

Uncomfortable Truths

The historian Tony Judt has changed our view of postwar Europe, challenged liberal America and provoked controversy with his criticism of Israel

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[The Guardian](#), Saturday 17 May 2008

Tony Judt has never fought shy of questioning long-cherished ideas. Postwar, his panoramic study of Europe after 1945 was loudly acclaimed in part because it dealt so bracingly with the lies and cover-ups on which the rebuilding of the continent depended – the number of Nazis and collaborators who retained positions of power, for instance, and the myths surrounding wartime resistance. Detail after striking detail documented how nations are never honest about their pasts, and how quickly inconvenient truths are buried.



Tony Judt (pictured left), who teaches at New York University, is known as a combative writer and reviewer, and this reputation is confirmed by his new collection of pieces, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century*, which opens with the trouncing of a recent biographer of Koestler for being, among other things, priggishly obsessed with his subject's sex life. Over the years, Judt has been notable, in particular, for his acid dismissals of "romantic" communists and their fellow travellers. Many of his targets have been French intellectuals – he has ripped into Sartre numerous times – but in *Reappraisals* he also, from his own position on the left, accuses Eric Hobsbawm of being a "mandarin" and calls the much loved EP Thompson a "sanctimonious, priggish Little Englander".

Since September 2001, however, Judt's articulate polemicism has taken a new direction – one that has transformed his life. Uneasy about the political reaction to 9/11 in the US, he soon began to publish a series of condemnations of Bush's international policies. But whereas his anti-communism sat comfortably with mainstream liberal opinion in America, his early opposition to the Iraq war threw him out of alignment with his usual allies, who were still rallying around the president following the terrorist attacks. Judt, who was born and has spent most of his life in Britain, began to feel more aware of being European – and different.

He raised hackles by labelling liberal commentators in America – including New Yorker editor David Remnick, Michael Ignatieff and Paul Berman – Bush's "useful idiots". But

by far the biggest tumults Judt has caused have followed an essay he published five years ago, entitled "Israel: The Alternative", which opened with the notion that "the president of the United States of America has been reduced to a ventriloquist's dummy, pitifully reciting the Israeli cabinet line", and went on to contend that the time had come to "think the unthinkable" – the bringing to an end of Israel as a Jewish state, and the establishment in its place of a binational state of Israelis and Palestinians.

The essay was written for the New York Review of Books, and within a week of its publication, Judt had received a thousand messages of protest. From that time, Judt, who lost close friends over the article, has been regarded as nefarious by a large section of American Jewry.*

Judt's political instincts can be traced, perhaps too easily, back to his upbringing. He was born 60 years ago into the Jewish community in London's East End. All his grandparents were Yiddish-speaking Jews from eastern Europe; his parents were "unapologetically Jewish, but secular, and not really Zionist. They were leftwing, even Marxist, but strongly against communism". On his 12th or 13th birthday, Judt remembers, he was given a copy of Isaac Deutscher's masterly biography of Trotsky: "Failed communists were acceptable – Deutscher, Trotsky – it was the successful ones who weren't liked."

The other books on his shelves at home (the Judt family moved around London, but settled in Putney) were Left Book Club monthly choices and Penguin Specials – hallmarks of "the autodidacticism of the left". There were memoirs of the Jewish East End, too, but Judt stresses that his parents' sense of being Jewish – even during the 1950s and 60s, when Zionism had much greater purchase than before the war – was "divorced from anything that people in New York now think of as Jewish identity".

His own relationship to Zionism is more complicated. "The thing that changed everything for me, at least for a while, was that my parents, despairing of my social life – thinking me too solitary – encouraged me to join Dror, the Zionist youth organisation. Which I did, at exactly the point in a teenager's life when it's possible to convince them that they have discovered the way the universe works. From the age of 15 until 19 or 20, I was a gung-ho, utterly committed, leftwing Zionist, which was plausible if you went straight from your bedroom to a kibbutz." From 1965 to 1967, he was Dror's national secretary.

Having taken his first set of exams at Cambridge, Judt left again for the kibbutz Machanaim with the six-day war pending and, in response to a call for volunteers from the Israeli army, became a driver and then a translator, joining the forces based on the Golan Heights: "I was 19 and romantic," he recalls.

But his views on Israel soon began to change. "I started to hear things, in the attitude of young officers above all, that I had never heard before, expressions of nationalism,

anti-Arab xenophobia, land hunger – ‘why didn’t we go all the way to Damascus?’, ‘the only good Arab is a dead Arab’ – that sort of thing.” The “conquistador attitude in Israeli officers”, Judt says, “gave the lie to the idea that there was something special about this war, this occupation, this army – myths that many Israelis still believe in ... By the time I went back to Cambridge at the end of the summer, I was already pretty critical of Israel: it was clear in my mind that the huge acquisition of land and people as a result of the war wasn’t going to work. What kind of Jewish state was this?”

Judt instead turned his attention to France, and began graduate research in Cambridge on the history of French Marxism. In 1970, he enrolled for a year at the École Normale Supérieure. “That was a gas ... a whole bunch of intellectuals coming down to breakfast in their dressing gowns, sipping coffee and eating croissants. They really were intensely smart in a way you don’t find in England, where people tend to camouflage their smartness, for all the obvious cultural reasons. At the École, you had to come up to scratch in every conversation, and it was exhilarating.”

