A year ago we marked (rather than celebrated) the centenary of the outbreak of what was at the time the most terrible war in history. Then this year we not only marked but also celebrated the 70th anniversary of the end of an even more terrible war.

Looking back on those three decades from 1914 to 1945, when a continent that had prided itself on being a cradle of civilization was torn apart by hideous destruction, by tyranny in the name of new ideologies and by mass murder, it’s not surprising that some have seen the 20th century as “the most terrible . . . in Western history.” Isaiah Berlin’s words were quoted (among other epigraphs to the same effect) at the front of “The Age of Extremes,” by E.J. Hobsbawm, itself one of a number of attempts to write a synoptic or panoramic history of that century. “Worst of times” has become a familiar phrase — platitude maybe — of our age.

What made that descent into darkness so grim was that the century had begun in a spirit of optimism, “with high hopes for further material progress” as Konrad H. Jarausch writes in his sweeping survey “Out of Ashes,” only to have its faith in progress — or merely in civilization — challenged, even shattered. First came the horrifying bloodshed of World War I, “the great seminal catastrophe of this century,” in George Kennan’s well-known words, from which all other disasters flowed.
How to make sense of this seemingly inexplicable regression into barbarism — and also of that other astonishing story, the recovery of Europe after 1945? Bernard Wasserstein took the title of his excellent book on the same subject as Jarausch, “Barbarism and Civilization,” from Walter Benjamin’s observation that “there is no document of civilization that is not simultaneously a document of barbarism.” If nothing else, the age offered a corrective to naïve faith that material advance in itself would make us better people.

One thing Jarausch can provide in his own telling is an unusual personal perspective. German by origin, born in Magdeburg during a war in which his father was killed on the Russian front, he belongs, as he too truly says, to the last generation with a traditional Gymnasium education, instructed in Greek and Latin as well as modern languages. Having come to the United States to complete his education, he stayed put and is now a professor at the University of North Carolina and, in his own words, “a Euro-American hybrid.”

His previous books have been on German history, including a study of Bethmann Hollweg, the chancellor a century ago when Germany unhappily plunged into war, and “After Hitler,” which starts at the end of the descent into darkness and looks at how Germany recovered and “recivilized,” to become the most successful democracy, and economy, in Europe. “Out of Ashes” doesn’t pretend to any overarching explanation, or to be a work of original scholarship. A narrative based on very wide reading in several languages, it might be called an old-fashioned book by an old-fashioned historian, which are not words of dispraise in this reviewer’s vocabulary.

When the 20th century began, the age of European empire was reaching its apogee, and imperial rivalry is one of many reasons often advanced for the catastrophe of 1914. As much ink has been spent on the question of how the Great War started and who bore responsibility for it as on any other historical topic, and to not much effect if that means finding a conclusive answer.
One thing we may safely say is that none of the European powers would have embarked on the war if they had known how it would be waged, what its cost would be and how it would end: in exile for the kaiser, death for the czar and his family, over 1.3 million dead for the French. As for the British, Jarausch says, they “wanted to eliminate German competition without too much upsetting the balance of power on the continent,” though in fact they failed to eliminate the competition while utterly upsetting the balance.

No consequence was so direct as the Bolshevik conquest of Russia, which would never have taken place without the war. Apart from anything else, had Karl Marx’s prophetic schema been true, the October Revolution would not have occurred in such a backward country. “The Red October was therefore a minority coup d’état that claimed to be a popular revolution from below,” as Jarausch rightly says.

If “Out of Ashes” can be said to have a single theme, it hinges on “the key concept” of modernity, so that, for example, “modernization was deeply involved in the imperial project.” Now modernity has become a fashionable concept, but it’s a most elusive one, and it presents plenty of problems, especially in the early 20th century.

Was Bolshevism modern? Was Fascism? Or was National Socialism? Mussolini and Hitler would have said so. In a chapter on “Modernist Provocations,” Jarausch looks at art and architecture, but provocation or not, there was much advanced building in Germany and Italy as well as in Russia, during the 1930s. Or as Jarausch rather oddly puts it, “The Nazi rejection of modernism was itself a product of modernity since they also embraced it selectively.”

