



**Guys:** This is a two-part reading. Part One is a *transcript* of an interview of the author on the NPR radio program called *Fresh Air*; and Part Two is an excerpt from his book. You must read both parts, digest them, and be prepared to be tested on them. To those of you who also wish to *listen* to the interview, click on the link below. (By the way, if your folks emigrated from Europe to the U.S. in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War—1940s and 1950s— then you will understand why.)

Source: <http://www.npr.org/2013/07/24/204538728/after-wwii-europe-was-a-savage-continent-of-devastation>

## PART ONE

### Transcript

## After WWII, Europe Was a 'Savage Continent' of Devastation

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TERRY GROSS, HOST:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross. Imagine a world without institutions: no governments, no schools or universities, no access to any information, no banks. Money no longer has any worth. There are no shops, because no one has anything to sell. Law and order are virtually nonexistent because there's no police force and no judiciary. Men with weapons roam the streets, taking what they want. Women of all classes and ages prostitute themselves for food and protection.

I'm quoting here from the opening of the book "Savage Continent." It's not a futuristic thriller. It's a book about Europe right after World War II, when many European cities were in ruins, millions of people were displaced, vengeance killings were common, and so was rape. And some countries were deporting unwanted ethnic groups.

My guest Keith Lowe is the author of "Savage Continent," which has just been published in paperback in the U.S. It won this year's Hessel-Tiltman Prize for History from the English branch of PEN, the international writers' organization. Lowe is also author of the book "Inferno," about the devastation of Hamburg during World War II.

Keith Lowe, welcome to FRESH AIR. Before we go into some of the details in your book, tell us why you wanted to write a book about what Europe was like right after World War II.

KEITH LOWE: Well, I suppose I was used to seeing this sort of, these wonderful, cozy myths about the way the war ended, and, you know, everybody celebrating and sailors grabbing hold of nurses in New York's Times Square and kissing them, and all these sort of things. And I was aware that it hadn't really quite ended like that.

I mean, there was lots of unfinished business all around Europe - in fact, all around Asia, as well, come to think of it. But it struck me that there wasn't really anything which went into detail about how the war hadn't really finished in a lot of parts of Europe.

So, yeah, it was something which has always fascinated me, and I wanted to set a few records straight, if you like.

GROSS: To set the scene for what happened after the war, let's just talk briefly about what happened during the war in terms of the massive destruction and how cities were destroyed. So people, after the war, a lot of people had no homes. They had been displaced. They had nowhere to go. So would you just give us an overview about some of the massive destruction throughout Europe?

LOWE: Yeah. I mean, it's difficult for us now to realize quite how bad the destruction was. In fact, it was difficult for British people and Americans to really understand how it was, even at the time. You know, we'd seen photographs of devastated cities in the immediate aftermath of the war, but when officials actually went across to Europe from London, they were really shocked by what they saw.

I mean, they were kind of expecting it to look a little bit like, I don't know, London or Manchester or those places that had been bombed during the German blitz. But, of course, when they arrived in places like Germany or Poland, they saw that the damage was exponentially worse.

So Warsaw, for example, was 90 percent destroyed, and this was just one city out of hundreds all across Europe which had been almost sort of wiped off the face of the map, really. There are plenty of reports, which I could quote to you, actually. I'll read a quote to you now from somebody who witnessed the devastation of Hamburg in May 1945. This is a guy called Philip Dark, who was a British lieutenant, who arrived in Hamburg just at the end of the war.

And he said, he wrote in a diary, he said: (Reading) We swung in towards the center and started to enter a city devastated beyond all comprehension. It was more than appalling, as far as the eye could see, square mile after square mile of empty shells of building, twisted girders scarce crowded in the air; radiators of a flat jutting out from the shaft of a still-standing wall, like a crucified pterodactyl skeleton, horrible, hideous shapes of chimneys sprouting from the frame of the wall. The whole pervaded by an atmosphere of ageless quiet. Such impressions are incomprehensible unless seen.

So that gives you a sort of idea of the horror that these people were struck with when they saw the devastation for the first time.

GROSS: And as you point out, not only were buildings destroyed, but institutions were destroyed. There were, in many places, no schools, no transportation, no post office, no police station, no hospital. It's so difficult to imagine what it would be like to be displaced under circumstances like that.

LOWE: Yeah. If anything, the destruction of institutions was even worse than what happened to the physical buildings of Europe. I mean, if you think that all the governments and the police forces and so on had been swept away by the war, I mean, these are the sort of institutions which hold a society together. So if you take all that away, then what's left, really, is chaos.

GROSS: And you write that during and after the war, there was incredible famine through parts of Europe, and that in fact, one of the Nazis' ways of dealing with this during the war was to try to find food for its people by starving some of the populations where it had invaded. Can you describe what the plan was?

LOWE: Well, I mean, in Germany, things actually during the war were not really so bad, compared to other parts of Europe. I mean, of course there was a lot of bombing going on, but actually, you know, women weren't forced to work like they were in Britain, for example. There were still things like hair salons for them to go to. There was plenty of food to go around.

