

## REVIEWS

Heinrich August Winkler, *The Age of Catastrophe: A History of the West, 1914–1945*, trans. Stewart Spencer  
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### METAPHYSICKING THE WEST

Heinrich August Winkler's thousand-page tome on 'the age of catastrophe', 1914–45, requires some contextualization for Anglophone readers. First, this brick of a book is merely Volume Two of a far more amplitudinous project, stretching from Antiquity to the era of Brexit and Trump. Second, Winkler's subject is neither world, nor European, history as such, but the story of 'The West'. This is, in other words, a heavily normative account—one that has been heaped with accolades in Germany. Winkler's role as a public figure is also relevant here. Born in Königsberg in 1938, descended from a long line of Protestant ministers, Heinrich relocated with his family to Württemberg in 1944. A teenage Christian Democrat, he switched to the SPD at the age of 23, and from that point on has been a stalwart, firmly on the party's right. In 1968 he was an outspoken opponent of student demands for university reform. As a doctoral student in Tübingen he was taught by the conservative historian Hans Rothfels. An important figure in the interwar *Volksgeschichte* movement—a thinly veiled rationalization of German-imperial designs in eastern Europe—Rothfels played a decisive role in the re-establishment of German historiography after 1945, editing the journal *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* and heading the German Historians' Association. Moving to Freiburg, Winkler's research centred on workers' movements in the Weimar period, a three-volume study appearing in the mid-80s.

Winkler first won a public name for himself in the *Historikerstreit* or 'historians' dispute' of the late 80s, a battle largely fought out in the pages of the

national press; he sided with Wehler and Habermas against the conservative revisionists, Nolte and Hillgruber, who were challenging the prevailing historiography of the Nazi period, locked under the consensus of the Allied victors for the first thirty years of the Bonn Republic. But it was the collapse of the Eastern bloc in 1989 that gave the decisive fillip to Winkler's career. When the Wall came down, he was an aggressive supporter of the break-up of the GDR and its incorporation within the existing structures of the Federal Republic, overriding the constitutional clause that called for a democratic consultative process. Here he emerged decisively to the right of Habermas, championing a 'take-over' for the reunification of the German nation, in contrast to Habermas's conception of a post-national constitutional patriotism, with revision of the Grundgesetz to achieve fairer integration of the GDR into the FRG. Parachuted from Freiburg into the Humboldt University in Berlin, he conducted a ruthless purge of its professors after 1991.

Full enthronement as the historian of Germany's national redemption came at the turn of the millennium with the two-volume *Der lange Weg nach Westen*, clocking in at 1,300 pages. (An English translation, *The Long Road West*, appeared in 2007.) Here Winkler confidently charted the country's tumultuous historical course—from pre-nation to Sonderweg to the triumph of Western-democratic normalization in 1990—in a fluent and highly political narrative. 'In the beginning was the Reich. Everything that divides German history from the history of the great European nations had its origins in the Holy Roman Empire', Winkler declared. 'We must go far back in history to understand why Germany became a nation-state later than England and France—and a democracy still later.' The 'myth of the Reich', grounded in a tradition going back to the Constantinian state church which held the *Imperium Christianum* to be the bulwark against the Antichrist, took worldly form in the coronation of the Saxon King Otto the Great as Holy Roman Emperor in 962. The outcome of the ensuing Investiture Conflict was more favourable to princes in the Germanic lands than in either Burgundy or imperial Italy, and early-modern state formation began on a 'lower territorial basis'—i. e., petty states—than in France and England. This particularity was reinforced after the Reformation by Lutheranism which made Protestant rulers 'popes in their own land'.

