LEIF JERRAM

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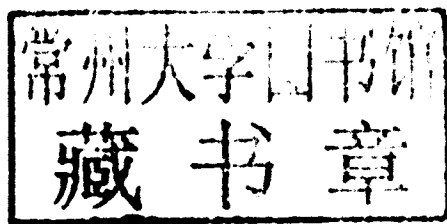
THE UNTOLD HISTORY OF EUROPE'S TWENTIETH CENTURY

'A remarkable work'
Times Literary Supplement

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The Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century

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Acknowledgements

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Leif Jerram was born in Woolwich in south-east London in 1971, and lived there until he went to study history at university. After having lived in San Diego, Bremen, Munich, and Paris, he completed his PhD in Manchester—the first industrial city. There he has remained, barring brief stints at Selwyn College, Cambridge, and Keele University. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Urban History in the Department of History at Manchester University. He has published widely in the field of cultural and urban history, including most recently *Germany's Other Modernity: Munich and the Making of Metropolis, 1895–1930* (2007).

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Introduction

The Untold History of Europe's Twentieth Century

There is a familiar history of the twentieth century—almost comforting in its familiarity, despite its triumphs, drama and tragedy. There is a well-known history of 'great individuals'—Adenauer and Lloyd George, Curie and Pankhurst, Clemenceau and Gorbachev, Stalin and Hitler, Franco and Mussolini. And there is a history of the great movements of nameless individuals, invisibly harnessed to some profound evolving truth: the rise of democracy, of women, of rationalism, of capitalism, of socialism, or of secularization; or the fall of communism, child mortality, or of empires.

But the real drama of history happens where the two worlds collide—where the nameless individual in the crowd meets the great man (or woman). What did the tsar care what the workers of No 6 Shop, Trubochnyi Metal Works in St Petersburg thought? Not much, perhaps. But he would certainly come to care, when they went on strike in 1916 and 1917, destroyed his world, and transformed global politics for our times. As for the people dancing wildly to 'black' jazz in the cellars of wartime Hamburg and Berlin, what did they care about the racial policies of Hitler, Goering, and Heydrich being decided in Berlin in the summer and autumn of 1941? A great deal, it would seem, for dancing to 'black' music in a racist state was a clear rejection of a certain set of ideas—a rejection expressed in the movements of their bodies and the smiles on their faces, but not in the ballot box. We need to tell a different story of a messy continent in a messy century. We have to give up our familiar tidy frameworks and neat narratives. If we want to find the point of encounter, and witness the rendezvous between big and small, we have to start thinking about *where* the twentieth century happened. We have to look at its streetlife.

If we want to find the 'scene of the crime' of the continent's history in the twentieth century, we have to think wisely about where we put our hide, and how we manage the stakeout. The best place to observe the encounter between big and small is the city, and the myriad nooks

and crannies, back streets and thoroughfares, clubs and bars, living rooms and factories that made them up. Cities matter, because in the nineteenth century, mankind entered a period of transformation perhaps only equalled in significance by the transformation wrought when, 10,000 years ago, humans stopped wandering and settled down to farm. Beginning in Britain and Belgium in the 1830s, people began to move to cities in their thousands, then their hundreds of thousands, and then their millions. By the end of the nineteenth century, this revolution was starting to transform large chunks of what we call 'the West': the north and east of France; all of Belgium and the Netherlands; northern Italy; the west of the Habsburg Empire in present-day eastern Austria, the Czech Republic, parts of Hungary, and southern Poland; much of Germany; a corridor between St Petersburg and Moscow; chunks of northern Spain; and much of the north-east of the USA. In the following one hundred years, these cities, these islands in rural seas, came to dominate every aspect of human experience in the West, from the ways we think to the ways we love, from the lives of women to the ways we organize our politics, such that by 1970, the village was the exception, and the city the rule. This book tells the story of Europe's twentieth century from the point of view of the street corners, bars, factories, squares and living rooms in which it happened.

The scale and rate of change was enormous, starting first in Britain. A city like Manchester was a modest provincial town in 1800, with a population of about 75,000 souls. But by 1900, it had grown to a mighty conurbation of 2,117,000. Birmingham grew from 71,000 in 1800 to a sprawl of 1,483,000 in 1900—before adding *another* million by 1951. This urban population explosion was not matched in the countryside, and that is just one of the unique features of this revolutionary transformation. While the populations of British cities grew up to thirtyfold, the rural parts of England barely doubled in the same period: Norfolk's population rose from 273,000 in 1801 to 476,000 in 1901.[1]

Britain set the pace for this change, but between 1880 and 1940, large chunks of the rest of Europe began to transform *even more* rapidly. Berlin grew from 826,000 in 1870 to 1.12 million in 1880, to 2 million in 1910, to 4.2 million in 1930. Milan swelled from 322,000 in 1880 to 1.1 million in 1940. Moscow went from 800,000 in 1890 to 2 million in 1930, and 4 million in 1940. The industrial sprawl of the Ruhr valley in western Germany tripled from 196,000 in 1870 to 568,000

in 1900, almost quadrupling to 2.2 million in 1940.[2] By 1900, about 70 per cent of British citizens lived in urban environments, and about 50 per cent of German and French citizens did, so 1900 represents an important tipping point. By 1970, 70 per cent of all Europeans lived in cities. This book, though, focuses on the trend-setters: the transformative core of Europe between Russia in the east and France in the west, Britain in the north and Italy in the south.

