



British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, US President Franklin Roosevelt, and Soviet leader Joseph Stalin met at Yalta in February 1945 to discuss their joint occupation of Germany and plans for post-war Europe
National Archives and Records Administration

When was the post-war?

Jessica Reinisch

There is a peculiar tension at the heart of scholarship about the years and decades after the Second World War. On the one hand, the political developments following the breakdown of the war-time alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union have spawned an enormous literature, in parts as old as the history it assesses. The history of the Cold War has long been a staple subject in history textbooks and modern history exam papers. But on the other hand, it was only in the last two decades or so, since some time after the fall of the Berlin wall, that historians have consistently begun to think about the post-war period as something that deserves detailed examination and explanation in parallel to, or even outside of, the Cold War frame of reference. Students are caught out by this contradiction. My first- and second-year undergraduates often think that post-war history seems overly familiar and ‘boring’, lacking any surprises; or they are put off

by what they perceive to be vast and ungraspable processes (such as ‘decolonisation’) or abstract concepts that mean little to them (such as ‘sovereignty’, ‘nation-states’ and ‘reconstruction’). Teaching this period is also complicated by the fact that reference points so familiar to children of the Cold War era – the Iron Curtain, the arms race, communism and capitalism as two different economic arrangements – no longer mean very much to people born in the new millennium.

The historiography of the post-war era is still in the process of being written and re-written. In this essay I want to highlight a number of ways in which historians in the last two decades have re-thought how this history should be told. They have done this partly by revisiting old debates, and partly by drawing on subjects, questions and sources that didn’t feature much in the older literature. As a historian of Europe most of my reference points concern European history.



Yevgeny Khaldei's famous photo of the Soviet flag raised over the Berlin Reichstag, 2 May 1945

Beginnings

All historians have to think about chronology if they want to explain why things happened in the way they did. Any attempts to 'periodise' – to organise the past into distinct blocks of time – are closely bound up with questions of causality. As a result, identifying the beginning and end points of a distinct period under review often triggers much broader questions. As the historian Charles Maier reminds us, historians have choices on how to narrate and demarcate a historical period: 'All sorts of potential connections might be discerned among different classes of chronologically-bounded events: a persuasive periodisation alerts us to select one set and, just as critical, to overlook the evidence of others. To periodise is to dismiss evidence as much as to gather it.'¹

So when did the post-war period start? If 'post-war' is simply interpreted to mean the period after the formal conclusion of military hostilities, then there seems little room for ambiguity: it began on 8 May 1945 in Europe, and on 15 August 1945 in Asia – the dates of VE and VJ day are clear enough. But things quickly get more complex when we realise that fighting stopped much sooner in some places than it did in others. By August 1944, the Red Army had pushed back the Wehrmacht in Romania (and Romania changed sides to join the Allies). By spring 1945, it advanced rapidly through Poland and Prussia. Adolf Hitler's suicide in late April 1945 and the Wehrmacht's surrender of Berlin was a signal that the war was all but over. Any neat chronology also gets complicated by various civil wars which both preceded and extended the Second World War – such as, in Europe, the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), often considered as a 'practice run' for the war that followed; or the Soviets' armed battles with nationalist partisans in the Soviet-occupied Baltic states and Ukraine (into the 1950s); or the Greek Civil War (1946–49).² In each case, local factors intermingled with larger processes. More broadly, thinking about post-war simply in terms of the absence of

conflict has its limitations. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm pointed out, post-war '[s]tabilization did not mean peace. Except in Europe, the Cold War was not an era when fighting was forgotten. There was hardly a year between 1948 and 1989 without a fairly serious armed conflict somewhere.'³

The historians who see 'post-war' as largely synonymous with the Cold War often find the beginnings even more difficult to pin down. The tit-for-tat developments in 1946–47 that make up a by now fairly standard narrative of the Cold War are an obvious starting point for many, but debates about the origins of Soviet-American confrontations continue: did it all start during the Second World War, or with the October Revolution in 1917, or perhaps even earlier? In practice it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify any single tipping point as the opening salvo of the Cold War. Nonetheless, scholars have long been preoccupied with pinpointing when it started – not least because a definite answer would finally lay to rest the question of 'whose fault' it all was. But this gets us quite far away from insights into the 'post-war'.

