Coda: Europe’s Existential Threats

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GARGAR1974

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On Saturday, October 1, 1977, I arrived in Belgrade to take up my post as East European bureau chief of *The New York Times*. I'd timed my arrival to coincide with the opening of the conference of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), one of many efforts during the depths of the Cold War to facilitate dialogue between East and West—the two halves of a very much divided, and at times hostile, Europe.

At dinner in the old Hotel Moskva, a vintage Balkan relic where I'd spend months until my apartment was ready, I ran into Alfred Friendly Jr., a veteran correspondent, most recently for *Newsweek*, based in Moscow. After dinner, we strolled through the streets of downtown Belgrade. It was dark and cold, a wind whipping off the Sava River swirling the last desiccated leaves of the late fall. There were few street lamps, and those that still glowed dimly cast little more than small pools of light on the pavement. The shop windows were full, but with shoddy clothing, thick-sole clodhopper shoes; the groceries stores had only a few sorry tins of food.

Oh my, I thought, my brow furrowing, this is where I'll be spending the next two or three years of my life. How utterly depressing. How do these folks cope? Then I looked over at Al. He was grinning broadly, his eyes wide with wonder as they leaped across the shop windows. Were we in the same city? We were, but Al was coming from Moscow where there were fewer streetlights, no lit up display windows brimming even with shoddy merchandise. In Soviet Russia, shoppers lined up in desperation without knowing if there would be a handbag or a sausage left to buy by the time they'd reached the doorway. "[Belgrade] is truly a worker's paradise," he finally blurted out. I expressed my skepticism, then stopped as the realization suddenly dawned on me.

It all depended on which direction you were coming from.

CAPITALIST EUROPE

Back in the days of the Cold War that was certainly true. But now that Europe is capitalist, quite literally from the Atlantic to the Urals, that still holds true. Indeed, there are still choices being made, alliances shifting as the tectonic plates of the continent continue to slide, and a delicate balance of war and peace remains largely unresolved. During the Cold War, life in some respects was much easier, certainly simpler. There were two starkly different halves of Europe, though an intricate tapestry of styles and cultures, languages, religions, and histories still distinguished the varied peoples, all of whom were in some fashion or other packed into just two sharply divergent visions of the future.

In the West, the capitalist nations of Western Europe were united by the European Union and NATO. The former envisioned one Europe with a single parliament, bureaucracy, regulations, eventually one passport, a single customs system, no borders, and toward the end of this bicontinental era a single pan-European currency—the Euro. On the military side was NATO, a relic of World War II, designed as a mutual defense pact against the "other" Europe. NATO included Canada and the United States—the latter the only power that possessed the capacity to go toe-to-toe with the vast might of the Soviet Union.

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As a counterbalance, in the East were the Soviet Union and its client states with communist political and economic systems, effectively run from the Kremlin and the Lubyanka, headquarters of the feared KGB state security apparatus. These nations were united into two organizations designed effectively to mirror their Western counterparts. COMECON, the economic pact, never needed to go so far as a common currency or single parliament because every move of each of its components was carefully stage-managed from Moscow and the Politburo of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. On the military side was the Warsaw Pact—the grouping of the military forces of the Soviet Union and its East European satellites, and was seen by the people of these nations more as a device for keeping them in line ideologically, rather than as protection against the threat of any NATO invasion. Indeed, most East Europeans would likely have welcomed NATO forces into their largely enslaved nations with open arms. They knew that freedom from the Soviet boot heel meant prosperity and a better life. On at least two occasions, in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968, Warsaw Pact forces invaded these nations to enforce a return to an orthodox form of communism acceptable to the Kremlin.

Now, the threat from the East is largely extinguished, at least in terms of an outright invasion—a massed force of Warsaw Pact tanks pouring through the Fulda Gap on the border between West Germany and East Germany. Today that chokepoint is actually all part of a united Germany, a thoroughly reliable member of NATO and the European Union. Equally remote—a second, more cosmic fear of a first-strike nuclear attack by Soviet missile forces that could wipe out the capacity of the United States and Western Europe even to retaliate, let alone exist as viable civilizations.

