

**István Deák, *Europe on Trial: The Story of Collaboration, Resistance, and Retribution During World War II*, Westview Press, Boulder, Colorado, 2015, pp. XXIII-257, ISBN 9780813347899.**

István Deák has set himself an ambitious task which few historians would envy. His goal is to write a comparative history of resistance and collaboration across Europe during the Second World War, one that covers western, eastern, northern, and southern Europe, and also includes the process of retribution in the immediate aftermath of the war. Few periods are so complex and pose such daunting problems of selection, coherence, and interpretation than Europe during the mid-twentieth century, imposing on anyone who wishes to provide an overarching narrative, let alone in fewer than 300 pages, the arduous demand of making tough choices and mastering a seemingly unlimited literature written in a dozen languages. That Deák has taken up this formidable challenge is to be greatly applauded, even if it is not quite true that he is the first to give it a try, as he claims in the book's introduction. Mark Mazower's *Hitler's Empire* (2008) stands as an influential recent synthesis, and those ready to peek beyond the limits of English-language bookshelves can reach to Gustavo Corni's excellent *Il sogno del 'grande spazio'* (2005) or, if time is not of the essence, to the nine volumes of Wolfgang Benz et. al. *Nationalsozialistische Besatzungspolitik in Europa* (1996-1999).

The result of Deák's efforts is a book that is more a general survey describing the main developments than a conceptual analysis structured around a specific set of theses. One suspects that the book has been written with an undergraduate readership in mind, and the author's repeated insistence in informing us about which languages Europeans speak and who was able to comprehend whom in the 1940s leads one to think that his intended audience is primarily composed of American students and their instructors looking for a useful textbook. It is in keeping with the expectations of this audience that Deák primarily seems to be intent in disrupting presumably widespread ideas about how well everyone but the Germans behaved during the war. As the title of the book already insinuates, Deák seeks to put 'Europe on trial', and the judgement he arrives at again and again in this book is that «Europe did badly» (p. 225).

In many respects, however, the underlying notion that there is still a lack of recognition for the complicity of many Europeans in the horrors of the mid-twentieth century and that there is therefore an urgent need for such exercises in moral judgement is of course somewhat off the mark. In fact, the participation of masses of Europeans in the crimes of the era has been the main theme of much of the literature published in the last three or four decades, and one wonders when the time will finally come when problems other than those oscillating around the long-resolved issues of morality can move to analytical centre-stage. One such question would be that of the more durable socio-political changes wrought upon European societies by the experience of occupation and post-war retribution. That is, after all, a subject to which Deák has already made an important contribution with a highly successful edited collection on *The Politics of Retribution in Europe* (2000), and he hints promisingly to this theme in the introduction of this book. Unfortunately, however, he never explores this subject fully here, though he

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does provide a scrupulous analysis of how ethnic cleansing in eastern Europe produced significant demographic changes and transformed the composition of local societies forever.

Deák is well aware of the intricate problems of definition that have plagued a generation of historians wrestling with the concepts of 'collaboration' and 'resistance', and though he places these categories at the centre of his analysis, he understands that these are flexible and not mutually exclusive terms, thus skilfully sidestepping many a bedevilled terminological debate. Conversely, his theme is that of making the reader empathise with the tough choices imposed on European populations through occupations. His approach is mostly chronological. After a brief chapter on the broader history of military occupation in Europe and the efforts to regulate it through international law, he works himself from Austria's *Anschluss* to the purges in the immediate aftermath of the war, ending with a discussion of the suspension and eventual resumption of trials against war criminals in the post-war period. In telling this story, he proposes a useful periodization of the war structured around three phases: a period of Nazi expansion between September 1939 and June 1941 that saw a general failure of many European states to mount an effective defence against the German invasion. After military defeat and the beginning of occupation, the Germans faced little serious resistance. Instead, this period was characterised by the accommodation of European populations to the fact of living under German occupation, with many Europeans showing some sympathy to the broader projects of Europe's New Order movements («Europe's honeymoon with Hitler», in Deák's phrasing). This was followed by an intermediary phase initiated by the German attack on the Soviet Union, which changed the position of the Resistance movement and in particular of Communist groups in Western Europe. Henceforth, the fight against the occupiers seemed to make much more sense, leading to a cycle of violent resistance activities and increasingly brutal responses by the occupiers in 1941/1942. In the final phase, roughly from the German defeat at Stalingrad in February 1943 to the end of the war, it became gradually obvious that Germany would lose the war, leading to a massive influx into the Resistance movements, while Germany's allies started to change sides: some, like Bulgaria and Romania, with distinctively more success than others such as Italy and Hungary. In covering these phases, Deák jumps effortlessly across the continent, providing vignettes about local motivations and conditions in different countries, all of which serve to demonstrate the nauseating complexity of the period and the dangers inherent in arriving at facile judgements about any one national case.

