

POSTWAR: THE MELANCHOLY HISTORY OF A TERM

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ore than any war before it or since, World War II was an exercise in world-making, an expansion of the imagination that ran in parallel with the struggle on the battlefield. Dominated by dreams of the future and human improvement, and by radically divergent views of what that might mean, it was a struggle in which virtually none of the participants thought or wished that things should go back to how they had been before the fighting began. “How New Will the Better World Be?” cautioned the American historian Carl Becker in 1944 in response, but amidst the war he went unheeded.¹ The Germans had begun with their talk of a “*Neuordnung*” or New Order, but their opponents quickly realized that they had no choice but to follow and offer alternatives. When H. G. Wells penned his polemic *The New World Order* in early 1940, it was to excoriate those members of the British ruling class who thought, just as they had in 1914, that there was nothing much wrong with how things were, and that once the Germans had been taught how to behave like gentlemen, everyone could settle down again and things could go back to being run in the old way.² That summer, as if to signal the death of liberal internationalism, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed a pact that proposed carving the world up into separate spheres of influence. The following year came the Allied response in the form of the Atlantic Charter and the detailed planning that eventually led to the formation of the United Nations.

Wells was right that old blinkers were not so easily cast aside. The war was a global one—far more than its predecessor in 1914–18—and its effects were felt across continents: a huge civilian death toll in East Asia, devastating famine in India. It accelerated urbanization and economic development in Africa and the Middle East and fanned dreams of the end of colonialism everywhere. Yet in the minds of Europe’s leaders—and not only Europe’s but Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joseph Stalin as well, men educated in the old truths of the nineteenth century—peace and security were still primarily issues that revolved around the future of Europe. When Gilbert Murray, a prominent internationalist, wrote in 1946 about the shift from the League of Nations to the new United Nations, he noted that “some great movement for unity and constructive reconciliation in Europe is an absolute necessity for civilization.” Then he added, almost as an afterthought: “Of course Europe is not everything. There are other continents.”³

“Europe is not everything.” That insight was a start but it was one acquired painfully and often reluctantly and its full implications took time to emerge. For the end of the war seemed to mark two quite distinct processes, and while one went deep into Europe’s heart, the other led far afield. The first was the effort to reconstruct a decimated continent, to stabilize the nation-state system that had emerged after 1918, and to restore democracy to peoples who had abandoned it. The second was to determine the fate of Europe’s overseas empires and to bring democracy and independence to those demanding it there. The disjuncture between

the two had been striking during the war, when many ardent anti-Nazis had seemed happy to defend the need for colonial rule indefinitely into the future. It was as though for them the war were about establishing the difference between good and bad ways of running empires, not about the evil of empire *tout court*. Putting these two stories together raises the question of Europe’s changing place in the world after 1945, in an era in which the long centuries of European global ascendancy suddenly and, to many people, unpredictably, came to an end.

Postwar, the title of this sweeping exhibition, seems as good a word as any to encompass this period of rupture and reinvention. But it is a word that like all such terms has its own secret history and carries its own



Fig. 1. John Vachon. *Wrocław 1946 (Marketplace at Grunwald Square)*. 1946. Photography

hidden and not-so-hidden implications. For to call these years the “post-war” years is not to lay bare something in nature. Time does not present itself in epochs; it is we who see it that way, and the way we carve periods out of time, fix their origins and endpoints, and label them is itself a revelation of perspective and its contingencies.

For one thing, no previous war in history had ever been regarded by those who lived through it as leading in its aftermath to some *post-war* era. The term was not unknown before 1939 but it was extremely rare, and even after 1918 it was not used except by a few economists and technical experts. Deployed shortly after World War II erupted in 1939, the term has enjoyed its own fitful history. Once it entered common



Fig. 2. A photographer in Warsaw uses his own backdrop to mask war-damaged buildings, November 1946.

parlance, very rapidly, in the early 1940s, it was never abandoned, but its peak usage occurred in two distinct phases: one during the 1940s themselves, as a term to describe a wished-for future, and the other after the end of the Cold War, to take a new look at a now-distant past.