Though the nuclear arsenals remain in place, there is little likelihood that either eventuality will occur today. For Soviet tanks to reach Germany, they would need to traverse Poland, the Czech Republic, or Hungary, each a thoroughly reliable member of NATO. And NATO notably requires that the invasion of any single member nation be answered by a reply by all member nations—the Article Five guarantee. This brings us to Ukraine, or further back, Georgia. These are the first major nations of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to go truly rogue—not only breaking with their former lord and master, but facing down Russian forces at the barrel of a gun, tank, or missile. Still, neither Ukraine nor Georgia is likely to be welcomed into NATO. Congress and any number of other West European members of NATO have little interest in being forced into a boots-on-the-ground defense of a nation that Russia considers an integral part of its "near abroad," the geographical perimeter of its very national security. True, the Baltic Republics, all full NATO members since March 2004, were part of the USSR, since communist troops overran them in the final offensive towards the end of World War II. But they were hardly ever part of the Russian core—indeed, in the hearts and minds of their people only marginally part of the Soviet Union.

IN MANY AREAS, THE ANCIENT LEFT-RIGHT DIVISIONS ARE BECOMING INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH OR SUSTAIN.

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STILL MY BEATING HEART

So where does the true heart of this part of Europe—onetime members of the Warsaw Pact and COMECON—truly beat? In good times, resoundingly with the West. But the last several years in Central and Eastern Europe could hardly be considered good times. This has been a difficult period—the global recession impacting each of these countries with varying intensity, but sparing none. In such cases, many hearts have turned back to "the good old days" of communism, this difficult period suddenly acquiring a golden halo. The good times are remembered, not the bad. In those times, all workers were guaranteed lifetime employment. There might not have been much to buy with the money earned, but there was little outright starvation. Somehow everyone was able to make do—a friendly farmer in the countryside with a spare hog, cow, or chicken.

One time, during the depths of the Cold War, I visited a Polish chicken farm. By that time, private farms were allowed in Poland, and this farmer had several thousand poultry in large sheds. For lunch, he invited me into his lovely house with his family—wife and two tow-haired sons. I sat down, fully expecting roast, fried, or grilled chicken. Much to my surprise, thick, sizzling ham steaks appeared on each of our plates. Delicious, but after awhile, I summoned my courage and asked what happened to the chicken that had seemed all but inevitable. "Oh, that's simple," my host smiled, puffing out his chest. "When a Pole is rich, he eats ham." In parlous economic times in Central Europe, private chicken farmers, even on the smallest scale, were inevitably rich.

But today, small-scale innovation doesn't go a very long way. In an advanced, capitalist nation, even one barely a generation away from the communist model, the gap between country and city and between rich and poor has widened to a gulf that all too often seems unbridgeable from below.

Moreover, with unemployment rates across the continent largely above 8 percent, not to mention in Spain, Portugal, Italy, even France where they've soared into the double-digits, it's hardly surprising that citizens would start looking for some alternatives—often at the political fringes.

"You know there is still a communist party in the Czech Republic," ventured a Chase banker, who'd arrived in the United States from his native land barely three years ago. He shook his head, hardly understanding how his countrymen could allow this. "And it's become increasingly popular." Certainly, this has become a trend increasingly difficult to explain, let alone sustain—especially in the wake of the downing of the Malaysian Airlines passenger jet MH17 by Russian-backed separatists over eastern Ukraine. The image of Russia suffered a deep blow in many of these nations. Yet in some locales, economics and jobs continue to drive politics.

Ironically, in many areas, the ancient left-right divisions are becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish or sustain. Rather than a conventional straight-line spectrum, the political universe has begun to bend so that today the spectrum has become, effectively, a circle or at least an oval. Continue traveling to the right, or clockwise in this scenario, and eventually you wind up on the far left. In terms of ideology and goals, fears and bogies that motivate these two once utterly apposite political views, they have effectively been joined on many key issues, often in the minds of their once most fervent supporters.

