Ian Kershaw

in conversation with DIARMAID MacCULLOCH

On 2 July 2015, Sir Ian Kershaw FBA, Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Sheffield, delivered his Raleigh Lecture on History, 'Out of the ashes: Europe's rebirth after the Second World War, 1945-49'.
A video recording of the lecture can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/kershaw

A few weeks earlier, Sir Ian was interviewed for the *British Academy Review* by the Reverend Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch Kt FBA, Professor of the History of the Church at the University of Oxford, and chair of the British Academy's Events and Prizes Committee.

Ian, I'm fascinated by the fact you started as a medieval historian. I bet there are still people in Yorkshire who think of you as that nice young Dr Kershaw who knows about Bolton Priory.[1] What happened to take you from that fascinating medieval stuff to something very different, but equally fascinating?

There are people who remember me as a medievalist in Yorkshire, it's true. A year or two ago I was made a Trustee of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society. At my first meeting I was greeted by a former colleague from Sheffield University, who said, 'See how standards are slipping. Now we've got a Lancastrian on the Board!'

The transition from medieval history to modern German history didn't take place in a Damascus Road conversion; it took some years to develop fully. And it was driven not by my exposure in any professional fashion to Germany history, but by my increasing prowess in the German language. I had wanted to do languages at school: I did Latin, but the only modern language I could do was French. As a makeshift subject for A-levels, I chose history. Later I started learning German as a hobby. And while in Germany for two months in summer 1972, I went to intensive German language courses and my German language improved fairly rapidly.

I also became intrigued by what sort of country Germany had been. It didn't match up at all with what I was seeing. I found myself asking questions about the place I was living in, a little town just outside Munich, and what had happened there in the Third Reich. That really was the trigger to my becoming increasingly interested in making the move from medieval to modern.

Chance occurrences seem to have happened so often in my life. As a total fluke a new position in modern European history was advertised in my department at Manchester University. One of my friends said, 'Why not have a go at it?' and at the very last minute I decided nothing would be lost in doing so. Unbeknown to me, my colleagues had said that, should I apply for this position, they would at least grant me an interview. I was treated as a complete outsider: I was even sent a map of the University of Manchester and how to get there! To my astonishment, but also intense delight, I was offered this position. I suppose they took what I would see as a sort of reverse gamble. Normally you appoint somebody on research prowess and hope they might be a decent colleague. With me, they'd had six years of me as a colleague, and they just took a gamble that I would do something in modern history.

That was how I came to change from medieval to modern history. After one completely schizophrenic year when I never knew whether the students were coming to do 'The Origins of the Open-Field System' or 'The Rise of Hitler', I settled down as a modernist.

I'm intrigued by that. You're talking absolute ground zero. You had no basis to go in apart from a fascination with the subject. What was your entry point? What did you start by researching?

I did what I could to take soundings, as well as reading as widely as I could. I got great help from a number of people, who opened the door for my first research trip to Germany in 1975 – with the help of a British Academy grant of £500.[2]

1. Ian Kershaw, *Bolton Priory: The Economy of a Northern Monastery, 1268-1325* (Oxford University Press, 1973).

2. Dr I. Kershaw was awarded a 'European Exchange Grant' of £500 in April 1975.

My first port of call was Munich, at the famous Institute of Contemporary History (Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich). Alan Milward, a Fellow of this Academy,[3] engineered a meeting with Martin Broszat, the Director of that Institute. And amazingly I had hit upon a topic that Broszat thought was a super one – the nature of public opinion, or as I later preferred to call it 'popular opinion', in Germany during the Third Reich. Again, completely unknown to me, he was the director of a massive project that was just beginning in Munich and he invited me to work with them.

So, to answer your question, my starting point of research was on popular attitudes towards the Nazi regime, in particular in the period before the war. I then got a research fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Stiftung to go to Munich for a year, in 1976-77. And I was faced with this wonderful material that was teeming out of local government administrative offices, justice offices, police stations etc. – things that hadn't been seen for 30 years. Little did I know it at the time, I was absolutely in on the ground floor of the beginnings of the social history of the Third Reich. Nobody in Germany had done this in 30 years. Yet here I was, a novice coming from England. It was fabulous.

It's an inspiring story, but a peculiar one. A native set of professional historians welcomed you, as someone from a completely different academic system, into their midst. Do you think it was an exception to the rule of how these things work in historiography?

I think it speaks well for the German historical profession at that time. I don't think I would have been as welcomed, dare I say, in the British or the French historical profession if I had come as a novice from Germany.

In Germany in the first post-war years, there had been a lot of continuity of conservative historiography. By the 1960s, that was starting to change. A number of people on the liberal left were taking up positions in universities and research institutes, and they were looking across the Channel and across the Atlantic for inspiration. There was an enormous welcome in Germany at that time, not just for me but for others from Britain and America who were working on German history. They positively welcomed an intervention from outside, seeing it as not coloured by the type of rancorous internal debates that were happening there, where people were divided into irreconcilable schools. They thought that somebody coming from the outside was somehow a dispassionate neutral observer who would tell them the objective reality.

You were actually performing a role for them in a sense, in that you enabled them to talk to each other by your presence and by the things you were doing.

