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INTRODUCTION

The World We Have Lost

The essays in this book were written over a span of twelve years, between 1994 and 2006. They cover quite a broad swath of subject matter—from French Marxists to American foreign policy, from the economics of globalization to the memory of evil—and they range in geography from Belgium to Israel. But they have two dominant concerns. The first is the role of ideas and the responsibility of intellectuals: The earliest essay reproduced here discusses Albert Camus, the most recent is devoted to Leszek Kolakowski. My second concern is with the place of recent history in an age of forgetting: the difficulty we seem to experience in making sense of the turbulent century that has just ended and in learning from it.

These themes are of course closely interconnected. And they are intimately bound up with the moment of their writing. In decades to come we shall, I think, look back upon the half generation separating the fall of Communism in 1989–91 from the catastrophic American occupation of Iraq as the years the locus are: a decade and a half of wasted opportunity and political incompetence on both sides of the Atlantic. With too much confidence and too little reflection we put the twentieth century behind us and strode boldly into its successor swaddled in self-serving half-truths: the triumph of the West, the end of History, the unipolar

American moment, the ineluctable march of globalization and the free market.

In our Manichaean enthusiasms we in the West made haste to dispense whenever possible with the economic, intellectual, and institutional baggage of the twentieth century and encouraged others to do likewise. The belief that *that* was then and *this* is now, that all we had to learn from the past was not to repeat it, embraced much more than just the defunct institutions of Cold War-era Communism and its Marxist ideological membrane. Not only did we fail to learn very much from the past—this would hardly have been remarkable. But we have become stridently insistent—in our economic calculations, our political practices, our international strategies, even our educational priorities—that *the past has nothing of interest to teach us*. Ours, we insist, is a new world; its risks and opportunities are without precedent.

Writing in the nineties, and again in the wake of September 11, 2001, I was struck more than once by this perverse contemporary insistence on *not* understanding the context of our present dilemmas, at home and abroad; on *not* listening with greater care to some of the wiser heads of earlier decades; on seeking actively to *forget* rather than to remember, to deny continuity and proclaim novelty on every possible occasion. This always seemed a trifle solipsistic. And as the international events of the early twenty-first century have begun to suggest, it might also be rather imprudent. The recent past may yet be with us for a few years longer. This book is an attempt to bring it into sharper focus.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY is hardly behind us, but already its quarrels and its dogmas, its ideals and its fears are slipping into the obscurity of mis-memory. Incessantly invoked as “lessons,” they are in reality ignored and untaught. This is not altogether surprising. The recent past is the hardest to know and understand. Moreover, the world has undergone a remarkable transformation since 1989, and such transformations always bring a sense of distance and displacement for those who remember how things were before. In the decades following the French Revolution the *docteur de vire* of the vanished *ancien régime* was much regretted by older commentators. One hundred years later, evocations and memoirs

of pre-World War I Europe typically depicted (and still depict) a lost civilization, a world whose illusions had quite literally been blown apart: “Never such innocence again.”¹

But there is a difference. Contemporaries might have regretted the world before the French Revolution, or the lost cultural and political landscape of Europe before August 1914. But they had not *forgotten* them. Far from it: For much of the nineteenth century Europeans were obsessed with the causes and meaning of the French revolutionary transformations. The political and philosophical debates of the Enlightenment were not consumed in the fires of revolution. On the contrary, the French Revolution and its consequences were widely attributed to that same Enlightenment, which thus emerged—for friend and foe alike—as the acknowledged source of the political dogmas and social programs of the century that followed.

In a similar vein, while everyone after 1918 agreed that things would never be the same again, the particular shape that a postwar world should take was everywhere conceived and contested in the long shadow of nineteenth-century experience and thought. Neoclassical economics, liberalism, Marxism (and its Communist stepchild) “revolution,” the bourgeois and the proletariat, imperialism and “industrialism”—in short, the building blocks of the twentieth-century political world—were all nineteenth-century artifacts. Even those who, along with Virginia Woolf, believed that “in or about December 1910, human character changed”—that the cultural upheaval of Europe’s fin de siècle had radically shifted the terms of intellectual exchange—nonetheless devoted a surprising amount of energy to shadowboxing with their predecessors.² The past hung heavy across the present.