In Winkler's telling, the 'myth of the Reich' served as a will o' the wisp for the German nationalism that emerged from the final demise of the Holy Roman Empire at the hands of Napoleon in 1806. German liberals failed to solve the problem of combining national unity and democratic liberty in 1848 because they dreamt of a 'greater Germany', including Austrian lands. Bismarck after 1871 sensibly solved the question of unity through forging a 'little-Germany', excluding Austria—a great step towards western normalization; but democracy was limited under the Kaiser, and imperial ambitions

were ‘inevitably’ countered by the other great powers, producing the debacle of 1918. Under the Weimar Republic, the ‘myth of the Reich’ served as a bridge between Hitler and Germany’s ‘educated citizens’ after the humiliations of Versailles, recalling the greatness of the Middle Ages when Germany had taken upon itself ‘the defence of the whole of the Christian west against the threat from the heathen east’. Ultimately, however, the Nazi era would provide the great *argumentum e contrario* for western-style democracy under the Bonn Republic. In *The Long Road West*’s happy ending, Germany achieves a European normalization with NATO and the EU, offering a model to other countries that have had their own ‘unique paths’ to travel.

Winkler’s next step was to ground the German story in an overarching history of what he calls—his master-concept—the ‘normative project of the West’, whose unfolding is humanity’s greatest achievement. This is the subject of his monumental tetralogy, *Geschichte des Westens* [‘History of the West’], appearing between 2009 and 2016. The first, still-untranslated volume, *Von den Anfängen in der Antike bis zum 20. Jahrhundert*—‘From the Beginnings in Antiquity to the Twentieth Century’—spans the millennia from the appearance of monotheism in Egypt in the 14th century BC to the outbreak of the First World War. The second, titled in the German *Die Zeit der Weltkriege* [‘The Age of World Wars’], narrates the conflict between the ‘normative project’ and its various challengers in the era of total war. The third is taken up with the Cold War competition between East and West. The fourth, *Die Zeit der Gegenwart* [‘The Time of the Present’], and what is in effect a fifth instalment, *Zerbricht der Westen?* [‘Is the West Breaking?’], dwell upon contemporary distempers.

What then is ‘the West’? Its goals are defined by Winkler in purely political terms: the realization of a national order combining separation of powers, the rule of law and representative democracy. But its project has a deeper meaning. Volume One roots the distinctiveness of the West in its religious history. ‘In the beginning was a belief: a belief in *one God*.’ Judaism provided a push toward rationalization and intellectualization. Christianity then threw two further concepts into the mix: the dignity of the individual and the separation of powers. According to Winkler, Jesus’s quietist answer to the Pharisees—render unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s, and unto God that which is God’s—laid the foundation for limited government and civil society. Subsequent milestones along the path to liberty and pluralism included the Investiture Conflict and Magna Carta, the Renaissance, Reformation and Enlightenment. It was an error to think that pagan Greece or Rome had played any significant role in this consummation of human freedom. Athenian democracy, vitiated by slavery and the exclusion of women, was a fraudulent irrelevance, which Madison rightly rejected as mob rule, to be avoided at all costs in the nascent United States. The only legacies from that

line were the chimera of a direct democracy that was a recipe for demagogy, and the sinister idea of a civil religion in Rousseau—a walkway to totalitarianism.

The separation of powers and its attendant freedoms crystallized as the ‘normative project of the West’ during the Atlantic revolutions of the late 18th century. Winkler lauds the American Revolution of 1776, the sensible-minded Founding Fathers balancing their appeal to the rights of man with a traditionalist harking back to lost privileges—Magna Carta, the Glorious Revolution—to bequeath a functioning system of government, complete with appropriate checks and balances. French development differed. By refusing to appoint the Bourbon prince Louis Philippe II—Philippe Égalité, as he became known—to replace his cousin, Louis XVI, sending both men to the guillotine instead, the French missed the opportunity to reach the calm waters of constitutional monarchy without passing through the maelstrom of *L’an II*. We might summarize Winkler’s formula for ‘the West’ as a healthy stew of Anglo-Saxon liberties ultimately based on Jesus’s distinction between the religious and temporal realms, spiced up with a dash—but not more!—of Enlightenment universalism. ‘Whoever wants not only to achieve freedom, but lastingly secure it, does well to follow the insights of the Anglo-Saxons, and French Enlightenment figures such as Montesquieu who oriented themselves to that knowledge.’

