



Year Zero: A History of 1945

By Ian Buruma

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A marvelous global history of the pivotal year 1945 as a new world emerged from the ruins of World War II

Year Zero is a landmark reckoning with the great drama that ensued after war came to an end in 1945. One world had ended and a new, uncertain one was beginning. Regime change had come on a global scale: across Asia (including China, Korea, Indochina, and the Philippines, and of course Japan) and all of continental Europe. Out of the often vicious power struggles that ensued emerged the modern world as we know it.

In human terms, the scale of transformation is almost impossible to imagine. Great cities around the world lay in ruins, their populations decimated, displaced, starving. Harsh revenge was meted out on a wide scale, and the ground was laid for much horror to come. At the same time, in the wake of unspeakable loss, the euphoria of the liberated was extraordinary, and the revelry unprecedented. The postwar years gave rise to the European welfare state, the United Nations, decolonization, Japanese pacifism, and the European Union. Social, cultural, and political “reeducation” was imposed on vanquished by victors on a scale that also had no historical precedent. Much that was done was ill advised, but in hindsight, as Ian Buruma shows us, these efforts were in fact relatively enlightened, humane, and effective.

A poignant grace note throughout this history is Buruma’s own father’s story. Seized by the Nazis during the occupation of Holland, he spent much of the war in Berlin as a laborer, and by war’s end was literally hiding in the rubble of a flattened city, having barely managed to survive starvation rations, Allied bombing, and Soviet shock troops when the end came. His journey home and attempted reentry into “normalcy” stand in many ways for his generation’s experience.

A work of enormous range and stirring human drama, conjuring both the Asian and European theaters with equal fluency, *Year Zero* is a book that Ian Buruma is perhaps uniquely positioned to write. It is surely his masterpiece.

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Editorial Review

From [Booklist](#)

In 1945, the war ended, but a new world began. Taken and destroyed cities were transformed; the liberated celebrated; scores were settled; people starved; justice was and was not meted out; soldiers and refugees came home; suffering ended, or continued, or began anew. An eclectic scholar who has written on religion, democracy, and war, Buruma presents a panoramic view of a global transformation and emphasizes common themes: exultation, hunger, revenge, homecoming, renewed confidence. Though there was great cause for pessimism, many of the institutions established in the immediate postwar period—the United Nations, the modern European welfare state, the international criminal-justice system—reflected profound optimism that remains unmatched. Buruma's facility with Asian history lends this selection a particularly internationalized perspective. But it is the story of his father—a Dutch man who returned home in 1945 after being forced into factory labor by the Nazis—that sews the various pieces together and provides a moving personal touch. -- Brendan Driscoll

Review

Charles Simic, *The New York Review of Books*:

“Year Zero...covers a great deal of history without minimizing the complexity of the events and the issues. It is well written and researched, full of little-known facts and incisive political analysis. What makes it unique among hundreds of other works written about this period is that it gives an overview of the effects of the war and liberation, not only in Europe, but also in Asia... A stirring account of the year in which the world woke up to the horror of what had just occurred and—while some new horrors were being committed—began to reflect on how to make sure that it never happens again.”

Adam Hochschild, *The New York Times Book Review*:

“Ian Buruma's lively new history, *Year Zero*, is about the various ways in which the aftermath of the Good War turned out badly for many people, and splendidly for some who didn't deserve it. It is enriched by his knowledge of six languages, a sense of personal connection to the era (his Dutch father was a forced laborer in Berlin) and his understanding of this period from a book he wrote two decades ago that is still worth reading, *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*.”

Wall Street Journal:

“[Buruma is] one of those rare historian-humanists who bridge East and West...Year Zero has a down-to-earth grandeur. Through an array of brief, evocative human portraits and poignant descriptions of events around the globe he hints, rather than going into numbing detail or philosophical discourse, at the dimensions of suffering, the depth of moral confusion and in the end the nascent hope that 1945 entailed...Year Zero is a remarkable book, not because it breaks new ground, but in its combination of magnificence and modesty.”

The Economist:

“[Buruma] displays a fine grasp of the war's scope and aftermath. Little conventional wisdom survives Mr. Buruma's astringent prose. Perhaps his most important insight is that the war was not a neat conflict between two sides. The victors included villains, and the vanquished were not all Nazis. On many fronts—notably Yugoslavia—many sides were at war...Many of the consequences of victory were grim. Normality returned in the decades that followed thanks to the grit and determination of those who pushed on past the horrors of 1945. Mr. Buruma's book honours their efforts.”

Financial Times:

“Elegant and humane...As generations with few memories of the second world war come of age in Europe and Asia, this luminous book will remind them of the importance of what Buruma terms ‘mental surgeons’, the politicians and warriors who reconstructed two continents left in rubble.”

The New Yorker:

“[A] very human history of ‘postwar 1945.’”

Smithsonian Magazine:

“[Buruma] makes a compelling case that many of the modern triumphs and traumas yet to come took root in this fateful year of retribution, revenge, suffering and healing.”