Today, in contrast, we wear the last century rather lightly. To be sure, we have memorialized it everywhere: museums, shrines, inscriptions, “heritage sites,” even historical theme parks are all public reminders of “the Past.” But there is a strikingly selective quality to the twentieth century that we have chosen to commemorate. The overwhelming majority of places of official twentieth-century memory are either awowedly nostalgic-triumphalist—praising famous men and celebrating famous victories—or else, and increasingly, opportunities for the acknowledgment and recollection of selective suffering. In the latter

case they are typically the occasion for the teaching of a certain sort of political lesson: about things that were done and should never be forgotten, about mistakes that were made and should not be made again.

The twentieth century is thus on the path to becoming a moral memory palace: a pedagogically serviceable Chamber of Historical Horrors whose way stations are labeled "Munich" or "Pearl Harbor," "Auschwitz" or "Gulag," "Armenia" or "Bosnia" or "Rwanda," with "9-11" as a sort of supererogatory coda, a bloody postscript for those who would forget the lessons of the century or who never properly learned them. The problem with this lapidary representation of the last century as a uniquely horrible time from which we have now, thankfully, emerged is not the description—the twentieth century *was* in many ways a truly awful era, an age of brutality and mass suffering perhaps unequalled in the historical record. The problem is the message: that all of *that* is now behind us, that its meaning is clear, and that we may now advance—unencumbered by past errors—into a different and better era.

But such official commemoration, however benign its motives, does not enhance our appreciation and awareness of the past. It serves as a substitute, a surrogate. Instead of teaching children recent history, we walk them through museums and memorials. Worse still, we encourage citizens and students to see the past—and its lessons—through the particular vector of their own suffering (or that of their ancestors). Today, the "common" interpretation of the recent past is thus composed of the manifold fragments of separate pasts, each of them (Jewish, Polish, Serb, Armenian, German, Asian-American, Palestinian, Irish, homosexual . . .) marked by its own distinctive and assertive victimhood.

The resulting mosaic does not bind us to a shared past, it separates us from it. Whatever the shortcomings of the older national narratives once taught in school, however selective their focus and ruthlessly instrumental their message, they had at least the advantage of providing a nation with past references for present experience. Traditional history, as taught to generations of schoolchildren and college students, gave the present a meaning by reference to the past: Today's names, places, inscriptions, ideas, and allusions could be slotted into a memorized narrative of yesterday. In our time, however, this process has gone into reverse. The past now has no agreed narrative shape of its own. It ac-

quires meaning only by reference to our many and often contrasting present concerns.

This disconcertingly alien character of the past—such that it has to be domesticated with some contemporary significance or lesson before we can approach it—is doubtless in part the result of the sheer speed of contemporary change. "Globalization," shorthand for everything from the Internet to the unprecedented scale of transnational economic exchange, has churned up people's lives in ways that their parents or grandparents would be hard put to imagine. Much of what had for decades, even centuries, seemed familiar and permanent is now passing rapidly into oblivion.

The expansion of communication, together with the fragmentation of information, offers a striking contrast with communities of even the quite recent past. Until the last decades of the twentieth century, most people in the world had limited access to information; but within any one state or nation or community they were all likely to know many of the same things, thanks to national education, state-controlled radio and television, and a common print culture. Today, the opposite applies. Most people in the world outside of sub-Saharan Africa have access to a near infinity of data. But in the absence of any common culture beyond a small elite, and not always even there, the particular information and ideas that people select or encounter are determined by a multiplicity of tastes, affinities, and interests. As the years pass, each one of us has less in common with the fast-multiplying worlds of our contemporaries, not to speak of the world of our forebears.

