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# London Review of Books

## After the Wars

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*The Age of Catastrophe: A History of the West 1914-45* by [Heinrich August Winkler](#), translated by [Stewart Spencer](#)

Yale, 968 pp, £35.00, September, ISBN 978 0 300 20489 6

Wolfgang Schäuble can't have expected an easy ride when he moved from Germany's Interior Ministry to its Finance Ministry on 28 October 2009. Angela Merkel's new coalition with the Free Democratic Party (FDP), the free market Liberals, was committed to reducing the government deficit. That summer the preceding Grand Coalition – the name for a coalition involving Germany's two largest parties, the Christian Democratic Union (CDU) and the Social Democratic Party (SPD) – had made use of its large majority to write a self-denying debt brake into the German constitution. If Berlin was to regain fiscal credibility, it needed to reverse the huge deficits run up during the financial crisis. Merkel's new finance minister would have to rein in the financial demands of the Christian Democrats' supporters as well as the tax-cutting ambitions of their Liberal partners. Schäuble was chosen because of his track record as a ruthless CDU powerbroker, a pivotal figure in German politics since the 1980s. But no one can have anticipated the centrality he would have in the Eurozone crisis, culminating in the brutal showdown with Greece in July this year. With good reason, Schäuble has come to be seen as responsible for blocking the transformative vision offered by Syriza.

There is profound disagreement about what is actually good for corporate Europe. The most articulate defenders of profit-driven growth in the Anglosphere find Schäuble's willingness to risk deflation in pursuit of fiscal balance incomprehensible. At the height of the crisis in 2011-12 fixers such as Timothy Geithner, the US Treasury Secretary, fumed at the fundamentalist fiscal conservatism of Frankfurt and Berlin. In November 2010 Schäuble replied in kind, dismissing Ben Bernanke's Quantitative Easing 2 as 'clueless'. Meanwhile, Germany's corporate giants such as Deutsche Bank can barely disguise their relief at the more expansive

course being followed by the European Central Bank under Mario Draghi in the face of protests from Schäuble and his allies at the Bundesbank.

Perhaps Schäuble is merely pandering to the conservative constituency in Germany. Often seen as a figurehead of post-democracy, he is in fact a loyal party politician determined to assert Christian Democracy as not just Germany's but Europe's natural party of government. Keeping Springer's populist tabloid, *Bild*, on side is essential. The dogged defence of fiscal discipline against the backsliding of the 'lazy Greeks' is popular well beyond the CDU base. Since Merkel's approval rating slumped following her generous offer to relax the rules on accepting refugees, Schäuble has surged ahead in the polls. And if data from the Pew Research Center are to be believed, he is popular not just in Germany but across much of Northern Europe.

But we underestimate the German finance minister if we see him merely as a tight-fisted Swabian vote-getter. Schäuble is not a post-ideological figure in the mode of Merkel or her predecessor as chancellor, Gerhard Schröder. He is a conviction politician, a man of ideas. As such, it's tempting to say that he belongs to an earlier era. It would be more precise, in fact, to say that he belongs to two earlier moments. His Christian conservatism dates from the early Cold War, warmed over by the neoconservative revival of the 1980s for which Helmut Kohl was the battering ram. The social market economy is for Schäuble not simply an economic policy option but the social form most appropriate to humanity, in its fallibility and selfishness and restless desire for freedom.

In 1989 when some combination of democracy and capitalism triumphed across Central and Eastern Europe, it was Schäuble as Kohl's chief of staff and interior minister who negotiated East Germany's accession to the Federal Republic. He likes to remind his audiences how many in the old West Germany wrote off any possibility of reunification, until they were proved wrong by 'naive' anti-communist activists. For Schäuble 1989 brought not the end of history, as Fukuyama claimed, but the restart of history. With it many of the comfortable simplicities of the old Federal Republic disappeared. There is no way back to the 'familiar' old days, which were, as he reminds West German audiences, framed by the threat of nuclear annihilation. Though reunification was the great landmark of his career, Schäuble does not deny that it came at the price of wrenching transformation and huge social costs in the East. But he has confidence in the mission of the West: 'The West has faced its challenges. Again and again.' Schäuble's ultimate source of optimism is the spiritual history of Europe. 'The Reformation, already, was an answer to the search for orientation in uncertain times at the end of the Middle Ages,' he said last year. 'Luther found an anchor in the freedom of Christian humanity. The West again and again draws on this strength, to face the unchained forces that threaten our freedom, our understanding of self-determination and human rights.'

