



MOVING TARGETS

Reckoning with the past

A Conversation with Emmanuel Le Roy-Ladurie

E *We would like to begin by posing a very general question on the*
I *European order and on Germany in particular. In the last few years, with the possibility of a structural change in the European situation, a renewal of the European order towards a kind of pre-Yalta situation has been widely considered. Do you believe that the comparison between the present situation and the pre-Yalta one is acceptable, and up to what point? And do you believe that a return to a pre-Yalta order is at all possible?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: There is certainly an acceleration in the pace of change in Europe, but there are also a few important elements of continuity. The hypothesis of a revival of some form of pre-World War II order would become a realistic one if there were a very serious change inside the Soviet Union, and an extension of its reform policy to Eastern Europe and to the smaller countries in the Soviet sphere. But frankly this seems to be a remote possibility. And even more unlikely is the possibility of reviving the other factors that existed in the pre-World War II situation, such as the German and French influences in Eastern Europe, and political realities like Austria-Hungary. One can only hope for a greater possibility of communication through less tightly sealed borders.

E *But doesn't this relative opening up of borders, this partial blurring of*
I *the division of Europe, seem to you a desirable change?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: Of course, very desirable, especially because of the fact that, in the end, all the events that brought the present situation about, are the fault of the Europeans, above all of the Germans, not only the events of 1939, of course, but also those of 1914. I want to stress this

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point because it is unfair to blame equally all the Europeans, even though one can indeed say that in 1914 the French, the English, and the Russians bore the responsibility of not controlling the situation for lack of cold blood and poor foresight of what could have, and did, happen. There remains no doubt that Germany's responsibility is by far the most serious. This having been said, the only advantage - if one can use this word concerning the present situation - of today's order in comparison with the past, is that, in spite of relative tension, it is less dangerous than rivalries for influence in Eastern Europe that could lead and indeed led to war, as shown by the Balkan wars just before World War I. All this potential for strife has naturally disappeared since one power, Russia, has, for the moment, an absolute hegemony in the area. This seems to me the only advantage of a situation that has many other unpleasant aspects for the peoples concerned, having no right to democracy, in Poland as well as in East Germany and in Czechoslovakia.

E *What is the possible role of Germany in a Europe where the borders*
I *between the two Germanies as well as among the other countries, would have become more permeable, possibly even to the point that the division of Europe would finally disappear?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: As of today, all questions about the role of a reunited Germany are purely academic and it is virtually impossible to give a realistic answer to them. Still, I believe that in the present historical phase the unity of Germany, or some form and degree of unity among Germanies, would not be very dangerous, and certainly not as dangerous as it used to be considered in the past. The Germans have changed a lot. Moreover, the range of German influence is seriously weakened by the feeble birth rate of modern Germany. In any case Germany would recover not the enormous military influence of the past, but the economic and cultural influence for which it already has the means.

E *What could be the respective capacities, of the Soviets, on the one hand,*
I *and on the other hand of the Germans, the Americans and the French, for exerting their influence in the new Europe that would appear after such an evolution?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: It is quite obvious that the Russians are not going to withdraw from Eastern Europe as they are withdrawing, or at least seeming to withdraw, from Afghanistan. It is likely that the influence of the

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Histoire économique et sociale de la France, Paris, 1977;
Le Carnaval de Romans, Gallimard, Paris, 1979;
L'argent, l'amour et la mort en pays d'Oc, Seuil, Paris, 1980.

West will grow, and it would, of course, be desirable that some French influence also existed. But all this is very premature, and the possibility depends on the future evolution of the Gorbachev phenomenon. This is not an easily interpreted phenomenon, but even if something is going to happen in the Soviet Union, it will still require a substantial amount of time and has yet to dispel the equivocal atmosphere that surrounds it.