ANOTHER PATH

In broad stretches of Europe, another path has emerged to trump communism and

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the blow that movement has suffered at the hands of Vladimir Putin and his neo-communist leadership in the Kremlin. The right wing has gathered enormous force. From France to Hungary, from the far north of Finland to the tip of Italy's boot, rightist sentiment has seized the imagination of the people, translating into votes at the ballot box and a shakeup in parliaments and power structures. A map compiled by Josse de Voogd for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant* demonstrates that apart from a few islands of leftist sentiment remaining in some of the major population centers like London and Paris, vast stretches of Europe have been taken over by the newly resurgent far right. Especially surprising is that some of the areas hardest hit by rampant unemployment—much of Spain, Italy, and the northern half of Portugal, have shifted quite abruptly from the far left to the far right. And often, this shift has taken place with barely a change in the goals or attitudes of the voters themselves.

Much of this is attributed to ancient configurations of these lands. Many of these "are new parties, but the geography of their gains does reveal ancient boundaries and rivalries," says de Voogd. "Alsace was occupied for decades by Germany and has been a bastion of the National Front for a long time already. In Germany, the Alternative for Germany (the new Eurosceptic party) and the extreme-rightist NDP do well in areas with many war refugees from the east." When we swing toward the east, we cross what for much of the 20th century was known as the Iron Curtain, separating the democratic west from the communist east. Even today, decades after the curtain was ripped down and both halves of Europe became, at least nominally, democratic, de Voogd observes, "in Eastern Europe, the party landscape changes rapidly, but here again voting behavior goes along with old fault lines. Countries were pulled apart and merged together, minorities ended up at the wrong side of the border, as, for example, Hungarians in neighboring countries having their own parties. The political map of Poland is dominated by the boundary between liberal and conservative, between what was once Germany and the rest; a 'phantom boundary' that officially doesn't exist. How important these invisible boundaries are is shown today in Ukraine."

Ukraine, as well as the nations of the former Yugoslavia, demonstrate what can happen when artificial boundaries fail to conform to ancient fault lines delineating ethnic, religious, or linguistic boundaries that are far more powerful than any boundaries drawn by politicians or diplomats. There have been similar, though less intense pressures in Western Europe—the Flemish and the Walloons in Belgium, Scots and English in Great Britain, Catalans and Bretons respectively in Spain and France. In each such case, nationalist trends date as far back as, or in some cases further than, the languages and religions that mark their particular region. What can and often does today divide them is politics. Hence, powerful regional forces can mean powerful shifts to the left or right.

In the mid-1980s, I accompanied Jean-Marie Le Pen, founder of the right-wing Front National, to a rally near the idyllic Lac d'Annecy. This was the heart of *la France profonde*—deep France, and home to the French right wing. There are powerful, ancestral forces of the right in France. During World War II, they drove the Action Française and Vichy—with few Frenchmen today professing any real loyalty to those groups that had allied themselves with France's conquerors, the Nazis of Hitler's Germany. Curiously, few of today's French