The Daily Beast:

“After total war with millions dead and the Shoah comes what? That is the question that propels critic and historian Ian Buruma’s panoramic history of 1945. It is a personal story for Buruma, inspired by his own father’s experience of the war and its aftermath, but with Buruma’s sharp and careful eye it becomes a window into understanding all the years since then.”

Lucas Wittmann, The Daily Beast:

“I’ve spent countless hours reading about trenches, tank battles, and dogfights, but no book had yet captured what came after all that as superbly as Ian Buruma does in *Year Zero: A History of 1945*. This book will change the way you think about the postwar era, i.e. ours.”

Publishers Weekly (starred):

“Rooted in first-person accounts—most notably, the author’s own father, a Dutch student forced into labor by the Nazis—Buruma’s compelling book manages to be simultaneously global in its scope and utterly human in its concerns.”

Kirkus Reviews:

“[An] insightful meditation on the world’s emergence from the wreckage of World War II. Buruma offers a vivid portrayal of the first steps toward normalcy in human affairs amid the ruins of Europe and Asia...Authoritative, illuminating.”

Booklist:

“In 1945, the war ended, but a new world began. Taken and destroyed cities were transformed; the liberated celebrated; scores were settled; people starved; justice was and was not meted out; soldiers and refugees came home; suffering ended, or continued, or began anew. An eclectic scholar who has written on religion, democracy, and war, Buruma presents a panoramic view of a global transformation and emphasizes common themes: exultation, hunger, revenge, homecoming, renewed confidence. Though there was great cause for pessimism, many of the institutions established in the immediate postwar period—the United Nations, the modern European welfare state, the international criminal-justice system—reflected profound optimism that remains unmatched. Buruma’s facility with Asian history lends this selection a particularly internationalized perspective. But it is the story of his father—a Dutch man who returned home in 1945 after being forced into factory labor by the Nazis—that sews the various pieces together and provides a moving personal touch.”

Fritz Stern:

“A brilliant recreation of that decisive year of victory and defeat, chaos and humiliation, concentrating on peoples, not states. Gripping, poignant and unsparing, *Year Zero* is worthy of its author in being at home in both Europe and Asia. It is a book at once deeply empathetic and utterly fair, marked by wisdom and great knowledge; the often personal tone inspired by the fate of his father, a Dutchman forced into German labor

camps. In the face of so much horror, it is an astounding effort at deep comprehension. A superb book, splendidly written.”

Michael Ignatieff:

“*Year Zero* is the founding moment of the modern era. Ian Buruma’s history of that moment is vivid, compassionate and compelling. Buruma weaves together a tapestry of vital themes: the exultation and sexual liberation that came with victory, the vindictive settling of scores that came with defeat and the longing for a world of peace, justice and human rights after the horror of total war. His story takes in the world: from Holland to Japan, and his heroes and heroines are the ordinary men and women who picked up the pieces of a broken world and put it back together for their children and grandchildren. We are their heirs and Buruma does our parents and grandparents justice in this magnificent history.”

Sir Ian Kershaw:

“A graphic account—well-researched, splendidly constructed and stylishly written—of the hinge year of the twentieth century, of its horrors, hopes, illusions and roots of troubles to come. Altogether compelling—a fine achievement.”

Sir Brian Urquhart:

“Ian Buruma gives a heart-wrenching account of the horrors, the unimaginable cruelties, and the sheer stupidities of the last months of World War II, and the attempts to deal with them in the first months of peace. Even after nearly seventy years, parts of his book are still almost unbearable to read. Buruma’s Dutch father improbably survived Nazi forced labor in Berlin, under allied air attack, until the German surrender; this book reflects an intimacy with the familiar dread of the forces of evil that never goes completely away.”

About the Author

Ian Buruma is the Luce Professor of Democracy, Human Rights, and Journalism at Bard College. His previous books include *The China Lover*, *Murder in Amsterdam*, *Occidentalism*, *God’s Dust*, *Behind the Mask*, *The Wages of Guilt*, *Bad Elements*, and *Taming the Gods*.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Deborah Tate:

What do you about book? It is not important to you? Or just adding material when you require something to explain what the one you have problem? How about your time? Or are you busy man or woman? If you don't have spare time to do others business, it is gives you the sense of being bored faster. And you have spare time? What did you do? Every individual has many questions above. The doctor has to answer that question due to the fact just their can do that. It said that about guide. Book is familiar on every person. Yes, it is right. Because start from on guardería until university need this *Year Zero: A History of 1945* to read.

Jacob King:

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Exactly why? Because this Year Zero: A History of 1945 is an unordinary book that the inside of the publication waiting for you to snap the idea but latter it will jolt you with the secret that inside. Reading this book alongside it was fantastic author who else write the book in such amazing way makes the content interior easier to understand, entertaining way but still convey the meaning fully. So , it is good for you because of not hesitating having this nowadays or you going to regret it. This unique book will give you a lot of gains than the other book include such as help improving your ability and your critical thinking approach. So , still want to hold off having that book? If I ended up you I will go to the guide store hurriedly.

Tom Salgado:

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