The drama in Winkler’s story is provided by the struggle between the normative project and its antagonists, witting—the ‘enemies of the West’, on left and right—and otherwise. As Winkler often explains, he conceived *The History of the West* as an expansion of his *Long Road* book on Germany, on reflecting that, though they had got there earlier and more peacefully, even the exemplary nations of the United States, Britain and France had taken quite some time to arrive at their normative destination. The practice of Western states and their leaders would often lead to ‘infractions’ of the project—Winkler consistently uses the neutral term *Vorstoss*, rather than the stronger *Widerspruch* or *Verletzung*—such as slavery, colonialism, ethnic cleansing. But the project was ‘smarter than its creators, who were biased with male and racist prejudices’, for it included a capacity for ‘self-correction’ that would gradually eliminate these tares. The final chapters of *From the Beginnings* survey the unrolling of this logic across a narrative terrain that stretches from the Napoleonic conquests via the US Civil War to the run-up to 1914, with excursions to the Mediterranean lands, Latin America, the ‘scramble for Africa’ and the colonized east. The book ends with a *tour d’horizon* at the start of the new century, highlighting Germany’s increasing isolation.

Winkler’s first volume, then, can be read as a massive preface to the 20th-century unfolding of the ‘normative project’ discussed in *The Age*

of *Catastrophe*. Driven by the ‘myth of the Reich’, Germany’s bid for world-power status—a revolt against ‘the universal values associated with all the western democracies’—made the First World War inevitable. The rising power of an unruly German Social Democratic Party only intensified the belligerence of the Wilhelmine elite, which grew ‘nervous’ that time was running against its project. That said, Winkler is understanding about the SPD’s vote for war credits in August 1914, which demonstrated the leadership’s loyalty to the West’s normative project: ‘There was much that linked Social Democrats and their followers to their own states: guaranteed freedoms, organizational freedom of action, and not last, the social achievements that had already been won.’ With Tsarist Russia—‘eastern’ in its Orthodox religion as well as its autocracy—on the Entente side, Winkler can’t present the first three years of slaughter as pitting the enlightened West against its enemies. But once Tsarism has exited the stage and the US has entered, the War becomes, in his eyes, ‘an ideological struggle between Freedom and oppression’. Its upshot turns out to be the best possible outcome for the normative project, since ‘a victory of Germany and its allies would also have been a defeat for the ideas of 1776 and 1789.’ Indeed, the Central Powers could never have been beaten without ‘America’s moral resolve’.

Germany was the only European state to change its constitutional form after the First World War—from a monarchy to a republic—without an overthrow of the social order. Winkler is full of praise for the ‘moderate’ SPD leaders who ensured this was so. Conscientious and non-partisan, they ‘leapt aboard a runaway train and brought it under control’. In their own way, Ebert and Noske were enacting the normative project when they sent the Freikorps to repress the Spartacist uprising, itself ‘an assault on democracy’, though any excess bloodshed should be deplored. The sensible alliance of the SPD leadership with the bourgeois parties avoided a catastrophic civil war. Instead, the blame for the rise of fascism and all that follows is laid at the door of the intransigent left. Catalysed by the ‘myth of the Reich’, the War had in turn led to the Bolshevik revolution, which destabilized the unevenly developed semi-peripheries of Europe and the Far East, leading elites in Spain, Romania and Japan to abandon early attempts at parliamentary democracy—their first faltering steps on the road to the normative project of the West—and embrace regimes of the radical right.

In Germany, the KPD’s impressive showing in the elections of November 1932 merely served to raise the fear of civil war, which was now ‘Hitler’s most powerful ally’. The SPD was once again fully justified in refusing any joint action with the KPD when Hitler was appointed Chancellor by Hindenburg: the desperate last-ditch effort to establish a united front against the Nazis was doomed to fail, because the Communists were openly touting the prospect of a social breakdown, which merely enabled Hitler to pose as protector

of the constitution. In Italy too, the main force undermining parliamentary government was the tendency of workers 'to pursue their ends by anarchistic means', combined with the nefarious effects of the Congress of Livorno, which established the Partito comunista d'Italia. According to Winkler, this merely 'played into the hands of the Fascists' and gave them a 'perfect pretext' to ignore the law of the land. Forming a happy pendant to the sad state of affairs in Italy and Germany were the Nordic countries, whose precocious advance towards Western normalization depended upon 'a free, self-confident peasant population, a pragmatic workers' movement insistent upon concrete improvements and, last but not least, an educational system marked by the spirit of Lutheranism'. A more puzzling case of democratic survival is Ireland, but it was blessed by a strong parliament and the absence of a significant Communist party—debts that were owed to British political culture for which the Irish, presumably, should have been more grateful.