There are three important points that Deák distributes throughout his book. The first is that German occupation policies in western and eastern Europe followed an entirely different logic, leading to a very different experience of occupation across the continent. The sheer brutality involved in the occupation of Poland, the Soviet Union, and the Balkans had no match in western Europe, where the occupiers generally tried to work through local intermediaries and institute a form of indirect rule that relied less on violence and brute coercion and more on ruling through local elites and administrations. Such different ruling techniques had important consequences, most notably in their effects on the socio-political texture of occupied societies. While the pre-existing elites in many parts of eastern Europe were annihilated either by the German or Soviet

occupiers, in the West the Germans sought to use intermediaries drawn mostly from the existing ruling class that enjoyed popular legitimacy, while largely ignoring the collaborationist and local New Order representatives who offered their services unsuccessfully to the occupiers. This is a point worth reiterating, given the recent fashion in the literature to proclaim the need to write integrated histories of the continent during the war while neglecting the vast differences in regional experiences. The second and related point is that the power of the German occupiers was generally very limited and that they had to draw extensively on local helpers across the continent to implement their goals. Here, in line with the more recent scholarship on the Holocaust and on ethnic cleansing in eastern Europe, Deák rightly stresses how masses of local populations sought to get rid of their ethnic minorities and participated in genocide, ethnic cleansing, and forced population movements for their own ends and with no need of German encouragement. Similarly, Deák reminds us that no state allied to Germany was actually forced to follow the German lead indiscriminately. Rather, their room of manoeuvre was extensive and they retained the possibility not to comply with German requests. Finally, his examples demonstrate that the Second World War was not a single war, but in reality comprised a multiplicity of conflicts that were fought out within occupied communities. These often very violent civil wars gravitated around internal ideological, social, and ethnic cleavages that were exacerbated and sometimes triggered by the experience of foreign rule, with the presence of the German occupiers providing a welcome opportunity for specific groups to implement their long-standing goals and dreams.

For a book that seems to be geared towards those seeking a first introduction into the subject, there are, however, some notable shortcomings. There are only a few footnotes throughout the text and for most of the time, the reader is left wondering not only about how to follow up on the various subjects discussed by the author, but also about where precisely he is getting his information and numbers from. What is one to make of claims such as that «it is my estimation that post-World War II criminal courts investigated, even if they did not always try and sentence, one in every twenty adult males for treason, war crimes, or collaboration with Germany» (p. 8), when no references are given and no information is provided on how this figure has been arrived at? Similarly, the secondary literature listed in a *Suggestions for further study* section at the end of the book is almost completely limited to texts published in English, and even here there are major, and indeed worrying gaps. For instance, amongst the suggested readings for the case of France, several of the leading survey histories of the occupation period published in the last two decades are missing, including Julian Jackson's highly influential *France: The Dark Years*, as well as major monographs by Robert Gildea and Richard Vinen. For the literature on the Nuremberg trials, readers are merely directed to former prosecutor Telford Taylor's personal account, and not a single title from the extensive recent historiography on the subject is listed. Quite what one should make of the film suggestions is another matter altogether, with the author recommending the work of Andrzej Wajda, Marcel Ophüls, and Louis Malle alongside such vapid blockbusters as Bryan Singer's *Valkyrie*.

