

# Pursuing power in Europe, 1815–1914

Richard J. Evans talks about his book *The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815–1914*, in conversation with Ruth Harris



Professor Sir Richard Evans is President of Wolfson College, Cambridge, and Provost of Gresham College, London; he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1993.



Ruth Harris is Senior Research Fellow at All Souls and Professor in Modern European History at the University of Oxford; she was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2011.

## What led you to write this compendious history of Europe in the way that you've done?

Nowadays I'm mostly known as a historian of Nazi Germany, but that's a relatively recent interest. It started when I got involved as an expert witness in the Holocaust denial libel action brought by David Irving against Deborah Lipstadt, the American historian (the trial was held in 2000). That led me to write a three-volume history of Nazi Germany,<sup>1</sup> largely because the lawyers said they couldn't find a really good one that went into any detail. But in 1995, when I had been asked by Penguin to write a volume on the period 1815–1914 in their *Penguin History of Europe* series, I was mainly known as a 19th-century historian. So after I'd finished the Third Reich books, it was great coming back to this in 2009, to get back to my earlier teaching, bring it up to date and learn new things.

The book owes a lot to my formation as a historian at Oxford in the late 1960s and early to mid '70s, when there was an explosion of new interest in social history. The English Marxist historians were just publishing their major works; the History Workshop movement was beginning; and I was fortunate enough to be a graduate student at St Antony's College, where friends of mine were doing modern French history, heavily influenced by the *Annales* school. More recently, when I came back to this topic after doing nothing about it between 1995 and 2009, cultural, global and transnational history had come onto the scene. I tried to fold all of those influences into this book – which is one reason why it's so long.

The other reason for the book's length is that, between the commissioning of the book and my saying 'OK, I'm ready to do it,' Penguin decided, after their experience in the history boom of the late 1990s and early 2000s, that only blockbusters really sell. They said, 'The contract is for 120,000 words, but could you please

1. Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (Penguin, 2003); *The Third Reich in Power, 1933–1939* (Penguin, 2005); *The Third Reich at War* (Penguin, 2008).

deliver 280,000?’ After a moment of shock horror, I thought, actually that’s great, because it allows me to go into a lot of detail, precisely to give this very broad coverage of pretty well every aspect of history in the 19th century, which I would not have been able to do if it had been a shorter book.

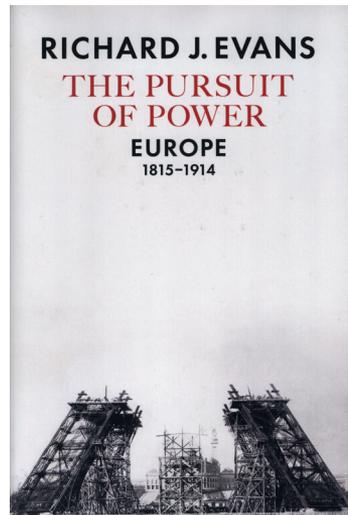
**The value of the book is indeed its scope, range and detail. It enabled me as a reader to hook onto things that are of great interest to me – about people and movements.**

**I am very struck by your account of emancipation. You argue that one of the distinctive features of the 19th century was the number of people who were emancipated. Could you explore a bit more this shift in social relations?**

I began with the fact that around 85 per cent of the population lived in the countryside until well into the second half of the 19th century. But in the economic, social, political, general histories of 19th-century Europe, you find there are only a few pages about the peasantry. I think people have been influenced by Marx’s characterisation of ‘the idiocy of rural life’: these are the people that get left behind by industrialisation. So I thought I would give them their due.

Despite the French Revolution, in the 1820s and ’30s serfdom still existed across large swathes of the continent – in particular in central and eastern Europe (including European Russia) – and I think that’s something that’s not sufficiently known. There was a whole process of emancipation where the serfs were freed – partly because states wanted to cement the loyalty of their inhabitants and give them some interest in the state, partly because the serfs had been rebelling, sometimes violently. So the emancipation of millions and millions of people in the rural population was a characteristic of Europe right through the 19th century. (Astonishingly, there were a few pockets where serfdom still existed until the 1920s.)