As in *The Long Road West*, Hitler's hegemony is founded on the 'myth of the Reich'. *The Age of Catastrophe* traces the origins of Nazi geopolitics to this 'specifically German idea', first pressed into service by conservative cultural critic Arthur Moeller van den Bruck in his work *The Third Reich* (1923). 'According to this myth', writes Winkler, 'the Germans had a historical mission, their task being to play a leading role in the European struggle to resist the advance not only of Bolshevism in the East but of democracy in the West.' Mentioned only in passing is the keynote work of another figure in this milieu, Spengler's *Decline of the West*. Invasion of Czechoslovakia gave concrete meaning to the idea of a pan-German racial-imperial order transcending the boundaries of any existing nation-state: 'the term "Reich" now acquired a new dimension that at the same time implied a much older quality.' Yet Nazism would eventually call into existence its exact opposite in the form of Roosevelt's Atlantic Charter, an abbreviated version of the normative project. The emergence of Nazism as a 'third force' between the liberal-democratic West and the 'totalitarian' East laid the foundations for an anomalous alliance between the last two against the first. But the victory of the anti-Hitler coalition led to 'a radical simplification of the international situation', with the onset of the Cold War. Now the West could finally confront the East, leaving the future dependent on the ability of the NATO powers to offer 'a beacon of light in the post-war world'.

If this account seems German-centric, that is what Winkler intends. The period between 1914 and 1945 'can with some justification be described as the German chapter in the history of the West', he argues, overshadowed by the Wilhelmine and Hitlerian assaults against democracy and human rights. Weimar receives twice as many pages in *The Age of Catastrophe* as Britain, France and the US combined. Indeed, Winkler essentially reproduces here Chapter 7 of the first volume of *The Long Road to the West*. The only novelty

of *The Age of Catastrophe* in this regard is the briefer sections devoted to other countries, in an additive spirit devoid of any comparative framework.

How to respond to this unwieldy project as a whole? There are three initial points to be made about Winkler's quasi-metaphysical *History of the West*. The first concerns his anachronistic, *ex post facto* construction of 'the West' itself, a term that started to become current only in the 1890s, when the US joined the ranks of the European imperialist states as a great power, and was fully canonized only with the arrival of the Cold War. In Winkler, this unhistorical usage is projected backwards in time to the Dark Ages by way of a counterposition between the two brands of Christian theology, in Rome and Byzantium—the latter lacking the vital division between secular and spiritual power that marked the former. (Lutheranism creates problems for this division, since Winkler treats it, rather inconsistently, as both a tap-root of authoritarianism, and the basis of Nordic social democracy.) The 'West' thus means Catholic and Protestant terrain, sharply delimited from that of Orthodoxy, which is given over to despotism and belongs to the 'East'. So, for Winkler, it was entirely fitting to extend the EU to Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and the Baltic states—all Catholic or Protestant—but a mistake to have included Orthodox Romania, Bulgaria and Greece so quickly, before they had been truly westernized. As for post-communist Russia, it remains a sink of tyranny, sacralized by Orthodoxy.

Second, Winkler's entire construction is ideologically apologetic. This is so from its first pages onwards, which even succeed in using the Egyptologist Jan Assmann—a leading scholarly critic of monotheism, famous for insisting on the intolerance that flowed from Mosaic conceptions of the deity—as an authority for Winkler's own encomium to those very conceptions. (Burckhardt had already pointed out that monotheism was inseparable from the idea of an authoritarian mission, as classical paganism was not.) Third, and most fundamentally, postulation of the meta-historical *telos* of the normative project dispenses Winkler from any of the standard tasks of historical explanation, allowing him to generate a colossal narrative of successive episodes and events in the past, without having to offer any notable causation for them, for that is essentially taken care of by the immanent logic of the project.