To many historians today, Cold War and post-war history are not one and the same, even if they overlapped in significant ways. A more useful narrative of the beginning of the post-war era starts with the first Allied efforts to plan for the aftermath of war, quickly resulting in sizeable national and inter-Allied planning committees and staffs. Results were periodically presented and debated at the Allied war-time summits. The Atlantic Charter, signed by Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in August 1941 (before the United States joined the war), gave a first glimpse of the two leaders' vision for the world after war, with their stated priorities of disarmament, collective security, self-determination and the restoration of self-government (in Europe, at least), and free trade. Allied post-war planning began in earnest after the entry of the Soviet Union and the United States into the war in 1941. In the subsequent four years, Roosevelt, Stalin,

An American soldier speaks outside with five survivors in the Nordhausen concentration camp, April 1945
United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, courtesy of Nancy & Michael Krzyzanowski



Churchill, along with other Allied leaders and their planning staffs, met regularly and slowly hammered out a series of agreements about how the world would be run after the war. These war-time agreements produced assumptions (for example, about the need for a regulated and planned form of capitalism in the West, and for expanded, benign, ideally ethnically homogenous nation-states everywhere) and institutions (such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) that proved to be of lasting significance. By this measure the post-war order really *did* begin to take shape in the conference rooms at Bretton Woods, Dumbarton Oaks, Yalta and eventually Potsdam. This was true even if some of the products of the early post-war plans disappeared quickly, or only came into existence later. For example, most of the states created in the aftermath of the war had not featured explicitly in the war-time agreements. Among the new states were Israel (1948); the Republic of Korea (in the South) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (in the North) (both in 1948); the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic (both in 1949); the People's Republic of China (also in 1949), as well as the new post-colonial states in South and South East Asia and the Middle East. Nor had the subject of nuclear arms and how to regulate them featured much at the war-time summits, but it would become a staple of post-war and Cold War history.

A long-standing matter of debate has been how far the end of the war in 1945 really saw the beginning of something new, rather than the continuation of older patterns. In the context of German history this question turned into a heated debate about 'Stunde Null' (or 'hour zero'), which revolved around whether the end of the Third Reich in 1945 really meant a radical break with the past and a chance of a genuine new beginning. Some scholars maintained that it did and used this insight to clear post-war institutions and personnel from the tarnish of their previous association with the Nazi regime. But others argued that the idea of a clean break or fresh start on a blank slate was merely an illusion championed by the new German political authorities, and ultimately delayed any real engagement with the extent to which the Nazi project had grown in the fertile soil of German history. Yet others insisted that the Nazi years were a twelve-year long 'aberration', and after 1945 'real' German history could finally resume; to them 'the beginning' is really all about a resumption of supposedly normal paths. For all of them, talk of beginnings had very real practical and political consequences.

End points

To scholars of the Cold War, endings are usually much less ambiguous than beginnings. After years of perestroika and glasnost reforms and the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in Washington in 1987, the cluster of events in 1989–91 then brought the Cold War order to an end. The success of Solidarność in the Polish parliamentary elections, the end of the People's Republics in Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia and Romania, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the unification of East and West Germany, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact – all these events serve

as markers for the end of the Cold War and the beginning of a new, post-Cold War world. More critical voices might interject that the Cold War has still not fully ended, since our thinking today is still shaped by the categories, paradigms and institutions it gave rise to (from 'the West' and 'the Third World' or 'Global South' to NATO and the United Nations Development Programme), and many of the local and regional conflicts fuelled by the Cold War are still ongoing – but even they would agree that 1989–91 marked a definite sea-change.