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I *How do you see the relationship between French and German influence in Eastern Europe?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: One cannot deny that there is some French influence in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania, even in East Germany, and a not negligible one in Poland. But all in all it is rather modest and is mostly cultural and economic. As far as Germany's relations with Eastern Europe are concerned, the Polish certainly do not entertain good memories of the Germans and this might multiply possibilities for the French. Add to this that after the war, Stalin pushed Poland towards the West, absorbing an enormous piece of Poland in the USSR, and compensating it with an almost as big piece of Germany. The result is that there is a shadow on Polish-German relations that does not exist in the case of France.

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I *This is obviously a shadow created by historical heritage, but are there other historical remnants, tendencies that survive, or footprints of the past, if one can use the term?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: Of course there are. The most obvious

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example is Poland's Catholicism, which is a political factor that has always existed and has survived through time. For its stubborn fidelity, in fact, one could compare Poland's case to that of Ethiopia's Christianity. Another example is that of East Germany, a country on whose territory a powerful foreign army has camped for decades. The ruling *élite* in this country has experienced this forced co-operation with the USSR in the same way as it experienced Prussianism; here we can see a continuity of forms that we could call a pseudo-morphosis. Even the idea of the division of Germany more or less along the present lines, has some roots in the past and indeed it is worth recalling that a Genevan thinker, Frederic Amiel, had, in a book he published in 1865-66, forecast three German entities more or less along the present lines: a Catholic Germany in the west, Protestant Prussia in the north east, and Austria. This 120-year-old forecast came true under circumstances more tragic than he could ever have forecasted. If many Germans are longing for unification - which is a legitimate, normal and deserved aspiration - it is not unthinkable that one could deem the survival of the two different States as the best solution, under the condition that basic freedoms be granted to the East Germans. This, of course, would mean reunification after a short span of time.

E *In Amiel's scenario, what was the factor in which the two Germanies*
I *could find their identity?*

Emmanuel LE ROY LADURIE: It was basically a religious factor. The political units are identified as Catholic Germany in the west, Protestant Prussia in the north east, and then Catholic Austria.

E *The national identity issue is becoming a widely posed question again. In*
I *Spain and even in France it is becoming a topic for discussion. What do you believe to be the state of the question in Germany? Is German identity something impossible?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: German identity is the most real thing existing. Behind it there is a great cultural tradition. Before 1914, and maybe even up to 1930, this tradition was possibly the most important world culture in the scientific, philosophical and historical fields. Of course, a shadow has been thrown on it by the Nazis, who have *ex post facto* dishonoured the German past in which the use of force was undoubtedly an element, but was as legitimate as that of any nation. After the Nazi interlude it has become very difficult to justify the German past. Today, not only is it impossible to claim Hitler's

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heritage, but it has also become difficult to claim Bismarck's, Prussia's and even that of Frederick II. The fact that this heritage has become flawed explains why the Germans are so prone to Americanization.

As far as the identity of other countries is concerned, such as the identity of France, they have, of course, suffered much less than Germany. They only suffer from a kind of universal low-level homogenization due to Americanization and linguistic Anglicization. Yet, I believe that the national identities are still quite strong and we actually live in a rather parochial environment. The problem is how to step out of this parochial identity into a European one. At present more than a European identity there is a kind of European nebula that encompasses the Catholic and Protestant peoples of Europe. Orthodox Europe, which in the nineteenth century seemed to be in the process of joining the rest of the continent in spite of the influence of Byzantine and Islamic civilizations, has taken a step backward in this century. And it is too early to say if the new Russian leadership is really going to change direction.

E *We have said that the history of Germany is a history of force. . .*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: In the history of any great nation there is an element of force. In my country, however, after 1715, a certain consensus developed among the different provinces that had been conquered by force. And if one does not consider Napoleon's brief passage that ended in defeat, the revolution, whatever its drawbacks and defects, succeeded in replacing the loyalty of the provinces to the king with a stronger feeling of citizenship. In Germany, on the other hand, the element of force in binding the country together has been more important and has been in play for a relatively longer time. This was quite obvious in Frederick II's time, but Bismarck also made the tragic error of annexing Alsace and Lorraine by force.