The result is a product of staggering industry: the four volumes of *The History of the West* and its sequel amount to over 5,000 pages, cranked out in less than a decade, or an annual 500 pages, year after year, of eminently readable prose. As they approach the present, these become an increasingly manic chronicle, the most disparate developments recounted side by side without halt or synthesis, as if in a kind of compulsive dictionary of the past. The condition of this enormous construction is its restriction to political history, more or less narrowly understood. Deeper social or economic

transformations are touched on, so far as the story demands them, but never explored in their own right. The common-sense association of 'the West' with the most advanced forms of capitalism is barely noticed. Cultural developments, other than ideas that can be slotted into the normative project or its infractions and self-corrections, are largely ignored. Aimed at the broadest of publics, the upshot is an old-fashioned story, competent and superficial, with a reassuringly upbeat ending accompanied by sensible caveats.

Turning to *The Age of Catastrophe*, any satisfactory account of the thirty-year period covered by the book must provide some explanation for the disasters that punctuate it: the two world wars and the rise of the Fascist dictatorships. To what extent does the West's normative project play a causal role, either as foil or stimulus, in these events? Winkler does acknowledge some anomalies in his interpretation of World War One as a struggle 'between Freedom and oppression', such as the fact that the wartime Land of the Free saw the Espionage and Sedition Acts, the jailing of Eugene Debs and an orgy of anti-German jingoism. He is less candid about other problems, neglecting to mention that the United States was no more a democratic regime at the national level than Britain, Germany or Italy. The Jim Crow system was a system of racial and *class* disenfranchisement, every bit as effective as the Prussian three-class voting system in entrenching the most reactionary classes at the highest reaches of American power. Wilson himself was a direct expression of this system.

The reality that Britain was already a world power in 1914 also apparently raises no problem; Germany's ambition to become one was the intolerable cause of the war. As David Calleo long ago pointed out, the boot was if anything on the other foot. Britain's overweening global status made any steady balance of power within Europe impossible, destabilizing the continent once Germany became its leading economy. In short, as Lenin said, it was the uneven development of imperialist competition that made a major war between the rival predators at some point inevitable. Unable to handle imperialism as a general phenomenon of the period, Winkler is finally reduced to a play on words to pin the blame on Berlin. The Second Reich precipitated the conflict with a war of 'putative [not preventive] self-defence'—*Putativnotwehr*, rather than *Präventivnotwehr*. In effect, he simply recycles the worn-out *Kriegsschuld* thesis of the Entente at Versailles—itself recycled by the Bonn-era ideologue (and ex-SS member) Fritz Fischer, who captivated Winkler as a young student back in the 50s—and ignores the subsequent literature dismantling it.

As for the opponents of 'the West': if the normative project is simply defined as the separation of powers and liberal democracy, the observation that neither Bolshevism nor Fascism distinguished themselves by a stiff

commitment to such ideas is obvious enough. But if one considers the ways in which these opposing political formations used the idea of 'the West', it is much less clear that either can be construed as anti-Western ideologies. The notion that Bolshevism was a 'radical alternative' to the West makes sense only in light of Winkler's excision of Rousseau and lumping of Marx together with Luther and Fichte as exponents of the 'myth of the Reich'. But in any more objective sense of the Western political tradition this is an absurdity, since it is hard to imagine a more stridently westernizing project than Lenin and Trotsky's. Their work constantly refers to the history of western Europe as a standard and model; their intellectual framework came from one of the West's greatest social thinkers; and they saw themselves as standing in a lineage that very much included the great figures of the Atlantic revolutions so revered by Winkler. It would seem more natural to say that they were concerned with fulfilling the initial promise of 1789 rather than breaking with it. Winkler allows that 'Lenin was a westerner', but only in the sense of an embrace of technical and scientific progress. Otherwise he was completely beyond the Pale.

