

# Did Western Civilization Survive the 20<sup>th</sup> Century? \_\_\_\_\_

—Alan Charles Kors\_\_\_\_\_

THE VERY FACT that the question posed above might reasonably be asked is in itself alarming, though it should not be. The West, in its various incarnations, has feared the end of its own civilization almost from the beginning. We do ourselves and our civilization a great disservice if we imagine ourselves the unhappiest of souls at the unhappiest of times, or as the last bearers of the Western torch.

Imagine the question of the end of something akin to Western civilization being posed when Athens fell; or when Christian Rome was sacked by barbarians; or when the Norsemen ravaged settled Europe; or when feudal warlords reigned unchecked; or when the Black Death left soul and society without mooring. Imagine the question posed by critics of the papacy, when visiting the decadence and bad faith of fourteenth-century Rome, or by Catholic apologists when they saw Western Christendom rent first in two and then into a multitude of competing sects. Imagine the question posed during the religious civil wars, or, indeed, during the devastation of the Thirty Years War,

when Europe became a charnel house of competing militant creeds and dynastic interests; or during the Terror, the decades of Revolutionary and then Napoleonic Wars. Coming closer to our own time, imagine the question posed on the slaughterfields of World War I, or at Auschwitz or in the Gulag. The West is resilient beyond all seeming possibility, and something gives it that resiliency. The West has survived its barbarians without and, more dreadful yet, its own barbaric offspring within. If it could outlast Attila the Hun, Julius Streicher and Michael Suslov, it surely can outlast Jacques Derrida, Stanley Fish and the Friends of Bill.

At each moment of seeming dissolution, there have been diverse Jeremiahs, profound voices who in rightful lamentation analyze compellingly the depths to which we have fallen, the irretrievable loss of something vital—and yet the West has survived. It has been a matter of mind and spirit. Greece fell, but its philosophers conquered the minds of those who conquered its soil, and, indeed, its muses touched consciousness and sensibility wherever its language became accessible. It fell, but when the human bearers of Christian revelation sought a human voice of natural philosophy by which to explain, justify and elaborate upon their beliefs, they found it, almost despite themselves, in Greece—first in Platonic and neo-Platonic philosophers, later in

---

Alan Charles Kors is professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. He is editor-in-chief of the *Oxford Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, and co-author of *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (HarperCollins, 1999).