But the only way that this was maintained was by taking this food and these resources from all across the rest of Europe. So, for example, in Holland, in The Netherlands, just towards the end of the war in the beginning of 1945, there was a terrible famine and people starving. They had rations of a certain amount of food per day, but it was pointless to even think about this, because there wasn't any food in the shops.

People were reduced to doing things like eating tulip bulbs because there was just - there was nothing else to go around. They'd leave the cities and go out into the countryside, desperately sort of petitioning farmers to give them something, anything, and, you know, swapping their watches or, you know, oil paintings or anything they could take along to trade for food.

So, yeah, conditions in - all across Europe were pretty terrible, especially towards the end of the war. It really struck Germany, as soon as the war had finished. They got a real shock after the war.

GROSS: So you're saying that food was taken from countries that Germany had invaded, and that food was taken back to feed the Germans?

LOWE: Yes, absolutely. I mean, that was part of the reason for invading eastwards into the Ukraine and so on, was to get hold of the vast food supplies that were available in Eastern Europe. I mean, they wanted to make sure that they had food security. Of course, there are all kinds of other reasons, too. But yes, once that was removed, they struggled to get by. So they had to get food from other areas of Europe.

As the Third Reich got smaller and smaller and smaller, as the Allies sort of approached on each side, their food problems became worse, and eventually they were defeated, and life in Germany was intolerable. I mean, the people were living on 700, 800 calories a day for over a year after the war had finished in Germany.

GROSS: So if you're just joining us, we're talking about life in Europe right after World War II, and my guest Keith Lowe is the author of the book "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II." And it's just come out in paperback in the United States.

Let's get to life after the war in Europe. First of all, the Allies allowed slave labor of some Germans. Would you explain who was forced into this slave labor?

LOWE: Well, various people. It depends where you were in Europe. I mean, we and the Western Allies took a lot of German soldiers prisoner and took them back to the States or took them across the Channel to Britain. And, you know, rather than have them just sitting, languishing in some prisoner of war camp, we put them to work, which is fair enough.

But, you know, this lasted up until the middle of 1947. So, yeah, there was - the prisoners of war were one section of people. But once you get into Eastern Europe, there were large civilian German populations living all across Eastern Europe, had been for centuries. And, you know, people in Poland or Czechoslovakia or Hungary or wherever decided after the war they didn't want these German populations anymore. So they wanted to expel them. But in the meantime - this takes time. So in the meantime, they rounded them up and put them into sort of transit camps and hired them out to - as labor on local farms and so on.

GROSS: In your book, you write that forced laborers in Czechoslovakia were routinely humiliated in ways that deliberately emulated the Nazi treatment of Jews. And then you print a document that was posted in a district of Prague in June of 1945 by a local national committee in Prague, and this document was meant to explain how they were going to, quote, "solve the questions of Germans, Hungarians (technical difficulties)."

And I should ask you: Why is Hungarians in there?

LOWE: Hungarians, because Hungarians were seen as collaborators with the Germans. So they were seen as an ethnic group who were not wanted in the country anymore.

GROSS: OK, so would you read an excerpt of this?

LOWE: So they were included, too. Yeah, sure. The document says: (Reading) All persons from 14 years of age who come under the category German, Hungarian, traitor or collaborator will wear on the left side, visibly, on white canvas, size 10 by 10 centimeters, a swastika, together with the number under which they will be registered. No person marked with a swastika will receive normal ration cards.

Secondly, it says: (Reading) No person marked with a swastika is allowed to use tramway cars, except when they go direct to work, at which time they must do so in the trailer. Seats must not be used by these persons. And thirdly, no person marked with the swastika is allowed to use the pavement - in other words, a sidewalk. They may move only on the roadway.

And then at the end of the document, it says: These measures are only temporary, pending the deportation of all these people.

GROSS: Were there expulsions like this throughout Europe?

LOWE: There were expulsions all over Europe. You see, the different nationalities around Europe who had been found or perceived to have collaborated with the Germans were not really welcome in countries where they were minorities. So, you know, you have Hungarians in Slovakia. You have Ukrainians in Poland. They wanted to expel them.

But really, the biggest minority all over Europe which was really hated after the war was, of course, the Germans. And there were German populations everywhere in Europe, had been for centuries. And it's estimated between 12 and 16 million Germans were removed from their homes and shunted in Germany just after the war.

GROSS: And are these largely Germans who had lived in these other countries for generations, or are these Germans who had fled from Germany during the war?

LOWE: Well, a little bit of both. There were Germans who had moved into these countries during the war to take advantage of the fact that you know, Germans were now in control of Europe. But actually most of them were Germans who had spread out over the centuries all across Europe.

And, of course, in Poland, there were a huge number of Germans who had to be kicked out of the country because Poland had taken over a part of Germany after the war. So, you know, this large chunk of Germany was now not Germany anymore. It was Poland. So they needed to remove all the Germans in order to let the Poles come in and take over their position.

GROSS: Where did the expelled Germans go?

LOWE: Well, this is it. They're expelled into a country which has been devastated. I mean, there's - there really is nowhere for a lot of them to go. They're shoved into a Germany where there's not enough food to go around for the people who are already there. There's no shelter. And suddenly, you have another 12 or 16 million people arriving.

