

After Catastrophe: Europe since 1945 (Spring 2019)

Contemporary Issue Essay

Your final writing assignment for this course is an essay on a problem, debate, or impasse in contemporary European politics in historical perspective. This assignment will allow you to synthesize the skills you have gained in primary source and historical analysis, while also exploring one of the major themes of the course—the salience of the recent past for understanding the European present. You are welcome to select any contemporary issue of interest to you. You can choose to focus your paper on a problem confronting a single European city/region/country, several cities/regions/countries, or a transnational European institution such as the EU or the European Court of Justice. A list of possible themes to consider, along with relevant sources for each, will be made available on the course Canvas site. Of course, these are only general thematic areas, and your paper would need to identify a more precise problem or issue. You are welcome to choose a topic to investigate based on this list, but you can also work on a different area.

You are welcome and encouraged to draw on information from lectures and the course readings (in particular, Tony Judt's *Postwar*), but the assignment will also require some additional research. Your research will need to identify two types of sources:

Sources that explain the contemporary issue you've chosen. You will likely find articles or editorials in recent European newspapers and magazines (or American newspapers reporting on Europe) most helpful in this regard. A guide to searching European newspapers in English translation is available through a link in the course Canvas site. Academic articles may also be helpful in identifying a contemporary issue.

Historical sources, primary or secondary, that allow you to place the contemporary issue in historical perspective. The research guide on Canvas will have suggestions depending on the topic you are interested in. We will discuss research strategies in class, and you are welcome to meet with us during office hours for recommendations.

Some questions to think about as you formulate your argument include:

- Is your contemporary issue more the result of ongoing historical developments, or does it reflect a rupture with the recent past?
- Does your contemporary issue have parallels in an earlier historical period that may help policymakers think about how to address or resolve it? Or, are there important differences from earlier periods that should caution us against drawing analogies?
- How deep in the past do we need to go to understand how and why the problem arose?
- What is at stake in choosing one or another historical precedent as the crucial antecedent for the contemporary issue?

It is not necessary (indeed, likely impossible) to address all of these questions within a relatively short, 6-8 page (double-spaced) paper. Instead, choose one or two that will help you most effectively tie your contemporary issue to the history we are studying in class. There are many possible ways to link past and present, and the key to this assignment is to choose a lens that allows you to make a succinct and convincing argument.

Your paper will be evaluated along the following criteria:

- Do you choose a relevant debate in contemporary European politics and concisely explain its scope and significance?
- Do you establish a clear thesis that links the contemporary issue to a historical parallel, origin, or departure? (E.g. does your paper answer at least one of the questions listed above?)
- Does your historical analysis, drawing on primary and/or secondary sources, offer convincing support for your thesis? (You are not required to use primary sources for the historical analysis component, but the strongest papers will incorporate at least one historical primary source.)
- Are the organization and mechanics sound?

Keep in mind that a one- or two-paragraph description of your topic, along with a provisional bibliography (including at least three outside sources) is due on **Monday, April 8 at 5 p.m.** This won't be graded per se, but it is an opportunity for us to make suggestions that can help improve your final paper. Of course, the more work you put in to this initial assignment, the more effective feedback you will be able to receive. The essay is due on **Monday, April 29 at 5 p.m.**