They were very welcoming towards my subsequent work, particularly the Hitler biography – and then the most recent book I did on *The End*.[4] People were asking, 'Why has no German historian done this?' It is interesting that

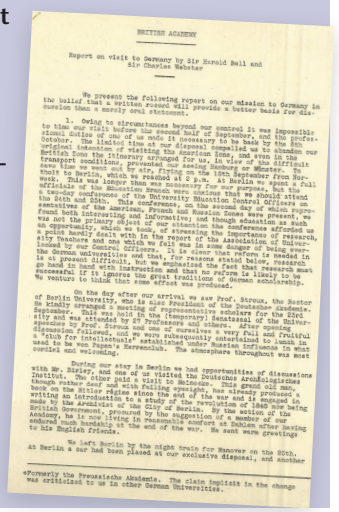
3. Alan Milward was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1987.
4. Ian Kershaw, *The End: Hitler's Germany, 1944-45* (Penguin, 2011).

FROM THE BRITISH ACADEMY ARCHIVE

In September 1947, the President of the British Academy, Sir Harold I. Bell, and Sir Charles K. Webster (who would succeed him as President), visited Germany in order to enquire into the state of scholarship there in the aftermath of the Second World War. On their return they produced a 6-page typed report of their findings.

They discovered that a particular problem was the lack of books. 'Of all the University libraries in Germany only five, Erlangen, Greifswald, Halle, Heidelberg, and Tübingen, are undamaged; at Cologne and Marburg the damage is slight. Some, like Bonn, Giessen, Hamburg, Munich, and Würzburg, are totally destroyed. Seminar libraries, municipal and state libraries, have suffered equally. Even where no serious damage has occurred the isolation of Germany from the rest of the world has entailed the almost total lack of recent publications; indeed more than one person stressed the difficulty of even discovering what works of importance had appeared during the war.'

But they revealed less material difficulties too. 'So far as our observation extended it would seem that it has been easier to resume research in classical and humane studies than in mediaeval and modern history. A greater proportion of teachers in the last subject, which was already in a somewhat precarious position, were removed by the Nazis and of those who remained a greater proportion identified themselves with the Nazi régime and cannot therefore be now allowed to continue in their posts. It is very difficult to find younger men to take their place and there seems a certain reluctance for teachers to specialize in the 19th and 20th centuries and thus be compelled to put forward views which may be considered by one or more of the parties of the present day as hostile to their purposes. Nevertheless in our discussions we pointed out the necessity for the objective study of recent modern history and in particular the period 1919-1939. When this point was made, there was generally full agreement, but it is perhaps natural that there seemed to be little sign of preparation for such study.'



BRITISH ACADEMY

Report on visit to Germany by Sir Harold Bell and Sir Charles Webster

We present the following report on our mission to Germany in the belief that a written record will provide a better basis for discussion than a merely oral statement.

1. Owing to circumstances beyond our control it was impossible to time our visit before the second half of September, and the Professional duties of one of us made it necessary to be back by the 1st October. The limited time at our disposal compelled us to abandon our original intention of visiting the American Zone, and even in the British Zone the itinerary arranged for us, in view of the difficult transport conditions, prevented us from visiting Hamburg or Münster. We thus left Berlin, which we reached at 2 p.m. on 10th September from Horsham. This was longer than we necessary for our purposes, but the officials of the Education Branch were anxious that we should attend a two-day conference of the University Education Control Officers on the 9th and 10th. This conference, on the second day of which representatives of the American, French and Russian Zones were present, was not the primary object of our visit to Germany, but it afforded us an opportunity, which we took, of stressing the importance of research, a point hardly dealt with in the Report of the Association of University Teachers and one which we felt was in some danger of being overlooked by our Control Officers. It is clear that reform is needed in the German universities and that, for reasons stated below, research is at present difficult, but we were pleased to find the fact that research must go hand in hand with instruction and that no reform is likely to be successful if it ignores the great traditions of German scholarship. We venture to think that some effect was produced.

On the day after our arrival we saw Prof. Stroux, the Rector of Berlin University, who is also President of the Zonal Education Committee. He kindly arranged a meeting of representatives of the Universities for the 23rd September. This was held in the (temporary) Senatssaal of the University and was attended by 27 Professors and others. After an opening speech by Prof. Stroux and one of ourselves a very full and fruitful discussion followed, and we were subsequently entertained to lunch in the "Club für Intellektuelle", established under Russian influence in what used to be von Papen's Herrenclub. The atmosphere throughout was most cordial and welcoming.