And, of course, the local population don't really regard these people as proper Germans. They're quite resentful of these sort of new arrivals. So there's a lot of enmity between the sort of Reich Germans and these sort of ethnic Germans from elsewhere. So, yeah, it must have been awful for all concerned, really, a really terrible time.

GROSS: You know, you were talking about how whole groups of people were deported from, you know, from several countries after the war because they wanted to get the Germans out. They wanted to get collaborators and traitors out of their countries. And it's odd, in a sense, because what they're doing in part is trying to create more ethnic purity, which is what the Germans were guilty of.

LOWE: Well, exactly. It's kind of ironic, isn't it, that actually, the people after the war kind of finished off what the Germans had started, in some ways. And it was - this was a perennial problem. This wasn't something that was new to the Second World War. You know, during the aftermath of the First World War, they had had a - they tried to sort of purge Europe of these sort of minority communities in various different countries by changing the borders of the countries to suit the populations.

But really, it was impossible, because all the different ethnic minorities across Europe were too dispersed. So, you know, after the Second World War, where they saw nationality had really been a major part of the violence during the war, they thought the only way to prevent it breaking out again was to move the populations around Europe, to try and make sure that, you know, all the Poles lived in Poland, all the Ukrainians lived in Ukraine and all the Germans lived in Germany, and so on.

GROSS: My guest is Keith Lowe, author of "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II." We'll talk more after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Keith Lowe, and he's the author of the book "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II." And it's just been published in paperback in the U.S. In the search for collaborators after World War II, for those who collaborated with the Germans, women were singled out if they had slept with a German.

So a lot of women through Europe were punished, and you write one of the typical punishments for having consorted - as the word was used, consorted with a German - was a public head shaving. And some of these were kind of like ritualistic public head shavings. Can you talk about that?

LOWE: Yeah, sure. I mean, this is a punishment, which happened most famously in France, but actually all across Europe, also in, you know, up in Scandinavia, in Greece, in Italy, in The Netherlands, and so on. Women were kind of seen - I suppose symbolically - as a sort of embodiment of the nation, if you like. So the fact that some of these women had slept with German soldiers was kind of seen as the ultimate betrayal.

So come the end of the war, the local populations wanted to put this right, and the way they did this was by rounding up these poor, unfortunate women and ritually humiliating them. I mean, quite often, they were stripped, sometimes completely naked, but quite often to a degree of nakedness. They were paraded before the local communities, taken to, say, the public square, where they were put up on a stage, and then had their heads shaved in front of everybody.

So the whole point was that everybody in the community would be able to identify these women, and, you know, they would be identified forevermore as the people who had betrayed their nations.

It was quite a widespread problem. I mean, in Norway, for example, about 10 percent of the women of marriageable age had had a German boyfriend during the war. In France, it's estimated there are around 80 to 100,000 illegitimate children of German soldiers born in France. So, you know, that just goes to show the extent of the sort of - the number of women who were willing to sleep with German soldiers.

GROSS: What happened to those babies and other babies like them after the war? Were they considered a threat?

LOWE: Absolutely. This is one of the things that really probably surprised me most during the research for the book, actually, is the way that children were treated after the war. And children of Germans were treated terribly by their local communities. I mean, they were

shunned. They were, you know, ridiculed in school. In some cases, there's anecdotal stories about some of these infants being killed by resistance members.

I mean, it's really quite a shocking state of affairs after the war. I mean, the place that sums it up most, I suppose, is probably Norway, now I come to think of it, because most of Europe tried to sort of sweep this issue under the carpet, pretend it hadn't happened. You know, they punished their women, and then tried to pretend that it was all over.

But in Norway, they took the bull by the horns, and they thought, you know, we've got these children. They're children of German soldiers. Obviously, they're going to grow up to be a threat to the nation, because they will inherit German characteristics. There were all kinds of bizarre government documents claiming that these kids are going to grow up to have a propensity to want to start marching and listening to military music and so on, simply because they had German genes.

And they set up a government committee to try and work out how they could get rid of these kids, how they could export them to somewhere, anywhere outside Norway. So they immediately struck up a deal with Australia. They wanted to send about 10,000 of these kids to Australia.

And the Australians were on board for a while, until they realized that they were German children. And so they - you know, then they weren't interested anymore. Throughout this whole process, these children are considered German children, regardless of the fact that their mothers are all Norwegian. It's a bizarre situation. I can't imagine it happening today, but really awful the way these kids were treated after the war.

GROSS: But they were never deported.

LOWE: They were never deported, because they couldn't find any legal way of doing it, and they couldn't find anyone who was willing to take them on. But in Norway, these children were not given Norwegian citizenship until they were 18 years old. So every year, their mothers had to take them to the police station to register them as kind of like an enemy alien living in our midst. Imagine the humiliation of that every year until you're 18.

GROSS: Keith Lowe will be back in the second half of the show. He's the author of "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II." I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

...author of the book "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II." It's about life in devastated cities with no food or law and order, and it describes the vengeance killings, expulsions and the continued victimization of Jews and other minorities after peace was declared.