Of course one could easily point out that that tragic error had been committed by Louis XIV and by Richelieu in annexing Alsace up to the Rhone. This can obviously be said, and if one can speak of Bismarck's policy as a tragic error, it is because it contrasts with the very wise policy that he conducted *vis-à-vis* Austria after his victory in 1866. In so doing, he created the seeds of a conflict between Germany and France that eventually led to World War I, as unreasonable as it might look to us today. Bismarck's tragic error was to leave

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behind him a construction that had a built-in element of fragility, and this fragility has been fully manifested because his inheritors were much less brilliant than he was, to put it mildly. Also the successors of Richelieu and Louis XIV were less capable and brilliant, yet the conditions were more favourable and their work ended up being more durable.

E *Now that this element of force has led to disaster, how and up to what point, could Germany recover its identity? What are the elements of her past that are still valuable today, and that could be recovered without detaching Germany from the West?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: Germany does have a tradition of enlightenment, with Lessing as one of its representatives. It is certain, however, that the German national idea is not based on this. While French national identity is founded on the notion of citizenship, the German idea has largely borrowed from Herder's ideas, that thought of a People as a quasi-biological entity. If these ideas were in a way acceptable flowing from Herder's pen, they became dangerous in Hitler's hands. The crushing of the Third Reich and subsequent occupation not only erased, in West Germany at least, the Nazi past, together with the Prussian past, which was of a different type, but also allowed the blossoming of democratic tendencies that had existed for a long time in the Rhine Valley.

As you know, several political philosophers of the past thought that the national characteristics of a people were basically determined by its political constitution. They probably exaggerated, but it is certain that the old demons have been exorcized in democratic Germany. I don't think there is any more doubt about Germany belonging to the West and its abandoning all its imperial dreams. It might be sad to say, but true imperialism needs strong demographical growth and today Germany's population is growing older and older. I believe the question of German imperialism is resolved.

E *Still, in terms of political identity, is there any danger of Germany re-discovering its Central European nature?*

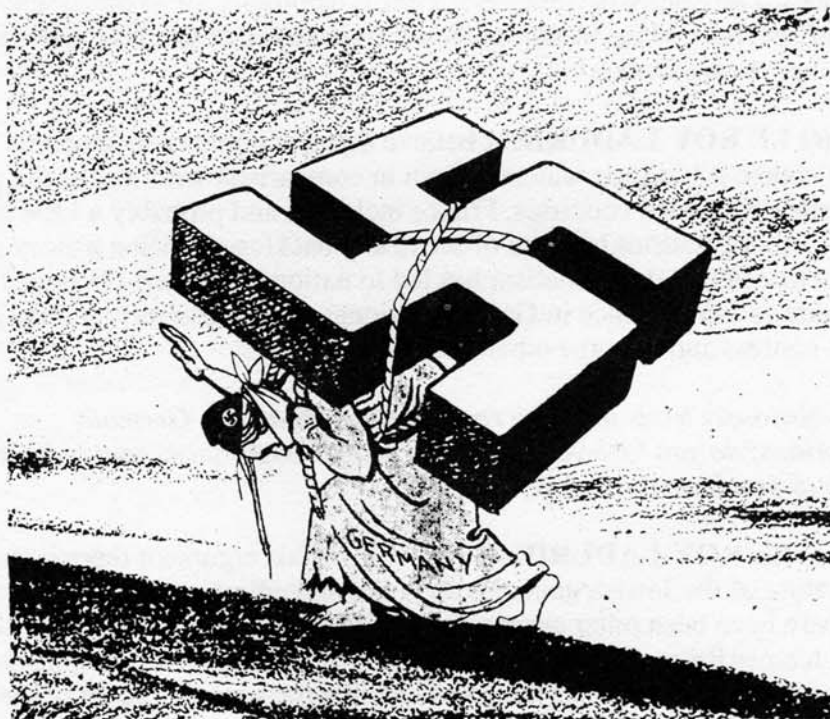
Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: What one could fear along these lines is a new German-Soviet pact. This certainly would not be desirable. Still, should this occur, not being signed by Stalin and especially not by Hitler, even such a pact would have a different meaning than that of 1939. In any case, I believe