All of this is surely true—and it has disturbing implications for the future of democratic governance. Nevertheless, disruptive change, even global transformation, is not in itself unprecedented. The economic "globalization" of the late nineteenth century was no less disruptive, except that its implications were initially felt and understood by far fewer people. What is significant about the *present* age of transformations is the unique insouciance with which we have abandoned not just the practices of the past—this is normal enough and not so very alarming—but their very memory. A world just recently lost is already half forgotten.

What, then, is it that have we misplaced in our haste to put the twentieth century behind us? Curious as it may seem, we (or at least we

Who do we miss?

Americans) have forgotten the meaning of war. In part this is, perhaps, because the impact of war in the twentieth century, though global in reach, was not everywhere the same. For most of continental Europe and much of Asia, the twentieth century, at least until the 1970s, was a time of virtually unbroken war: continental war, colonial war, civil war. War in the last century signified occupation, displacement, deprivation, destruction, and mass murder. Countries that lost wars often lost population, territory, security, and independence. But even those countries that emerged formally victorious had similar experiences and usually remembered war much as the losers did. Italy after World War I, China after World War II, and France after both wars might be cases in point. And then there are the surprisingly frequent instances of countries that won a war but "lost the peace": gratuitously wasting the opportunities afforded them by their victory. Israel in the decades following its victory in June 1967 remains the most telling example.

Moreover, war in the twentieth century frequently meant civil war: often under the cover of occupation or "liberation." Civil war played a significant role in the widespread "ethnic cleansing" and forced population transfers of the twentieth century, from India and Turkey to Spain and Yugoslavia. Like foreign occupation, civil war is one of the great "shared" memories of the past hundred years. In many countries "putting the past behind us"—i.e., agreeing to overcome or forget (or deny) a recent memory of internecine conflict and intercommunal violence—has been a primary goal of postwar governments: sometimes achieved, sometimes overachieved.

The United States avoided all that. Americans experienced the twentieth century in a far more positive light. The U.S. was never occupied. It did not lose vast numbers of citizens, or huge swaths of national territory, as a result of occupation or dismemberment. Although humiliated in neocolonial wars (in Vietnam and now in Iraq), it has never suffered the consequences of defeat. Despite the ambivalence of its most recent undertakings, most Americans still feel that the wars their country has fought were "good wars." The USA was enriched rather than impoverished by its role in the two world wars and by their outcome, in which respect it has nothing in common with Britain, the only other major country to emerge unambiguously victorious from those struggles but at

the cost of near-bankruptcy and the loss of empire. And compared with the other major twentieth-century combatants, the U.S. lost relatively few soldiers in battle and suffered hardly any civilian casualties.

As a consequence, the United States today is the only advanced country that still glorifies and exalts the military, a sentiment familiar in Europe before 1945 but quite unknown today. America's politicians and statesmen surround themselves with the symbols and trappings of armed prowess; its commentators mock and scorn countries that hesitate to engage themselves in armed conflict. It is this differential recollection of war and its impact, rather than any structural difference between the U.S. and otherwise comparable countries, which accounts for their contrasting responses to international affairs today.

It also, perhaps, accounts for the distinctive quality of much American writing—scholarly and popular—on the cold war and its outcome. In European accounts of the fall of Communism and the Iron Curtain, the dominant sentiment is one of relief at the final closing of a long, unhappy chapter. Here in the U.S., however, the same story is typically recorded in a triumphalist key.³ For many American commentators and policymakers the message of the last century is that war *works*. The implications of this reading of history have already been felt in the decision to attack Iraq in 2003. For Washington, war remains an option—in this case the first option. For the rest of the developed world it has become a last resort.

After war, the second characteristic of the twentieth century was the rise and subsequent fall of the state. This applies in two distinct but related senses. The first describes the emergence of autonomous nation-states during the early decades of the century, and the recent diminution of their powers at the hands of multinational corporations, transnational institutions, and the accelerated movement of people, money, and goods outside their control. Concerning this process there is little dispute, though it seems likely that those who regard the outcome—a "flat world"—as both desirable and inevitable may be in for a surprise, as populations in search of economic and physical security turn back to the political symbols, legal resources, and physical barriers that only a territorial state can provide.

But the state in my second sense has a more directly political significance.