Again, over half the population were women. In most books on 19th-century Europe, you have a few paragraphs on the rise of ‘feminism’. It seemed to me really important to bring women into the picture, to look at their lives, work, family, their experiences. Here again, despite the French Revolution which was very much a men’s affair, in the early 19th century women pretty much didn’t have any rights at all. Their property – if they had any – was the property of their husband or their father. They couldn’t join professions. They really didn’t have any education, so female illiteracy rates were far higher. There was a long process of the emancipa-



Richard J. Evans, *The Pursuit of Power: Europe 1815–1914*, was published by Allen Lane in September 2016.

tion of women – giving them more rights – again, mostly fought for by themselves. Later on in the century, particularly after 1900, some nationalist movements, such as in Finland or Czechoslovakia, actually campaigned for women to get the vote, because they saw them as the educators of the next generation, and wanted them to bring up their children as Finnish and Czech nationalists.

**You don’t just talk about the question of women’s rights. You also see things in gender terms. This is a remarkable achievement for a mainstream European history book.**

I do try and bring gender in where I can. Quite often gender is used as a synonym for women. But I try and talk about masculinity. For example, why did men in the middle of the century suddenly start growing enormous beards? It’s a striking

feature when you look at any photographs or paintings of statesmen, politicians, engineers, etc., so I talk about that as a sign of masculinity. You did get some people explicitly saying that. For example, the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who had a vast moustache which covered most of the bottom half of his face, was said by one of

his acolytes to grow it to emphasise his masculinity. I think this was a response to the beginnings of the rise of feminism and the extension of more rights to women.

**Why did men in the middle of the century suddenly start growing enormous beards?**

It’s very important to have a human dimension of history, not just a lot of dry facts. I try and fold in quotations, experiences, anecdotes and stories. And I begin each chapter with a life story. There are four men and four women who make up the life stories of the eight chapters.

**Those introductions to the chapters are some of the best passages in the book. Are these people chosen because they exemplify contradictions and paradoxes? Are they there simply because, although the 19th century seems close, it’s actually still very much a foreign country?**

I chose these eight individuals partly for their intrinsic interest, their vividness, and partly to bring across the difference between 19th-century people and their sensibilities, consciousness and behaviour and those of the 20th century. The 19th century is indeed quite strange in some ways. It’s now a few years since the last people who lived in the 19th century have died. In comparison to the 20th century, we don’t know a lot about it. I wanted to bring across the strangeness.

I picked each one from a different country. I found myself looking for an interesting Scandinavian woman, which I found rather difficult. In the end I came across Fredrika Bremer, who was a Swedish novelist in the 1840s and '50s, whose works are now completely forgotten outside Sweden. I chose her because, like all the other characters, she raises a number of the questions that are discussed in the chapter as a whole.

She starts the chapter I call 'The Age of Emotion' – in contrast to 'The Age of Reason' in the 18th century. Fredrika Bremer was religious, and that relates to the way religion turned into a more feeling, emotional phenomenon and practice, involving things like apparitions of the Virgin Mary, about which of course you yourself have written. She was a novelist, so that brings us into literature and the way in which it was influenced by gothic and romantic themes. There's a fantastic scene in one of her novels where a beautiful young blind woman – Fredrika Bremer felt she was rather ugly, so the most beautiful women in her novels are blind or afflicted in some other way – stands in the middle of a thunderstorm on a precipice and shouts, 'I'm free, I'm free.' (To my great disappointment, she doesn't jump off, she just goes back home and dies peacefully.)

Bremer's life also raises a lot of questions about women and gender. Because she was unmarried, when her father died her elder brother had all the income from her novels. He drank and gambled it away until he died a miserable death, fortunately early. She had no other male relatives, so she campaigned for unmarried women's rights. So there are many things in her life story that make her very interesting, and raise the questions that I deal with in that chapter.

**I'd like to discuss with you the choice of title, *The Pursuit of Power*. In your Preface, you contrast power with glory, and you explain that different forms of power were pursued in the 19th century.**

What struck me is the fact that power became a very diverse but central way in which people framed their ambitions and their lives in the 19th century.