Of course Luther was not Germany's sole contribution to Europe's modern history. And Germany did not consistently uphold the promise of the 'Western heritage'. For Schäuble, born in 1942 and growing up amid ruins, the shadow of Nazism and the violence of the Second World War will never be forgotten. But it is the overcoming of the nightmarish past, the labour of rebuilding and the lessons learned in the process that count. From these he derives something like a missionary responsibility for Germany. It is vital, Schäuble believes, that Europe should profit from Germany's example and find the will in its moment of crisis to found a new constitution based on co-operation and self-discipline. The stakes could not be higher. For Schäuble, it isn't globalisation that first exposed the limits of the European nation state. As he sees it, the inadequacy of the Westphalian system of sovereign states became clear in 1914. The European Union is the only historically adequate response to that failure. It is the future of the West that is at stake now in the struggle over the euro. The old continent with Germany at its heart must demonstrate that it can prevail in a new world shaped by the US and a rising Asia.

Repeatedly, as he has sized up the scale of the challenge facing the Eurozone, Schäuble has turned for inspiration to the historian Heinrich August Winkler, whom he calls admiringly the 'great optimist of the West'. Though he is relatively unknown outside Germany, a remarkable burst of productivity late in his career has turned Winkler into the most influential German historian of his day. Moving from the University of Freiburg in the early 1990s to take over the history department at the Humboldt University in Berlin, the crown jewel in the newly unified university system, Winkler was a key figure in the Anschluss of the East German academy. But German unification didn't just help Winkler's career: it gave his writing a more general significance. A monumental two-volume history of Germany published in 2000 made him famous. Ubiquitous in the pages of *Die Zeit* and *Der Spiegel* as well as on talk shows, Winkler has served as a phrase-maker not only for Schäuble, but for Schröder and his successors at the head of the SPD as well as Schäuble's predecessor as finance minister, Peer Steinbrück. More than any other German historian he articulates the historical common sense of the new Germany.

Born in Königsberg in 1938, and proud of his roots in the Bildungsbürgertum, the educated middle class of the German East, Winkler is a public historian in the 19th-century sense. It is a self-conception that he inherited from his mentor, the doyen of conservative German historiography Hans Rothfels. In the 1960s as Rothfels's students split between right and left, Winkler established himself as the house historian of the centrist wing of the SPD and its associated foundation, the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. He made his academic reputation with monumental histories of the German labour movement and a three-volume study of the crisis of the Weimar Republic which, though critical, refused to anathematise the leadership of the SPD for the choices they made in their desperate effort to establish the first German

democracy. In the 1980s Winkler was one of the most prominent historians to ally himself with Habermas in the Historikerstreit, the 'historians' dispute' that made the Holocaust a focal point in West Germany's historical discourse.

