

Purges and Wars in 20th-Century Europe

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ABSTRACT

The word *purge* refers to a repressive process of a political nature: it means ostracizing and/or punishing individuals or sometimes entire categories of people believed to be disloyal, politically suspect, or even hostile. Those who carry it out sometimes acknowledge their action as a deliberate policy. More frequently, however, the term is applied after the fact to describe practices whose forms, levels of violence and breadth are incomparable. Since the 20th century, the purge logic applied in purification policies in Europe has been closely tied to the concept of a nation or a social project that believes its political and social unity is being threatened by enemies within. Authoritarian and revolutionary regimes perform purges in both peace time and wartime. Democracies have been more likely to carry them out in wartime or post-war periods, in a dual logic of punishing traitors and national regeneration.



Screen grab of archive footage *Punishing Traitors in Melitopol* (1944). A Red Army representative reads the verdict before the hanging, 9 February, 1944.
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Front page of *Nouvelles du matin*, 15 August 1945. “Pétain sentenced to death and ‘national indignity’...”



“The Shorn Woman of Chartres,” Robert Capa, 16 August 1944 (reproduced in Philippe Frégné and Gérard Leray, *La tondue (Shorn Woman) 1944-1947*, Vendémiaire, 2011). Source: Cliotheque.

Multitude and Diversity of Purge-like Practices in the 20th century

A multitude of practices fall within the logic of purges. In Europe, the French Revolution, and more specifically, its Jacobin phase, introduced the principle of a “permanent purging” of supposed enemies within. Over a century later, and at the other end of the continent, the Bolshevik regime, worried about the uncertainty of its future, carried out a large-scale purge with changing targets but a stable principle – the firm belief that enemies within were working to undermine the revolutionary enterprise. In both of those extreme instances, a so-called administrative purge went hand in hand with massive legal and extralegal repressions. Without necessarily being directly tied to an on-going conflict, the repression with the intention of purification was equally related to the fear of war and to the implementation of an enterprise of social transformation. The idea was to neutralize potential foreign agents as well as any individual whose past, social origin or behavior was perceived as being beyond the pale of the society being built.

In Europe, the 20th century was marked by wartime purges of unprecedented breadth that arose from the encounter between the myth of a “pure” nation and total and civil wars. Internments and expulsions/deportations of entire categories of individuals — confirmed instances of which took place as early as the First World War in the French Republic and the Russian Empire — bear witness to this. The figure of the enemy was also the foundation of

violent repression during the civil wars in both Russia (1918-1921) and Spain (1936-1939), where mass internments, arrests and summary executions were carried out. In the case of the wars in the former Yugoslavia, the goal of ethnic and national unity was at the heart of the violence inflicted on minorities between 1991 and 1999. The purge logic was manifest, although this particular episode is more generally referred to as “ethnic cleansing.”

Between the First and Second World Wars, the rapid rise in exclusionary and racist ideologies engendered a previously unknown type of purge: ostracization followed by systematic persecution of Jewish populations first in Germany and then in all of Nazi-occupied Europe. The genocide of European Jews was rooted in a radical and ideologized purge logic that, starting with processes previously observed in other instances of purges (laws of exclusion from the civil service, special statuses, ostracization and more), evolved into an unprecedented mass extermination that gave rise to a classification in international law in 1945 (Nuremberg Charter).

Purges in Wartime

Nevertheless, the term purge is more generally used to describe resorting to legal and extralegal means intended to punish and ostracize traitors in wartime or post-war periods. In Belgium, the demand for “purification” was expressed during a brief period of violence after the country was liberated in 1918, before being abundantly echoed in the press during the post-war period. Public sentiment obliged the government to sanction the *inciviques* more broadly than it had intended to. In the northern and eastern regions of France, there were many denunciations and trials of traitors and profiteers following the 1918 liberation. First military courts and then civilian ones pronounced several dozen penal convictions.

During World War II, “lists of traitors” circulated among resistance networks, and the individuals named on them became the targets of attacks and assassinations (France, USSR). This practice, which took place outside of any institutional framework and in a war situation, has since been described by historians as “warrior” purges: the logic of tactical struggle co-existed alongside that of punishment. Later, the expulsion of the occupying forces was accompanied by punitive brutality: shaving the heads of women accused of consorting – often sexually – with the occupier; people’s courts and summary executions (France, Belgium) that were often arranged by Resistance fighters who were in charge in local contexts (France, Czech provinces). National authorities returning from exile and hoping to rebuild on “purified” foundations frequently tolerated those improvised forms of justice for a certain time, while also hastening to set up official punitive frameworks in order to channel the population’s desire for justice while establishing the legitimacy of the regenerated national government.

Purging to Rebuild

In the countries liberated in 1918, and even more so in 1944-1945, purges were part of a larger undertaking of political and social regeneration that was desired not only by those governing, but also by a large swath of the population. The size of the sacrifices made, the universal dimension of the declared goals of the war, and the violence of the war itself all bolstered that demand.

Post-war purging took a tremendous leap that was both qualitative and quantitative between World War I and World War II. In every liberated nation, the legal system charged hundreds of thousands of people, and tried tens of thousands of them, or even hundreds of thousands in the USSR. Political leaders from the occupation period were tried for high treason (Pétain and Laval in France; Jozef Tiso in Slovakia; Vidkun Quisling in Norway). Legal innovations and resorting to retroactivity were characteristic features of those purges. Tailor-made laws against “murdering and torturing civilians and prisoners of war” in the USSR, registration on the “lists of those deprived of civil rights,” in Belgium, new crime of “national indignity” and the corresponding penalty of “national degradation” (loss of civil rights) in France, “offenses against the national honor” in the Czech provinces. The range of sentences was broad: from civil servants being dismissed from their jobs to the death penalty, via the loss of civil rights,

property confiscations, etc. In some cases, those sentences were extended in business or intellectual environments through various kinds of ostracization (e.g. being banned from practicing their profession or from being published).

After those two total wars, “population transfers” and expulsion of minorities by decree or in the context of international treaties also took place. Those transfers fell within the logic of homogenization of national populations and were sometimes explicitly recognized as being part of a larger process of purging (e.g. the Sudeten Germans).

Bringing Purges to a Close

The political stakes after 1944 impacted the breadth and types of purges carried out in different countries. In northern and western Europe, purging was a subject of argument between political parties: some believed that it needed to draw to a close quickly in order to devote the nation’s energy to rebuilding, for which it was only a necessary first step; others argued for severe and exhaustive purges, while yet others denounced it as illegitimate. In occupied Germany, purging was part of the denazification process, which, until the 1960s, most citizens thought of as being imposed by the victors – even though Germans did participate in the procedures. Then the next generation confronted their parents about what they had done during the war.

Dominated by the Red Army, central and eastern Europe conducted purges that were influenced both by Sovietization and by each country’s experience during the war. The principle of punishing traitors was reined in everywhere by the need for material reconstruction and the establishment of national narratives about the government’s and population’s behavior during the war. Post-war purges ended with amnesties decreed in the late 1940s and in the following decade, while procedures for reintegrating civil servants were put into place. Still, several countries excluded individuals involved in mass murder from those amnesties and eliminated statutes of limitations for their cases.

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