Tim Blanning's *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648–1815* – the preceding volume in the *Penguin History of Europe* series – is really defined by the upper classes and the elites in the 18th century.<sup>2</sup> Glory and honour were absolutely essential concepts. They faded a bit in the 19th century, but didn't completely go away – you can even see them in the outbreak of the First World War.

But more and more, as education spreads across the population, as society becomes more complex, as industrialisation and urbanisation change things, as you have this process of emancipation – which raises the question of 'what do we do with our freedom?' – you can see political parties emerging in the second half of the 19th century, struggling for power through elections, over government, in legislative assemblies. You can see

the competition for economic power by great industrialists. The pursuit of profit is also, in a way, a pursuit of power over other people. You can see trade unions, workers struggling for power over their own lives against the monopoly of power by their employers. You can see the Impressionists in revolt against the power of the Academies: they want to determine their own artistic careers and expression. So power is a very diverse phenomenon.

As usual, when you're writing a book, you can't think of a title. I suddenly thought of it one day in the bath, which is where all the great ideas come from. I thought, Tim Blanning's book is *The Pursuit of Glory*. What was the key thing that people were pursuing in the 19th century, across the board? It was power – but power understood in this very varied way. One or two people have remarked that *The Pursuit of Power* sounds an old-fashioned title, all about diplomatic and high political history. But that's not what I mean by power. And the whole literature on power in the last 30–40 years has been getting away from that rather simple political concept.

**One of your character portraits explores the relationship between emancipation and power.**

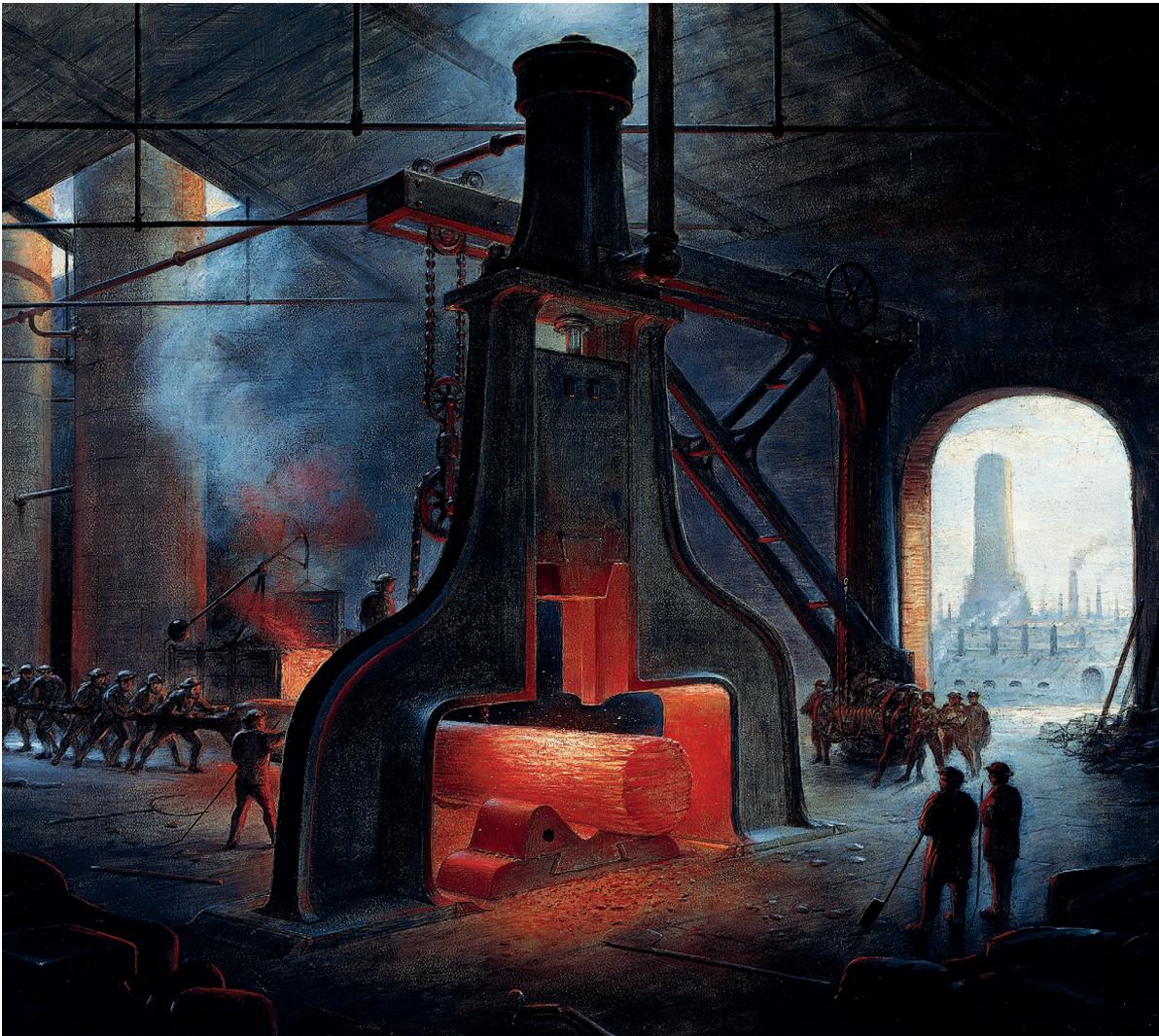
I begin my chapter 'The Paradoxes of Freedom', on the economy in society from 1815 to 1848, with the autobiography of a Russian serf, Savva Dmitrievich Purlevsky, who unusually could read and write. It's clear that what he really resented was the fact that his seigneur, his landlord, had the power to have him whipped, could tell him what to do, make him work without pay. It's that lowly status and the fact that he couldn't control his own life. In the end he ran away, when he was threatened with being whipped. He found refuge in a sect called the Skoptsy, who were 'Old Believers' in the Orthodox tradition. But he then discovered that they practised self-castration as an ascetic form of life, so he ran away again before he was recruited by them. What comes through his life story is his burning resentment and his desire to have power over his own life.

