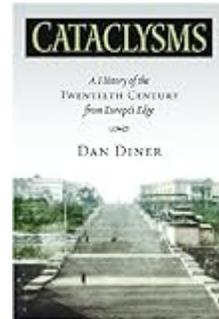




**Dan Diner.** *Cataclysms: A History of the Twentieth Century from Europe's Edge.* Translated by William Templer with Joel Golb. George L. Mosse Series in Modern European Cultural and Intellectual History. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008. viii + 322 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-22350-2.



**Reviewed by** Jacob L. Hamric (Department of History, University of Tennessee)

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## Ethnic Conflict and Civil War in Twentieth-Century Europe

This is a provocative book. Originally published in German as *Das Jahrhundert verstehen* (1999), the ably translated English version of Dan Diner's book offers numerous keen insights on twentieth-century European history. In the introduction, Diner argues for the fusion of two interpretative axes in modern Europe. The first is what the author refers to as a "universal civil war, a war articulated in terms of polarized semantic categories of 'truth,' political belief, and ethical value," between communism in the East and democracy and capitalism in the West (p. 4). He argues that this axis dominated European affairs from 1917 to 1989. The second is constituted by national and ethnic conflict, which Diner notes came to the forefront in the nineteenth century, especially in the Ottoman and Russian empires, then became overshadowed by the universal civil war in the twentieth century, only to return with a vengeance following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In addition, the author claims to use eastern Europe as his geographical focal point—thus bringing to the center the role of the aforementioned empires, and particularly of the minor-

ity groups living within them—in order to demonstrate the validity of his interpretative axes effectively. Finally, Diner explains that the universal civil war was characterized by two distinct periods, 1917-45 and 1945-89. He explains that the first half of the century, due to its conflict, catastrophes, and "cataclysm," has created a "collective memory" that has "obscured the second half" of the century (p. 9). The author argues that the nature of the Cold War itself compressed time, producing "forms of conduct tending toward repetition of the constantly same" (p. 10), while genocidal catastrophes such as the Holocaust, although not aimed at the end of humankind, have placed a much greater burden on historical memory. The work, although easily readable, assumes some background in modern European history, and is best suited for advanced students or scholars.

The book is organized mostly thematically rather than chronologically into five distinct essays that address the author's various arguments. Diner discusses his idea of a universal civil war in chapter 1, stating that "much speaks for confrontation between freedom and equality

as the central interpretative axis for understanding the twentieth century” (p. 48). As Diner puts it, the concept of twentieth-century freedom, pivotal to western (especially Anglo-American) political philosophy dating back to the Enlightenment, constituted a “liberation from the traditional ties of an estate-based, corporative nature,” and was based on the “principle of the free individual whose obligations to society were construed as an expression of free will” (p. 38). By contrast, Diner states, the concept of equality evolved into the antithesis of freedom by the mid-nineteenth century due to the long-term impact of the radical phase of the French Revolution. With the onset of Marxism, definitions of equality as a political term rejected liberal-democratic notions of freedom and became expressed in the Marxist terminology of class conflict. In this respect, the author views the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution as the starting point of the universal civil war. Just months after American entry into the war, Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin and U.S. president Woodrow Wilson outlined their criteria for equality and freedom as “a universal claim based on a social interpretation of the social environment” (p. 43). These events initiated the first phase of the universal civil war, in which the West enacted various policies of intervention and isolation against Lenin’s and Joseph Stalin’s Russia, with a few notable exceptions, until the end of the Second World War, when the second phase began with the onset of a full-blown ideological and political struggle.

Diner fully admits that his interpretation of freedom versus equality as the center of a universal civil war is “incapable of assimilating two events,” the Anglo-American alliance with the Soviet Union against the Axis during World War II, and National Socialist Germany’s racial policies of mass murder (p. 48). He argues, however, that the western powers and the Soviet Union “could draw together on the basis of historically transmitted and geo-politically shaped premises,” as these countries at least “espoused ... societal interpretation[s] of the world,” albeit sharply opposing ones (p. 49). Examined in the broader geo-political reality of twentieth-century diplomacy, the Grand Alliance merely “constituted a manifest, dramatic exception” (p. 49). Even more boldly, Diner asserts that Nazism lay “outside the conventional boundaries” of universal civil war between capitalism and democracy versus communism (p. 49). Despite the radical anti-Bolshevism of Nazi ideology, the author sees an obvious distinction between anti-Bolshevism in the National Socialist regime and that of the western liberal democracies. The conflict between

