

# Europe

by [Stephen Schecter](#) (April 2019)



*On the Pont de l'Europe*, Gustave Caillebotte, 1876-77

Modern Europe was forged by the novel. But now the novel has come to an end, and with it so has Europe. What started with Cervantes and moved across France and Britain, then Germany and Poland, crumbled finally in Russia against Tolstoy's literary backdrop of War and Peace. Together, Pierre Bezukhov and Napoleon put an end to history.

In the beginning, Europe, the idea of Europe, started with a rape. Zeus, disguised as a charming white bull, carried Europa off from her native Asia, setting the two continents on a collision course. Greece against Persia. Civilization against the barbarians. Burying the act of rapine beneath a crown of glory, even if the glory put the Son of God on a cross, haloed in thorns. Not to matter, however. The guilt lay with the Jews, not with the hand-wringing Roman governor of that meddlesome province, Judea.

Ah, the glory of ancient Rome, it too founded on murder, one twin slaughtering another to give rise to a Republic, and the Republic ending in knives thrust through its most illustrious senator. Crime entered the city, again lay at its core, but who remembered? The gods were borrowed from Greece, the phoenix that had conquered the world and had then been conquered. But then, when the dauphin Empire had seemed at its height, the religion from the heartland of Asia came and conquered it in turn. Seventeen centuries later Gibbon meditated on this fall. The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, he called it, but others wondered if he were not talking about the more contemporary one.

It would take another century. Of course, there were still the Jews if not the meddlesome province, Judea. They had been bandied about for centuries, the still undigested element in the dream that Europe had become and, since the Renaissance, ever more dream-like. Always going back, not to the rape but to the glory, leap-frogging over reality when the nasty business of peoples and borders and beliefs set in. A line was drawn, a strong unbroken line from Erasmus to Napoleon, tunneled by the Enlightenment like thin steel wire. Philosophy once again ruled supreme. But the United States of Europe was defeated by the continental blockade of Mr. Pitt and his

friends. Perhaps what Gibbon metaphorically foresaw was not the collapse of the British Raj, but the end of the idea of Europe, which even today tries to bury its crimes under the razzmatazz of a tottering euro.

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Let us not forget, as we are so fond of saying and forgetting. Let us not forget that the war that started Europe off now went on within its borders, the most senseless war of all, the war against the Jews. In its second civil war of the twentieth century, Europe liquidated its Jews in a process of industrial murder that harnessed the worst of human passions, and so bequeathed to the world, alongside the Sistine Chapel, the legal idea of crimes against humanity. Two thousand years later, maybe more, Europe finally gets its comeuppance. Having emptied itself of its Jews, the continent is now bankrupt. Only an idea of itself remains, and the idea now turns against its one legitimate child that thrice in a century came to its rescue: America. For America is anything but Europe, the Europeans would have us believe, just as the Jews were anything but Christian. Indeed, to the intellectuals still clinging to the Enlightenment, America is European design in poor taste. Even its crimes are not quietly and properly swept under the rug.

Such disdain is only the mutterings of an aristocracy in decline. And Europe definitely is in decline. A Muslim middle-eastern Sheikh now owns the champion of English Premier League soccer, an American Jew controls its rival Manchester United,

while Fly Emirates is emblazoned on European Champion Chelsea's jerseys. Greece is being bailed out by a disgruntled Germany, the Spanish banks are going under, Italy's debt is dangerously high, France still thinks it is defending the Rights of Man, though that concept does not extend to the Jews or to their state, and England is as skeptical of Europe as it was downright opposed to Napoleonic hegemony. The only thing England seems to see eye-to-eye on with its EU compatriots is its hostility to Israel. Indeed, English anti-Semitism has resurfaced with a vengeance, ensuring that when the chips are down, the Jews are still useful as some kind of social cement for a Christian Europe that grows less Christian by the day.

There will, it seems, be no resuscitation of the Holy Roman Empire. What is left, then? Tourist destinations? The charm of glossy brochures evoking a rapidly fading memory that something once charming existed, now turned to pixie-dust, the Sunset Boulevard of the Renaissance? Were cubism or surrealism really as important as they seemed? Was Proust anything more than a dandy, Weimar but a bad movie preview? Story for story, the great Hollywood black and white films of the forties and fifties today seem to shine far brighter than the story that was Europe. Even Russia is retreating to its Muscovite origins and beyond, deep into Tartary. Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn. Putin and Ahmadinejad. The true marriage of Cadmus and Harmony. And instead of nostalgia a question: if all good stories come to an end, what do we say of bad ones?



Thus I wrote only a few years ago. Since then things have only gotten worse on the western side of the Atlantic. In the meantime I met a brilliant man who teaches history at a

Canadian Jewish high school and loves everything Greek, ancient Greek that is, from Athenian to Hellenic and onto its rediscovery that for him got modernity rolling. Where would we be without it? he asked me rhetorically, meaning democracy, science, cosmopolitanism, perspective, the bursting aside of deadweight and constriction by the glittering sun of Aristotle and company? I said nothing, content to see the sparks fly from his mind and listen to him make the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries come alive for me again. Besides, he teaches at a high school where he sees first-hand, so he tells me, the effects of the black hats whose influence, as far as he can make out, threatens the very fabric of Israeli society, turning it back to pre-Enlightenment days, the Jewish one he means. *Haskala*, I say to myself, and remember the short stories in Hebrew I read at my own Jewish high school that challenged the grip of hidebound religion on the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. But all I can think of as I listen to him talk is the denunciation of Israel that poured out of the mouth of Theodorakis and friends not long ago.