You'd been talking about how women who were found to have consorted with Germans had to often undergo public ritualistic head shavings to shame them in public and punish them in public. But you also write that even women who weren't collaborators were in danger throughout Europe after World War II because rape was so common. And if you could describe why rape was such a widespread problem after the war.

LOWE: Well, firstly, there was - it's terrible to say, but there was the opportunity. There was nobody really keeping control. There were no sort of police forces and so on keeping soldiers under control and stopping them from doing these things. When the Allies invaded, they could pretty much do what they liked, so there was a proportion of them who did. But there's also a sort of, there's kind of a, I think, a psychological thing. Like I was saying before, you know, the women as a symbol of the nation. There was something psychological about the way particularly the Soviets, when they arrived in Eastern Germany, it was a way of asserting their domination over Germany, was to go in and dominate the women. So there was a huge amount of rape. When the Soviets arrived in Germany, it's estimated around two million women were raped by soldiers. I mean horrendous idea of what it must've been like to be a woman in these circumstances. But you know, a smaller percentage were raped by Western Allied soldiers, partly because we had a little bit more discipline over British and American soldiers. The Red Army was much more left to its own devices, really, than British and American soldiers were.

GROSS: But you write that even in countries that have been liberated from the Germans, Allied soldiers who participated in that liberation felt like, well, I earned the right to have some sex and it's going to be with you. You know, that there was a sense of like, I earned it, you owe it to me and I'm going to take it.

LOWE: Yeah. Absolutely. And, you know, this is a problem. Even, there were even people who were liberated from concentration camps who were starving and were approached by Allied soldiers who expected them to sleep with them. They said, you know, we liberated you, what are you going to do to - how are you going to show your gratitude? There was one particular woman who was interviewed, whose interview I use for the book, who said, you know, I was emaciated. I had no flesh on me at all. Why they should want to have me is beyond me. But they were animals. They just wanted to have sex. What could I do?

GROSS: So with an epidemic of rape, you also have a lot of children being born who are born as a result of the rape, and you also have a lot of VD as a result spreading through Europe, right?

LOWE: Yeah. A huge amount of VD. And I mean this is partly - the problem is that women become a sort of currency in a way. I mean any Allied soldier who wants to have sex with any woman, he's got vast amounts of wealth compared to all of the local population. They're all starving. They need food. He wants sex. He's got food. I mean there were people who would sell their bodies for a Hershey bar. You know, I came across 10-year-old girls who had venereal disease because they had to sell themselves to Allied soldiers. And this was epidemic. I mean it was everywhere. It was across the whole of Europe and VD went along with it.

GROSS: Let's talk about the Jews who had survived World War II, but you know, many Jews from Germany had fled to other countries. If they hadn't, they were probably killed during the war. And, you know, Jews were already living through Europe. Were Jews welcome in the countries they were living in after World War II?

LOWE: Well, you would expect, wouldn't you, that after everything that the Jews had been through, when they came home after the war you'd have expect them to at least have some kind of welcome or some kind of sympathy. But actually, really, the opposite was true. I mean in general they were treated either with indifference or with outright hostility. Now, there were various reasons for this. After all, the propaganda that had been doing the rounds throughout the war and before the war, there were plenty of people who had ideological and sort of racial reasons to dislike the Jews. But really most of it I think came down to the idea of the property of the Jews. I mean when the Jews were sent away to concentration camps, or expelled or fled, they left behind property, which was then taken up by the local communities. So you know, you had Romanian peasants who for the first time have access to decent furniture, a nice house which has been abandoned - fine, I'll move into that. Good clothing, they had taken over the livestock that's been left behind. Now suddenly, if the Jew who owns all of this property comes back, he's not going to be welcomed, is he?

So there's actually a really dark joke that I came across exactly about this subject. In Budapest there was, the joke went something like this: A Jew returns from a concentration camp and he meets his neighbor. And his neighbor looks at him in shock and says, my goodness, I wasn't expecting to see you. How are you? And the Jew says, well, I'm terrible. I've just come back from the camp and I have nothing left but the shirt on your back. So this is the kind of atmosphere that they're coming back to.

(LAUGHTER)

LOWE: Exactly. It's a dark humor of the best kind. This is what they're coming back to after the war is over.

GROSS: Well, you know, you suggest that one of the reasons why some countries supported the creation of Israel as a Jewish state was they wanted to get rid of the Jews in their country and that would've been a convenient way of doing it.

LOWE: Oh, yes. Yeah. I mean there was all kinds of sort of violence against Jews after the war. The most famous was the Kielce pogrom in 1946 in Poland. But there was all kinds of little versions of the same thing dotted around Poland and Slovakia and Hungary and places. And this was not really, you would expect the authorities to crack down on this sort of thing, but they didn't really. They were quite enthusiastic about expelling - or encouraging, rather - Jews to leave, because it's the perennial problem of the Jews, isn't? They were convenient scapegoats. So allowing a sort of nationalist feeling, a sort of common enemy - if you like - allowed people like the communists to assert their own authority in the aftermath of the war. They were quite happy for Israel to be created so that the Jews would be encouraged to go.

GROSS: You've said that there were several postwar pogroms in Europe. Would you describe one of them?