The basic premise of *The Age of Catastrophe* is that 'the Bolshevik reign of terror was more than just a reaction to the extremely difficult situation in early 1918 both inside Russia and beyond, for it necessarily resulted from Lenin's plan to create a new communist society within a backward country'. The distortion here is the phrase 'Lenin's plan'. Unlike Fascism, Leninism never produced a general political theory to justify one-party rule; party autocracy was always understood as an undesirable but unavoidable historical necessity in the particular conditions of Russia. As Winkler's analysis shows, neither Lenin nor Trotsky thought it was possible to create a communist society in Russia alone. When Trotsky's call for world revolution at Brest-Litovsk was answered with mass demonstrations and strikes, the SPD leadership in Germany exerted every effort to undermine the movement, hardening the very isolation that Winkler himself acknowledges was one of the main reasons for the dictatorial methods of the Bolsheviks. The notion of a direct route to socialism and communism in such confinement was Stalin's, not Lenin's. Anyone with an iota of historical curiosity must pose a question that *The Age of Catastrophe* avoids: what might have been the consequences of a forthright defence—by Kautsky, for example—of the Bolshevik revolution and a call for solidary insurrection in the West in 1918, for both the course of Russian political development and the prospects for socialism in western Europe?

What of Fascism? Winkler's reading on the Italian case is strikingly thin: the entire analysis of Mussolini's rise rests on two non-Italian sources, Denis Mack Smith and Hans Woller. The author rather embarrassingly claims that the Blackshirts forced their opponents to drink 'retsina' rather than castor oil.

The fundamental claim is simply that ‘the West fell into disrepute because the political right blamed it for the country’s ostensible *vittoria mutilata*’. But Mussolini presented Fascism as the culminating stage in a vague grand narrative sweeping through liberalism and socialism; he never posed his ‘revolution’ as one against ‘the West’. Under Schmitt’s influence, Hitler for his part framed the Third Reich as a German Monroe Doctrine: a claim to continental hegemony strictly analogous to what the United States had achieved in the decades after the Civil War. More generally, the entire panoply of ideas that accompanied imperialism in the West—social Darwinism, racism, spheres of influence, the need to seize raw materials—were simply recycled and amplified in German National Socialism. Far from constituting a revolt against the normative project, in historical rather than hypostatic terms, Nazi ideas mostly recapitulated west European ones.

The question of ideological antecedents aside, did the Bolsheviks and the young Communist parties of Italy and Germany throw open the way to their enemies on the far right, as *The Age of Catastrophe* contends? Chronology is crucial here. The fracturing of the Second International wasn’t caused by the attempt of Lenin’s supporters to challenge the pro-war stance of the German SPD, nor by the Bolshevik dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. Rather, it dates to the SPD’s infamous vote for war credits in August 1914, defended by Winkler on the slender basis that had the party acted otherwise, an underequipped army of Russian peasants recently routed by a second-rate power in the Far East might have reached Berlin. At that point in time, Leninism didn’t really exist as a distinct doctrinal current within international social democracy: the Bolshevik–Menshevik split was as yet a tempest in a teapot, not even widely understood by activists in Russia itself.

Of course the emergence of a revolutionary threat to capital on the left was a key condition for the rise of Fascism in both Germany and Italy—as too in Spain, though not in Romania or Japan—triggering at once a force of counter-revolutionary violence against it from below, and an accommodation, intending cooption, of this force by the established elites of land and money from above, for the common purpose of crushing labour. This was an objective dynamic, for which it is absurd to blame the newly born KPD or PCd’I, as if they should have decided not to exist. On the other hand, *contra* Winkler, Social Democracy bore a prior, subjective responsibility for the rise of Fascism, at least in Germany, first by rallying to the inter-imperialist war of 1914, without which Nazism would never have become a significant force, and then by ensuring that the forces of old-regime reaction—the army, the Junkers, the Krupps and Thyssens—were preserved intact in 1918–19, indeed welcomed as allies in putting down the revolutionary left. That was avoidable, as Fascist hatred of Communism was not. *The Age of Catastrophe*

praises the SPD as a force for national unity while condemning every attempt at mass mobilization from below as an irresponsible putsch. Yet on Winkler's own telling, Ebert's readiness to resort to counter-revolutionary violence not only prompted the left-wing USPD to resign from his provisional government, but also 'opened up an unbridgeable chasm between the moderate and the radical elements in the German workers' movement' once Noske crushed the Spartacist revolt.