“Postwar”: it is a crisp term, pragmatic yet imbued with hope. It posits the audacious possibility of a break with violence, the dawning of a new era in which war itself is finally banished from human affairs. Friedrich von Gentz, secretary to Klemens von Metternich, had hoped that the 1815 Congress of Vienna might win Europe a breathing space of one or two generations; neither he nor any other respectable statesman seriously believed that war could be eradicated for ever. That was, in the nineteenth century, the millennial dream of radical evangelical fanatics, not sober diplomats, not even the most mystically inclined. Yet this was the hope in and after World War II, a hope of course given extra urgency after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Over a century the dreams of nineteenth-century American and British peace activists had been passed on to those most practical of dreamers, the mid-twentieth-century planners. It was American planners who drove the thinking among the Allies about a new era of global peace and prosperity. They were men like State Department officials Sumner Welles and Leo Pasvolosky, the one, in the early years of the war, the most important figure in Washington driving thinking about international governance; the other a brilliant foreign-policy expert, a keen student of Soviet communism and a man aware of the importance of dreams in international politics and of the pitfalls that lay in wait for them. They wanted to avoid the mistakes of the past, and in particular the mistakes of their American predecessor Woodrow Wilson. The British followed reluctantly, fearful that “postwar” was a cover term for anti-imperialism or else, more cynically, for an American takeover of their possessions. But they too understood that you could not fight a modern war with a conscript army without a clear sense of what you were fighting for, and that an integral part of that sense was the capacity to “win the peace,” or at least to think during the war about how to prevail once the fighting had stopped.

If the golden age of the postwar was the last two years of the war itself, the term remained useful long after 1945 because the world was now living in an atomic age. The millennial dream of universal peace acquired new meaning once war had suddenly become more terrifying than ever. Within days of the bombing of Nagasaki, Bertrand Russell warned that “the prospect for the human race is sombre beyond all precedent.”⁴ Even before this, seventy scientists working on the Manhattan Project, led by physicist Leo Szilard, had petitioned President Harry S. Truman to think carefully before resorting to the military use of the bomb against the Japanese. Concerned scientists presented world peace as a goal above politics—but scientists, like businessmen, tend to imagine a world above politics as the place they live in. In fact, not only did political tensions get in the way of the dream of international control of atomic energy, they broke apart the alliance of the Big Three that had defeated the Nazis and the Japanese. One way or another, the alliance against Napoleon had held for generations; the alliance against Germany scarcely outlived

Adolf Hitler himself. Or, to be more precise, it held—just—but frayed badly in the 1940s to the point of invisibility. The Cold War—another new term that betrayed the preposterous ambition, the unfulfilled longing, embodied in the term “postwar”—was now underway, and the long shadow of the atom bomb, as this exhibition testifies, overhung it.

Did the Cold War mean that the promise of a “postwar” time had been falsified? Certainly there were indications of this, as civil war in Greece erupted in a series of campaigns that swept the mountains of the mainland, left hundreds of thousands dead or displaced, and saw napalm used on the European continent for the first time before the 1940s were out. Yet Greece aside, war did not return to Europe: so much was gained. And arguably the principal goal of the postwar planning effort was attained: to keep the general peace in Europe once Nazism was defeated. From this perspective, “postwar” embodied the deeply Eurocentric view of what mattered that we started out highlighting, a view in which the war that counted was the war within Europe, or over Europe’s future. Other wars, in this way of looking at things, could be discounted as “small wars,” or better still omitted from the collective memory and conscience of the world. One could thus overlook, as much of the European and American media did, the stirrings of colonial revolt in Algeria beginning in May 1945; Damascus, where the war against Hitler morphed seamlessly into the war for Syrian independence against France; and insurgencies in Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, and Madagascar in 1945–47, bitter and bloody conflicts that marked, in retrospect, the endgame of empire.

The trouble was that “postwar” was an argument not only about peace but about stability. What counted internationally, and counted more and more in the atomic age, were not the rights of colonial peoples, still less the universal march of democracy, but the stabilization of power around the world to prevent conflict between the Soviet Union and its enemies spilling out of control. This usually, especially early on, meant American support for at least some of the tottering European empires—French and British in particular—even if in the 1950s and early ’60s the United States in particular was often working quietly behind the scenes trying to get its allies in Europe to liberalize colonial rule. The odds were stacked against those fighting for liberation from the colonial regimes, and from their perspective the “postwar” era could only be regarded as one in which the legitimacy of their struggle was questioned and opposed. Europe mourned its dead, lamented its past, and simultaneously celebrated its continued role in civilizing the backward peoples of the world. So talk about the postwar was obviously a matter of perspective and for many outside Europe, the wars to think about were those to come, not those behind them. Other wars remained to be fought, other peaces to be challenged. One reason surely for the declining use of the term “postwar” in the 1960s was the growing awareness everywhere that the age of wars had not ceased, that national liberation—often attainable only through war—was the cause of the age, and, increasingly, that beyond the achievement of national self-determination and colonial independence, a new era of wars lay in wait: of civil wars, such as those in

Pakistan and Nigeria, or of Third World powers, like that between China and India. The omnipresence of war stretched into the future. The postwar era, in short, was nothing if not an era of new wars.