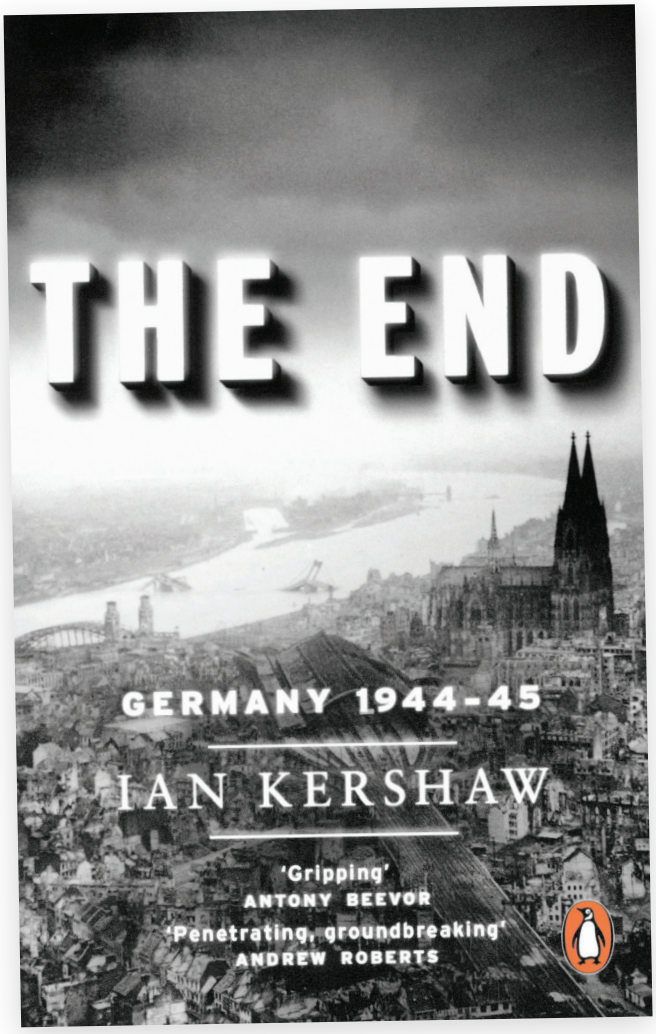
During our stay in Berlin we had opportunities of discussions with Mr. Birley, and one of us visited the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. The other paid a visit to the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut. The other paid a visit to Professor Heimpel. This grand old man, though rather deaf and with failing eyesight, has already produced a book on the Hitler régime since the end of the war and is engaged in writing an introduction to a study of the persecution of the Jews now being made by the Statistical Office of the City of Berlin. By the action of the British Government, procured by the suggestion of a member of our Academy, he is living in reasonable comfort and is a member of our endured much hardship at the end of the war. He sent warm greetings to his English friends.

We left Berlin by the night train for Hanover on the 20th. At Berlin a car had been placed at our exclusive disposal, and another

*Formerly the Preussische Akademie. The claim implicit in the change was criticised to us in other German Universities.

BA570. Thanks to the British Academy's archivist, Karen Syrett, for finding this document.

The original may be read via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/germanyreport1947



these sorts of books – such as Richard Evans has written as well[5] – are not conventionally written by German historians. I think this is because of the nature of their academic training, which provides a hindrance to this sort of wide-ranging work.

You could turn to Fascist Spain and say the same thing, couldn't you? It was necessary for an outsider to say the things they couldn't.

That's right, that has been the case with Paul Preston, whose work on Spain I admire enormously.[7] Before him, Raymond Carr worked on Spain too.[8] And of course, Norman Davies is feted as an enormous influence in Polish history.[9] It is a trend of British historical training, that people have been brought up to be experts on the histories of other countries.

Why do you think it is characteristic of British history? I've got a reductionist explanation: we hate our cooking, so we go abroad to places which have nicer cuisine.

That may well explain an interest in Italy and France. I'm not quite sure it goes for Poland or Germany.

So you start with this interesting subject: popular opinion on the Third Reich. How do you get from that to one of the great biographies of Hitler?

Again, it was a lengthy transition. When I was doing that work on popular attitudes towards the Nazis, part of that work concentrated on attitudes towards Hitler. Political attitudes towards Hitler then got me fascinated in the person who was creating these attitudes and in the propaganda structures that had helped to build up this picture of Hitler. Two books emerged from that research in Munich. One was called *The 'Hitler Myth'*, which was on acclamatory attitudes in the Third Reich.[10] Another was called *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent*, which dealt with oppositional attitudes.[11]