More alarmingly, the book contains a number of factual errors. For example, the claim that «aside from the seventy-odd Nazis executed under order of the Nuremberg

Tribunals and other American-dominated courts during the first years after the war, all other Germans tried and sentenced by the Allies in West Germany were released» (p. 213) is wrong, given that almost 500 war criminals were executed in the Western Zones. Similarly, many of the references to the Hague Regulations of 1899/1907 are imprecise or simply not correct. Article 4 does not cover the subject of militias and irregular troops, as claimed by the author (p. 21); Article 1 does. We are told that «hostage taking (and hence hostage shooting) as well as reprisals had been recognized as perfectly legal by The Hague Conventions and also, somewhat surprisingly, by one of the American-led Nuremberg Tribunals in 1948» (p. 168). Yet the Hague Regulations do not say a single word about taking hostages, and while the so-called 'Hostages Trial' from 1948 did recognise the legality of shooting hostages according to contemporary international law, it did not sanction indiscriminate massacres in the manner conducted by the Germans. Articles 42 and 43 do not «outlin[e] the citizenry's duty to obey enemy occupation forces so long as the latter abided by the terms of The Hague Convention» (p. 21); there is no mention of the 'citizenry' in the article and the question of whether it can be inferred from Article 43, which actually states that the occupier «[...] shall take all the measures in his power to restore, and ensure, as far as possible, public order and safety», that the population owes indefinite loyalty to the occupier is an intricate problem that has been heatedly discussed by specialists.

What is then somewhat confusing here and elsewhere is the way in which complex issues are simplified and presented without recourse to the safety net usually sought by historians in the qualifying relative clause. Generalisations are of course necessary in any survey history, but the level of simplification with which some of Deák's claims are expressed can be disconcerting: «unlike the Danes or the Dutch, the inhabitants of the Balkans were not peaceful people; the many hundreds of years of struggle for or against the Ottoman-Turkish overlords had taught them to trust only their weapons and their own families and clans» (p. 62). Other judgements are ill-considered at best: Werner Best «deserved the title of righteous» for his involvement during the rescue of the Danish Jews, because he «had taken a great risk by ignoring orders from Berlin» (p. 133). Nowhere does the author tell us that, as we know from the work of Ulrich Herbert, it was actually the *völkisch* ideologue and anti-Semite Best who wanted and had made the initial request in Berlin for the deportation of the Danish Jews, while his motivations in looking the other way when the Jews were evacuated to Sweden were due to the fact that he did not care about how exactly the country was «de-Jewyified» as long as the Jews were gone. And should we really think of Adenauer's Germany as a «model democracy» (pp. 214, 223)? Sometimes the generalisations are a bit more than irritating: «to resist meant to leave the legal path and to act as a criminal» (p. 112), it required «the talents of a burglar, a forger, and a thief», and the «resistance fighter had to be prepared to act as a professional murderer» (p. 113). Irrespective of what one ultimately thinks about both the strategic and moral value of resistance activities, applying a language of criminality to the Resistance movements as a whole risks turning the problem of morality on its head.

Despite these problems, Deák has written a highly readable and concise history of Europe's mid-twentieth century, providing a coherent overview of the major issues.

That alone is no small feat. He ends his study with an optimistic note on how Europe has learned its lesson from the 1940s, remarking how today «the danger of a new European conflagration seems remote» (p. 227), while ideas such as «making life bearable not only for the privileged but for everyone» that emerged from the experiences of the war «still predominate on much of the continent» (p. 228). While recent events provide little cause for such confidence, one should at least hope that in this assessment the author will be proved right.

Camilo Erlichman  
University of Amsterdam  
c.erlichman@uva.nl