In its final phase, the Cold War split the West German left, with Winkler adopting a hawkish position, criticising the SPD leadership for its refusal to engage with anti-communist movements such as Solidarnosc. In the autumn of 1989 any semblance of left unity collapsed along with the Berlin Wall. Unification, driven at a breakneck pace by Kohl, Schäuble and Co, was more controversial than is commonly remembered. Habermas, the Greens and much of the East German opposition favoured a measured approach that would have involved not merely annexing the GDR to the Federal Republic – which is essentially what happened – but staging a full-blown constitutional convention to settle the basis for the united Germany. For Winkler this amounted to a wilful denial of national history. To insist as Habermas does that Germany stand at a critical distance to its nationhood, that it exemplify the 'post-national state among nation states' is for Winkler perverse and self-defeating, reinstating in new terms Germany's claim to a Sonderweg, a 'special path'. To arrive in the West, Winkler argued, Germany had instead to embrace its nationhood. This was the theme of his first bestseller, *Germany: The Long Road West 1789-1933* (2006). The curse of German history was not an excess of nationalism but a deficiency. For too long, he argued, the German upper class had been hag-ridden by visions that predated the emergence of modern notions of the nation state. The fantasy of the Reich drew inspiration from the moth-eaten legacy of the Holy Roman Empire, with its boundaries sprawling across Central Europe. This is what led the Kaiserreich to abandon Bismarck's measured Realpolitik in pursuit of an empire. Visions of the Reich gave credibility to Hitler's even more grotesque visions of a continental empire. Defeat in 1945 brought an appropriate sense of proportion. Winkler's reassuring message was that, in seizing their chance to reunify Germany, Kohl, Schäuble and their generation were not betraying Germany's postwar vocation; nor were they abandoning the legacy of Konrad Adenauer, for whom the young Winkler cherished a fogeish enthusiasm. On the contrary, they were finally making their nation truly normal. By learning to live as a nation state within a unified and democratic Europe, Germany would reach the end of its long road to the West.

This argument satisfied the Berlin political elite and Winkler found his book taken up by Chancellor Schröder. Later editions were blurb-ed by Schäuble and Joschka Fischer of the Greens. But the idea that Germany had reached the end of a long road raised the question of where exactly it had arrived. What was this 'West' where it had finally found safe harbour? Its economic dimensions were clear enough. Repurposing the 'German model', the Red-Green coalition of the late 1990s eagerly embraced neoliberalism. In a sketch celebrating 150 years of the SPD, Winkler credited Schröder's wage-repressing labour market reforms as one of the party's defining contributions to German history, a claim acknowledged by Merkel herself at

the launch of the most recent biography of her predecessor. As she has acknowledged in her recent statements on the refugee crisis, Merkel also inherited from the Red-Green coalition a new approach to immigration that would open up German citizenship to long-term foreign residents. After this cosmopolitan moment the shock was all the more severe when in 2003 Berlin confronted the Anglo-American drive to war in Iraq, a war waged in the name of 'the West' that alienated the vast majority of the German political establishment. Again Habermas led the way in interpreting the huge demonstrations of 15 February 2003 as a declaration of European independence from the United States. What had been revealed, Habermas argued, with Derrida as his co-signatory, was a profound division within the heritage of the West. Winkler certainly felt the tensions of this division. He opposed the war. But his scholarly response was the reverse of Habermas's. For Winkler the notion of the West as a safe harbour at which Germany had finally arrived transmuted into the idea of the West as an open-ended and quarrelsome project that requires continuous self-criticism and renewal. In *Geschichte des Westens*, a four-volume history published between 2009 and this year, Winkler retold the history of the West from antiquity to the Ukraine crisis of 2014 as a divided but interrelated whole, a place where the core principles of pluralism, freedom, rule of law and democracy have been articulated, elaborated and argued over. *The Age of Catastrophe* is volume II of this enterprise, in which Winkler accounts for the crisis of the interwar period. This massive series of books, which synthesises the history of the United States, the British Empire and all of continental Europe into a single narrative, is a monument to Winkler's determination to articulate and account for the history of the West as a transatlantic coproduction.

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For Winkler as for Schäuble the idea of Western Christendom still marks out the dividing lines of geopolitics today. But Winkler's version of the story has a further twist, which is essential to understanding both his enormous narrative of interwar crisis and the way he sees the politics of the Eurozone crisis. Into the sweeping drama of Western civilisation, into the modern struggles over neoliberalism and the squabbling in the EU, he injects the terms of a classic political confrontation. The most important and often the most damaging division within the West from the 19th century to the end of the 20th has been between left and right, split at least until the 1970s broadly on class lines. This tension reached its first ruinous climax in the period after the First World War. According to Winkler, there is one all-important question here, one that haunts his histories as well as his reading of contemporary politics: the ability of the democratic centre to mediate between the extremes.