LOWE: Like I said, the most famous was the Kielce pogrom. But there were plenty that happened in Hungary. There's one I describe in the book where a local rumor started passing around that children were going missing. And, of course, who would steal children? Well, it was these demonic Jews, of course, who people said used the blood of children in their rites. It's kind of a sort of vampire-ish tale which is echoed all the way down through the ages. And people I don't think really truly believed this, but they wound themselves up into believing it for the sake of causing violence in their communities and getting rid of these people violence in their communities and getting rid of these people and stealing back their property. I mean there's one particular instance I'm thinking of where a woman broke into a shop which is owned by a Jew and started beating her and saying this is for the mattress that I had to give back to you. This is for the cow that I had to give back. You know, this was not really about the child that had supposedly gone missing. This was about her being crossed - what she regarded as her own property had been taken back by the Jew in question.

GROSS: Were there safe places for Jews in Europe after the war?

LOWE: There were. I mean ironically the safest place for Jews after the war was in Germany. I mean this was a place that was heavily policed by the Allies. They set up camps for Jews to come and stay in and to be rehabilitated and so on, and then some of them were

encouraged by sort of local groups to move onto what was then Palestine, what's now Israel. But other parts of Europe, they didn't really want to have their Jews anymore. I mean there was all kinds of violence meted out on Jewish communities all across Europe, and especially after the Kielce pogrom in 1946. Jews fled en masse and the place they went to was Germany. From Germany different groups allowed them to escape to other places outside Europe.

GROSS: Do you think that the post-World War II ethnic conflicts and deportations set the stage for some of the civil wars and conflicts that followed in subsequent decades?

LOWE: Absolutely. I mean we've got a sort of a - kind of a narrow idea of what the Second World War actually was. I mean we tend to think of it in America and in Britain as this war which is solely between the Allies and the Germans. But, you know, on a local level there are all kinds of other things going on - local civil wars which are taking place in parallel to the Second World War. So once the main war is over and the Germans have been defeated, there's nothing really to stop the civil wars from continuing, so they do. I mean there was a really terrible ethnic conflict between Poles and Ukrainians which lasted all the way through 1946, 1947, and indeed continued a bit beyond there. Then there was in Yugoslavia, there was another ethnic conflict which really came to an end in 1946, I suppose, but was resurrected in the 1990s. I mean the problems that happened in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s were directly related to the Second World War. It was kind of a rerun of the same things that had happened in 1945.

GROSS: My guest is Keith Lowe, author of "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II." We'll talk more after a break.

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(SOUNDBITE OF MUSIC)

GROSS: If you're just joining us, my guest is Keith Lowe. He is the author of the book "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II." And it's just been published in paperback in the U.S.

You're British. And you write in your book that World War II is a national industry in England - movies, dramas, documentaries. And I think in America we've gotten a taste of this through public television and the BBC - in which we've gotten to see a lot of these British documentaries, but you know, it's become something of an industry in United States too with books and movies and, you know, the whole idea of like the greatest generation.

LOWE: Yeah. Yeah.

GROSS: Why do you think that's true? You know, why do you think it's true that there have been so many movies and books and documentaries about World War II?

LOWE: Well, it's all about mythmaking, isn't it? I mean all the - every nationality after the war used the war to make myths about themselves. So for the British, for example, this is considered to be, you know, it's even called our finest hour in the words of Churchill, this was our finest hour. We still believe this now. We think that this was when British really showed what they were made of, they stood up against the might of Germany. They stood alone for it, which is kind of funny when you think of all of the empire resources we had, which were also backing us up: the Australians, the Canadians and so on, the Indians.

And America too, they, you know, this was seen as kind of, it was the good war. It was unambiguously a good war; you were fighting against this horrible evil regime. Things seemed nice and clear-cut then. Now, all of this is, of course, a big myth. Things weren't clear-cut. They weren't clear-cut for the British. They weren't clear-cut for Americans either. There was all kinds of complications involved. But it's nice for us, it's cozy for us to remember it this way because, you know, it makes us feel good about who we are and who we've become.

GROSS: Well, we'll what wasn't clear-cut? I mean the British were being bombed by the Germans. The Germans were exterminating the Jews, so what's not clear-cut about that?

LOWE: Well, what's not clear-cut is that that wasn't the only thing that the war was. I mean there were all kinds of other things going on. There was a whole political thing all across Europe between communism and right-wing politics, you know, the extreme right being fascism. Socialism and so on really took off after the Second World War, but it was all there during the war.

Now, we as Allies are stumbling into this situation, not really understanding it and policing it in a very sort of kack-handed way. So when we arrive in Greece, where similar things are happening, we suppress all the local partisans because we don't want communism to take hold, and instead we prop up military dictators who were - you know, Greece still a military dictatorship into the 1970s. So to pretend that

it was all very sort of simple and clear-cut, even for us Allies, is kind of missing the point of what was really happening on the ground during the Second World War.

GROSS: We're at a point in time where most of the people who fought in World War II have died or they're very elderly. People who were born during or in the aftermath of the war or who were children during the war, they're - many of them are still alive and can tell their stories. Did you do any direct interviews as research for your book?