**I think you're right to concentrate on the offended dignity of the man. This leads me back to that remarkable chapter on 'The Age of Emotion'. What are your thoughts about this romantic investigation of the self, and its relationship to other trends that you talk about: mechanisation, mass society, atomisation?**

Yes, educated people increasingly believed, particularly going back to the Romantic movement in the 1820s and '30s, in the authenticity of their feelings as a guide to life, as the foundation of everything else – in absolute contrast to the 18th-century Enlightenment, when they wanted to repress feelings and put intellect at the centre of identity.

I argue that this was a very gendered phenomenon. Because of the growth of parliaments and the increasing

2. Tim Blanning, *The Pursuit of Glory: Europe 1648–1815* (Allen Lane, 2007). Professor Blanning was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1990.



The 19th century was a period of exciting technological innovation. In this 1871 painting, James Nasmyth depicts his invention, the steam hammer, at work in his foundry near Manchester. IMAGE: DE AGOSTINI PICTURE LIBRARY/GETTY IMAGES.

power of elections, men needed to show that they were responsible by repressing their emotions. Emotionality was assigned to women. If you look in encyclopaedias for the definitions of 'men' and 'women', they became increasingly gendered along emotional lines as the century progressed. (Later on, when the struggle for women's votes started, women who were active in these campaigns also – at least in public – began to repress their emotions and reject this idea that women were not responsible adults.)

I think that there are many ways in which the expression of emotion was linked to different areas of life. There was an increased feeling that industrialisation and the machine age were reducing people to automata, and that they needed to be freed from this as well. It's very interesting how the rhetoric of anti-slavery – which was a big cause in the first half of the 19th century – came into other struggles. For example, feminism was a struggle against the enslavement of women: women needed to gain control over their own lives and not be told what to think or feel by men. In the factory, trade unionists struggled for workers' rights, and they began to argue for more

leisure time: in early industrialisation, a 12 – or 14-hour working day allowed nobody any time at all for expressing themselves or developing in other ways.