Every history has a horizon. Some write modern European history orientated towards 1914 or 1939. For Eric Hobsbawm it was the rise and fall of the Soviet project that framed the short 20th century. For the gloomy histories of Europe that emerged from the 1990s, such as Mark Mazower's *Dark Continent*, the moment of collaboration and genocide, 1940-42, revealed the

truth about European political culture. Winkler's history finds its pivot in the SPD party conference in November 1959 at Bad Godesberg at which the party abandoned the aim of overthrowing capitalism and the politics of class conflict in favour of electoral reformism. It was only after this, with the two leading political parties in the most powerful country in Europe firmly wedded to the West, that the disastrously violent trajectory of European history could be altered and made safe. The story of the interwar period as told in *The Age of Catastrophe* is a crisis-torn prelude to this moment.

In this period, the fate of democracy depended on political parties' willingness to form coalitions and on the incorporation of political extremes. In Winkler's rather lop-sided account, this was a question above all for liberals and the left. In Britain the Labour Party was able to take power in 1924 as a result of the acquiescence of the Liberals. In the US race and region cut across class affiliations and limited the emergence of a radical left, enabling Roosevelt to assemble a powerful coalition of Northern progressives and Southern racists. In continental Europe the fate of democracy was decided by the ability of social democrats to reconcile the demands of party unity with the need to find external partners. Winkler surveys the familiar cases of socialist self-evisceration in Italy and Spain. The more benign outcome in France was a consequence of the republican loyalties of a large swathe of the middle class. But Winkler doesn't only rehearse the obvious cases: he discusses the Baltic states and Scandinavia as well as much of Central Europe. The fate of the continent, he concludes, depended on German democracy. After the collapse of the Wilhelmine regime at the end of the First World War the SPD leadership struggled to hold together its own divided constituency while attempting to build coalitions with Liberals and Christian Democrats. In the process the party split twice, the far left mounted a coup, the leaders of the centre and the right connived in the murder of many members of the radical left, the majority of the party then reformed, only to lose power in the autumn of 1922. The SPD did not return to office until 1928, just in time for the Great Depression, which fundamentally damaged the welfare state, the chief postwar gain of the German working class. It was no coincidence that it was a vote by the parliamentary party to reject the austerity measures demanded by the Centre Party (an antecedent to the Christian Democrats) that felled Hermann Müller, the last Social Democratic chancellor of the Weimar Republic, on 27 March 1930. Not until Bad Godesberg were the tensions that tore the interwar SPD apart finally resolved. And it would be another ten years before Willy Brandt took office as chancellor.

Rather than proceeding nation by nation, it would have been more revealing had Winkler treated the crisis of interwar democracy as a trans-continental phenomenon, with choices in one country conditioning those available to others. In particular, the US decision to insist on repayment of its First World War loans had a disastrous impact on the room for manoeuvre of progressives in Europe. Ironically, Winkler's treatment of these trans-atlantic connections

was far more sophisticated in his earlier books on German history. But these quibbles aside, Winkler's approach has real purchase on the 1920s, when the language of class was at its most dramatic and the threat of revolution seemed real. More problematic is his determination to extend this analysis of the problems of democracy up to the present day.