LOWE: I did. I interviewed a dozen or so people. I tended to rely more on interviews that had already been done by other people in various archives around the world, especially our Imperial War Museum here in London. But also, you know, the United Nations' archives are pretty good and there are other university archives in the States which are also pretty good. On the other hand, you are right. When you get to a really good story, nothing can replace that.

There was one particular guy I interviewed here, a Polish guy called Andre, and he told me stories about his childhood in Germany in a displaced persons camp after the war. There were amazing stories about how he played with ammunition, found panzerfausts, which are kind of small German bazookas, lying around in the forest. And he and his friends used to fire this thing across the valley for fun. You know, really amazing stories.

GROSS: He's the one who told you that the orphan children during the war ran around like they were feral dogs.

LOWE: Yeah. Absolutely. And he was one of them. He said men - seeing men, adult men, out of uniform was something you never saw. Nobody he knew had a father. He didn't - actually seeing men in the displaced persons camp was a real rarity. So you know, there were no male role models for these children. There were just mothers struggling to get food together and do the washing and so on. And in the meantime the kids just ran wild because they could.

And he had a ball of a time. But there were plenty of others who, you know, playing with ammunition is not really a good thing for a nine year old boy to do, and there were plenty who paid the price.

GROSS: Since there are so many World War II movies and, you know, both documentaries and fiction films, I'm wondering if you have any favorites. And if, you know, there's ones that you like because of all the research that you've done and because of what - what a good job you think it does of depicting life during or after the war.

LOWE: Yeah. I think the film which always springs to mind is an Italian film called - it's a Rossellini film, "Germany in the Year Zero." It's really bleak. It's about a child who is in post-war Berlin and he has no sort of moral compass. He doesn't know what's right and what's wrong. All he's got is what he's been taught during the war by Nazis. He's got no real male role models to show him the way and everyone around him is struggling for survival.

And, yeah, it's a very bleak film.

GROSS: Rossellini made some incredible films during and just after the war in Italy that's shot in the rubble. It's kind of remarkable to see it.

LOWE: Yeah. It's amazing that he was able to make these, you know, wandering around with cameras right there. I mean it's - they have a real sort of documentary feel to them.

GROSS: Mm-hmm.

LOWE: It's almost like you're right there.

GROSS: And then there's "The Third Man," and even though that's, you know, a kind of drama and mystery, that too is set in the rubble in Germany. Do I have it - is it in Germany?

LOWE: No, it's in Vienna.

GROSS: In Vienna, yeah, yeah, yeah.

LOWE: That's a wonderful film. That shows all the sort of moral problems that there are after the war. That's a fantastic film for the moral destruction that the war has created.



GROSS: Keith Lowe, thank you so much for talking with us.

LOWE: And thanks very much for having me. It's an absolute pleasure.

GROSS: Keith Lowe is the author of "Savage Continent: Europe in the Aftermath of World War II," which was just published in paperback. You can read an excerpt on our website, [freshair.npr.org](http://freshair.npr.org). One of the films we were just talking about, "The Third Man," was directed by Orson Welles.

His lunchtime conversations from the 1980s with his friend and fellow filmmaker Henry Jaglom have just been transcribed and collected in the new book, "My Lunches with Orson." John Powers will review it after a break. This is FRESH AIR.

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## PART TWO

### Book Summary

Recounts the disorder in Europe after World War II, describing the brutal acts against Germans and collaborators, the anti-Semitic beliefs that reemerged, and the Allied-tolerated expulsions of citizens from their ancestral homelands.

### Excerpt: Savage Continent

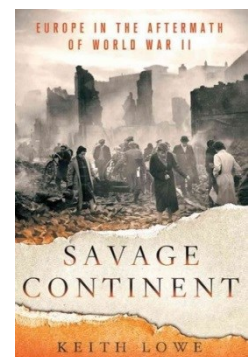
#### *Introduction*

Imagine a world without institutions. It is a world where borders between countries seem to have dissolved, leaving a single, endless landscape over which people travel in search of communities that no longer exist. There are no governments any more, on either a national scale or even a local one. There are no schools or universities, no libraries or archives, no access to any information whatsoever. There is no cinema or theatre, and certainly no television. The radio occasionally works, but the signal is distant, and almost always in a foreign language. No one has seen a newspaper for weeks. There are no railways or motor vehicles, no telephones or telegrams, no post office, no communication at all except what is passed through word of mouth.

There are no banks, but that is no great hardship because money no longer has any worth. There are no shops, because no one has anything to sell. Nothing is made here: the great factories and businesses that used to exist have all been destroyed or dismantled, as have most of the other buildings. There are no tools, save what can be dug out of the rubble. There is no food.

Law and order are virtually non-existent, because there is no police force and no judiciary. In some areas there no longer seems to be any clear sense of what is right and what is wrong. People help themselves to whatever they want without regard to ownership – indeed, the sense of ownership itself has largely disappeared. Goods belong only to those who are strong enough to hold on to them, and those who are willing to guard them with their lives. Men with weapons roam the streets, taking what they want and threatening anyone who gets in their way. Women of all classes and ages prostitute themselves for food and protection. There is no shame. There is no morality. There is only survival.