But this change from field to street was not just an impersonal demographic process, for which the faceless abstractions of statistics will suffice. The move to the cities, and the population explosion within them, necessitated a profound revolution in the ways that Europeans saw themselves and the world—a revolution we are still living with today. Whereas for thousands of years, Europeans could look to the Torah, the Bible, and the Koran and see their agricultural worlds written there, with rules of morality, political order, economics, and family, the move to the cities made these rule books redundant. New codes, new rule books had to be found, and the new circumstances of life in cities set Europeans on a quest for answers about who they now were, and how they now should live.[3] It was not a deliberate revolution, fomented in the minds of angry men; it was an accidental revolution, a by-product of, say, the quest for cheap cloth, the search for a good night out, or the control of typhoid. The history of the twentieth century was dominated by the questions of who would write the new rule books, and what they would contain.

This transformation of everyday life between the 1890s and the 1970s touched every feature of the continent's history: its politics, its culture, the lives of women, sexual identities, the very fabric of our surroundings, and the assumptions we make about how life should be understood and organized. This book tells the story of that revolution from the perspectives of the places and spaces in which it happened, and the people whose lives we see lived out in them. This focus on the 'crime scene' of history is important, for while I, and all the people I know (academics and 'civilians' alike), are acutely sensitive to where they live and work—and invest huge amounts of time, emotion, and money in arranging their surroundings 'just so'—there is a painful silence about 'where' history has happened in the writings of many historians. This is an obvious paradox—why do people who are so ready to fret about the 'where' of their own lives so often ignore the

'where' of their subjects' lives? Just as any criminal investigation starts with the injunction to all police officers to 'preserve the crime scene', so any historical investigation should look at where it happened for crucial clues about what was happening, how it was happening and why it was happening. We ignore this forensic bonanza at our peril. It is time to put the 'where' into the 'why' of history. 'Where' matters. The physical spaces matter—the layouts of rooms, the relationships of things, the distances between, the temperature, the lines of sight. And the values of a place matter—the ideas it bears, from danger to fun, from sick to healthy, from sacred to profane.

Above all, there is a silence about one of the most crucial *mises en scène* of this revolutionary period in Europe: the city. Some have tried to tell the story of the whole continent.[4] Others have focused on states and nations, offering histories of Britain, Germany or the USSR.[5] Others have focused on great individuals, like Hitler and Stalin, Churchill and Lloyd George, Emmeline Pankhurst and Marie Curie, de Gaulle and Adenauer.[6] There have been outstanding studies of people's everyday lives.[7] And finally, historians often focus on great movements—whether political or social. The 'rise' of women and the working class, and the great sociopolitical movements like capitalism, liberalism, communism, socialism, and fascism all have their histories.[8] It is not my goal to rubbish these historians—without their work, mine could not have been completed. But sometimes, the excellent history in these books happens halfway between 'everywhere' and 'nowhere', and that is not where humans exist. Humans live their lives *somewhere*. *Somewhere* is real, tangible, fixed, located. 'Germany' is not somewhere (its borders have changed with alarming regularity); 'women' are not somewhere, but the office I am sitting in now, writing this, is somewhere. In the words of a leading geographer, 'historians write as if the whole of human history happened on the head of a pin'.[9] He is right; we do. It is time to put the *where* into the *what* and the *why* of this most momentous of human transformations.

This book offers a history of this crucial century that happened *somewhere*: in the streets and factories, cinemas and nightclubs, housing estates and suburbs, offices and living rooms, shops and swimming baths of Europe's booming cities. This book does not seek to imply that cities were the *only* place that the history of Europe happened. The gas chambers of Auschwitz or Treblinka; the great naval battles

of the Atlantic or tank battles of Kursk; the corridors of the Kremlin, Whitehall, the Elysée Palace or Bonn; the bourses, offices, exchanges and banking halls; and the army barracks of Spain in the 1930s or Greece in the 1960s, were also places where the destiny of millions have been shaped. About these places this book is largely silent; in some cases, they have their histories already; in others, they remain to be written.