Which begs the question: why then the revival of interest in the postwar after 1989? There can be no question about this refocusing: in the 1990s, the number of books with the word in their title suddenly trebled compared with the previous decade; in the first fifteen years of this century, the number more than doubled again. books like Tony Judt's

"Postwar" also signaled a specific psychological situation: coping with the past in all its dimensions, embarking on the work of mourning, the estimating of material and psychic losses, and above all—a theme that came naturally to our increasingly psychologizing era—the reckoning with trauma. How did we get over it? Did we? Can we put it behind us? And now, in 2016, the more Europe descends into infighting and the more the far right returns from the ashes, the more we are drawn back to those questions, and the more we talk about "we" and forget to ask



Fig. 3. Floris Jespers. *The United States Saved Belgium from Starvation during the War and When Peace Came They Helped to Rebuild the Country and Its Scientific Institutions*. 1939. Tapestry, 502.9 × 563.9 cm.

Postwar, conceived and written in the aftermath of Europe's reunification, articulated a new concern, and help us understand the reasons for it too.' This time round "postwar" was primarily not a policy matter but an academic one—the concern of historians, and of historians of Europe in particular, and beyond that, of all those seeking to understand the promise of the future of a newly unified continent by returning to the last moment before its division. In this context "postwar" mean everything that the term "Cold War" had denied: the autonomy of Europe in relation to the superpowers, the possibilities for continental and national revolutionary reconstruction, movement as opposed to stasis.

who "we" really are. It is all too easy even for historians to forget that the postwar was also the last phase of the "scramble for Africa," and that the imperial land grab that began in the Maghreb in the mid-nineteenth century ended in the desperate jockeying over the fate of the Italian colonies in north and east Africa, the same territories—Libya, Eritrea, Somalia—whose plight today reminds us how little was actually settled in that postwar moment.

Can art encourage us to reflect on the limits and bounds of our perspective? Can the notion of "postwar" be expanded to include those only peripherally drawn into World War II and those whose real wars lay

years, sometimes decades in the future, and may be continuing at the time of this writing? The challenge of this exhibition is to target that older Eurocentric conception and to amplify its meaning. The art itself shows a commonality of visual languages that transcends the specificity of historical experiences and hopes. It also suggests an underlying commonality of hopes characteristic of that moment in world history—the emergence of rural populations everywhere into dignity, the appeal of formalism, the embrace of the technical as an engine of social transformation. If the threat of the bomb was one force bringing people together, these were others. Older, identifiably European languages of painting were quietly jettisoned: the pastoral—rarely encountered in the works shown here—and above all the neoclassicism that had offered the principal challenge to modernism across the ideological spectrum in the 1920s, and that survived after 1945 only momentarily in pockets of Socialist Realism. Into the vacuum came a diversity of aesthetics that mediated the violence of the war years and tried to find ways to contain it. There is an unprecedented sense of the fragility of the human body in a physical landscape now detonated by bombs or churned by rebuilding. The utopianism that survived into the postwar era, and indeed that underpinned a new era of ambitious social planning, coexisted with a deep sense of psychic unease. “Postwar” as a moment of hope, an era of achievement; “postwar” as a sense of promise that was not to be fulfilled because it could never have been. All of that and more is visible here.

- 1 Carl Becker, *How New Will the Better World Be?* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1944).
- 2 H. G. Wells, *The New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1940, repr. ed. Minneapolis: Filiquarian Publishing, 2007).
- 3 Gilbert Murray, “Retrospect and Prospect,” *From the League to the U.N.* (London, New York, and Toronto: Geoffrey Cumberlege, Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 191, 197.
- 4 Bertrand Russell, “The Bomb and Civilization,” *Glasgow Forward*, August 18, 1945.
- 5 Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (New York: Penguin Press, 2005).