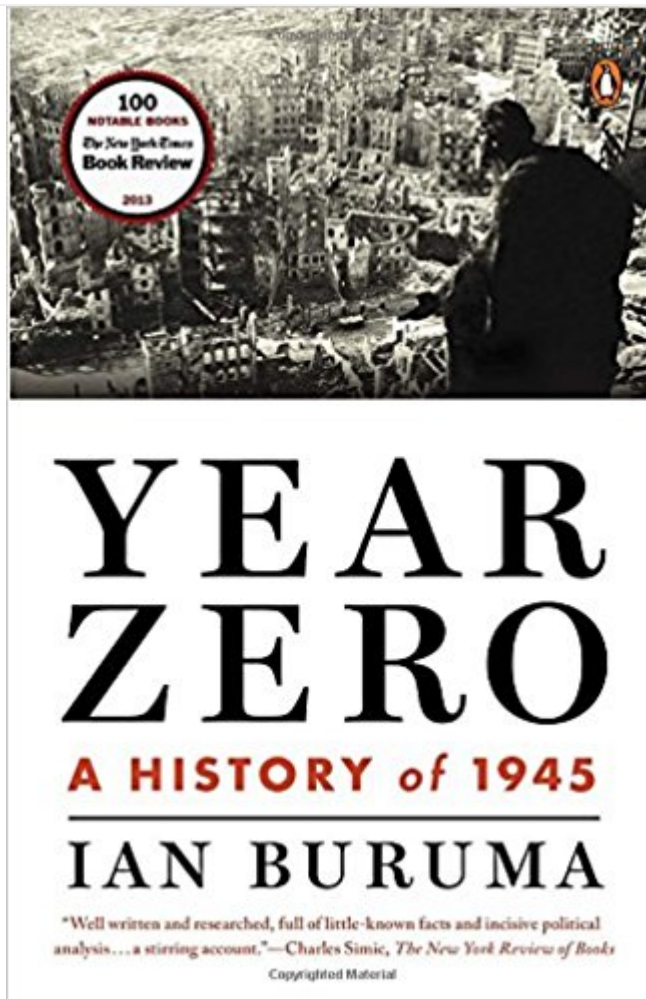


{essays in history}

The Annual Journal produced by the Corcoran Department of History at the University of Virginia

Year Zero: A History of 1945



Volume 47 (2014)

Reviewed Work(s)

Year Zero: A History of 1945. By Ian Buruma (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013). Pp. 368. U.S. \$29.95, Canada \$31.50

Recently, a number of books have emerged centering on the events of one particular year. Adam Goodheart's *1861: The Civil War Awakening*, Joseph Ellis' *Revolutionary Summer: The Birth of American Independence*, and Florian Illies' *1913: The Year Before the Storm* are among the most recent examples, to name a few. Ian Buruma's *Year Zero: A History of 1945* fits within this trend. The book is a comprehensive account of the aftermath of World War II. Buruma, a Luce Professor of Democracy, Human Rights, and Journalism at Bard College, describes in moving detail the tragedy and promise that characterized the pivotal year of 1945. Unrestrained eroticism following liberation, widespread hunger, displaced persons, revenge meted out toward collaborators, and plans for a peaceful new world order are among the very "human" themes that draw Buruma's attention.

The merciless raping of German women by Red Army soldiers not only "made the despised *Untermenschen* feel like men again," but was also the "surest way to repay humiliation with humiliation" (82-83). Under American "reeducation" programs, the "Japanese were surprisingly willing pupils" (297). Anecdotal accounts littered throughout the narrative add to the highly personal nature of the book. For the women liberated from the Bergen-Belson concentration camp, something as simple as red lipstick helped "give them back their humanity" (30). Buruma also occasionally relates the experiences of his father, who was captured by the Nazis during the occupation of Holland and forced into labor in Berlin – though, more often than not, these interjections distract and seem out of place. While the book is no social history, Buruma does a good job of integrating ordinary persons' stories into the grand narrative occupied by figures like Chiang Kai-shek and Charles de Gaulle. Global in scope, events in Europe and Asia take center stage. Political transformations from the Balkans to Indochina are explained simply, providing readers with a sweeping geopolitical context. By addressing the root of complex power struggles in places like Vietnam and Korea,

Buruma shows how the critical events of 1945 set the foundation for decades of Cold War conflict.

Despite Buruma's accessible style and his grasp of context, *Year Zero* is not without disappointments. For starters, the title is deceiving. The term "year zero" seems to imply a fundamental new beginning, a restart, if you will. Unfortunately this "restart" dynamic is addressed only in the final chapter, which focuses on the birth of the United Nations. Nor is this book truly a history of the year 1945. Because it is organized thematically (exultation, hunger, revenge, etc.), and not chronologically, many important events of the first half of 1945 are noticeably absent. The Battle of Berlin and the downfall of the Third Reich are nowhere to be found. Similarly, the dropping of the atomic bomb—a monumental event of the second World War—receives scant attention. Moreover, events after 1945 find their way into the narrative. The thematic organization also lends itself to dizzying shifts among places like Manchuria, Paris, and the Philippians – sometimes all within a few pages. Because many of the themes overlap, the book is highly repetitive. *Year Zero* is drawn from a wide range of secondary sources. The book presents very little that is new in terms of research or interpretation. Rather, its strength lies in Buruma's ability to provide a sweeping context accented by humanist elements. The casual reader may be drawn to this book, while the more advanced scholar is likely to find it mundane. For serious students of history, Tony Judt's *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* is probably a better choice.

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