In contrast, *Streetlife* tells five 'stories' of how Europe was transformed in the twentieth century, from the point of view of some of the spaces and places which dominated that transformation, and where the big histories of great individuals and the small histories of 'ordinary' people came together to produce their devastating effect. Chapter 1 explores the century's politics. The power of a Lloyd George does not exist in the issuing of an order in an office in Whitehall, but in its execution in a munitions factory in Manchester—somewhere out there in the real world. We need to turn politics upside down, for every great river is only a sum of its tributaries, be they ever so small. The mighty river does not cause the little brook, but the other way round. It was in the cities that the progressive parties of the twentieth century were formed in the 1890s and 1900s, and it was in cities at the end of the First World War—and not in the trenches—that almost every political system to the east of France collapsed, as communists used the newly formed brigades of industrial workers to topple bourgeois, aristocratic, and monarchical orders. New ideologies, like Italian Fascism and German National Socialism, struggled to make their presence felt in the cities, because they did not have access to the factories, docks, and railways that had provided the bedrock of left-wing politics, but both ideologies had to find ways of penetrating them if they were to succeed in seizing and holding power. And cities always had the potential to destabilize any regime—not just in the 'revolutionary decade' at the 'Great' War's end. In France in 1934, one of Europe's most stable democracies, concerted violence around the Assemblée Nationale brought down the government, and contemporaries expected it to bring down the whole Republic. And it was in the calm suburbs of the post-war settlement that Europeans finally accepted both capitalism *and* socialism. Some 'crime scene investigation' of post-war politics reveals the trivial nature of Parisian violence in 1968—but shows how fragile Soviet domination of Eastern Europe

was. Major urban disturbances in Berlin (1953), Warsaw and Budapest (1956), Prague (1968), and the Polish dockyard cities of the Baltic from 1970 until 1989 could have such profoundly destabilizing effects that governments in Moscow might fail, and Communist parties in satellite states be forced into humiliating compromise. And one European city in particular, Berlin, was at the heart of major global geopolitical confrontation from the Airlift in 1948 to the 'revolution' of 1989. It was the spaces of the cities which mattered: the ways factories brought people together in new formations, the layout of streets that made them unpoliceable, struggles to control pubs and bars, the development of suburbs to undermine socialism, the symbolic value of urban settings, and the inability to pacify dockyard disorders. All politics has a 'somewhere', and this book tries to find that place.

Chapter 2 asks what the history of Europe's women might look like from the perspective of the 'streetwalker'. The very fact that that word is so pejorative when used of women speaks volumes about the difficulties women have faced in being able to take hold of urban space, and still retain their 'respectability'. It might seem reactionary to say so, but focusing on the 'where' of women's experiences means recognizing their preoccupation with securing a 'where' of their own—a home as a place where they might transform their lives, perhaps more important than the more 'public' spaces of the street or the workplace. Many women across the century did not aspire primarily to many of the things that we associate today with enhancing women's status, like university education, or achieving senior roles in companies or government. Perhaps surprisingly, many women were at the forefront of campaigns to *prevent* women going to university or taking highly skilled jobs. Outside the home, factories brought women together for the first time in dynamic ways, and crystallized many of the conflicts between working-class women and working-class men that characterized the century. But the idea that all women went to work in factories in the First World War, and then desired to stay there, is not the case. Many women struggled hard to avoid taking up paid work outside the home, so burdensome was their unpaid work within it. We are faced with a paradox: for the last forty years, feminists have argued that women need to get out of the home to succeed. But for the previous eighty or so, most women's goal was not to get out of the home, but to get into one. That is not to say, though, that women were happy to be *confined*

to the home: they fought hard in the 1910s, 1920s, 1930s and beyond to force their way into places conventionally barred to them—bars in First World War Vienna, car factories in interwar Birmingham, or rock'n'roll nightclubs in post-war Berlin—and insisted on their right to stay there. It is contentious to say so, but arguably, looking at the 'where' of women's lives suggests there was no 'rise' of women in the twentieth century—at least, not in relative terms. Most women who worked outside the home worked in 'feminine' jobs in service industries throughout the century—the figures changed little. And the humiliation of women with shaven heads in Paris or raped in the hundreds of thousands in Berlin, Warsaw, and Budapest in 1945–6 show how unstable the 'rights' of women have been within living memory (and the rape of women in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s underlines this). But the achievement of safe, dry, warm housing across Europe, from Moscow to Glasgow to Milan, in the 1950s and 1960s represented a fundamental transformation of women's lives, and did more to liberate women than perhaps any other change.