**One of the ways in which you bring out the sense that this period is a foreign country is by describing the awe associated with new inventions and technologies. This is the opposite of the idea that mechanisation necessarily leads to de-humanisation. What do you think is the balance between optimism and pessimism in the century?**

One of the striking things about the 19th century is how few wars there were in contrast to the 18th and the 20th centuries, how localised they were – not global like in the 18th or 20th century – how short they were, how few countries they involved, how limited their objectives were. Whether it was Bismarck's wars of German unification, or Italian unification, or the Crimean War, they were all fairly brief. In comparison to the 18th and 20th centuries, there was not a lot of bloodshed. That seems to me to be particularly a product of the so-called

Concert of Europe. Because they had seen the huge damage that the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars had inflicted upon society and the established order, statesmen agreed that, if there was a problem, you held a congress or conference and tried to sort things out. So in that respect I take a rather positive view.

It was also a period of massive technological innovation, which just got faster and faster. Of course, it's still getting faster now. But this was the century in which technological innovation really kicked off. By the beginning of 1815, the railways are only just over the horizon, the telegraph is over the horizon. By 1911, you've got aircraft dropping bombs on Libya in a colonial war, you've got the machine gun – so there is a negative side of innovation. But you also have the motor car, you've got the sewing machine – you could go on and on.

People did find this very exciting. I quote a survey at the end of the 19th century in which they asked a lot of people what the next century was going to be like. The overwhelming response was, 'It's going to be fantastic, it's going to be wonderful, the best century ever.' Of course, they got that very wrong for the first half of the 20th century. But there was a good deal of optimism. Progress was the great mantra of the 19th century.

#### **How did the development of transnational and global history in the last 15 years help you in thinking about Europe's place in the wider world?**

One of the benefits of the long delay in my starting this book between 1995 and 2009 was that the growth of global history happened. I was able to see European history from 1815 to 1914 as a period in which Europe dominated the world. This is the only period in history where Europe was richer, stronger, more powerful, better armed, and more influential than other continents. In the 18th century, you've got other great empires – the Ottoman, the Chinese, the Mughal empire in India. In the 20th century the European empires collapse.

The 19th century is not just a century of colonialism – in particular, of course, the scramble for Africa. It's also a period in which Europe's interactions with the rest of the world became much more intense. Some 60 million Europeans left the continent, mostly for the Americas, carrying European concepts, practices, ideas, civilisation. So the boundaries of Europe became porous. Gradually, when they got to America, Argentina, Australia or wherever, they began to drift away from the original European models. Of course, a lot of people came back: a third or more Italians came back, repeatedly, sometimes for good, sometimes just to visit their homeland. So there is a lot more intense interaction.

And, as the century progressed, American technology and its impact upon Europe became much more

important. The great example is the aeroplane, but there are many others. American influences on the European economy became more powerful, and America seemed more and more to be the future.

#### **To come full circle, I will end by asking you how writing this work on European history has changed your work on German history.**

You mentioned transnational history – the idea of looking at phenomena, ideas, concepts, inventions, that transcend individual nations and have an impact upon the whole of Europe. I try in my book to pick out transnational elements. For example, one of the figures I discuss in the book is the intellectual, political leader of Greek independence, Kapodistrias, who actually served time as a Russian foreign minister. Or if you look at the history of revolutions in Europe, you find Poles everywhere. The Polish were the one nation in the 19th century who were constantly, violently rebelling – against the Russians (in particular), the Austrians and the Prussians. And if they couldn't get anywhere in Poland, they headed off to Italy and tried to take part in a revolution there. There were a lot of these characters who moved around Europe.

Looking at the history of Europe in this context does of course have an impact on my own work on German history. In a collection of my essays published in 2015, *The Third Reich in History and Memory*,<sup>3</sup> I discuss recent historiographical trends in the history of Nazi Germany. Where did the Nazis get their ideas from? There has been a long-established tradition that sees Nazi ideology as coming from Germany, from the accumulation of different kinds of ideas within Germany – anti-democratic ideas. Nowadays, it's much more fruitful and interesting to look at the very varied sources of Nazi ideology: the French racism of Gobineau, ideas from Britain of Social Darwinism, 'elite theory' from Pareto and other Italian theorists, or anti-Bolshevism from the Russian counter-revolution in 1918–19. So it was a very diverse set of ideas that the Nazis appropriated and melded together.

When you study the history of an individual country, particularly a very problematical one such as that of Nazi Germany, you can gain a lot by looking at the broader picture. ■

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3. Richard J. Evans, *The Third Reich in History and Memory* (Little, Brown, 2015).