Editor's introduction

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When we began, in 2002, to plan the five conferences which led to the papers reproduced in this book we had two overarching objectives. First, we wanted to take as our starting point the collapse of communism in the USSR and in central and eastern Europe and the events which followed, not least the emergence of 15 separate countries as a result of the break-up of the Soviet Union, the velvet divorce between the Czechs and the Slovaks in 1993 and the violent conflicts that led to the fragmentation of Yugoslavia. Whilst historians continue to debate whether or not the transition which began in 1989 marked the end of an era, it would certainly seem to be the case that the changes in central and eastern Europe in the 1990s did not simply arise out of the end of the Cold War but reflected longer-term developments and aspirations, which could be traced back over the previous two centuries.

This extended period has been characterised by repeated attempts with varying degrees of success to convert ideas and ideologies into social and political actions and structures. At the same time it has also been characterised by an overlapping series of contests, often violent and bloody, between these ideas and ideologies: absolute monarchy versus the sovereignty of the people; autocracy and dictatorship versus constitutional government; multi-ethnic empires versus the demand for national self-determination; balance of power versus collective security; communism versus capitalism; totalitarianism versus liberal democracy.

Perhaps the most obvious starting point for this enterprise was the French Revolution but the bicentennial celebrations in 1989 had generated many publications in various languages and, after some discussions, we decided to take the revolutions of 1848 as our starting point and 1989 as our end point. At first sight 1848 may seem a surprising choice. After all, in less than two years the old orders had been restored and the Habsburg empire, which had seemed in terminal decline in the spring of 1848, had regained power in central Europe and northern Italy, and elsewhere the old orders had also been restored thanks to the conservatism of the peasantry, the internal divisions within the ranks of the revolutionary forces, the growing concern amongst the middle classes about social disorder and unrest and the widespread fear of the reign of terror that had followed the French Revolution. Nevertheless, the return of the old orders did not mean that nothing had changed. From this point on people increasingly formed and joined political parties and social movements, which in turn began to align themselves with particular social classes, while more and more women of all social classes became politicised and mass circulation newspapers emerged with their own political agendas.

At the same time the "genie of nationalism", set loose by the French Revolution and then subsequently articulated by Romanticism in the early 19th century, became a popular cause in 1848, and was never returned to the bottle but, instead, gradually

evolved from the preserve of educated elites into an ideology that could mobilise the masses.

Having established our parameters we then began to identify other key moments in the intervening 140 years for the focus of the project and the associated conferences. There was no shortage of possible candidates and no shortage of advocates for each of the proposed critical moments and turning points either. In the end the planning group selected three other events in recent European history which, we felt, helped to explain the momentous developments which took place in the last decade and a half of the twentieth century. These were the Balkan wars of 1912-13, the peace conferences and re-structuring of Europe in 1919, and the re-structuring of Europe and the emergence of the Cold War after 1945.

The developments at the end of the two world wars virtually selected themselves. The 'Wilsonian' idea of national self-determination raised expectations across central and eastern Europe, but while new nation-states emerged other minorities remained disappointed and became disillusioned. Within many of the new states there were internal divisions which re-emerged in the 1930s and 40s and again after 1989. In others democracy proved a fragile plant and soon succumbed to authoritarian forces. Yet, at the same time, developments in 1919 also set the international political and national agenda for the next seventy years: the emergence of the United States and Japan as global powers; the growing mutual distrust between Russia and the Western powers; the irredentist aspirations of the defeated nations; the attraction of socialism for many in the West matched by the fear that many others had of the spread of Bolshevism; the recurring demands for independence by national and religious minorities; the idealistic desire for a means of ensuring collective security and a lasting peace clashing with the political realities and the national interests of the more powerful nations.

Although it could be argued that the Second World War was the culmination of a conflict between the Great Powers that had been ongoing in various forms since the mid-19th century, and that the internal divisions that had been apparent in some states such as Yugoslavia since their inception in 1919 deteriorated into civil wars; it could also be argued that in spite of the tensions brought about by the division of Europe into two camps a kind of balance of power emerged, imposed by the two superpowers, which for the next forty years or so kept the lid on the cauldron of minority issues and border disputes which had plagued central and eastern Europe for much of the first half of the 20th century.

It is within this context that we decided that the fifth of our critical moments over the last 150 years should be the Balkan wars of 1912-13. The Balkan crisis of 1908-14 had emerged largely as a result of growing nationalism in the region and the declining power of the Ottoman Empire. The tensions re-emerged at the outbreak of the Second World War and determined to a large extent whether national groupings supported the Allies or the Axis Powers. Then, after a period of apparent calm and stability during the Cold War the same national and religious issues re-surfaced within the federal Yugoslavia and between Serbia and Albania in the 1990s.

At this point it should be stressed that these five key years – 1848, 1913, 1919, 1945 and 1989 – were always intended to be emblematic of wider changes that had taken place. For example, we anticipated that historians writing about the Balkan wars would not restrict themselves to the years 1912 and 1913 but would probably want to trace back the origins at least to 1878 if not earlier. Similarly, we assumed that those who were writing about the events of 1989 in central and eastern Europe would want to go back to the Brezhnev era and the coming to power of Gorbachev and then make observations about the developments in the initial post-communist era in the 1990s.

Our second main objective in planning the five conferences and the production of this book was to encourage "multiperspectivity". The Council of Europe had been using the term in its literature on the teaching of history since around 1990. Broadly speaking this represented a commitment to move away from a grand narrative approach to European history towards one that focused on a multiplicity of overlapping narratives. To encourage this we invited historians to present papers which reflected different national perspectives on the same events and developments and to engage with each other and with the other participants in round-table discussions about the variety of perspectives – national and historiographical – that were presented. It has not been possible to incorporate those discussions into this publication but they have greatly influenced the structure and content of the CD-Rom which is the other main component of this Council of Europe project.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the authors who have contributed to this book not only for their texts but also for taking part so wholeheartedly in the other proceedings at the conferences. The memory of a group of eminent historians from all over Europe taking part in a simulation of the Bosnian crisis of 1908 will stay with me for a very long time: illuminating, stimulating and a great deal of fun. The background notes, role cards and rules of engagement for the simulation can be found on the CD-Rom. I would also like to express my heartfelt thanks to the ministries of foreign affairs and education in France, Germany (and the Georg Eckert Institute in Braunschweig), Greece, Hungary and Ukraine for helping with the organisation of the five conferences. The opportunity to discuss the Yalta Conference in the Livadia Palace itself or to convene in Sèvres to discuss the peace treaties of 1919-21 was a very special experience, which all who took part greatly appreciated.