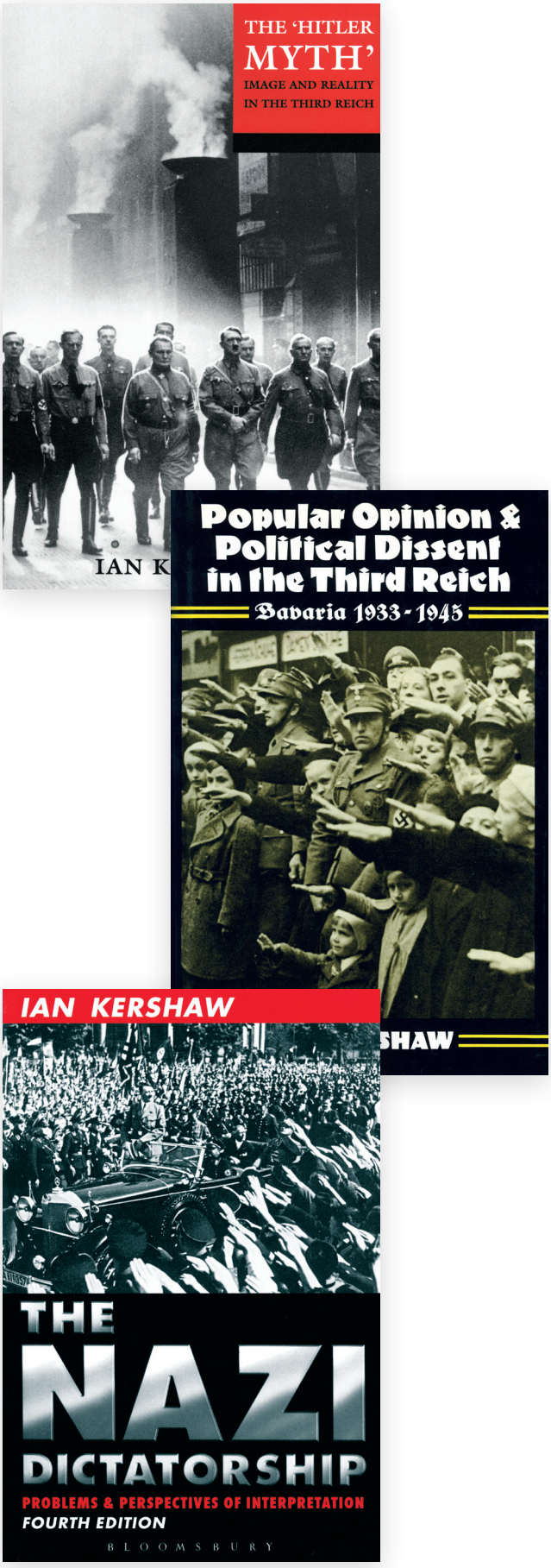
In the meanwhile, I had been invited to a conference at Cumberland Lodge in Windsor Great Park in 1979, which turned out to be a really decisive historiographical influence. You don't often say that about conferences, but this was a really important one. All the leading historians from Germany and Britain were there. As a novice, I watched this kind of tennis match – somebody would smash the ball over the net, and back it would come – between different sides of the ideological debate about the role of Hitler and his significance in the Third Reich. The 'intentionalists' wanted to see the entire history of the Third Reich as being determined by Hitler's personality, Hitler's dominance and Hitler's ideology: 'Nazism is Hitlerism', as one person said at the conference. On the opposite side were people who felt Hitler was a weak dictator and couldn't control all of the structures around him: they moved to a 'structural' or 'functional' approach, where you analyse the chaotic nature of government in the Third Reich.

In retrospect, it was like a division of labour between those people who concentrated on foreign policy, where Hitler's role was more obvious, and those who concentrated on domestic policy, where often he took no part whatsoever in what was going on.

The conference left me completely intrigued with this division in Germany and why Germans were so polarised around this. It struck me instinctively and intuitively as obvious that Hitler had played an important role in what was going on, without necessarily being in control of all the minutiae. I became much more interested from then on in the political structures of the Third Reich and the way in which that system worked, and in the reasons why this rancorous debate had emerged. Out of that came *The Nazi Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives of*

5. For example, Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (Penguin, 2003), *The Third Reich in Power* (Penguin, 2005), *The Third Reich at War* (Penguin, 2008). Richard Evans was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1993.
7. For example, Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (HarperCollins, 2012). Paul Preston was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1994.
8. Works include Raymond Carr, *Spain: A History* (Oxford University Press, 2000). Raymond Carr was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1978.
9. Norman Davies, *God's Playground: A History of Poland* (2 volumes, Oxford University Press, 1981). Norman Davies was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1997.

10. Ian Kershaw, *The 'Hitler Myth': Image and Reality in the Third Reich* (Oxford University Press, 1987).
11. Ian Kershaw, *Popular Opinion and Political Dissent in the Third Reich: Bavaria 1933-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1983).



Interpretation, published in 1985. Only three chapters in the book focused distinctly on the role of Hitler, but that in itself took me further in the direction of Hitler.

Eventually, in yet another of the chance developments that seem to follow my career, I was asked by Penguin to write a biography of Hitler. Initially I said, 'No, I don't think I want to write a biography of Hitler. There are two good ones there already, by Bullock and by Fest.' They said, 'Okay, fair enough. If you change your mind, let us know.' I was sufficiently intrigued by this to reread Alan Bullock's wonderful biography, initially written in 1952,[12] and then Joachim Fest's very stylish biography, written in 1973.[13] I thought, 'They are both very good, but I think I could improve on them.' It was a bit of a tall order, but I agreed to take it on, little knowing what was coming down the track. The next years of my life were completely taken up with writing this Hitler biography.[14]

The starting point was transcending this debate about intentionalism versus structuralism, which I thought had run into a cul-de-sac. My biography used two concepts: Max Weber's charismatic domination, and the notion of 'working towards the Führer', a slogan I found in a Nazi speech. I thought that linking these two things together offered me a vehicle to overcome this division, and to see how Hitler could play such a vital role without having to run everything, or take every decision himself. He could often take no decisions until the last minute but things would move inexorably in the direction that he wanted.