Historians less focused on the Cold War find it much harder to point to the concrete end points of the post-war. Part of the problem is that any discontinuities looked rather different in different settings. In Britain, for example, post-war history, when narrated as the history of British prime ministers, usually starts with the election of Clement Attlee in 1945 and ends with the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979. Elsewhere, national political chronologies point to different breaks and transitions. Nonetheless, some historians have identified broadly comparable social, political and economic patterns across Europe (though inevitably with outliers that don't fit) as part of a chronology of recovery from war, economic growth and boom, and eventual crisis and instability. As such they often break up the post-war decades into several distinct periods, each defined by its own dynamic and each with different end points.

The first post-war period, the immediate aftermath of the war, lasted until the end of the 1940s or early 1950s, and was in character very different from subsequent decades. It was marked above all by individuals' and societies' attempts to recover from the devastation, loss and deprivation caused by years of war, foreign occupation, Holocaust and ethnic cleansing. It involved priorities such as feeding starving bodies, preventing the spread of mass epidemics, rebuilding houses, resettling refugees, electing new governments, and identifying and punishing those responsible for the catastrophe and crimes of war. Not surprisingly, the aftermath had much longer-lasting repercussions in states devastated by foreign armies and attempts to carry out 'scorched earth' policies, and whose nationals had died in large numbers, compared with those that had remained neutral or escaped more serious damage.

Nazi racial policy, the mass extermination of undesired groups and the destruction of not just material infrastructures but also of law and order and social norms was of an entirely different order in eastern and southern Europe compared to the northern and western parts. In countries like Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia early post-war choices were determined by the fact that once ruling social groups had been entirely wiped out. Turning back the clocks to a time before 1939 was impossible in this scenario. In north-western countries, by contrast, the early post-war reconstruction programmes often revolved around initial attempts to restore existing political institutions and infrastructures, even if they ultimately emerged transformed. Taking this period seriously involves realising that none of the subsequent developments and Cold War confrontations were inevitable at this stage.

The second period of the post-war era consists of the roughly two decades following the early 1950s. By this time, much of the rubble had been cleared, new governments had assumed office and economic recovery was well under way, in spite of gloomy predictions to the contrary. This, to many historians, marked the end of the aftermath of war and the beginning of a new era of economic boom and political stability. Hobsbawm named it the 'Golden Age' (1950–75) of prosperity, material growth and social change – particularly, but not only, in the developed countries of the capitalist world. In part this Golden Age rested on a widespread agreement that economic policy had to be regulated and planned if the boom and bust of the interwar was to be avoided, and was accompanied by expanded welfare states in east and west. Throughout the 1950s, living standards rose significantly across Europe alongside steep economic growth rates. But the parameters in which this recovery took place differed in east and west. The western European economic miracle and expansion of consumer spending was fuelled partly by help from the United States (though arguments are still ongoing about the precise impact of US economic assistance), and by abundant sources of labour: migrants, refugees, repatriants, expellees, returnees, and all kinds of other people on the move. Guest worker programmes further enabled the mass importation of manual labour. In eastern Europe, economic recovery and reconstruction proceeded within centrally-planned systems, which prioritised land reform, the nationalisation of the means of production and industrialisation. They were managed through national Five- or Six-Year Plans of economic targets. Overall, the slope of growth rate graphs differed across Europe, but everywhere growth far exceeded any previously recorded episodes. This was the 'economic miracle'.

