

Writing off Europe

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Dead Europe, by Christos Tsiolkas, Sydney: Random House, 2005, 411 pp.

Dead Europe, Christos Tsiolkas's third novel, is a deeply disturbing work. The author believes in a Europe that is monolithically bleak and beyond redemption, and he has constructed characters and situations that conform to this idea.

The main protagonist is Isaac, an Australian-born photographer of Greek background, who travels to Greece for an exhibition of his work, which receives little attention but provides him with the opportunity to meet relatives and friends. He is dismayed to find them disillusioned and uninterested in politics, having instead embraced racism and consumerism. He decides to travel to Europe's major historical and cultural centres, such as Paris, Prague, Berlin, London and Cambridge, where he chronicles through his photography the decay of contemporary, or as Tsiolkas himself describes it, "post-communist Europe."

The novel is organised through a series of plots and sub-plots that are rather contrived and seem, more than anything else, a means of playing with different styles, each supposedly providing a different perspective. One of the recurring leitmotifs has Isaac exploring his Greek heritage in a remote peasant village. He discovers that his relatives murdered the young Jewish boy left in their care by his father when the Germans were about to invade Greece during World War II.

The murder, in Tsiolkas's presentation, speaks to the perceived entrenched anti-Semitism in the backward regions where peasant traditions prevail. The boy assumes a sort of supernatural presence, appearing as a menacing image in each photo Isaac takes on his journey. This symbol of racism and superstition is a recurring theme throughout the novel, with the Jewish boy wreaking vengeance on those who murdered him and their descendants.

Another strand of the narrative involves Isaac and his lover Colin. The latter is a working class man of Irish background who at a young age had some fascist sympathies instilled in him by his bullying stepfather. Isaac's own parents were heroin addicts, his father dying from an overdose. His mother was of peasant background and his father had been involved in left-wing politics, particularly during his university years in Paris. Both landed in the working class as migrants in Australia.

Then there is Isaac's metamorphosis into a depraved blood-lusting parasite. His experiences in Europe leave him as something of a bloodless, spiritually empty carcass, seeking sustenance, vampire-like, in violent sexual encounters where he draws blood from his victims. A particularly ghoulish and silly aspect of the novel has his mother rescue her son when he winds up in hospital with a mysterious illness, by cutting herself and at regular intervals feeding Isaac her blood. Isaac's illness could be a metaphor for AIDS, but this is as ambiguous and arbitrary as almost everything else in the novel.

Dead Europe ends on a rather false, life-affirming note. Transported back to Australia, Isaac is cared for by Colin and his mother, who has sacrificed her soul in order to save her son. This could indicate the severing of the ties between Australia and Europe and an affirmation of family values as a counterweight to the social and political chaos that characterises Europe, but it is not clear what the author means.

Tsiolkas, Australian-born (Melbourne, 1965) and of Greek descent, has written plays, criticism and reviews. A principal theme in his first two novels was racism. His first novel, *Loaded* (1995), was critically acclaimed and made into a film, *Head On* (1998, directed by Ana Kokkinos). His second novel, *The Jesus Man* (1999), received mixed reviews. *Loaded* had some interesting features, in particular the conflict between a young gay man's search for identity and the expectations of society, family and the Greek diaspora in Melbourne's working class suburbs. Even in this novel, though, Tsiolkas demonstrates a predilection for shock tactics.

The Jesus Man is also set in a working class suburb of Melbourne, against the backdrop of the Whitlam government's sacking in 1975. The novel traces the life and experiences of a Greek migrant family and the middle son's depression that leads ultimately to a grisly murder and his suicide. The more convincing aspects of the novel are those that concentrate on the dynamics of Greek migrant family life. The novelist's increasing reliance, however, on grotesque sexual and brutal depictions indicates an accelerating disorientation.

To his credit, with *Dead Europe* Tsiolkas attempts to treat important issues that other Australian writers seem to be neglecting. He is animated by a desire to discover, behind the official propaganda, the causes of social and political upheavals. In an interview posted by the Paperback Bookshop, he explains, "The initial genesis for what is now *Dead Europe* lay in my responses to the civil wars that erupted in Yugoslavia at the beginning of the 1990s. As my ancestry is in the Balkans, I wanted to understand conflicts that too easily were interpreted by the Western media as arising from the savagery and irreconcilable differences of the Balkan people."

Unfortunately, he is artistically unable to transcend his own disillusionment, which in his case, reflects deep political misconceptions. He is hardly alone in this, but rather he expresses the views of a social layer that has drawn very pessimistic conclusions from the collapse of Stalinism and social reformism. For instance, in the same interview, he states that there were three deaths that he claimed "gave purpose to the title": the death of Yugoslavia, of the agrarian and peasant class in Europe and "the other death in the book is connected. It is the death of communism.... Again, the book is not a legitimising of European communism; if anything it probably acknowledges the failure. But, again, I wanted characters to give voice to the devastation wreaked by the collapse of communism, that though we in the democratic West celebrate its end, the collapse of such a huge system and such a key ideology of the Enlightenment brings with it a certain misery and moral collapse" (www.paperbackbooks.com.au/christos.htm#interview).

While there is no doubting Tsiolkas's seriousness and intentions—he spent seven years in researching European history and writing the novel—the fundamental problem with his approach is bound up with his ignorance of a *specific* historical question, the rise and fall of the USSR and Eastern Europe.

Stalinism was not the outcome of a struggle for Marxism, but its antithesis. Bureaucratism arose in the 1920s in the Soviet Union as an opportunist adaptation to the growing isolation of the economically

backward workers' state as a consequence of the failed revolutions in other countries.