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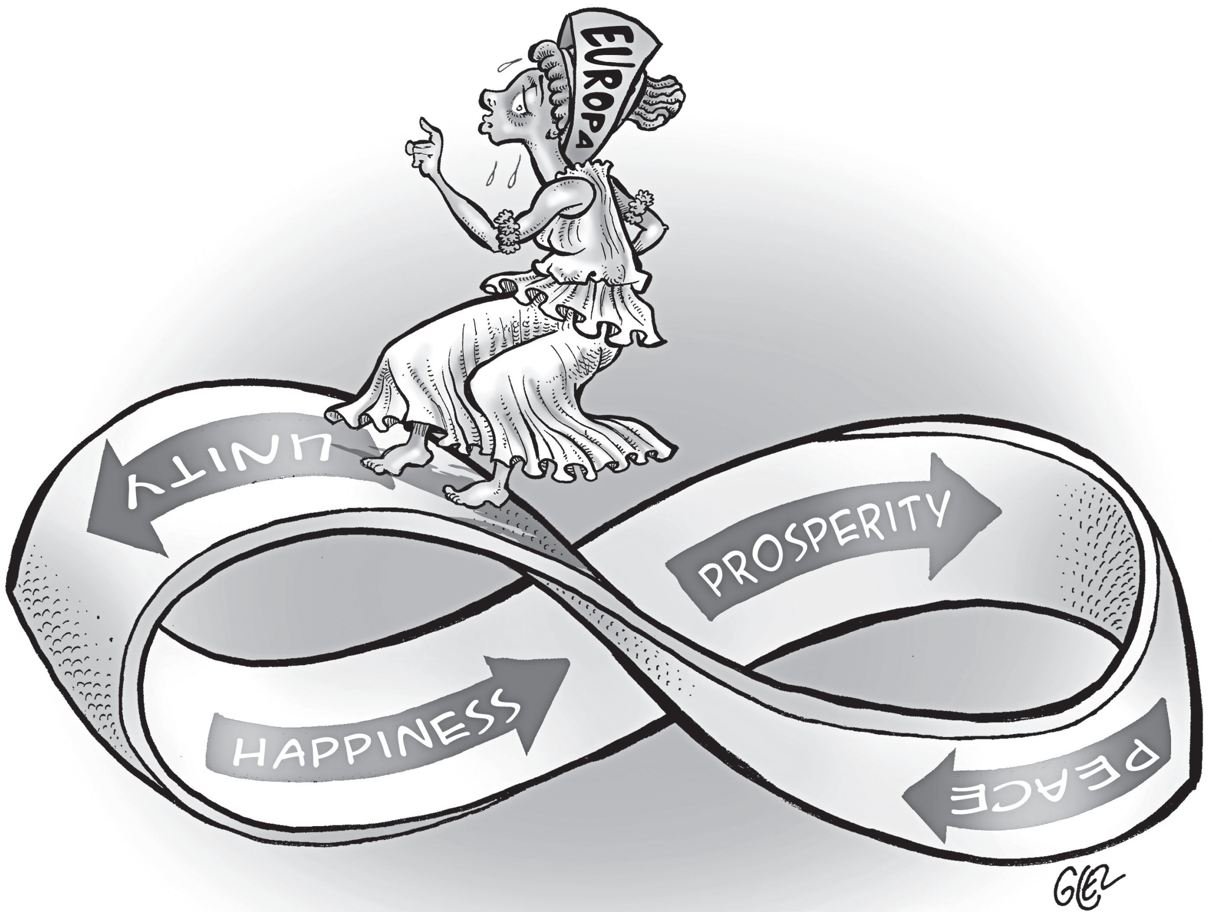

DAMIEN GLEZ

patriots who professed active service in the anti-Nazi underground known as the Resistance recall that group's close alliance with what would become the French Communist Party. But they turned out in force for the arrival of Le Pen and his entourage. In a vast, white tent, tens of thousands of French men and women screamed their welcome, some throwing themselves in front of him as he strode down the center aisle. It was little different from an American revival meeting, with Le Pen as the pastor of a flock dedicated to all he represented. In those days, his blonde, pig-tailed daughter Marine accompanied him everywhere. Today, she is the standard bearer of the party, with a following no less fanatically devoted to her cause than her father's. What's different is the political environment where the right now flourishes.

No longer is the European right the pariah it once was. Europe today is another generation removed from the fascist era. In France, communism is all but dead. At its peak in 1945, having carried the flag of the resistance to Germany's Nazi occupiers of France, it boasted more than 500,000 members. In 1981, when I arrived in Paris as a correspondent, the nation's newly-elected Socialist president, François Mit-

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terrand, had just welcomed the first communist members of a French cabinet to serve in the government since party leader Maurice Thorez served as vice president of the Council of Ministers in 1946 and 1947. A panicked Ronald Reagan sent his vice president, George H.W. Bush, racing to Paris in June 1981 to win Mitterrand's assurance that Western military secrets would not be compromised and find their way to Moscow.

Mitterrand assured him, as he would later assure me, that it was all a carefully calculated ruse to destroy the party. "Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer," he winked. And it worked. Mitterrand embarked on a determined program of nationalization of private banks, railroads, and utilities that ultimately collapsed of its own weight. The communists bore the brunt of blame for failure of this ill-conceived move toward state ownership and control of the economy. Eventually, they were shown the door, and the party began slowly, but steadily to fade. A second brief flirtation with power under Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin in the 1990s was its final death-knell. Today it is little more than a faint echo of the new Front de Gauche (FG) under the leadership of the popular, but apparently unelectable, Socialist Party dissident Jean-Luc Mélenchon. Even the communist newspaper, the powerful daily *L'Humanité,* with a circulation of 500,000 at the end of World War II, has shrunk to barely 70,000 today and persists largely on the strength of a campaign of donations that raised some €2 million in 2008.