The end of the aftermath and the beginning of a new period of stability can also be narrated in less economic and more political and psychological terms, often through the notion of a 'post-war consensus'. Across Europe, by the mid-1950s the spectrum of acceptable political solutions had notably narrowed. Extremes on either right or left had become unacceptable and episodes of civil unrest were limited. Coalition governments became a regular feature of western European political life. At the same time, war-exhaustion, rising living standards and growing material freedoms also seemed to be conducive to a 'widespread desire in the 1950s for political quiescence, family stability and domesticity'.⁴

At the same time, the 1950s and 1960s also saw the redefinition and eventual unravelling of the western European empires. Students often assume that decolonisation followed the war. But taking the post-war period seriously in fact sharpens our sense of chronology and periodisation by pointing to a crucial interlude. The war had indeed exposed and amplified the limitations and weaknesses of the imperial powers, who struggled to keep a lid on increasingly assertive nationalist movements. And for the next 15 or so years, all European

In the UK, the first wave of the mid-century baby boom peaked in 1947, followed by a second peak in 1964 (see Office for National Statistics, Births in England and Wales)



imperial powers did go through processes of decolonisation, at times involving bloody conflict. But, importantly, all European powers tried to resist the pressures by re-imposing and redefining colonial rule. None of them thought in 1945 that the age of imperial rule was over; none foresaw that by the early 1970s it would be. As the historian Martin Evans puts it, the '1945 moment' was 'a point of imperial reassertion not decline', marked by imperial powers' attempts to reform – by winning the 'hearts and minds' of the local populations, or, if necessary, by winning them over by force.⁵ Only by the 1960s, and for a combination of financial and political reasons, did colonial rule appear as unsustainable. France's war in Algeria brought the Fourth French Republic to an end (and Charles de Gaulle back into power), though elsewhere less blood was shed.

By whatever measure, the post-war consensus unravelled amid the economic shocks of the early 1970s. To many historians, this slide into the 'disturbing seventies'⁶ was a watershed moment and marked the end of the long post-war. After a few years of student radicalisation and mass protest, and



Berliners stand on top of the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate, 10 November 1989

the return of the centre-left parties to power, it all came finally to a head some time between 1971 and 1973: in August 1971, the dollar was taken off the gold standard and the gold-based international monetary system (inaugurated at Bretton Woods in 1944) broke down. In October 1973, as a result of the Arab-Israeli war, OPEC, the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries, announced a steep increase in the price of crude oil. The widespread panic in import-dependent European states triggered rising unemployment and inflation everywhere. The assumptions that had underpinned the previous decades' boom (for example, concerning the reliability of ways to regulate the international economy, and the unlimited availability of labour and cheap fossil fuels) all came crashing down.⁷ Some historians see this moment as an end to a long period of hope, optimism and the promise of infinite and one-directional improvement. But the post-war was definitely over.

'Post-war' is not the same as the Cold War

To what extent should or can the history of 'post-war' be written as one of the Cold War? The Cold War is a term used to describe the political, diplomatic and economic relationships between the former war-time Allies after 1945, which transformed the world in several respects: it foregrounded the rivalries between the US and USSR and de-emphasised others (such as those, say, between Britain and the rest of Europe or its decolonising empire, or between China and the Soviet Union), and it froze and normalised a fundamentally unstable state of affairs. More generally, the Cold War implanted certain assumptions: about binary choices and the absence of alternatives, about the optimum path of economic development and progress, and as a result about the shape of history; that found their way into much of the economics, politics, language, culture, education and day-to-day life in the 1950s-1980s.

So by some measure, studying the Cold War helps to give shape to an undeniably significant feature of the post-war era. But perhaps one of the most noticeable changes in writings about post-war history in the last two decades lies in historians' attempts to avoid seeing one simply through the prism of the other. They find that reducing everything to the outcome of a particular set of political alignments flattens historical complexity and chronology, and obscures many questions about life after 1945 that don't fit the Cold War mould. Interestingly, as the historian Geoff Eley has noted, it took the end of the Cold War to first prompt historians to take proper stock of the post-war as a distinct period (or sets of periods), rather than an epilogue to the world wars or beginning of the Cold War. 'So long as the stability of Western European political arrangements, the effects of the peacetime affluence and the Cold War's determinative framework still held,' Eley argued, 'the indefinitely expanding present of the 'post-1945' could also continue to unfold. While the watershed of 1968-73 and the ensuing disorder of the 1970s and 1980s certainly damaged those certainties, it required the Gorbachev era, the Revolutions of 1989, and the end of communism to prepare the ground for closure.'⁸ The end of the Cold War marked the end of a whole period of history, and with it, allowed for closer inspection and re-periodisation.

