The future of the European past

On the inauguration of a series of articles concerning the future of Europe's history & culture

It is no longer news that the history of the European past and its role in shaping American cultural life is under severe attack. In virtually every university that offers a liberal arts curriculum, in every arts institution that deals with the European classics, and in the offices of every publication that engages in intellectual pursuits, the discussion of the past has become, in effect, the principal battleground for mapping out the future of our culture.

The very concept of a liberal arts education is, of course, an invention of the European past, and traditionally our concert halls, our opera houses, our art museums, and our universities have understood themselves to be the intellectual custodians of that past. Yet in the face of a concerted assault from radical multiculturalists, on the one hand, and left-wing historical revisionists, on the other, the traditional priority given to the European past in American cultural life has been made an issue of fierce and contentious debate.

On the fate of history as a humanistic discipline, including the history of the European past, we are publishing in this issue an analysis by Roger Kimball of an important new book on the subject, The Killing of History: How a Discipline Is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists by the Australian writer Keith Windschuttle. The deconstruction of historical truth plays a major role, after all, in the way ideological myths are now regularly substituted for the verifiable facts in recounting the European past and elucidating its bearing on contemporary cultural values. In the 1990s, writes Mr. Windschuttle,

the newly dominant theorists within the humanities and social sciences assert that it is impossible to tell the truth about the past or to use history to produce knowledge in any objective sense at all….

The central point which history was founded on no longer holds: there is no fundamental distinction anymore between history and myth.

In Europe itself, meanwhile, political and cultural developments raise many questions about the ability of our European contemporaries to deal with a debilitating crisis of confidence in regard to
their own most exalted traditions. Immigration from the Third World, the war in Bosnia, the embrace of the most debased varieties of American popular culture, and the spread of religious fanaticism—these are but a few of the factors that have now made the authority of Europe’s cultural traditions problematic in Europe itself. The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the loss of faith in the welfare state in Western Europe have created great opportunities for a renewal of Europe, yet the very concept of a centralized European community now threatens Europe with a new or maybe, as David Pryce-Jones reminds us in this issue, a not-so-new form of bureaucratic collectivism.

It is in the hope of defining and clarifying the issues and implications of this alarming cultural breakdown on both sides of the Atlantic that The New Criterion is inaugurating with this issue a series of essays on The Future of the European Past. Mr. Pryce-Jones’s essay, Ancient Ghosts Stir, which concentrates mainly on France, Germany, and England, is the first of the series that will continue to appear in our pages through the 1996-1997 season. Appropriately, we believe, this essay begins the discussion of the future of the European past by looking at the immense role played by twentieth-century totalitarianism—Nazism and Communism—in shaping the European present and casting doubt on the European future.