The cohesion of democratic ranks has continued to be a problem according to Winkler. After the apparent stabilisation of Bad Godesberg it arose again in the 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of an opposition in West Germany that placed itself outside the political system and which solidified in the form of the Green Party. Then, even before the Greens had been entirely tamed, reunification led to the incorporation in German politics of the remnants of the Communist Party, in the form of the Party of Democratic Socialism (PDS), which, after the splintering of the West German SPD provoked by Schröder's neoliberalism, helped put together a new left block known as Die Linke in 2007. These splits have hurt the SPD. Nevertheless, taken together, the SPD, the Greens and Die Linke have won majorities in four out of seven general elections since 1990. But no Red-Red-Green coalition has been attempted. And for Winkler, true to his historical formula, it is essential that this remain the case. Since the 1990s he has argued tirelessly against the 'mirage' of a broad left coalition, insisting that the PDS and Die Linke are not fully assimilated to the West. A Red-Red-Green coalition, he claims, threatens to hurl Germany back into the political crises of the 1920s, with the rump of the SPD shifting to the left and middle of the road conservatives migrating to the far right. But to dismiss the possibility of Red-Red-Green coalition is to make Merkel's CDU into the pivot of all calculations, whether in a Grand Coalition or a centre-right coalition with the Liberals.

The publication of Winkler's magnum opus has coincided with the financial crisis and its aftermath, the second great self-inflicted wound suffered by the West in less than a decade. It was hardly surprising that Putin decided to take advantage of this, exploiting the chaos in Ukraine and presenting Berlin with a choice between East and West that it would rather avoid. At the launch of Winkler's penultimate volume in September 2014, a discussion between Schäuble and Winkler was dominated by the subject of Russia. Both men are concerned that the German public shows so little willingness to confront Putin. The need to defend the values of the West as defined by Winkler became a recurring theme in Schäuble's speeches last winter. Despite protests from Die Linke, Winkler turned a speech to the Bundestag commemorating the defeat of Hitler's Germany into an anti-Putin rallying cry.

No one in Germany advocates a military confrontation with Putin of the sort favoured by hawkish voices in Washington, which places all the more burden on the restoration of the economic and financial vitality of the European project, and makes the fate of Greece even more important. The election in January of a Syriza government was celebrated by the left from Brooklyn to Berlin. But Syriza and its supporters misjudged their antagonist. When the

then Greek finance minister Yanis Varoufakis and others speculated that they were being waterboarded for the sake of whipping French fiscal policy into line, they fatally underestimated the political antagonism against their own party. Syriza had counted on the supposed values of the West – of respect for sovereignty, pluralism and democracy – to assure it a fair hearing. To understand the feelings of the Berlin political class about their victory, Syriza's politicians would have done well to read Winkler's piece in *Die Zeit*, where he announced that, seen in the context of the historical struggle for Western values, the new Greek government was a symptom of crisis, an expression of Putin's manipulation as well as the resurgent Front National in France. Syriza, he wrote, was an irresponsible populist movement that reflected the malign influence across the continent of Russia's anti-Western authoritarianism. The Polish leader, Donald Tusk, announced that Greece risked becoming a source not just of financial but political contagion. It was Schäuble, however, who translated the vocabulary of anti-leftism into the terminology of 21st-century government. The problem with Syriza, he said, went beyond technicalities and calculations of debt sustainability. It was more basic. It was a question of 'trust'.

In July Habermas told the *Guardian* that Schäuble and his SPD allies had 'gambled away in one night all the political capital that a better Germany had accumulated in half a century – and by "better" I mean a Germany characterised by greater political sensitivity and a post-national mentality.' But as Winkler has said more clearly than anyone else, the EU has never been conceived as a post-national project for Germany. It is rather a frame within which German national history can be realised. For Winkler, as for Schäuble, this certainly involves a commitment to democracy. But their conception of pluralism has always been tempered. Despite the prominent position of figures such as Habermas and the tolerance extended to fringe parties like Syriza or Die Linke, the dominant strand in Europe's postwar history has never offered space for the realisation of a radical alternative politics. Under normal circumstances the neoliberal logic of discipline is enough to enforce these ground rules. But conditions since 2008 have been far from normal. And far from manifesting a forgetting of history, as Habermas suggests, the active politics of containment pursued by Schäuble reflects the continuing power of the conservative impulses that derived from the disasters of the first half of the 20th century.

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