



**Bernard Wasserstein.** *Barbarism and Civilization: A History of Europe in Our Time.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. xxiii + 901 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-873074-3.

**Reviewed by** Jost Dülffer (Historisches Seminar, Universität zu Köln)

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## Ambiguous Civilization, but Barbarism without Genocide

The book begins and ends with a Walter Benjamin quote: “There is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism” (pp. vii, 793). The citation refers to the dichotomy expressed in the book’s title and sinks the poles between which the history of the old continent from World War I to the present day is located. The presentation emphasizing dichotomy is the great strength of the work and maybe also the only—comparatively minor—weakness. Some readers may be troubled by his conclusion, that “[e]vil stalked the earth in this era, moving men’s minds, ruling their action, and begetting the lies, greed, deceit, and cruelty that are the stuff of the history of Europe in our time” (p. 793). Still, what Bernard Wasserstein achieves with this approach is not grand narrative but a fascinating, well-informed way of telling many stories from many perspectives. Overall, he succeeds in including as much information as possible in a book of nearly 800 pages of text, although one might lament the absence of structuring reflections.

Wasserstein, a prolific writer who has written at least eight books on Jewish history, turns here to a familiar subject. Other authors who have attacked it, like Harold James and Mark Mazower, have designed their tasks in a similar way, while Niall Ferguson tried to sum up too much in his attempt.[1] While James presents an optimistic view and Mazower highlights the catastrophic effects, Wasserstein does both. In his introduction, Wasserstein explains that he has written fifteen chronological chapters with five cross sections around specific mo-

ments or decades. But this description does not do justice to his constant flitting between thematic or geographical focuses in the chapters and even in subchapters. He introduces the relative decline of Europe’s economic or demographic role in the world and follows the path from its role as a continent of emigration to one of major immigration. Also, he discusses symptoms of the decline in religious belief. Demography, intellectual history, literary or other cultural achievements, economies, and social cleavages constitute the steadily changing focuses of the book. In the section on the 1930s, media history and censorship are given attention, as is the “age of anxiety.” Migrations, especially forced migrations, are discussed as part of the histories of many states, not only after the world wars. Family roles, gender development, and leisure culture can be regarded as integrative themes in many parts of this book. Each chapter starts with a literary quote that is unique and well chosen, and Wasserstein derives these snippets from many unexpected sources. Sometimes a quotation’s paradoxical or paradigmatic meaning is only later revealed by the narrative.

Initially, I assumed that Wasserstein, as Zara Steiner does in her book on international relations, would write mainly a political history concentrated on governments and their actions, party politics and coalitions, and international negotiations, treaties, international crises, and their solutions in de-escalation and wars.[2] The wars are treated especially well, if explained in excessive military detail. Still, on the whole, the balance of the book is good.

While generals get due attention, so do the sufferings of simple soldiers, and the battlefield experience of World War I especially is described in a life-like way. Wasserstein's account includes Russia, the Soviet Union, the Ottoman Empire, and Turkey.

I found only two striking omissions from the subject matter, probably made deliberately, because similar Anglo-American works on the topic treat them; still, this decision is difficult to understand from the German standpoint. The first omission relates to the role of the colonial states and their empires in the first half of the twentieth century. Only the "exit from Asia," the Suez adventure, and Harold Macmillan's "wind of change" speech and its consequences receive a few pages of attention. Is the role of all the major or minor empires not a fundamental element in explaining what took place in Europe during the last century? Can one really mention, as Wasserstein does, that West Germany enjoyed the "luxury ... in this period of not having to cope with" the remains of a former empire (p. 532)? While some might prefer to reflect on the German loss of overseas colonies in 1919, still some mention should be made as well of the consequences of the German colonization of National Socialist *Lebensraum* and its subsequent loss of territories in the East. Especially in Wasserstein's explanation of German history after 1945, much remains to be said on the long shadows of this kind of genocidal colonialism beyond his focus on the problems of German partition into two states.

The other major problem in the composition of the book is the consideration of the genocide of the European Jews and the other mass killings committed during the years from 1919 to 1945. While World War II takes up some 130 pages in three chapters ("Hitler Triumphant, 1939-1942," "Life and Death in Wartime," and "End of Hitler's Europe 1942-1945"), the thirteen-page subchapter on "Mass Murder" starts with more than two pages of Soviet mass murders and antisemitism, follows with German antisemitism since 1890, and finally culminates with the Holocaust. These few pages do not describe Jewish sufferings or those of the Slavic "sub-humans" caught up in the German machinery, but instead discuss Adolf Eichmann, Rudolf Höß, and the German apparatus. The resulting picture of the war is affected since, from September 1939 in Poland, the fighting was inextricably an instrument of racial war as an external and internal fact of life in German-ruled Europe.

That said, Wasserstein has written an impressive

book. It draws effectively on German-language scholarship without giving too much responsibility for twentieth-century history to the largest power in central Europe. He writes in an elegant style and makes many associations. When he touches upon a certain topic for the first time, he manages to provide historical background in a few sentences before treating the event. Only in a few places does this strategy seem odd, as when he relates the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, quotes Günther Schabowski's abortive press conference, and then refers to Persian king Cyrus's edict, which freed the Jews from Babylon with "lapidary eloquence" without stumbling (p. 584). It is not Wasserstein's style to mention too many long-term developments, to offer broader analytical considerations, or to deal with the historical expectations or plans of politicians. Even so, the author competently manages to characterize succinctly all the major regimes, including Stalinism and post-war Soviet rule in eastern Europe, along with related political developments. Those tempted to accuse Wasserstein of "nation-hopping" should note that even so, he manages to include precise accounts of the different stages of the Cyprus conflict as well as the history of each of the Baltic states in the quickly changing phases of the last century. Wherever I had some knowledge of events or developments or structures, I found the associations of the author illuminating, and sometimes brilliant. One may find his handling of affairs sober, balanced, and sympathetic, perhaps slightly more so for West Germany than for East Germany.

In comparison with similar works, Wasserstein's book offers far the most effective narrative picture of a declining continent. It is a masterly work painted in the pointillist style. To see the whole picture the reader must step back for a disturbing story of civilization and barbarism. Readers have much to gain academically from this scholarly work.

#### Notes

[1]. Harold James, *Europe Reborn: A History, 1914-2000* (London: Longman, 2004); Marc Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century* (New York: Knopf, 1999); and Niall Ferguson, *The War of the World: Twentieth-Century Conflict and the Descent of the West* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

[2]. See the excellent book by Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

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