

Europe in ruins in the aftermath of the Second World War

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The toll of the Second World War in terms of both human and material resources was the heaviest that mankind had ever known. Although the conflict had a global dimension that was even more pronounced than the 1914–1918 War, it was Europe that was the principal victim of this confrontation. The total number of victims is estimated at almost 40 million, more than half of whom were civilians. Following all the deportations and expulsions, there were, in 1945, nearly 20 million displaced persons awaiting repatriation. The unprecedented racial, religious and political persecutions and the mass deportations into labour or extermination camps had stirred up hatred among the peoples of Europe. The discovery of mass graves in the concentration camps appeared to shake the very spiritual and moral foundations of Western civilisation. The Germans were overwhelmed by a feeling of guilt, which fuelled an intense ethical debate and only added to the disarray of the defeated nation.

Europe was in ruins and reduced to total confusion: factories and transport links destroyed, traditional trade dislocated, livestock wiped out and shortages in raw materials and foodstuffs prevalent. The war was being prolonged by purges and the settling of old scores, which were once again tearing apart the liberated countries. Reconciliation seemed extremely difficult. It was impossible to imagine that, one day, yesterday's enemies might join together to form a common organisation. There were three basic questions for the peoples of Europe exhausted by the conflict. The first was economic: how could material damage be repaired and economic activity revived on the old continent? The second was political: how could the return of a conflict which had set Europe and the whole world ablaze be prevented? The third was cultural: how could the survival and renaissance of European civilisation be ensured in the face of the increasing threats, which seemed to be embodied in the ideological schism and confrontation between the victorious American and Soviet blocs?