It's an absorbing biography, which I hugely enjoyed. I have turned my hand to biography myself, and one thing that strikes me is that normally you gain a certain sympathy for your subject. You tend to excuse, or at least understand, the discreditable things. I think most biographers feel that. (I do about Thomas Cromwell.) But *you* can't, can you?

No. Some people have said that that must be peculiar about writing a biography of Hitler. But it's no different from writing a biography of Stalin, is it? Paul Preston faced the same problem with Franco.[15] Maybe Mussolini too: in his brilliant book, I think Denis Mack Smith had a different problem – if you treat Mussolini as a buffoon, then you miss much of the evil that Mussolini was perpetrating as well.[16]

In an odd fashion, I think it must be easier to find a distance if you don't like the person than if you do. Also, is there not a distinction between empathy and sympathy? You can use the intuitive method to try to understand why people are doing things, even if you don't sympathise with them. I think that's possible in the case of Hitler, even whilst detesting everything that he stood for.

The other question that struck me when reading the biography was whether you felt soiled or

12. Alan Bullock, *Hitler: A Study in Tyranny* (1952). Alan Bullock was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1967.
13. Joachim C. Fest, *Hitler: Eine Biographie* (1973).
14. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1889-1936: Hubris* (Allen Lane, 1998).
Ian Kershaw, *Hitler 1936-45: Nemesis* (Allen Lane, 2000).
15. Paul Preston, *Franco: A biography* (Fontana Press, 1995).
16. Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini: A biography* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1982).
Denis Mack Smith was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1976.

crushed by the story. As I read it, I could end up feeling really very depressed by this revelation of someone so monstrous and yet so successful in the short term. Did you feel the psychological strains of writing about this monster?

I felt all sorts of psychological strains, but they were mainly as a result of the work involved, up against a timetable.

No, I don't think I did feel that depression. Maybe that's just a matter of different authors' personality traits. But I had been working on this for a long time – not specifically the Hitler biography, but on Nazism – so the general depressive nature of the topic was well-known to me, and in a sense I was inured to it. I suppose when I got to the part where he finally put the bullet through his head, I felt a sense of rejoicing rather than depression. Rejoicing the work was over, but also rejoicing for humanity that this was finally finished.

Of course, it's a story which, if you're writing it as a German, may have a more profoundly depressing effect, because indirectly you'd be a part of the story. I'm not lurching into the notion that I have special privileges as an outsider, but perhaps particularly as a Brit you think, 'Well, this did come to an end, and it came to an end partly through our agency.'

Speaking as an early modern historian, I've got problems with too many sources. You must have felt overwhelmed by the sources. What sort of choices do you make when you're faced with a vast amount of material?

It *is* overwhelming. But when you come down to the person of Hitler himself, there's a strange way in which Hitler is cocooned in the silences of the sources. The sources have really severe problems, in that anybody saying anything about Hitler was either an enemy or a devotee. There are next to no neutral comments, or even the sort of comments you would get about Churchill – that he was a hero, 'warts and all'. Next to nobody who was a devotee said anything critical, and next to nobody who was an enemy said anything positive. And Hitler himself wrote so little: and much of what he did write was wilfully destroyed at the end of the war. Unlike Stalin, he wasn't a bureaucrat: he had no bureaucratic tendencies. So decisions were sometimes non-decisions, with some casual comment of his being picked up by other people. The point is that it is very difficult to get at Hitler through the sources.

I was very fortunate in that one crucial source had become available just before I started the biography. That was the complete set of the Goebbels diaries, running from 1924 through to April 1945, with hardly any breaks in them at all. Before then, bits and pieces of these diaries were known, but the majority of them were

thought to have been lost. Then they were discovered in Moscow on glass plates, which were like an early form of photocopying, by Elke Fröhlich from the Institut für Zeitgeschichte Munich, who is a very good friend of mine and was the widow of Martin Broszat. They were used by David Irving to publish a set of diaries for 1938, which was a crucial year. By the time I had finished, the whole lot of these diaries had been edited by Elke Fröhlich and published.

Goebbels was obviously writing for later publication as a heroic story. But he was an absolutely conscientious diary writer: every night, however tired he was, he would write in his diary. After the war started, he dictated it: he had special secretaries who did his diaries. Much of the time he would say, 'Yesterday I met the Führer and he said …', and he would often go for several pages about what Hitler was saying, what they were planning to do, and so on. You have the nearest thing to a running commentary – not only on Hitler's actions, but also what Hitler was thinking about with regard to those actions. With numerous caveats attached to them, Goebbels' diaries are an indispensable source and I was very fortunate that they became available. The biography would have been much weaker without them.

Do you think there is much more to come out, things that we don't know about?

Not specifically on Hitler, no. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, vast amounts of material started to become available in Moscow. I went to Moscow in the mid-1990s hoping to get more material on Hitler, and came away very disappointed: there were bits and pieces, but not very much. Of course, other things about the Third Reich itself will doubtless still emerge in doctoral theses and so on, particularly regarding Nazi rule in Eastern Europe. But I don't think we're likely to come up with any more material of really major significance with regard to Hitler.