Chapter 3 explores the way that cities shaped the century's culture. But it does not take the view that culture is a sort of 'medicine', which people should consume for their own benefit. 'Culture' here means the ways that people represented the world to themselves and to each other, the ways they described and understood the world, not the ways that people 'improved their minds'.[10] The unique genius of twentieth-century culture does not lie in the art gallery, the museum, the theatre, or the opera—all urban spaces which revolutionized nineteenth-century culture. Instead, this chapter focuses on seven key places in which Europeans relatively suddenly and relatively quickly chose to produce and consume culture, and thereby revolutionized the ways they related to others and themselves: the chapter moves from the music hall to the cinema, from the football stadium to the dance hall and jazz club, and from the discotheque to the living room. What I am here calling 'culture' is often analysed by historians as 'leisure'—a way to dissipate time—rather than culture—a way to understand the world. Far from just being ways to make time disappear, these places were at the heart of who we have become. When Europeans have loved or mourned, come of age as men, or freed their bodies as women, they have often done so not (just) through great novels or abstract paintings, but through pop songs and in cinemas. What

matters is not just the lyrics of pop songs, or the storylines of movies, but the ways those lyrics and storylines were used in people's everyday lives. To understand that, you need to know about the 'where' of the film or the pop song or the football match as much as the 'what'. How these new spaces of culture came about, and transformed the lens through which people viewed the world, is a matter of profound importance. This is not to say that 'high' culture is irrelevant: the gap between 'high' and 'low' culture has often been crossed, and is some-times barely detectable at all. Great drama, like *Brideshead Revisited* or *Das Boot*, can succeed on television attracting audiences of millions; great music and poetry like *West Side Story* or the *Dreigroschenoper* (*Thre'penny Opera*, by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill) can render the distinctions between 'high' and 'low' redundant. But the music hall transformed the ways we related to our friends on a night out, and thought about performers in ways that still linger: music halls taught us to be still, to turn away from our friends, and to be quiet. The cinema continued that revolution, stealthily promoting silence and stillness in previously restless bodies, and making culture producible only with large amounts of money. The football stadium provided a world of masculine physicality, identity, and debate only paralleled in significance by the world of work or the military—both of which have retreated in the last thirty years, leaving football triumphant. Dance halls segregated young people from their parents in their cultural lives for the first time, creating the 'teenager' as a life phase and identity. Jazz bars shifted the focus of European music from melody to rhythm, challenged imperialist racial hierarchies, and underlined the uncon-trollability of city cultures by the authorities. Discos and nightclubs finessed the transformation in people's relationships to their bodies begun in the dance halls. And, finally, living rooms shifted European culture from outside the home to inside the home, first with the radio, and then with the television, which turned families away from facing each other, and organized the geography of the living room in the same way as the geography of the cinema: still, silent people sitting in rows—a totally new model of family interaction.

The fourth chapter shows how urbanization transformed Europeans' sexual identities, the ways that people thought about themselves and their bodies, and the extent to which the state or society might inter-vene in people's private lives. Up until the end of the nineteenth

century, Europeans had slept with all sorts of people in all sorts of ways—homo and hetero, consensual and abusive, legitimate and incestuous. That is not to say that *everyone* experienced sex in this anarchic way: most people around 1900 had relatively concrete preferences for sexual partners, and there were many social conventions which limited people's actions and desires. But the historical record shows a range of sexual activities and identities in the 1890s that make our own age seem very prudish, and blows the idea that the 1960s were an age of sexual liberation right out of the water. In the closing decade of the nineteenth century, in medical consulting rooms, legislatures, bars and backstreets, people started to be defined, and define themselves, more and more in terms of a sexual identity. This effected a revolution in sexuality, bringing it under new forms of control. It transformed people's views of their bodies. And it went to the heart of the relationship between citizen and the state. The histories of heterosexuality and female homosexuality are, at the time of writing, so slim that, to explain this phenomenon, the chapter has had to rely on the evidence surrounding men who had sex with men. This is not intended to be controversial or provocative—it is to do with the accidents of the historical record, and the assumptions of present-day historians on whom I rely. I assume here that 'gay' rights or the dignity and selfhood of 'gay' people is no less and no more than that of any other type of person—Jew, woman, poor, Catholic, old, young. And so gay people will serve as an 'index' and proxy of the freedom of *all* people. For at the turn of the twentieth century, it is clear that homosexuality and effeminacy, and homosexuality and the criminal law, were not things that one would necessarily associate with each other. Masculinity was not based solely on heterosexuality. From the fair grounds, barracks, and cafés of St Petersburg to the shops in London's West End, there was a profound fluidity underpinning the choice of sexual partners for many (not all, but many). Far from being characterized by 'Victorian values', a tour through the parks, bars, and fairgrounds of Europe's *fin de siècle* shows soldiers sleeping with businessmen, coal hauliers dancing with police officers, and diplomats cruising for sex with adolescents. Between the wars in European cities, if we follow the police on their raids or the guidebooks to 'underground' Berlin or London we see the formation of more 'concrete' sexual identities, in two ways. First of all, states became more interested in people's