europe liked the Jews either. The Nazis may have specifically killed Jews, but anti-Semitism was as common throughout Europe as talking about the weather. This means the Jews who managed to survive returned home only to find all their property stolen by locals, who then encouraged them strongly to just go away. Even in Poland, a nation that suffered proportionately more than any other under the Nazis, traumatized Jews were massacred by traumatized Poles, the latter simply exhibiting attitudes they'd always had but used by now to violence.

This book details something else you don't hear about much, if at all: the expulsion of whole groups of people from countries. First it was the Germans from countries like Poland and Czechoslovakia. Now you might think, who cares - they had it coming. But it didn't stop there. Poles were flushed out of Ukraine and Ukrainians almost completely ejected from Poland. As for the Jews, well, seeing as they had no home anymore, they decided to leave the continent altogether. Hitler was defeated only to see states with formerly multi-ethnic makeups ethnically cleansed - most of all by the Jews. Stalin encouraged this too, distracting people with nationalism while installing Communism in their respective governments, after which total state control was erected and wouldn't be dismantled until forty years later. In other words, Europe was freed from Hitler, only to hand over half of it to Stalin. This was the Good War we hear so much about.

And while the Communists were brutal, the Western powers weren't exactly angels either. As the Cold War came into being, the Western governments, principally America, decided it was absolutely critical to stop the appeal of the U.S.S.R., its former ally. The worst extent of this policy was supporting governments that were, in some cases, quite as state-controlled as Communist governments, but happened to be anti-Commie. Fascism was defeated. Except for Franco's Spain. Democracy won, except in Greece in 1967, when the military overthrew the government. One uncomfortable fact follows another till you want to curl up in a ball and hide in a dark room.

This is a good and important book, easy to read and unforgettable.

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## Dem says

Savage Continent-Europe in the Aftermath of World War II by Keith Lowe is an excellent book and a ground breaking study of the years that followed the Second World War.

I have read a lot of books about the war and the concentrations camps and the violence and atrocities that took place in Europe at this time.

I had never actually read a book about the aftermath of the war although I had often wondered about this period in history.

The World War left Europe in chaos. Landscapes had been ravaged, entire cities razed and more that 35 million people killed. Across most of the continent the institutions that we now take for granted such as the police and the media, transport, national government were either absent or hopelessly compromised. Crime rates soared, economies collapsed and the European population hovered on the brink of starvation.

This book is divided into 4 sections dealing with The Legacy of War , Vengeance, Ethnic Cleansing and Civil War.

Most of us have the impression that the end of the War meant the end of the killing and suffering. But the truth is the killing and suffering went on and on. What followed the end of the war was as bad as much of what happened during it and continued for almost 10 years. And those responsible were not heartless Nazis; in many cases they were the good guys, the victorious Allies.

In the immediate aftermath, the cruelty, even savagery, of what was perpetrated not only on surviving German soldiers but on civilians and on collaborators in various countries which had been occupied was shocking. I was really shocked at how women in particular, suffered dreadfully in the aftermath of the war.

This is certainly a thougroughly researched book and Keith Lowe really paints the facts very Cleary and documents his sources at the end of the book. Lowe does not take sides in this painful story but tries to get the facts and the information to the reader in every chapter and I really think he succeeded in his task.

This is not the easiest of reads but it is certainly an education and I learned so much that I found myself jotting notes down as I read this book.

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