After 1918, democracy was fragile in much of Europe, and the Depression was the tipping point, in Germany and elsewhere. And yet, once again confounding Marxists, it was the radical right that often made a stronger appeal than socialism.
If trying to attribute blame for the Great War is fruitless, there may be a more serious argument about who in the 1920s was responsible for the catastrophic failure of constitutional government, or even basic decency. And here is something Jarausch might have developed more from his cross-Atlantic perspective.

He mentions in passing that the American government “was unwilling to forgive its loans to the Entente countries for the purchase of war matériel that had fueled a boom in the United States,” but there was more to it. After World War I, the Americans withdrew into a shell. In an ugly period not merely of isolationism but of nativism and racism, they slammed the door shut to immigrants, while refusing to accept their international duty.

At the beginning of the 1920s the French and the British longed for any kind of American security guarantee against German revanchism. And by the end of the decade a Foreign Office representative in London wrote forlornly that “Great Britain is still staggering from the effects of the superhuman effort made during the war, is loaded with a great burden of debt and is crippled by the evil of unemployment,” while conscious of the total superiority of the United States, “25 times as large, five times as wealthy, three times as populous, twice as ambitious, almost invulnerable” — but determined to keep clear of Europe. That shortsightedness was something for which many young Americans would pay a heavy price after 1941, though not as heavy as the price Europe paid for its own follies and sins.

Sometimes Jarausch’s pen nods. The ’20s sound more plodding than roaring from sentences like: “In the fast-paced metropolitan centers, a quest for romance drove flappers into dance halls to meet young men in search of diversion.” He has already called Kaiser Wilhelm’s order to his troops in 1900 to be as “terrible as the Huns” an “ill-advised injunction,” when “exterminatory” or plain “repulsive” might have been better words. When he writes that the German Jews’ “ostentatious accumulation of wealth spurred widespread envy,” he doubtless doesn’t mean it to sound as it might to some
ears, but to say that “it was the compliance of most victims that made the Final Solution possible” is a little worse than clumsy. What made it possible, alas, was the passive or active compliance of the Germans who carried out the great murder.

No book of this length can be inerrant, but to say that “several million tribesmen” inhabited German South-West Africa (now Namibia) at the beginning of the last century when the actual number was less than one million — even before the genocidal German campaign against the Hereros — is careless. The great European newspapers of that age did not include Le Monde, which was founded in 1944; and Stanley Baldwin was not a “hard-liner.”

The age of great European wars ended as abruptly as it had begun. Also unforeseen, the consequences for the decolonized countries were often disappointing or unhappy. Within the completely artificial borders left behind by the departing powers there were far too many disparate peoples unhappily stranded in someone else’s country.

Despite such problems, however, Europe itself was reborn after 1945 from the ashes of Jarausch’s title. Economic and social revival was followed by the conception and birth of the European Economic Community or Common Market. These years were what the French called the trente glorieuses, the astonishing three decades of growing productivity and prosperity. Then, in the mid-1970s it all came to a grinding halt. In Eastern Europe, there was an even deeper problem, with “real existing socialism” ending in failure, frustration and implosion.

According to Jarausch, change came once more in the years after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 as Europe took additional steps toward unification. “Ending a period of prolonged stagnation,” he writes, “the creation of the European Union (E.U.) was the result of a second relaunching of integration.” Although awkwardly expressed, that seems to imply that developments
springing from the 1992 Maastricht Treaty brought renewed prosperity, which he can scarcely mean.

To the contrary, the years since Maastricht have been peculiarly bitter for Europe — and for “Europe” as a political concept. It proved impotent when the former Yugoslavia was torn apart, and by now it should be impossible to speak of a common foreign and security policy for the E.U. as anything but a fantasy.

The recovery of Europe after the “most terrible” century may be a wonder. And yet this is not a happy moment for Euro-enthusiasts. Although Jarausch dismisses “federalist celebrations of the ‘superstate’ of Europe,” he cheerfully writes that “the European project is . . . very much alive,” words that must sound hollow in Athens at present.

Despite its comparative demographic decline — from about 25 percent of the world’s population in 1914 to about 11 percent in 2013 — Europe is not dead or dying, as some neoconservatives gloatingly suggest. But to recover, it will need to revive once again, this time perhaps from the ashes of a doomed drive toward an unachievable “ever-closer union.”

OUT OF ASHES

A New History of Europe in the Twentieth Century

By Konrad H. Jarausch


Geoffrey Wheatcroft is the author of “The Controversy of Zion,” “The Strange Death of Tory England” and “Yo, Blair!”

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