

Swords Turned into Plowshares

Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?: The Transformation of Modern Europe

By James J. Sheehan
Houghton Mifflin.
304 pp. \$26.00.

Reviewed by
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EUROPEANS, it has been said, spent the first half of the 20th century slaughtering one another and the second half drowning their sorrows in production and consumption. This is more or less confirmed by James J. Sheehan in his new book. The eminent Stanford University historian's larger interest, though, is the changed relationship between statehood and warfare. It once would have been unthinkable to define sovereignty apart from military capacity and symbolism. "Without war, there would be no state," declares the iron law of the 19th-century historian Heinrich von Treitschke that is the title of one of Sheehan's chapters. And by the end of the book he has effectively established the astonishing transformation reflected in his citation of the words of Germany's president in 1990: "Today sovereignty means participating in the international community."

Sheehan says his objective is to show that Europe's refurbishment of sovereignty in a pacifist direction is thus far exceptional. In 2002, the neoconservative author Robert Kagan similarly argued that Europeans now dream of a utopia where violence and force have passed from the world. Kagan offered his view at a moment when Euro-American relations were coming unglued over the run-up to the Iraq invasion. Sheehan does not openly reach Kagan's conclusion that the United States may have to take responsibility for patrolling a "dangerous world" alone because its old allies have grown soft. But he appears to want to

show Kagan was on to something significant that has become deeply ingrained.

The story told here has the Europeans building a new kind of state after 1945, a "civilian state," under special conditions created by the bipolar politics of the Cold War. That conflict left certain parts of Europe armed to the teeth, but war was essentially off the table. As pawns in a geopolitical contest, Europeans faced external constraints that for the first time in history kept them from turning on each other.

They responded to their new condition, Sheehan says, with an internal choice: Through integration they would make peace—by focusing on providing goods and services. Since the Enlightenment European thinkers had been predicting that violent passions would be replaced by commercial interests, and in the postwar world it finally happened. Sheehan does not deal seriously with consumerism, but West and East it undoubtedly mattered that Europeans became spenders and getters, not simply workers and makers.

Sheehan's prose is elegant and economical; his examples and quotations are also beautifully marshaled. "The killing was relentless" in World War I combat, he notes. "Unlimited by human stamina, the mechanical delivery of artillery rounds could go on for hours, even days, as long as there were shells to feed the guns." The horror is neatly captured by his statistic that of France's 1.3 million war dead, 300,000 were so mangled, dismembered or pulverized as to be unidentifiable.

IN THE LIGHT of their history, it remains puzzling that the Europeans could turn all their swords into plowshares. It is one thing to describe their transformation, and quite another to explain it. Although finely crafted as a descriptive narrative, *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?* is somewhat less of an explanatory success.

One reason is Sheehan's disproportionate attention to the Europeans' pre-World War II violence. This is essential for registering how new their current "pacifism" is. And it enables him to emphasize that civilians, rather than being the foundation of European states, were in the past sacrificed without a second thought on war's grim altar. But his analysis of the era after World War II does not begin until the book is three-quarters over. So one has the feeling that a direct answer to Sheehan's main question is constantly being postponed.

Then there is the matter of how broad an explanation is necessary to make sense of the momentous transition Sheehan has in his sights. Early on, while covering the attitudes toward war, he provides illuminating vignettes of popular authors like Norman Angell and Iwan Bloch.

Curiously, when he reaches his key challenge in the post-World War II period, he lets geopolitics and economics do almost all the work. When the explanatory premium is at its height, he leaves out the cultural and popular factors, but they may be critical to understanding what he at one point calls a "slow, silent revolution."

There are many untapped sources here, beginning with the glamorization of war that persisted among Europeans—as

Jean Lartéguy's best-selling classic, *The Centurions* (1961), graphically illustrates. On the other side of the ledger, the hostility toward war and weapons proliferation eventually expressed through the German and other Green parties is not mentioned. Usually originating from the far Left (only alluded to as a source of 1970s terrorism), these attitudes are unlikely to have been crystallized either by early Cold War dualism or by commerce. Sheehan does narrate the perpetration of the Holocaust, but neglects to observe that Europeans first came to grips with the worst atrocities of World War II 30



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years after the fact, because new realities initiated a greater sensitivity to violence.

