



4-1-2016

George Friedman, *Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe*

Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>

 Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Farhat-Holzman, Laina (2016) "George Friedman, *Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*: Vol. 74 : No. 74 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol74/iss74/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Comparative Civilizations Review* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

**George Friedman, *Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe*
Doubleday, 2015**

Reviewed by Laina Farhat-Holzman
lfarhat102@aol.com

I read George Friedman's intelligence reports almost every day, and reviewed one of his books, *The Next Hundred Years*, several issues ago. Friedman is chairman and founder of Stratfor (Strategic Forecasts), a leading private intelligence company. I think he and several of his colleagues (including Robert D. Kaplan) are the best analysts of international geopolitics. Few other analysts regard geography as a major player in world affairs, an oversight that makes so many get it wrong.

For the past few years, his reports have focused on the world's borderlands, those faultlines where countries or ethnicities meet with hostility latent. His latest book, *Flashpoints*, explores Europe's past and present (and potentially future) with an eye to the borderlands that can become flashpoints for conflict.

The only other scholar mentioning this issue was Samuel P. Huntington, with his much discussed *Clash of Civilizations*. Huntington noted that every border shared with Muslim countries is and has always been bloody. This observation has proven itself many times over in the past decade.

Europe has given much to the world in the past 500 years: the scientific revolution, religious reformations, political liberalism with participatory governance, and nationalism—the creation of nation states ideally governed by their own people in democracy. Europe has modeled the modern world with its peaceful civil life, rule of law, and amenities available for all that were once the exclusive luxury of the ruling elites. We are talking about only Western Europe here, along with its British offspring, the United States.

But there is another side to Europe: a region of catastrophic conflicts along its many geographic and political flashpoints. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century has been much admired by the educated among us because it largely discarded religion as a governing institution, replacing it with 'reason.' Friedman explores the underbelly of the Enlightenment, in which some of its prized institutions gave rise to unanticipated and ugly consequences.

Nationalism can be a benign institution when it only means that a country's people love their country and its culture. However, when love of country morphs into hatred of other countries, nationalism becomes an excuse for violence. Europe's two world wars exemplify this.

Nationalism in Europe is based on shared faith, common history, language and culture. This is why Jews, no matter how long they lived in a country, could not be accepted as that

nationality; they did not share the predominant faith, Christianity. As all Europeans become more secular, this problem has melted.

Although Muslims have long lived in parts of Europe, the immigration crisis today has brought far more Muslims than can be assimilated into European culture. Multiculturalism, a theory that makes all cultures relative, is not working in Europe as had been hoped. Too many Muslims are coming at one time, too many to be absorbed. And multiculturalism interferes with attempts to absorb an alien population. (In the US, migrants are free to practice their particular cultures, with the exception that if they want to be American, they must accept American norms of behavior and values. This has worked, and the price of American citizenship is the abandonment of the more alien aspects of the immigrant's culture.)

What makes this migration even more unacceptable is the campaign of Militant Islamism to seduce the youth and endanger Europe's stability. Cyprus is the first European country to have split in two over religion and ethnicity; half is Greek Christian, half Turkish Muslim.

In addition to the mutually hostile religious differences, immigration is facing an economic problem. There are not enough jobs for these immigrants. Peace and prosperity are inseparable. Without prosperity, there can be no peace.

Reason, replacing religion, can morph into ideologies that demand as much fanaticism as that of the true believers of religion. Furthermore, the decline of religion in Europe has left the young with a nihilism that discards both national identity and cultural identity; it becomes an 'anything goes' culture that is ill equipped to defend itself against such fanatical ideologies as neo-Nazism and Militant Islam.

With this book, Friedman provides us with the definitive analysis of today's Europe, exploring Europe's geography, political life and history. The geography alone dictates regional and country borders. His important contribution is the interaction of geography, history and politics.

In his preface, he reminds us that "Between 1914 and 1945 roughly 100 million Europeans died from political causes: war, genocide, purges, planned starvation, and all the rest. It was particularly striking in Europe, which had, over the course of the previous four hundred years, collectively conquered most of the world and reshaped the way humanity thought of itself."

How could this happen in a place that in 1913 represented the highest level of civilization, rich in culture, with a population similarly educated, with rulers related by blood (offspring of Queen Victoria), and with institutions such as the military, trained with the same standards and values?