For modern generations it is difficult to picture such a world existing outside the imaginations of Hollywood script-writers. However, there are still hundreds of thousands of people alive today who experienced exactly these conditions – not in far-flung corners of the globe, but at the heart of what has for decades been considered one of the most stable and developed regions on earth. In 1944 and 1945 large parts of Europe were left in chaos for months at a time. The Second World War – easily the most destructive war in history – had devastated not only the physical infrastructure, but also the institutions that held countries together. The political system had broken down to such a degree that American observers were warning of the possibility of Europe-wide civil war.<sup>1</sup> The deliberate fragmentation of communities had sown an irreversible mis-trust between neighbours; and universal famine had made personal morality an



irrelevance.'Europe', claimed the *New York Times* in March 1945, 'is in a condition which no American can hope to understand.' It was 'The New Dark Continent'.<sup>2</sup>

That Europe managed to pull itself out of this mire, and then go on to become a prosperous, tolerant continent seems nothing short of a miracle. Looking back on the feats of reconstruction that took place – the rebuilding of roads, railways, factories, even whole cities – it is tempting to see nothing but progress. The political rebirth that occurred in the west is likewise impressive, especially the rehabilitation of Germany, which transformed itself from a pariah nation to a responsible member of the European family in just a few short years. A new desire for international cooperation was also born during the postwar years, which would bring not only prosperity but peace. The decades since 1945 have been hailed as the single longest period of international peace in Europe since the time of the Roman Empire.

It is little wonder that those who write about the postwar era – historians, statesmen and economists alike – often portray it as a time when Europe rose like a phoenix from the ashes of destruction. According to this point of view, the conclusion of the war marked not only the end of repression and violence, but also the spiritual, moral and economic rebirth of the whole continent. The Germans call the months after the war *Stunde nul* ('Zero Hour') – the implication being that it was a time when the slate was wiped clean, and history allowed to start again.

But it does not take much imagination to see that this is a decidedly rosy view of postwar history. To begin with, the war did not simply stop with Hitler's defeat. A conflict on the scale of the Second World War, with all the smaller civil disputes that it encompassed, took months, if not years, to come to a halt, and the end came at different times in different parts of Europe. In Sicily and the south of Italy, for example, it was as good as over in the autumn of 1943. In France, for most civilians, it ended a year later, in the autumn of 1944. In parts of eastern Europe, by contrast, the violence continued long after VE Day. Tito's troops were still fighting German units in Yugoslavia until at least 15 May 1945. Civil wars, which were first ignited by Nazi involvement, continued to rage in Greece, Yugoslavia and Poland for several years after the main war was over; and in Ukraine and the Baltic States nationalist partisans continued fighting Soviet troops until well into the 1950s.

Some Poles contend that the Second World War did not really end until even more recently: since the conflict officially began with the invasion of their country by both the Nazis and the Soviets, it was not over until the last Soviet tank left the country in 1989. Many in the Baltic countries feel the same way: in 2005 the presidents of Estonia and Lithuania refused to visit Moscow to celebrate the 60th anniversary of VE Day, on the grounds that, for their countries at least, liberation had not arrived until the early 1990s. When one factors in the Cold War, which was effectively a state of perpetual conflict between eastern and western Europe, and several national uprisings against Soviet dominance, then the claim that the postwar years were an era of unbroken peace seems hopelessly overstated.

Equally dubious is the idea of *Stunde nul*. There was certainly no wiping of the slate, no matter how hard German statesmen might have wished for one. In the aftermath of the war waves of vengeance and retribution washed over every sphere of European life. Nations were stripped of territory and assets, governments and institutions underwent purges, and whole communities were terrorized because of what they were perceived to have done during the war. Some of the worst vengeance was meted out on individuals. German civilians all over Europe were beaten, arrested, used as slave labour or simply murdered. Soldiers and policemen who had collaborated with the Nazis were arrested and tortured. Women who had slept with German soldiers were stripped, shaved and paraded through the streets covered in tar. German, Hungarian and Austrian women were raped in their millions. Far from wiping the slate clean, the aftermath of the war merely propagated grievances between communities and between nations, many of which are still alive today.

Neither did the end of the war signify the birth of a new era of ethnic harmony in Europe. Indeed, in some parts of Europe, ethnic tensions actually became worse. Jews continued to be victimized, just as they had been during the war itself. Minorities everywhere became political targets once again, and in some areas this led to atrocities that were just as repugnant as those committed by the Nazis. The aftermath of the war also saw the logical conclusion of all the Nazis' efforts to categorize and segregate different races. Between 1945 and 1947 tens of millions of men, women and children were expelled from their countries in some of the biggest acts of ethnic cleansing the world has ever seen. This is a subject that is rarely discussed by admirers of the 'European miracle', and even more rarely understood: even those who are aware of the expulsions of Germans know little about the similar expulsions of other minorities across eastern Europe. The cultural diversity that was once such an integral part of the European landscape before, and even during, the war was not dealt its final death—blow until after the war was over.

That the reconstruction of Europe was begun in the midst of all these issues makes it all the more remarkable. But in the same way that the war took a long time to end, so the reconstruction took a long time to get going. The people who lived amidst the rubble of Europe's devastated cities were more concerned with the minutiae of everyday survival than with restoring the building blocks of society. They were hungry, bereaved and bitter about the years of suffering they had been made to endure – before they could be motivated to start rebuilding they needed time to vent their anger, to reflect and to mourn.