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that today the political identity of Germany is democratic and parliamentary. There is no new Nazi danger. The ideology of the Greens certainly has some aspects that are sometimes equivocal but one shouldn't be excessively alarmed. It is a hardly disputable fact that in Europe, once the authoritarian or totalitarian regimes have been overthrown, nothing, or almost nothing survives. In Italy neo-Fascism is a very marginal electoral phenomenon. In Spain, Francoism has practically disappeared, and in Austria no one remembers having been a Nazi.

E *But what are the Germans going to do with their 1933-1945 history?*
L *Don't you believe that this is a moral and political problem more than a historical one?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: Well, the history of Germany is a terrible disaster and not only between 1933 and 1945, but between 1913 and 1945. It provides the sad performance of a great country, a great culture, committing



A prophetic cartoon (Daily Express, 7.29.1933)

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suicide because of the stupidity of its ruling *élite*, and because of general absent-mindedness. Look at what Germany was in 1913, stretching from Strasbourg to the Baltic countries, and compare it with what is left today.

I have recently seen, on the cover of a book on the history of Germany, something that seems to me a very good symbol of this disaster: a romantic painting of the early nineteenth century showing a gigantic and lonely tree uprooted by the wind. I don't believe that the Germans have forgotten the tragic page of their history that was the 1933-1945 period. The Austrians are frequently accused of having forgotten and the Germans of tending to forget, but the rest of the world takes particular care of reminding them of it, again and again. One could, of course, condemn this tendency to forget. But I have to stress that, contrary to the Austrians, the Germans have not completely forgotten the 1933-1945 period. A feeling of guilt is, in any case, still alive with the Germans today, and is particularly heavy to bear for the younger generation.

E *And isn't this feeling of guilt preventing the construction of a new national consciousness?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: I believe that a national consciousness exists. Of course it is a little watered down in comparison with that of the past, as in the other European countries, France included, and probably a little more than in the other countries because of the heavy backlog of such a history and by the fact that political nationalism has led to national disaster. I believe that there is more self-confidence in German national consciousness than they are willing to confess and than the others tend to believe.

E *This obviously leads us to the recent argument among German historians; do you believe that it has really brought important political and ethnical problems to the forefront?*

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: At the core of this argument there is the specific nature of the Jewish genocide. It is undoubtedly true that in the present century there have been other crimes on a similarly gigantic scale, in the Soviet Union, in Khmer Rouge-controlled Cambodia, in Menghistu's Ethiopia, and in Chinese-occupied Tibet. Under the condition that the specific nature of the Holocaust is not forgotten, I believe that a study of comparative history might be legitimate and I believe that not even Habermas would deny that.

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E Still, one could pose a certain number of questions about this argument.
L Why has this effort to look at the Nazi period in a historical perspective attracted so much attention right now, while a certain number of scholarly works had already been published in the '60s and early '70s? And why are these arguments so much more violent than in the other European countries? Is there a special role of the historians in German society?

Emmanuel LE ROY-LADURIE: If these discussions, which in other countries would remain confined to academic circles, in Germany involve society at large, it is because German historians are the guardians of this very difficult memory. In Germany it is inevitable that historical reflection concentrates on this catastrophic past. If one thinks of a German historian, the name that first comes to mind is that of Fritz Fischer, who analysed the causes of World War I, and proved the responsibility of the chief of staff and of the German ruling groups. It is inevitable for German historians to concentrate on that tragic phase of their national history, between 1913 and 1945 when, as I have already said, a great country and a great culture committed suicide.