the western powers and the Soviet Union was based on political values originating in the Enlightenment, which offered opposing interpretations of social reality. Since these opposing interpretations had spread globally, such a conflict “took on the trappings of a civil war” and “transcended traditional demarcations based on loyalty to a state or a nation” (p. 50). By contrast, Nazi racial ideology precluded the possibility of its proponents partaking in civil war. The Nazis had no desire to promote their values or to recruit outsiders from the German racial community to join their cause. Their worldview, based on race rather than politics, did not simply transcend concepts of state and nation, it destroyed them.

Diner brings his second axis to the forefront in chapter 2. He argues that countries in interwar eastern Europe, such as Hungary and Poland, offer the best case studies for the intertwining of national and ethnic conflict and the universal civil war. For instance, after Bela Kun’s establishment of a Soviet Hungarian Republic in March 1919, the western powers encouraged Rumania (and Hungary’s other neighbors) to press for counter-revolution—in other words, anti-Bolshevism—and to secure its irredentist claims in Hungary, which were already being worked out at the postwar peace conference. The key to Kun’s support, according to Diner, was not communism at all, but rather nationalism: the Hungarian people initially did not care about Kun’s rhetoric of class struggle as long as he maintained his commitment to preserving Hungary’s territorial integrity. When the communist leader started a bloody purge against Hungarian counter-revolutionaries, whom he equated with Rumanian imperialists, most Hungarians supported Rumanian intervention and the overthrow of his regime. As for Rumania, it did not need to embrace the anti-Bolshevism of the West, as it was more than willing to invade Hungary simply to fulfill its own territorial ambitions. The author offers a similar account of the intermixing of his interpretative axes in interwar Poland. Here, Diner surmises that the Polish-Soviet War of 1920-21 had dramatic consequences for Polish foreign and domestic policy. For starters, the war led to a rapprochement between Russia and Germany in the 1922 Rapallo Treaty. Moreover, conflict with Russia radicalized Polish nationalism, as Polish leaders depicted Poland as a “white nation” facing the menace of the “red” Soviet Union. As a result, the possibility of a federated structure in Poland gave way to an ethnic idea of the nation and the attempted “Polonization” of its religious (Jewish) and ethnic (German, White Russian, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian) minorities. In sum, Diner notes that eastern European coun-

tries such as Poland and Hungary had an extremely hard time balancing ideas of freedom and equality or democracy and communism with national-self-determination, a dilemma that often led to national and ethnic strife within their borders.

Diner's capstone essay is perhaps chapter 4, in which he focuses on genocide in the first half of the twentieth century. He begins by giving an overview of the "complex process of religious ethnification" in the Ottoman Empire from the early nineteenth century to World War I (p. 160). He states that the transformation of the "millets" (religious communities) into nations by the early twentieth century left only the Greeks and Armenians as major minorities in an increasingly Turkish-Islamic state. Thus, the presence of the minority issue in the heart of the empire increased at the same time nationalism was spreading throughout eastern Europe. As a result, Diner explains, ethnic conflict in the Ottoman Empire as directed by the Turks against the Greeks and Armenians became widespread. Such conflict only stopped after the mutual expulsions of Muslim Turks and Orthodox Greeks from Greece and Anatolia, respectively, following World War I. As for the Armenians, the author notes they had no homeland or nation to escape to, and thus were doomed to suffer the fate of genocide initiated by the Ottoman government. Diner then devotes the bulk of the chapter to analyzing the atrocities committed by the Nazi regime. He uses Stalin's Soviet Union as a point of comparison to demonstrate the uniqueness of the Nazi genocide of the Jews. On the one hand, he aptly points out the brutal nature of the Stalin regime, explaining that no one was safe from sanctioned terror, not even the highest echelons of the Communist Party; in contrast, in Adolf Hitler's Germany, "everyone could be certain of his fate, one way or the other" (p. 191). Therefore, at least comparatively, "Hitler's rule gives the impression of order, even of legal security" (p. 191). On the other hand, Diner asserts that the methods and motivations of killing in Nazi Germany far exceeded the atrocities in Stalin's Soviet Union. In terms of forced labor, he explains, although the death of thousands of the slaves was "part of the bargain" in both regimes, "it was not a specific and central aim" in Stalinism (p. 192). When it came to killing the Jews, the Nazis imposed forced labor "merely to create an impression of utility" (p. 192). Diner states that the Nazis "killed for the sake of killing" (p. 192), not only going beyond any degree of criminality Stalinism had to offer, but going far beyond "normal" antisemitism—as seen in interwar Poland, for example—even at the expense of the regime's own survival during World War II, defying "uni-

versally valid standards of self-preservation" (p. 193).