An alternative to Stalinism existed, embodied in the Left Opposition, organised by Trotsky and his co-thinkers in 1923. In the late 1920s, the leaders of the Opposition were arrested and sent into exile. This assault on Marxism in the Soviet Union culminated in the great purges and the Moscow Trials, and finally the assassination of Trotsky in 1940 in Mexico.

By the outbreak of World War II, the communist parties around the world were thoroughly Stalinised organisations, whose political aim was to suppress socialist revolution. Although the political and historical origins of the Stalinist satellite states in Eastern Europe were different from those of the Soviet Union where the working class had taken power in a social revolution, these were also Stalinist regimes and had nothing to do with communism.

In many Eastern European countries, the Red Army was welcomed, but under the Moscow bureaucracy's orders, suppressed the revolutionary aspirations of the working class and sought to re-install the weak and discredited bourgeoisie. It was only in response to the Marshall Plan that the Moscow bureaucracy felt compelled to carve out its sphere of influence and nationalise most industry in the region.

In the former Yugoslavia, a "deformed workers state" was created through somewhat different means. Having taken power, the Yugoslav Communist Party, led by Tito, with mass support and against the wishes and plans of Stalin, undertook an economic transformation based on nationalisation of industry and trade and unified different ethnic groups into one entity—Yugoslavia. However, this organisational break with Stalin did not constitute a programmatic break with Stalinism itself. Subsequently, Tito sought a means of balancing between the two superpowers—American imperialism and the Soviet bureaucracy.

The collapse of Eastern European regimes, therefore, and the Soviet Union did not signify the collapse of communism, but rather signifies the collapse of all nationalist based programs including social reformism and trade unionism.

Tsiolkas, unhappily, identifies Stalinism with communism and proceeds from this false premise to investigate the ramifications of their collapse in his novel. By implication, his comment above attributes to Stalinism a progressive historical role, as an extension of the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Read metaphorically, his *Dead Europe* suggests the impossibility of any progressive solution to the unresolved social and historical issues that have re-emerged more sharply in what was once the centre of revolutionary cultural and political ideas, Europe. Tsiolkas has written off Europe and the European working class. Skeptical and pessimistic about the working class's ability to struggle against the ills of capitalism, Tsiolkas attempts to startle the reader and jolt him or her out of supposed apathy.

Tsiolkas's political and historical misconceptions have aesthetic implications. His Europe is one-dimensional, and he restricts himself to superficial observations and characterisations of certain layers in society: the disillusioned middle class, the Greek peasantry and the most disenfranchised and depraved, almost lumpen elements. The book resembles a freak show, with the majority of ordinary people absent from this Europe he has conjured up out of the most extreme layers and circumstances. No one is asking Tsiolkas to paint a rosy picture of Europe. The last two decades has seen a social devastation in most European centres. Nevertheless, the majority of people do not necessarily adapt, conform or descend to the basest form of existence. Many merely survive the best they can.

By bringing to the fore the most extreme situations and characters, Tsiolkas eliminates the need for complexity and contradiction. He may disagree, but in our view he has taken a short-cut. The general emerges

through a concrete depiction of the particular and ordinary. Shock tactics and the grotesque serve only to further desensitise and alienate.

Where he tries to deal with the not-so-extreme, the characters and their circumstances are still undeveloped and stereotyped because they seem to exist only to conform to what Tsiolkas believes to be true, rather than what really is *in general*. For instance, there is a Yugoslav couple who live in Cambridge with a teacher. The couple, who are educated professionals, now work as a cleaner and a waiter. They are cynical and anti-Semitic. The conversations they have with Isaac and the teacher are littered with academic jargon and are really nothing more than empty sophistry to justify racist views. This caricature of East European exiles provides nothing more than grist for the mill for those who insist that racism is intrinsic to human nature.

The Greek middle classes fare not much better in Tsiolkas's simplistic, one-dimensional portrayal. Hedonistic, self-serving and cynical, they provide no insights into their own political and social disillusionment and apathy. The presentation of the Greek peasantry also lacks social dynamics, as if time has stood still.

One of the most extreme episodes involves a Russian couple: the pregnant wife grooms her husband for his homosexual live sex show, in which his mother appears on stage as narrator. Other characters include a heroin-addicted mother whose teenage son prostitutes himself to foreign tourists. There are variations on these themes, but none that yields any profound insights. In fact, there is not a single character—including Isaac himself—with redeeming features or who arouses any sympathy whatsoever. There are other goings-on, such as bestiality and paedophilia, which serve no particular purpose and are neither more nor less interesting than anything else in the book.

It is clear Tsiolkas has reached an impasse; he is profoundly disoriented and disillusioned. He needs to study the history of the twentieth century much more critically if his intention is to write about important matters in a more convincing and truthful way. Reviewers' opinions, ranging from uncertainty as to what to make of such a "confronting" work, to uncritical praise, don't help matters.

For instance, Humphrey McQueen on "Book Talk" in a transcript from Radio National (www.abc.net.au/rn/arts/booktalk/stories/s1404914.htm) says, "My concern and doubts are as nothing compared with the achievements in *Dead Europe* as a novel of ideas, with its compelling choice of language and delineated characters." Ian Syson from *The Age* proclaims that "This book is not just good; it's breathtakingly good. This is Tsiolkas surely making his ascent to the position of one of Australia's pre-eminent contemporary novelist." The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Sacha Molitorisz says "Dizzying in its ambitions and intensity, *Dead Europe* is an impressive achievement."

Tsiolkas comes across in interviews and discussions as sincere and serious. It seems, however, that he operates in an artistic milieu in which self-criticism isn't encouraged. It would be detrimental to his development as a serious writer if he were to unquestioningly accept the publicity and the praise heaped upon him for this novel.



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