Later, long after we had parted, I formulate to myself my theoretical objections to his argument. The Reformation, not the Renaissance, was the signal event to kickstart modernity, even if it took two hundred years of war and bloodshed to enshrine the idea that people of different religious persuasions could inhabit the same country. And how could the Reformation have caught on if Martin Luther did not have the Hebrew Bible to hurl against the Church? And how would he have had the Bible without the Maccabees? This brilliant man sided with the Hellenists. The Maccabees were zealots, he argued, unable to reconcile Judaism with the world spirit of the times and ended up bringing the restored monarchy into ignominy. The parallels he was drawing with our times were unmistakable. But I remained adamant in my heart, which longs for the spirit of the Maccabees to take hold today among Jews, who light the

Hanukah candles and praise the heroes of old, but never take their heroics as applying to them. I do, as do all religious Zionists I am sure, as does the man I would vote for to become Israeli Prime Minister, a religious Jew who would proceed to separate synagogue and state. But religious Zionists wear white knitted kippahs, not black hats. If I lived in Israel I would wear a white knitted kippah too, even if I did not attend synagogue. When I am in Israel, the entire country feels like my synagogue, and as I ride the trains and walk the land I feel I am retracing the steps of our patriarch Abraham who buried his wife in Hebron. It says so in the Hebrew Bible, the oldest recorded real estate transaction in history. Had the British not forcibly deported the Jews from Hebron in 1929 after the Arabs massacred them in a rampage, we would not need the Bible to remind people of that fact. As far as I know, neither ancient nor modern Athens protested that British travesty.

What contradictory times we live in. Our cultural elites should back Israel because it is a liberal democracy, where everything we value in Toronto thrives there as well. Yes, there is an ultra-orthodox stream that once was part of the Jewish Reformation, but then turned dynastic and now has turned political, well organized and well-integrated into the Israeli political landscape. It gets its way through political horse-trading so endemic to that landscape, with an electoral system designed to prevent accountability because Jews love to run a country the way they run a synagogue. But even the *haredi* stream is fractured, and it is far from certain its offspring will be able to resist the lures of modernity. If this brilliant man were gay, he would discover that quick enough, but since he is not he will have to take my word for it. Instead our cultural elites support the gangsters and fanatics who would liquidate the only Jewish state in the world, making a mockery of the liberalism their Enlightenment

so indebted to the Greek miracle of Antiquity had inaugurated. Between an idea and Jewish existence I choose the latter, just as I have no truck with queers who scream against what they ignorantly claim to be Israeli apartheid. How have the intellectuals fallen, I think to myself, but not this intellectual to whose words I listen with pleasure, my mind quickened as it has not been in years. Our debate, I think, is worthy of the one carried on between the schools of Hillel and Shammai, though I have not held up my end very well.

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I understand this man's concerns. I understand because I think Israel should destroy the Al-Aksa mosque along with its neighbor and rebuild the Temple, but I would keep the rabbinate as far from the rebuilt Temple as possible. Somehow we have to reconnect the Bible to the Jewish people, and a third Temple would certainly do it, bringing Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem at least three times a year and untold coin to the national treasury. How to run it, how to staff it, how to conduct prayer which was once called labor within its walls would require the most startling innovation since Solomon. But Solomon thought outside the box and so could we, for we would need a chapel even for atheists. I have not figured out the mechanics as yet, but the need for the rebuilt Temple is evident if Jews are to assume the mantle of national sovereignty. The man I would vote for to become Prime Minister of Israel thinks similarly. I saw it in his eyes on Israeli television when he was interviewed on the question. The retreat from Gaza, he said, was a disaster. Now we fight firebombs with Iron Dome missiles, and only because we forget

that the land legitimately belongs to us. After all, there was once a thriving Jewish community in Gaza, not only a decade ago but four centuries ago. It spawned Sabbath prayers and a false Messiah. Had we remembered that, we would not have been so ready to leave for false promises. Had we had the Temple, we would have remembered. But when asked how a rebuilt Temple would work he did not answer. Only his eyes smiled as he said he did not know how it would work, but he did know the Jewish Temple needs to shine from the heart of Jerusalem.

Those who pride themselves on being secular do not know that, for they have long ago given up reading the Bible. Unfortunately, given the Good Book is the template of western literature and steeped in all that makes life interesting. Love. Betrayal. Murder. Apology and recidivism. The God story itself is a lesson in psychology and sociology 101, the truths we would rather not acknowledge. Not for nothing did God create difference and then get caught in its web, each time starting over on a smaller scale, each time unleashing destruction to clear the decks. Wilful natural selection, one might say, though men have rarely helped Him in His task, a failure duly documented in the Word that came forth from Jerusalem. Still, there is the Word, thousands of pages, scroll upon scroll, and for that alone even secular Jews should be proud. Who else has a God Who created man in His image and then knew disappointment by the end of chapter six? And then later: it is a terrible thing I am doing, taking one nation out of another to bring you to a land where I enjoin you to rid it of its inhabitants and there become a holy people, My holy people, and establish My sanctuary where you shall come and sacrifice in your seasons and Mine? And if you follow My statutes the rains shall come in their seasons and you shall be fruitful and prosper and all of humanity shall be blessed as I promised Abraham when I bid him get up and go. And for those who do not like some of the statutes there is



always interpretation built into this text which has difference built into its story. But even they should know there is no escaping sin, though lovingkindness is always a blessing. How much farther from Europe can you get?

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