But the author does not stop there. His chapter on genocide is crucial because it exemplifies how Diner fits numerous sub-arguments and bold claims into his larger narrative. For example, Diner formulates several provocative conclusions about the origins of and responsibility for the Holocaust. He points out that the mass extermination of Polish Jews was well underway when the Nazis expanded deportation to German Jews in the fall of 1941. As he puts it, the Holocaust came about from "a gliding escalation, the limitless extension of a practice of extermination already established in principle" (p. 177). The infamous Wannsee Conference of January 1942, although useful in fulfilling a need at an administrative level for "a symbolic act," did not constitute an "official resolution sanctioning action" (p. 178). What the conference did do, the author states, is demonstrate that no one in the Nazi bureaucracy opposed Reinhard Heydrich's genocidal policies (much to Heydrich's relief), while allowing other Nazi officials present to later excuse themselves from responsibility for ordering mass murder by explaining they were "at a loss" as to the precise reasons for the meeting in the first place (p. 178). In fact, Diner not only holds such bureaucrats responsible for the Holocaust, he also places collective blame on the German people. Of crucial importance, he argues, is the role of ideology. He refutes the claim that ideology, in this case the Nazis' worldview, needs to follow an elaborate program administered at the micro level. Instead, ideology "works through osmosis. It spreads a thin veneer of justification over events and can perform a useful service in allaying doubts or overcoming moral inhibitions when under social pressure" (p. 179). In short, all ideology really needs to be successful is for someone to appeal to it at certain critical moments. The group targeted also plays a key role; as long as the victims are not "persons with whom one feels a bond of kinship or ethnicity," little, if any, moral inhibition will stop genocides (p. 179). Although many Germans claimed not to know "what" was happening to the Jews, it is highly unlikely they did not know "something" was happening to them (p. 180). Diner's final verdict: it did not matter if Germans had an "inward conviction" about killing the Jews, it mattered only that "they acted 'as if' they were so motivated" (p. 180).

*Cataclysms* raises important questions about modern German and European history. No reader is likely to agree with all of the author's assertions. At times, Diner seems to stretch his argument regarding a universal civil war. For example, he claims that the Spanish Civil War,

often presented by scholars as the classic struggle between fascism and its opponents, was not about fascism, or even ideology for that matter. All of the great powers, including Hitler's Germany, used geo-political rather than ideological reasons to enter the conflict (or to stay out of it, in the case of Great Britain and France). Hitler decided to help the Spanish nationalists as a tool for implementing his grandiose plans for German expansion and ultra-German nationalism, not as an attempt to influence a war between Bolshevism and anti-Bolshevism. Such an argument coincides nicely with Diner's conceptualization that Nazism does not fit the twentieth-century civil war between democracy/freedom and communism/equality. This point of contention relates to the larger issue of the scope of Diner's work, in which Germany clearly plays a central role. If Nazism is simply an exception to the author's civil war model, it is an extraordinarily important one. At the same time, Diner is mostly careful in passing judgment or making forceful

arguments.

The number of subplots and conclusions incorporated in the various essays is astonishing. In his framing of a western concept of freedom, for example, Diner astutely recognizes some notable differences between the political philosophy of the maritime powers (Great Britain and the United States) and the continental powers (mainly France); in analyzing the rise of Hitler in the Weimar Republic, he reframes the question: instead of dictatorship versus democracy, scholars should consider dictatorship versus dictatorship—in other words, why Hitler, and not Franz von Papen, Kurt von Schleicher, or Alfred Hugenberg? Although eastern Europe is not the focal point of the work, as Diner makes it out to be in the introduction, he should also be commended for writing a geographically well-balanced account of twentieth-century Europe that includes the Ottoman Empire, Russia, and eastern Europe as fully as it treats Great Britain and France.

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