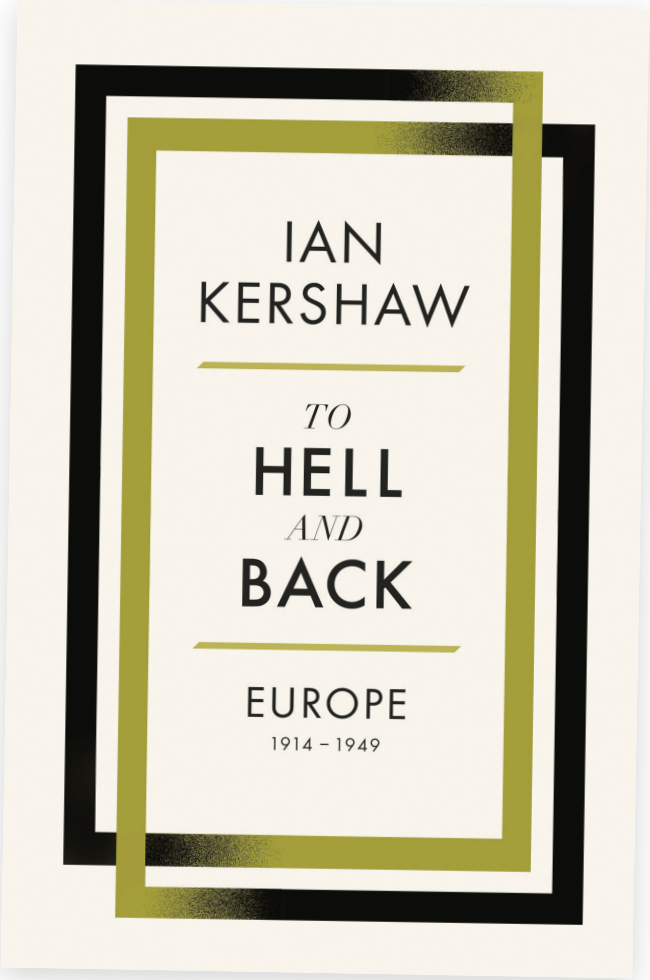
Let's move on to the book you are publishing this autumn, *To Hell and Back: Europe 1914-1949*, the first of two volumes covering the 20th century in *The Penguin History of Europe* series. What scale of book is this?

It is about 550 pages of text. It is rather a small book compared to some I've written!

So crudely speaking, it covers two world wars. What new areas did you find you needed to go into?

Practically everything. Apart from my specialism on Germany, I had to read an immense amount on practically every other country – even countries I thought I knew reasonable amounts about, such as the Soviet Union and Italy, let alone Britain and France. I learned an awful lot about a lot. Although you say it covers two world wars – the wars do define the story I'm telling – but nonetheless I had to do a lot about the interwar period and about peacetime developments.

The structure of the book is deliberately broken into narrative sections of relatively small timescales. But I have one thematic chapter, as there are certain things that completely override the chronological divisions. In that



chapter I had to deal with socio-economic development – social change, and economic lessons to be drawn from the war. I also had a section on the churches: I had to learn a lot about the role of the churches, and I went back to your *History of Christianity*.[17] I also had a section on the intellectuals in the crisis, which meant reading a lot, including novels, and trying to get to grips with Bolshevist and fascist intellectuals. The final section of that chapter dealt with popular entertainment, including the great developments of cinema and literature. So I had to deal with a wide compass of things.

My initial thoughts were that my history of Europe in the 20th century would be one volume, but then Penguin suggested it should be two volumes. At that point, I had to rethink the enterprise. I was faced with the question of whether to end the first volume in 1945, or take it on to 1949. You can play it either way. But instead of seeing the absolute break in 1945, I wanted to see how the Second World War led inexorably into the Cold War, and to end the book where the Cold War had congealed into its separate halves. I end it with the Soviet atom bomb in 1949. I don't think it's a bad way of ending it, to see the immediate post-war period as the aftermath rather than the prologue.

17. Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity* (2009).

It's such a fascinating period. (*My* secret is that I wanted to do a doctorate on the Weimar Republic interwar period, but at that stage I couldn't be bothered learning German.) What fascinates me is how inevitable that second war was, after 'a war to end war'. Presumably, you're grappling with that question through your text.

I do grapple with that, and I think you're right that it was near inevitable. I try to explain it through a matrix of four intersecting points that make a second cataclysmic war more or less inevitable. The four points are four legacies of the First World War.

The first is that we are left with very acute nationalist tensions; and nationalism was now largely defined through ethnicity. The second is that there were irreconcilable territorial disputes, which often went hand-in-hand with the ethnic divisions. The third is heightened class conflict, now focused on Bolshevik Russia. Of course, there had been big class conflict from industrialisation onwards; but now it had a real, sharp ideological focus on the Soviet Union. The fourth interlocking point is the presence of the deepest crisis of capitalism there had ever been. This had two parts: an inflationary crisis in the immediate post-war years, and then a deflationary crisis in the 1930s.