IN MANY COUNTRIES, THE RIGHT WING IS CONCERNED ABOUT THE LARGE AND GROWING MINORITY POPULATIONS, ESPECIALLY ISLAMISTS, IN THEIR MIDST.

ROUND AND ROUND

The downfall of communism in Russia and the satellite nations of Eastern Europe did little to help the fortunes of the Western communist parties in general. Europe, east and west, has gone in different directions. But economics has played an important role in transforming the political landscape, and in a most curious manner. In some countries, especially those from the old Soviet bloc, the good old days today are increasingly glimpsed through rose-tinted spectacles. Such an era of full employment and at least a thinly-stocked pantry seems all too attractive when times are difficult and employment is all too often a function of the Marxist maxim, "From each according to his ability, to each according to his need." And the appeal only multipled when the Great Recession began to spread misery across Europe in 2007-2008.

So in some countries the turn has been to communism, while elsewhere and more broadly, the turn has been to the right. But in both cases, the economic, political, and diplomatic prescriptions of each are converging—this vicious political circle meeting at bi-polar extremes.

When Israeli forces invaded Gaza in July, large elements of the left and the right came to the immediate support of the Palestinian cause. As the Front de Gauche put it, this was the very "occasion to reaffirm the support for the right of an independent state for the people of Palestine." At the same time, Le Pen's Front National, while somewhat divided on the issue, has supported an independent Palestine. As

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the center-right French daily *Le Figaro* put it in July: *"Ce soutien à l'indépendance nationale palestinienne se retrouve globalement dans le milieu national-révolutionnaire."* ("This support for national independence for Palestine is found globally in the national-revolutionary milieu.")

Indeed, the biggest threat now in Europe is at the margins. In many countries, the right wing is concerned about the large and growing minority populations—especially Islamists—in their midst. This is not a new fear. A quarter century ago, when I was writing my book, *The Fourth World War: Diplomacy and Espionage in the Age of Terrorism*, with the late Count Alexandre de Marenches, long-time head of French intelligence and a top aide to Charles De Gaulle, his expressed fear of the greatest threat to France was "a foreign community that is growing in our midst whose languages and customs we do not understand." He meant Arabs. Marenches was certainly to the right of center politically, but hardly an extremist. He was a realist, however. These fears have only grown in the ensuing decades and spread to a vastly broader segment of the electorate. In turn, politicians and political parties have learned to profit most effectively from these fears and loathings.

THE BIGGEST ISSUE IN TODAY'S EUROPE BOILS DOWN TO LOYALTY AND TO WHOM OR TO WHAT IT IS WORTH BEING LOYAL.

ONWARD TO PARLIAMENT

This year's elections for the European Parliament were the first real indication of just how broadly and deeply these political currents have engulfed the continent. In Austria, Denmark, Great Britain, and France, right-wing groups opposed entirely to the European Union won victories that often translated into a substantial number of seats in the new European Parliament. In all, at least 25 percent of the new Parliament's seats are occupied by representatives utterly opposed to its existence in the first place. The election of 2014 is seen by many observers as the most anti-establishment since pan-European elections were first held in 1979. The center-right faction with the ironic name, European Peoples' Party, is the largest single unit, which will lead its parliamentary leader Jean-Claude Juncker to take over in November as President of the European Commission—effectively the continent's elected leader. The prime minister of Luxembourg from 1995 to 2013, he was the longest-serving head of government of any EU nation and one of the longest serving democratically elected leaders in the world. As a founding organizer of the European Monetary Union, Juncker and his party are not as far to the right as those European parliamentarians who actually oppose the very concept of the EU. There are other parties that fulfill that mission. In France, Marine Le Pen's Front National took 25 percent of the vote, nearly double the meager 14 percent won by the Socialists of ruling President François Hollande.