One of these was the Europeans' loss of the foreign lands where they had long employed brutality without compunction. Even as the foundations of the postwar world were being laid, they did not give up their old imperial posture. Sheehan seems to minimize the profound challenge colonial engagements (which at one point he somewhat euphemistically labels "global obligations") pose to his main arguments. Nevertheless, from this perspective much of postwar European history looks more in continuity with the bloody past than a break from it.

In the 1950s and 1960s, facing better armed opponents, the Europeans were simply beaten; at other times, they decided the benefits of retaining overseas rule did not justify the costs. Either way, their "choice" to change did not flow directly from postwar fundamentals. (And until the end of the Cold War Europeans, East and West, often supported the hot wars of their patrons around the world.)

IT IS SHEEHAN'S chapter about what has happened since 1989 that does perhaps the most important work in *Where Have All the Soldiers Gone?* By then war and even genocide had returned to European soil, and many saw a new consensus growing for European militaries to play a role in preventing atrocities like those they had once perpetrated. Famously, the German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, previously a pacifist, came around to supporting NATO's armed intervention in Kosovo. But, argues Sheehan, what these episodes really show is that Europeans had turned against war for good. Britain and Russia—the one more eager than Continental powers to sign onto America's campaigns and the other fighting savage wars on the periphery—now drop out of Sheehan's account, though they had been central to it before.

Sheehan is very good at recalling European anxieties about deploying troops in the 1990s and after. Yet it is dangerous to equate insistence on multilateral agreement in initiating conflict—sovereignty as participation in the international community—with the rejection of violence altogether. With his once paci-

fist party part of the governing Socialist coalition, Fischer also supported the recent Afghanistan campaign, meager as Germany's military help proved to be. But together with other politicians of "Old Europe," he drew the line at Iraqi invasion. Did this really express a distaste for war now encoded in European genetics? Or was it a rejection of the particular war the United States had opted, against all reason, to start?

One wonders, in other words, whether Sheehan is really calling on a long-term story to explain what in many ways is a short-term phenomenon—European dissent from America's global war on terror. It will take considerable time, after Iraq and George W. Bush, to know if NATO's fracturing around Iraq portended something permanent. Despite the transformation of their armies and attitudes, Europeans retain the ability to deploy massive force to strategic ends.

So the question is whether telling a history culminating in European dissent from the Iraq adventure is a narrative too neat and too final to capture how issue-specific and hence temporary that dissent may prove to be. Still, Sheehan is clearly right in this thought-provoking volume that something has happened, however much one might question its roots and depth.

Exploring Uncharted Territory

The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia

By Orlando Figes
Metropolitan.
740 pp. \$35.00.

Reviewed by
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"MAGISTERIAL" may be an overworked adjective in book reviews, but it accurately describes Orlando Figes' latest volume. A professor of history at Birkbeck College, University of

London, he has written two equally weighty studies: *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, and the multi-prize-winner, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891-1924*. In *The Whisperers* he reconstructs "private life in Stalin's Russia" through interviews with representative samples of Russian citizens at all levels of society who survived decades of oppression by the ruthless dictator and his successors.

As a graduate researcher in Moscow during the 1980s, Figes explains, he made a first attempt at an oral history of the early Soviet period by interviewing Russian friends and their families, but they seemed "too nervous to speak in depth." He realized then the importance of producing a "counterweight to the official narrative of Soviet history."

After the USSR collapsed in 1991, Figes thought again about exploring "this uncharted territory." Not until 2002, though, when he completed *Natasha's Dance*, did he undertake the task, assisted by teams of researchers who gained access to the public archives of Moscow, St. Petersburg and other Russian cities, and to over a dozen private family archives. Their most valuable source was the testimony of more than 400 oral interviews that usually lasted for hours and often stretched to several days. Figes himself conducted many of them. Some were also provided by the Memorial Society, a Moscow-based human rights organization. There was a sense of urgency about the undertaking because the average age of the interviewees was 80.

The author considers *The Whisperers* unique in that it probes the interior world of families and individuals during seven decades of the Soviet system. Previous histories focused more on external events in particular periods: the Civil War of the 1920s; the persecution and exile to Siberia of millions of "kulaks" (moderately wealthier peasants) and the "Great Terror" of the 1930s, which included the execution of some of Stalin's Party comrades; the crowded communal housing of the urban proletariat; the War and postwar years. Figes calls Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* (1973) the great oral history of the labor camps.