The four points taken together are overlapping and interlocking. But there was one country where all of these four points came together in their most extreme form: Germany. In Germany, you have the context within which Hitler is able to achieve such demagogic prowess and take control of the state. As soon as that happens, the peace of Europe is in great jeopardy. Unlike other countries where tensions exist – including fascist Italy – Germany is a threat to the rest of the continent and the rest of the world. That's the context within which I think this second war becomes increasingly inevitable. It is highly probable from the aftermath of the First World War, increasingly probable after 1933, and then in the later 1930s impossible to avoid.

I'm fascinated that, in the narrative you've just set out for me, Hitler hardly comes into it. On that reading, Hitler was a puppet of forces greater than himself.

No, certainly not a puppet of forces greater than himself. But he was able, more than anybody else, to exploit forces which were greater than himself. Those forces existed before Hitler. After all, until 1930 Hitler was a politically marginal figure: the Nazis got 2.6% of the vote in 1928. What you've got is a set of contexts within which this figure can play such an explosive and disastrous role. My analysis is a structural analysis of contexts within which an individual comes to play a disproportionate role.

Your career will now include a biography of a single individual and a structural narrative. I can see why they both work, but the biography would suggest that you're sympathetic to the idea that a single person can completely change a situation.

Yes, an individual can change a situation dramatically. In the biography, I was very much at pains all the way through – especially in the initial two-volume version – to hold the two sides together: Hitler was possible because of things that made him possible. The two questions I posed at the beginning of that biography were: what made Hitler possible, and how was his exercise of rule possible? You can't explain those by the person; you have to explain them otherwise.

Putting it very crudely, and I said as much in the book at one point, without the First World War, Hitler in the Chancellor's seat in Germany would have been totally unthinkable. After the Second World War, ditto. It's the context that enables a person like that to come along. Where the structures provide the possibility, then the individual comes along and is able to manipulate the circumstances and mould them through his own actions. I think that's the case with Hitler, and it is why this one individual is able to play such a baleful role, given the structural conditions for his rule in the first place.

I'm very sympathetic to the Great Man theory of history. I think of Hitler and Stalin, obviously, but also Slobodan Milosevic and, in a happier way, Nelson Mandela – one can hardly imagine the outcome in South Africa without Nelson Mandela. They're all making their luck, aren't they?

Yes, they are. And you could argue the case of Margaret Thatcher. It goes without saying, she left an indelible mark, which was a specific mark of her personality, on history. But certain preconditions existed to allow this Prime Minister to play that role and make that mark. It's another example that shows the need to marry personality and the structural conditions for a particular individual's role.

Let's move on to your Raleigh Lecture: 'Out of the ashes: Europe's rebirth after the Second World War, 1945-1949'. You have been talking about the inevitability of the Second World War after the First. I guess the next lesson is the fact that there wasn't a Third World War. There was a Cold War, but not a Third World War.

If you'd been around in 1945-46, I don't think you would have bet too much money on Europe, within a decade or so, being a very stable place, east and west. You wouldn't have bet too much on a prosperous outcome. And you wouldn't have bet that much money on avoiding another war.

My starting point for this lecture is how unlikely it was that Europe would emerge from the ashes after 1945 in such a fashion. The Second World War, which left about four times as many people dead as the First and the continent in ruins, actually produced enormous prosperity and stability within a decade or so. It's an astonishing story. It strikes me that one of the most important questions of the 20th century is why that could happen: why the First World War produces the roots of the Second, and why the Second World War produces this highly positive outcome which brings peace to Europe for the next 70 and more years.

Again, I would look for structural explanations of this and probably point to five things. The first, of course, is the destruction of the power of Germany itself. Germany

ceases to be a politically powerful entity that threatens the rest of the continent.

The second is what I describe in the book as a catharsis of a sort. In the immediate post-war period, Europe is still a chaotic and violent continent. In that period, you have a lot of attempts to deal with the Nazis and fascists who have caused the problem. The vengeful actions in bringing these people to account for their crimes are only a partial success, but attempts are made in every Western European country and much more stringent attempts made in the east. Nazism and fascism ceased to be political entities.

There is also the expulsion of vast numbers of people – not just Germans from Czechoslovakia and Poland, but also Poles and Ukrainians. There are tens of thousands of people moving around. It is horrendous ethnic cleansing on a major scale, but it actually brings a new face to Eastern Europe, which had been the most troubled part of the continent beforehand.

The third point is around the role of the superpowers. Europe is now shaped in the image of each of the superpowers in different ways, east and west, so there can't be anything other than their image. In Eastern Europe, power eventually comes out of the barrel of a Soviet tank. In Western Europe, the strong American influence means that liberal democracy is established under different guises. The role of the superpowers is crucial in this.

Fourthly, even with all that, what couldn't be foreseen was the massive economic growth which took place across the continent, not just in the west. This growth brought the possibility of economic stability in the west, where there hadn't been any before. In the east, there was economic growth, but the political system there meant that it was pushed into a relatively stable system – even if with internal upheavals from time to time.

The final point is around nuclear weapons. In 1945, you get the American atom bomb. In 1949, you get the Soviet atom bomb, which the Americans hadn't been expecting. Four years after that, each of them had hydrogen bombs.

When you put these five elements together, you have an explanation of how Europe could come out of the ashes to such a level of stability and prosperity. We focus on the Cold War, which we see as this negative factor that emerged from the Second World War – 40 years of inexorable division, which it would be impossible to overcome until 1990. And yet it's possible to argue that the Cold War itself was actually the basis of the post-war stability.