In Paris, he dismissed at first hand the abstruse structuralist Marxism of Louis Althusser (“listening to him, at a crowded and sycophantic seminar, I was utterly bemused”) and was strongly influenced by Annie Kriegel, the charismatic resistance heroine and leading (former Stalinist) historian of French communism.

Judt taught at Cambridge, Berkeley – where he bought himself a Ford Mustang and drove up and down Highway One – and Oxford. “I remained an obscure academic well into early middle age,” he says. The first step towards a fuller engagement in contemporary politics came in the early 80s: “I decided I had lived an insufficiently cosmopolitan life until then, so I taught myself Czech and became involved as a walk-on player in the organisation that was smuggling books in and manuscripts out of Czechoslovakia.” Soon Judt was writing about Václav Havel and the underground. As recounted in *Postwar*, he was a witness to the velvet revolution, having set off for Prague at the first sign that the state system was crumbling.

“After 1989,” he has written, “nothing – not the future, not the present and above all not the past – would ever be the same.” Judt, who had moved to NYU in the mid-80s, worked hard to bring together eastern European and American intellectuals, and in 1995 founded the university’s Remarque Institute – he is still its director – to promote the study and discussion of Europe in America. It was during a two-year stint in Vienna in the middle of the decade that *Postwar* began to take shape. In writing it, he was increasingly conscious that a chapter in the history of Europe – an era that a good proportion of its current population had lived through – had come to an end. “As soon as you realise how good it is, this book will frighten you,” commented Neal Ascherson in one review: “This is not just a history. It is a highly intrusive biography ... ‘postwar Europe’ is us.”

The "problem of memory" tackled in *Postwar* – of a past easily set aside – is also a theme of *Reappraisals*. Judt was alarmed on discovering that, for the first time, not a single student taking one of his classes had read *Darkness at Noon* (Koestler is one of his heroes). "This set me thinking that we have moved on very fast, not only from people who are seen to no longer matter, but from a set of issues too." Since 1989, he proposes, public intellectuals have mattered less and less. What's more, it is still generally and complacently assumed that America "won" the cold war in that monumental year.

Postwar, which came out in 2005, suggested that "what binds Europeans together ... is what it has become conventional to call – in disjunctive contrast with 'the American way of life' – the 'European social model'." Judt is outspoken in his advocacy of north European-style social democracy, and stresses the need to remember why European welfare systems came about in the first place: "We are so busy remembering all the things that active states do badly, we have forgotten what they do well ... The Anglo-American model with its cult of privatisation is not only ethically dysfunctional, but will soon be seen to be economically dysfunctional."

He points out that it would never have occurred to him to write the 2003 essay on Israel had he been living in Europe. But he was frustrated "with the remarkably unbalanced coverage of the Middle East in the States" and was conscious of the cultural prohibition unique to America, whereby "all Jews are silenced by the requirement to be supportive of Israel, and all non-Jews are silenced by the fear of being thought antisemitic"; the result is that "there is no conversation on the subject". This is especially regrettable because any resolution of the Israel/Palestine question depends on a change of attitude on the part of the US. At the moment, Israel is like an "adolescent", he argues in *Reappraisals*: it "is convinced that it can do as it wishes ... that it is immortal".

Judt's views on the Middle East became headline news in the autumn of 2006 following the cancellation – an hour before it was due to start – of a public lecture he was to give, entitled "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy", at the Polish consulate in New York. The Polish consul, Krzysztof Kasprzyk, later acknowledged that he had been contacted by a number of Jewish groups – including the Anti-Defamation League and the American Jewish Committee, who were concerned about the subject of Judt's address. "The phone calls were very elegant but may be interpreted as exercising a delicate pressure," Kasprzyk said.

When news of the cancellation broke, and accusations began to fly, the incident developed into the "Judt affair". The *New York Review* published an open letter to Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL, signed by 114 intellectuals who felt that Judt's right to free speech had been abrogated. Numerous articles on both sides appeared in the press and the matter of criticism of Israel in America was – for once – thoroughly ventilated. The implications of the cancellation, Judt believes, were "serious

and frightening”, though the affair had its absurd side: the organisers of a talk he was due to give at Manhattan College on October 17 2006 asked him not to mention Israel – not an easy task given that it was a Holocaust memorial lecture, and its agreed title was “The Holocaust in postwar Europe”. (He withdrew.)

Judt says, resignedly, that the adjectives used to describe him in the media have now changed. He has become, in America, “the controversial Tony Judt” and “Tony Judt, well-known critic of Israel”. He finds this “a bore”, especially as his opinions “aren’t regarded as especially unconventional in the rest of the world”. So it made his day when a member of the audience at a lecture he gave recently came up to him afterwards and said, perhaps a little disappointedly: “You’re not controversial, you’re just complicated.”

•*This paragraph was changed on Tuesday May 20. It originally said that just before the essay was published, Robert Silvers, the editor of the New York Review of Books, asked: “You are Jewish, aren’t you?” But Robert Silvers did not ask the question. An editor of the New York Times op-ed pages put the question to Judt, in 2006, in relation to a different essay published by that newspaper.