The new authorities that were taking up office across Europe also needed time to establish themselves. Their first priority was not to clear the rubble, or repair the railway lines, or reopen the factories, but merely to appoint representatives and councils in each area of their countries. These councils then had to win the trust of the people, the majority of whom had learned through six years of organized atrocity

to treat all institutions with extreme caution. In such circumstances the establishment of some kind of law and order, let alone any physical reconstruction, was little more than a pipe dream. It was only outside agencies – the Allied armies, the United Nations, the Red Cross – that had the authority or the manpower to attempt such feats. In the absence of such agencies, chaos reigned. The story of Europe in the immediate postwar period is therefore not primarily one of reconstruction and rehabilitation – it is firstly a story of the descent into anarchy. This is a history that has never properly been written. Dozens of excellent books describe events in individual countries – especially in Germany – but they do so at the expense of the larger picture: the same themes occur again and again throughout the continent. There are one or two histories, like Tony Judt's *Postwar*, that take in a broader view of the continent as a whole – however, they do so over a much larger timescale, and so are obliged to summarize the events of the immediate postwar years in just a few chapters. To my knowledge there is no book in any language that describes the whole continent – east and west – in detail during this crucial and turbulent time.

This book is a partial attempt to rectify this situation. It shall not, as so many other books have done, seek to explain how the continent eventually rose from the ashes and attempted to rebuild itself physically, economically and morally. It will not concentrate on the Nuremberg trials, or the Marshall Plan, or any of the other attempts to heal the wounds that had been created by the war. Instead it is concerned with the period before such attempts at rehabilitation were even a possibility, when most of Europe was still extremely volatile, and violence could flare up once again at the slightest provocation. In a sense it is attempting the impossible – to describe chaos. It will do so by picking out different elements in that chaos, and by suggesting ways in which these were linked by common themes.

I shall begin by showing precisely what had been destroyed during the war, both physically and morally. It is only by fully appreciating what had been lost that we can understand the events that followed. Part II describes the wave of vengeance that swept across the continent, and suggests ways in which this phenomenon was manipulated for political gain. Vengeance is a constant theme of this book, and an understanding of its logic, and the purposes to which it was put, is essential if we are to understand the atmosphere of postwar Europe. Parts III and IV show what happened when this vengeance, and other forms of violence, were allowed to get out of hand. The ethnic cleansing, political violence and civil war that resulted were some of the most momentous events in European history. I shall argue that these were, in effect, the last spasms of the Second World War – and in many cases an almost seamless link to the beginning of the Cold War. The book will therefore cover, roughly, the years 1944 to 1949.

One of my main aims in writing this book was to break away from the narrow Western view that tends to dominate most writing on the period. For decades books about the aftermath of the war have focused on events in western Europe, largely because information about the east was not readily available, even in eastern Europe itself. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union and its satellite states this information has become more available, but it still tends to be obscure, and generally appears only in academic books and journals, often only in the language of the originator. So while much pioneering work has been done by Polish, Czech or Hungarian writers it has remained accessible only in Polish, Czech or Hungarian. It has also remained, largely, in the hands of academics – which brings me to another purpose of this book: to bring the period to life for the general reader.

My final, and perhaps most important, purpose is to clear a path through the labyrinth of myths that have been propagated about the aftermath of the war. Many of the 'massacres' I have investigated turn out, on closer inspection, to be far less dramatic than they are usually portrayed. Equally, some quite astonishing atrocities have been hushed up, or simply lost in the sweep of other historical events. While it might be impossible to unearth the exact truth behind some of these incidents, it is at least possible to remove some of the untruths.

A particular bugbear of mine is the plethora of vague and unsubstantiated statistics that are regularly bandied about in discussions concerning this period. Statistics really do matter, because they are often employed for political purposes. Some nations routinely exaggerate the crimes of their neighbours, either to distract attention from their own crimes or to further their own national causes. Political parties of all colours like to exaggerate the misdeeds of their rivals, and play down those of their allies. Historians also sometimes exaggerate, or merely pick the most sensational number from the range of figures available, to make their stories seem more dramatic. But the stories from this period are fantastic enough – they do not need exaggeration. For this reason I have tried where possible to base all my statistics on official sources, or on responsible academic studies if official sources are missing or suspect. Whenever statistics are in dispute I shall put what I consider to be the most reliable number in the main text, and alternative numbers in the notes.

That said, it would be foolish to imagine that my attempts at accuracy cannot be improved upon. Neither can this book pretend to be a 'definitive' or 'comprehensive' history of the immediate postwar period in Europe: the subject matter is far too broad for that. Instead it is an attempt to shine a light on a whole world of surprising and occasionally terrifying events for those who might never otherwise have discovered them.

My hope is that it will open up a debate about how these events affected the continent during the most painful stages of its rebirth and – since there is enormous scope for further research – perhaps stimulate others to investigate more deeply. If the past is a foreign country, this period in Europe's history still has vast regions marked only by the phrase 'Here be dragons'.

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