Another book comes to mind – Tony Judt's wonderful *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945*.[18] I found it to be a very cheering book: it tells the story you've just told, but he was able to take it on because the book goes further. I noticed you didn't mention the Marshall Plan. Tony emphasised that quite a bit.

Yes, I should refer to that in terms of the conditions whereby Europe – Western Europe, anyway – acquired such prosperity. Of course, the Marshall Plan was also critical in bringing about the divide between east and west. In 1945, things were still fluid. The Marshall Plan is probably the moment whereby the division became an absolutely irreconcilable one.

As Alan Milward has demonstrated in his work, the Marshall Plan was not sufficient in itself to have brought about the economic growth, nor was it actually the element without which Europe would have descended into still greater economic chaos. Nonetheless, the Marshall Plan was symbolically important, and provided the impetus for the defeated countries – Germany above all, but also Italy and Austria – to think they were now being reintegrated.

Without Germany there could be no prosperity. So after the war the Allies were faced with this dilemma: do we take our revenge on Germany, but in so doing prevent Western Europe from recovering? By 1947 it was clear they were not going to do that. They were going to pare back on denazification and so on. What they were interested in was rebuilding Germany – that was the bulwark against the Communist system.

The Marshall Plan is critical in this: it was a vital symbolic element in the recovery of Western Europe, but the money that came in did also help to stimulate further the economic recovery which was already well under way.

It sounds as if your lecture is going to be a cheering story.

It *is* a cheering story. I suppose this is the cheering end to a dismal book, in a sense. Europe has come very close to destroying itself by 1945. By 1949 we're on the way

18. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (Heinemann, 2005).

Sir Ian Kershaw FBA giving the Raleigh Lecture on History, at the British Academy on 2 July 2015. A video recording of the lecture can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/kershaw

to a Europe which is, albeit divided, a success story for the next decades. Prosperity comes to Western Europe on an unprecedented scale – less so to the east, but there is economic growth there too. Compared with the 1920s and 1930s, there is also a good deal of economic stability which had not existed beforehand. We can obviously see optimism in it now, not least because we have avoided war all this time. With the Ukraine situation, you may say that is too optimistic. But we *have* avoided war. It *is* a surprising success story.

It does suggest that human beings can learn from their mistakes.

Undoubtedly they can. Undoubtedly we did. The Bretton Woods conference in 1944 set out precisely to do that, to learn from the economic mistakes that had created the problems that had beset practically the whole of Europe in the inter-war period. Bretton Woods contributed to a large extent to overcoming those problems. The American influence on Western Europe was detested by many, particularly on the left, and disliked on cultural grounds by many other people too; but that American influence was a very significant factor in the success story.

One other point is that, in the inter-war period, you had economic nationalism everywhere: countries were putting up protective boundaries, as nationalism in all its colours was so rampant. After the Second World War, the pressures are for co-operation and collaboration. This paid dividends in things like NATO on the military side, but also from 1950 onwards in Western Germany and France coming together in the Schuman Plan, which later developed into the European Economic Community. For the first time, people are looking really seriously for economic co-operation. Not that you would necessarily learn it from the *Daily Mail*, but it has been a major success story in Europe.

Looking back over this extraordinarily distinguished and productive career, you've managed to encompass a story which has a happy ending. It's a story of misery, wretchedness and one of the most monstrous human beings in history, and yet at the end of it humanity comes out well. Are you an optimist by nature?

I *am* an optimist by nature. But the story doesn't necessarily end on a completely happy note.

My second volume of this history of Europe in the 20th century will start in 1950 and go up to the present. I will take it beyond 1990: I don't think the notion of a 'short' 20th century can really be sustained now, when we're so far beyond the end of Communism. In any case, I don't think you can reduce the 20th century to Capitalism versus Communism, important though that is.

But in taking it on, I think I will end on a more equivocal note. Since 1990, we've had a euphoric moment following the end of the Soviet Bloc, which then rapidly ended with the ex-Yugoslavia wars in the middle of the 1990s; and then we had what seemed to be a period of economic growth – until the crash of 2008. When I was thinking of where to end this history of Europe, I thought: 'Europe will never be the same again after the crash of 2008.' That may turn out to be prescient. At any rate, it will end up with what I see as the victory of global corporate capitalism, where the trend towards neoliberal economic policies that were set at the end of the 1970s has not been halted or broken.

It's possibly an equivocal note on which to end, because we can't see what's coming down the track. Europe is not in a good place now, but it is in a far better place than it was in 1945. There will be some hesitation when I come to the final chapter. It won't be a happy end as such, but I think that's appropriate. At the end of this first volume, there is ground for great optimism because we see the beginnings of the better Europe to follow from the 1950s onwards.

We'll end on that moderately happy note. Ian Kershaw, thank you very much.

It's been a great pleasure, thank you.

On 3 December 2015, Diarmaid MacCulloch is joined by the author Hilary Mantel to discuss 'Thomas Cromwell re-imagined'. More information can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/events/2015
