

Book Review
By
Sajid Aziz

George Friedman, *Flash Points: The Emerging Crisis in Europe* (New York: Random House, 2015) 258.

‘Has Europe really changed or is Europe fated to constantly be mocked by the ‘Ode to Joy’?’ This sentence by George Friedman sums up the theme of his book, *Flash Points: Emerging Crisis in Europe*, about a continent that, according to the author, experienced genocide, gory wars, purges and starvations between 1914 and 1945, resulting in the demise of nearly 100 million Europeans. This 250-page book consists of three parts, along with a preface that sets the tone for discussion in the subsequent chapters by raising three questions: ‘First, how was Europe the place in which world discovered and transformed itself? Second, given the magnificence of European civilization what flaw was there in Europe that led it to thirty-one years of war? Finally,... we can consider not only Europe’s future but its potential flashpoints.’

The notion of geographical basis of conflict and war recurrently courses through the book. George Friedman calls them borderlands. The paradoxical nature of the borderlands lies in their potential to be a tangent and a mingling place between different cultures and traditions, but they can also be potential flashpoints. There is the borderland of Ukraine between European Peninsula and Mainland Europe; then there is the borderland from North Sea to the Alps between Germany and France; Pyrenees between Iberian Peninsula and rest of Europe; English Channel, a water border, between UK and Continental Europe. As aptly put by the author, ‘no continent is as small and fragmented as Europe.’

Part one, titled, ‘European Exceptionalism,’ gives a historical context to Europe’s conquest of the world, tracing its genesis in the defeat of Muslims in Iberian Peninsula in late 15th century, and the conquering of Aztec Empire in Mexico and Incas Empire in Peru by Hernan Cortes and Pizarro respectively. Christopher Columbus ‘discovered’ America which led to the massacre of indigenous population. Vasco de Gama found an alternative route to Indian Ocean, prompted by Muslim Ottomans’ capture of Constantinople in 1453. Asia and Europe were then linked by both sea and land. Spices from India were brought by ships to the sea and silk went overland from China. Both these routes terminated at

Constantinople, from where they were sent to Italian ports for further distribution in Europe. Thus, besides impelled by technology, more specifically naval technology, that Europe had been mastering, there was the palpable imperative of geopolitics and the need to find alternative trade routes, independent of Ottoman control. As 'Europe's assault on the world' continued apace, there were concurrent significant developments within Europe. Martin Luther challenged Catholicism and its perverted set of ethos, resisting the mediatory role of clergy and elevating individual conscience to be the central guiding course for human actions. Copernicus debunked the predominant prevailing notion that the earth was the centre of universe. All these ideas, developments and movements along with the works of Rene Descartes, Galileo and a whole lot of other philosophers and scientists, led to what are commonly labeled as 'Reformation' and 'Enlightenment'. These developments had their own set of concomitant problems. The most significant being, what Friedman calls, 'the fragmentation of European mind.' The greater sense of individualism also meant a severe sense of uprootedness, the weakening of traditional bonds and a lack of belongingness.

This thread goes to the second part of the book, 'The Thirty-One Years.' A wave of nationalism swept across Europe to compensate for the effacement of the traditional sources of bonds and the state was seen as the 'embodiment of the nation.' As the author rightly puts it, "the idea of the individual became submerged in the idea of nations and nothing personified it more than a mass army." This culminated in two gory world wars, fascism in Italy, and Nazism and holocaust in Germany. One of the most significant post-war developments was European integration. Germany and France created European Coal and Steel Community in 1951. In 1957, the Treaty of Rome was signed, binding together six countries-France, Germany Luxemburg, Belgium, Netherlands and Italy. The evolution of greater European integration in the form of European Union in 1992, which now consists of 28 states, had certain geo-strategic, economic and historical reasons. This organization was made for the primary purpose of forging an alliance of economic interdependence between European states, which would result in greater economic integration, accruing benefits to the member-states. Moreover, it indicated that Europe had left behind a history of internecine wars and entered a new era of cooperation. In terms of its geo-strategic rationale, USA supported and promoted the notion of European economic integration to 'resist'Soviet expansionist policies. On the military front, it had already established NATO with Western Europe. For Europeans, EU was a panacea.

For Friedman, it was not, as can be seen in existing and potential flashpoints. According to the author, the creation of European Union coincided with major wars in the Balkan and the Caucasus. These wars along with Russian war with Georgia in 2008 defy the European narrative that war is a thing of past in Europe. As for potential flashpoints, there exist a multitude of them. The most significant is Germany's economic preponderance and an economy that is largely export-driven which makes it the dominant voice in EU. The debt crisis in Greece, Ireland and other states and austerity measures forced upon them have created considerable resentment among the leaders and populace of those states. Moreover, it has provided suitable ground for parties/movements that oppose repayment of debt, immigration and the free movement of EU populations across the borders. Many right-wing parties profess to such ideas: Golden Dawn in Greece, Five Star in Italy, National Front in France and Jobbik in Hungary, to name a few

Then, there is the potential flashpoint of borderlands between Mainland Europe and European Peninsula, the latter is formed by the Mediterranean and Black seas in the south and by the North Sea and Baltic Sea in the north. The centre of this borderland is the place where eastern borders of Poland, Hungary, Slovakia and Romania converge on the western borders of Ukraine. The significance of this flashpoint increases manifold, given its immense strategic importance for Russia. Ukraine's chief port is Odessa and it is also the city Russia uses to access the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Thus, Russia would never want or possibly allow such NATO and EU penetration in its immediate neighborhoods. Among other potential flashpoints, the author discusses the ancient borderlands between France and Germany and the growing numbers of refugees and immigrants from Africa and Middle East, fleeing wars and poverty in their own countries to find refuge in Europe.

By carefully reading the book, one gets a sense that everything is not honky-dory in Europe. Besides having taken positive strides in forging a level of economic and political integration, there still exist a multitude of potential flashpoints that could possibly undermine the positives. One of the interesting things about the book is that, the author time and again weaves his personal experiences in the narrative discussing other broader issues. He starts chapter one of the book by recollecting his family's escape to Vienna from Hungary, "On the night of August 13, 1949, my family climbed into a rubber raft along the Hungarian shore of the Danube. The

ultimate destination of journey was Vienna.” He meets with German revolutionaries of 60s and 70s; visits borderlands between European Peninsula and European Mainland. By meeting people and listening to them can give a certain peep into individual mind but might not reflect the thinking of the society at large. Deriving overloaded and inflated conclusions out of such interactions, as the author seems wont to do, can sometimes lead to incorrect conclusions. The first two parts of the book completely focus on European history, whereas the last part is consumed by speculations and exploring likely flashpoints in Europe.

*Sajid Aziz is a
Research Assistant at CISS*