Overall, much of the historiography of the last two decades has been about disentangling the Cold War story – itself getting more complex, as broader geographies and sets of actors are being considered – from that of the post-war more generally. Two sets of comparisons have begun to take shape: between the experiences and outcomes of the post-war on either side of the Iron Curtain, and between the aftermaths of the First and Second World Wars. The first set of comparisons of post-war history in the east and west, in particular, has helped to bring

the 'post-war' into focus in a way that was impossible within the Cold War paradigm, which had dictated that two fundamentally, incomparable worlds and world views were pitted against each other. In fact, some historians have by now pointed to a range of broadly comparable patterns in both western and eastern European post-war history. The second set of comparisons of the post-war eras following the two world wars has older roots, but in recent reiterations has helped to anchor post-war history within longer historical trajectories. It serves as a reminder that thinking about the post-war, in fact, involves thinking about the broad outlines of the twentieth century. Rather than worrying that the lack of familiar Cold War reference points necessarily limits post-millennials' ability to understand post-war history, perhaps we should be reassured that they are less encumbered by Cold War mindsets, and thereby hopefully able to think about the post-war era in its own terms.

Further reading

Buchanan, T. (2012) *Europe's Troubled Peace: 1945 to the present*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell

Conway, M., Lagrou, P. Henry Rousso, H. ed. (2019) *Europe's Postwar Periods – 1989, 1945, 1918: writing history backwards*, Bloomsbury

Hobsbawm, E. J. (1994), *Age of Extremes The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph

Judt, T. (2005) *Postwar: a history of Europe since 1945*, Random House

Ian Kershaw, I. (2018) *Roller-Coaster: Europe, 1950-2017*, Allen Lane

Mazower, M. (1998) *Dark Continent: Europe's twentieth century*, Penguin

Mazower, M., Reinisch, J. and David Feldman, D., eds (2011) *Post-war Reconstruction in Europe: international perspectives, 1945-1949 (Past and Present Supplement Vol. 6)* Oxford: OUP

Reinisch, J. (2013) *The Perils of Peace: The public health crisis in occupied Germany*, Oxford: OUP, open access <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-perils-of-peace-9780199660797?cc=gb&lang=en&>

REFERENCES

- Maier, C. S. (2000) 'Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: alternative narratives for the modern era' in *The American Historical Review*, 105, No. 3, pp. 807-831, 810.
- Lowe, K. (2012) *Savage Continent: Europe in the aftermath of World War II* London: Penguin
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1994), *Age of Extremes The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph, pp. 252-3
- Mazower, M. (1999) *Dark Continent: Europe's twentieth century*, London: Penguin, p.295
- Events, M., ed. Stone, D. (2012) 'Colonial Fantasies Shattered', in *The Oxford Handbook of Postwar European History*, Oxford: OUP, p. 483
- Hobsbawm, E. J. (1994), *Age of Extremes The Short Twentieth Century, 1914-1991*, London: Michael Joseph, pp. 257
- Buchanan, T. (2012) *Europe's Troubled Peace: 1945 to the present*, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell
- Eley, G. (2008) 'Reviews: Europe after 1945' in *History Workshop Journal*, 65, pp. 195-6.

Jessica Reinisch is Reader in Modern European History and director of the Centre for the Study of Internationalism at Birkbeck, University of London. She has published widely on the aftermath of the Second World War and twentieth century European history. Her publications include, with Frank M., *Refugees in Europe, 1919-1959* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017); *The Perils of Peace: Public health in occupied Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2013, available as a free eBook from the OUP catalogue); and with Mazower, M., and Feldman, D. *Post-War Reconstruction in Europe: International perspectives*, (Oxford University Press, 2011).