Friedman shows that Europe's descent into hell in the 31 years between 1914 and 1945 was not a fluke. It was the natural outcome of the emergence of the negative sides of all the institutions it most valued—and the fact that geography matters.

PART ONE: European Exceptionalism

Unusual in a scholarly book, Friedman opens with an autobiographical history. His family fled with him, a baby, from Hungary in 1949. They were escaping the communists; they had finally had it with living in Europe.

His parents were born during the last days of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, a place so much a borderland that the town of his father's birth changed names and nationalities three times during his residence there. World War I ended the solidity of the four empires that ruled at one time or another over that region: the Ottomans, Hapsburgs, Hohenzollerns and the Romanovs—all of which collapsed in 1918, leaving the region in chaos.

His parents became used to the shifting borders and identities and to make it even worse, they were Jews who were very familiar with changes of nationality. They had lived everywhere and belonged nowhere.

The main source of instability in Europe had always been Germany: a relatively newly united country that had wealth, industry, intellect and culture—everything a modern state should have. However, it also had existential insecurity. Its neighbors, France and Russia, were a threat. This issue was behind the 31 years of horrific warfare and slaughter in Europe.

Friedman's family experienced World War II up close and very painfully. His father was drafted into the Hungarian army (allies of the Nazis) and fought against the Soviet Union. By the time of the Stalingrad campaign that was the beginning of the end for the Germans, the Hungarian retreat during the horrible winter of 1942-3 resulted in the death of most of them, and the death toll for Jewish soldiers was almost total. His father, a tough and clever fellow, survived.

This chapter is must reading for an inside account of what it is like in a borderland and what that meant during World War II.

Chapter 2: Europe's Assault on the World

This chapter covers the fascinating story of Europe's colonial adventures, begun 500 years ago. Europe's several Western countries (England, Spain, Portugal, France and Netherlands) undertook the conquest of the rest of the world. By 1914, there was no place left untouched by European power, culture and modernity. This colonialism had two faces: it opened up the lesser-developed world to a range of new ideas and opportunities, and it also was the source of much death and destruction.

The reason for this exploration and conquest was a response to Europe's old rival and nemesis: Islam, particularly the Islam of the Ottoman Empire. Over time, Europe prevailed and the Muslim World faded and crumbled.

Although this chapter is about the conquest, the rest of the book is about how it collapsed into chaos.

Chapter 3: The Fragmentation of the European Mind

There are consequences to abandoning all tradition, religion and custom, which was the process of modernization that Europe experienced during those five centuries. The religious, political and scientific revolutions did this, leaving Europe with what Friedman calls the fragmentation of the mind. One could be a scholar and a swashbuckler, pious and murderous; and in dismissing all traditional modes of thought and behavior, one could believe anything one liked. This explains how a country as steeped in culture and learning as Germany could rush headlong into the thuggish ideology of Nazism.

Friedman's insight into how the Enlightenment devolved into radical individualism is one of the most important analyses in this book. I had never before thought of the Enlightenment in a negative way. Out of that very Enlightenment came all the mad ideologies that brought with them the seeds for the murderous history of Europe.

PART TWO: Thirty-One Years

Scholars have recognized that World War II was just a continuation of World War I. Friedman identifies the period between 1914 and 1945 as the "Thirty-One Years." By the end of this period, "Europe had gone from the invincible center of the global system to a place where poverty was as common as self-confidence was scarce. In 1945, as Europe awakened from its orgy of violence, stunned by what it had done, the world's map was changing as dramatically as Columbus had changed it, and Europe was no longer at its center."

The rest of this section covers the postwar exhaustion, the Soviet resurrection and the American origins of European Integration. The European Union was the result: a great idea without concern for geography, history or values that characterized the individual nation-states.

PART THREE: Flashpoints

The rest of the book covers the current period after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the existing flashpoints from which conflict can come, or already is coming. Friedman examines the challenges facing the European Union. The chapters on Russia and its resurgence in its borderlands are particularly relevant now: the Georgian crisis was the first evidence of Russian resurgence.

One particularly prescient observation about the EU is: “It takes a long time for a borderland to disappear... You can forgive, you can pretend to forget, but the memory, fear, and malice never quite go away... The Europeans think that can’t happen again. They try to forget Yugoslavia and the Caucasus... They dismiss Ukraine. But old habits are hard to overcome.”

This is a brilliant tour de force and well worth your reading.