A further example of how the SPD actively undermined working-class mobilization comes in Winkler's discussion of the 1923 strikes against the government of shipping magnate Wilhelm Cuno, a mass demonstration staunchly supported by the KPD which appeared to open the possibility of a realignment of the entire post-war order. The SPD responded to the unrest by joining a Grand Coalition government under Stresemann, with Marxist theoretician Rudolf Hilferding as finance minister. From this position, it supported Stresemann's energetic repression of the revolutionary movement in Saxony, only later expressing some reservations. Predictably, Stresemann's treatment of insurrectionary stirrings on the right differed. In Bavaria, Gustav von Kahr was scheming to carry out a March on Berlin in imitation of Mussolini. But the 'bourgeois members of Stresemann's cabinet were convinced that neither militarily nor politically was a civil war with Bavaria desirable'. They appear to have had no scruples about unleashing a 'civil war' against striking miners.

The historical reality that shines through *The Age of Catastrophe* points to a rather different conclusion than the one its author intends: that no stable democracy in Germany was possible without a revolutionary break from the past and a geopolitical reorientation toward the Soviet Union. It fell to the Austrian Social Democrats to attempt to mediate between the obtuse reformism of the German SPD and the Bolsheviks, providing the main force behind the establishment of the International Working Union of Socialist Parties, Adler's ill-starred 'Two and a Half' International. Winkler's text makes inadvertently clear how the SPD's anti-Soviet orientation instead trapped it into supporting massively unpopular domestic policies that were a gift to the nationalist right. It is striking that the Austrian Social Democrats, well to the left of the SPD, did not suffer the electoral collapse that their German counterparts did, winning the largest number of seats in the elections of 1930. The SPD's capitulation ended fittingly with the party's vote for Goering's resolution in the Reichstag in May 1933, its parliamentary delegation standing up to bellow *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* along with the Nazis and all other deputies.

Winkler's analysis of Weimar's downfall, laying responsibility on the revolutionary left while exculpating the 'responsible' centre left, forms the model for his explanation of the rise of Italian Fascism as well. But this

attempt to fit the Italian case into the Procrustean bed of Weimar leads to serious distortions. He orders the narrative so as to place the 1921 Congress of Livorno, at which the left split off from the Italian Socialist Party to form the PCd'I, ahead of Mussolini's creation of the *fasci di combattimento* in March 1919, as though to attribute culpability to left infighting. True, the wave of factory occupations in 1920 was accompanied by an upturn in Fascist activity, but the industrial unrest can't be construed as a witless gift to the far right; rather, it was an incipient social revolution badly undermined by the dilatory response of the reformist socialist and trade-union leadership.

Finally, the problem with Winkler's framing of the Second World War is that, while Churchill and Roosevelt were signing the Atlantic Charter on their pleasure cruiser off the coast of Newfoundland, it was the Soviet Union that was actually fighting National Socialism. Winkler never adequately poses the problem of why the Red Army was so tenacious in its resistance to the Wehrmacht in comparison to the ignominious behaviour of the French Army in the summer of 1940. For him, the answer is simply terror. Drawing on one source, Jörg Baberowski, Winkler concludes that the soldiers of the Red Army had no way to retreat: they would be killed either by the NKVD or by the Germans. But this suggests a difference between the Eastern and Western fronts that throws much of Winkler's framing into doubt. If the Nazi war effort was fundamentally anti-Western, and the invasion of the Soviet Union simply a means to knock out a potential ally of the British and the Free French, why did the Wehrmacht pursue its policy of completely destroying the political elite in the USSR, but not in France? There is of course an underlying objective reason for this difference: collaboration in the West had a social and political basis—anti-Bolshevism. But if that is the case, it makes little sense to interpret National Socialist foreign policy as aimed primarily against the West: instead it represented the most radical possible attack on the Bolshevik project, and this was precisely the basis of its comparatively more relaxed attitude toward local elites in western Europe.