By contrast, in Greece, the far-left Syriza movement led by Alexis Tsipras, a handsome 39-year-old firebrand with a left-wing following nearly as messianic as the Le Pen's in France, scored a watershed victory with more than 26 percent of the vote, outpolling the nation's ruling New Democracy party. As it happens, Tsipras started his political career before the fall of the Berlin

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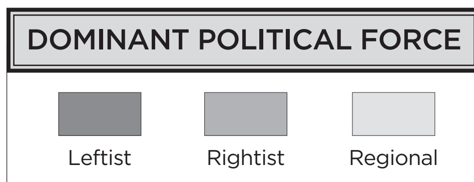
Wall as a leader of Greece's Young Communists in the late 1980s, which later morphed into a far-left organization more palatable in the post-communist era. Easier to swallow perhaps, but with policies increasingly in tune with the vast mass of the Greek people who had vicious economic austerity programs rammed down their throat by Germany and the European Union after Greece nearly went bankrupt in 2009.

In short, this European election displayed as vividly as any recent action the political fault lines that are opening into a yawning gulf between a fragmenting mainstream electorate and the explosive ranks of the far right and left. "A huge vote of no confidence in Europe's political elite," Great Britain's *Guardian* newspaper wrote. "After five years of currency and debt crisis, recession, and savage austerity, the results exposed a Europe of division: extremely volatile, fragmented, with voters disenchanted and those choosing to vote cutting their support for the mainstream in favour of fringe parties."



This map of Europe, as it emerged from recent national and European-wide elections and drawn by the electoral geographer Josse de Voogd for the Dutch newspaper *de Volkskrant,* demonstrates graphically the extraordinary political splits, but especially the sweep of right-wing forces, alongside the smaller, yet still entrenched pockets of the left.

Josse de Voogd 2014

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THE PRICE OF LOYALTY

The biggest issue in today's Europe boils down to loyalty and to whom or to what it is worth being loyal—religion, nationhood, political party and system, language and culture, history, or geographical consanguinity.

Without question, in the narrow confines of Europe, geography still plays a central role. Ukraine, for instance, is tugged forward and backward at least in part because of the geographical accident of its location—sandwiched between a Russia on its east, determined to retain what it can of its fading empire, and on the west, nations once forcibly allied with a communist Soviet Union now determined to trust their future to a Western Europe whose prosperity they had so long lusted after. At the same time, Ukraine maintains several of the other critical elements of today's Euro-loyalty. In religion, there are the Catholic Western stretches of the country and the Orthodox East, the Latin versus Cyrillic alphabet.

These same forces in parts of Europe are only complicated by other issues—vast immigrant communities speaking strange languages, sporting strange dress and customs; profound and apparently endemic unemployment, especially among young people and immigrants; fears of terrorism and crime waves. None of these have been addressed adequately by establishment parties or governments. So suddenly the fringe is on the cusp of becoming the mainstream in many European nations, even the European Community itself, the tentacles of whose distant bureaucracy seem to reach into virtually every village and many households in the furthest reaches of the continent. Most victims feel all but powerless to affect the course of these forces that are about to overwhelm their lives. But the alternatives held out to them seem so terribly attractive—while terrifying to the shrinking mass of the continent's mainstream.

The challenge for the future is to find a path through these growing thickets of left and right that seem to be closing around the middle. Indeed, as the circles begin to close, issues that once seemed manageable, dwarfed by memories of the apocalyptic possibilities of the Cold War, suddenly have become existential in their own right. Already memories of how close we came to nuclear Armageddon when the United States and the Soviet Union stood nose to nose during the Cuban Missile Crisis or the Berlin blockade have begun to fade. Today's weapons of confrontation across such borders as Russia and Ukraine—whether economic sanctions or supersonic anti-aircraft missiles—are no less lethal.

Current world leaders, however, seem to have little memory of the past. Putin and Obama, Germany's Merkel, and France's Hollande appear quite prepared to blunder blindly ahead, using today's weapons with little of their precedessors' understanding of the potentially horrific consequences. Sanctions and embargos can impoverish vastly more families than any nuclear weapon might destroy. Missiles can destroy the innocent lives of hundreds in a matter of seconds. Moreover, bitter hatreds, fueled by virulent forces of nationalism and religion, can fester long past the moment when outright confrontation is suspended. A wisdom that seems sadly absent among today's leaders is essential to return some stability to both halves of Europe. ●

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