The massiveness of Winkler's construction thus appears as a compensation for the lack of an explanatory framework that might account for the historical issues it raises. As is often the case with books such as this, narrative range functions as a placeholder for conceptual rigour. Despite its impressive scale, *The Age of Catastrophe* is basically an ideological exercise, an empirically implausible morality tale. Intellectually, it is obvious that the 'Second Thirty Years' War' of 1914–45 will never be understood without a theory of the interlocking dynamics of capitalist development and imperialist geopolitics. Winkler's long chapter on 'National States and Empires' in *From the Beginnings* is where one might expect to find some attempt to handle this problem. But it ends up as a diffuse narrative of well over 500 pages which manages to avoid accounting for the driving forces behind

European expansion. The only analytic statement provided is that the ‘agonistic principle’, with its roots in the Homeric epoch, pushed various European states to strive for glory in the non-European world. This explanation is, of course, wholly inadequate. It was imperialist conflict that broke apart the Socialist International, detonated the Russian Revolution and established the fundamental context for the rise of Fascism. The Second World War was also quite obviously, as Michael Mann has recently put it, ‘the last inter-imperial war’.

Where should this work be situated within the thought-world of today’s Germany? A decade younger than Habermas, not so directly affected by youthful experience of Nazism—but no less fervently attached to the new arrangements of the Bonn republic—Winkler owes the ideological and conceptual framework of his huge construction to two of Habermas’s most famous formulations: celebration of ‘the unconditional opening of the Federal Republic to the political culture of the West’ and of ‘modernity as an unfinished project’. *The History of the West* is built around a fusion of the two: the normative project of the West remains ‘unfinished’, so long as the rest of the world has yet to embrace it. As ‘a native Königsberger’, Winkler professes a ‘Kantian optimism’ as to the ultimate outcome.

At the same time, three traits distinguish him from Habermas. Untroubled by the appeal of the nation as an ideal, to which he is well attuned himself—as Habermas self-declaredly is not—he also makes far more of religion as a cultural marker of the West than Habermas would ever do, however reverent of religious contributions to public and private life he has latterly become. Winkler is also, by party background (Habermas has never joined one) and personal temperament, a Cold War hawk wherever Russia is at issue, outspoken SPD anti-communism of old seguing into abhorrence of an Orthodox-inflected despotism pronounced its sequel. Christianity—the right kind of Christianity, Protestant or Catholic—demarcates the West, with the exception of Israel, which belongs to it. From early on, Winkler opposed Turkish entry into the EU, an atypical position in the intellectual *juste milieu* to which he otherwise subscribes, not on grounds of torture or repression, or the occupation of Cyprus, but as alien in religious faith. The invasion of Iraq was a deplorable departure from the normative project, but the war on Yugoslavia fulfilled it, as did the attack on Libya, which Germany ought to have joined.

Things have gone badly in the new century—September 11, Iraq, the Crash of 2008 and now the spread of ‘populism’—but the two worst contemporary threats to the West hold out the promise of reuniting it, bringing Europe and America together again: the menace of Putin and the spectre of ISIS. Addressing the Reichstag in 2015, on the seventieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War, Winkler told the nation that Putin’s

unforgivable annexation of Crimea marked a turning point, putting in jeopardy the whole international order established since 1991. It required an unflinching response from the West, which had been too slow off the mark in associating Ukraine with the EU. Asked by *Der Spiegel* why he insisted on sanctions against Russia for a recovery of Crimea that had cost few lives, and not against the US for an invasion of Iraq that destroyed a hundred thousand, he replied that criticism of the latter was all but unanimous in the Western world, but who could say where the former might lead? In other words: the self-corrective dynamic of its normative project relieves the West of any need for retribution; but if the West is to survive, punishment of a fathomless East is imperative.