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difficulty in identifying moments when humanity swings out of its old paths on to a new plane, when it leaves the marked-out route and turns off in a new direction. One such time was the great social and intellectual upheaval at the turn of the eleventh and twelfth centuries which we so inadequately call the Investiture Controversy; another, it is usually agreed, was the period of the Renaissance and Reformation. The first half of the twentieth century has all the marks of a similar period of revolutionary change and crisis. Here, again, we are led to one of the central problems in the writing of history - the problem of periodization - and it would take us too far to discuss the theoretical issues it raises. But if we view the fifty or sixty years beginning around 1890 from this standpoint, it is difficult to avoid certain important corollaries. The first is that the twentieth century cannot be regarded simply as a continuation of the nineteenth century, that 'recent' or 'contemporary' history is not merely the latter end of what we call 'modern history', the most recent phase of a period which, according to conventional divisions, began in western Europe with the Renaissance and the Reformation. And if this is true, it would seem to follow that the standards of measurement we apply to contemporary history should be different from those applied to earlier ages. What we should look out for as significant are the differences rather than the similarities, the elements of discontinuity rather than the elements of continuity. In short, contemporary history should be considered as a distinct period of time, with characteristics of its own which mark it off from the preceding period, in much the same way as what we call 'medieval history' is marked off - at any rate for most historians - from modern history.

If these propositions have any degree of validity, it would seem reasonable to conclude that one of the first tasks of historians concerned with recent history should be to establish its distinguishing features and its boundaries. In doing so we must, of course, beware of false dichotomies.

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(That applies to all historical work); we must remember that all sorts of things last over from one period to another, just as all sorts of things regarded as 'typically medieval' persisted into Elizabethan England; and we should not expect to assign fixed dates to changes which, in the last analysis, are only changes in balance and perspective. But it still remains true that unless we keep our eyes alert for what is new and different, we shall all too easily miss the essential - namely, the sense of living in a new period. Only when we have the real gulf between the two periods fixed in our minds can we start building bridges across it.

It goes without saying that we can only consider contemporary history in this way when we are clear what we mean by the term 'contemporary'. The study of contemporary history has undoubtedly suffered because of the vagueness of its content and the haziness of its limits. The word 'contemporary' inevitably means different things to different people; what is contemporary for me will not necessarily be contemporary for you. It is still possible to meet people who have conversed with Bismarck, and (to mention but one personal recollection) my old colleague in Cambridge, G. G. Coulton, who died in 1947, was a schoolboy in France before the Franco-Prussian war, and still possessed his school uniform with képi and baggy pantaloons trousers - a diminutive version of the uniform of the French infantryman of the day - which he got out of stores for my eldest son to try on. On the other hand, there is already a generation in existence for which Hitler is as much an historical figure as Napoleon was for Bismarck. In short, 'contemporary' history is not always, and to say - as is often done - that the history of the past three centuries is an unsatisfactory definition of history is not necessarily correct.


Coulton was in his three terms in St Omer in Fourscore Years (Cambridge, 1947); it was in 1886-9.
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Twentieth century with different priorities from ours. Born into a world in which — as all present indications suggest — the major questions will not be European questions but the relationships between Europe, including Russia, and America and the peoples of Asia and Africa, they will find little relevance in many of the topics which engrossed the attention of the last generation. The study of contemporary history requires new perspectives and a new scale of values. We shall find more clues, for example, in Nkrumah's autobiography than in Eden’s memoirs, more points of contact in the world of Mao and Nehru than in that of Coolidge and Baldwin: and it is important to remember that, while Mussolini and Hitler were prancing and posturing at the centre of the European stage, changes were going on in the wider world which contributed more fundamentally than they did to the shape of things to come. The tendency of historians to dwell on those aspects of the history of the period which have their roots in the old world sometimes seems to hamper rather than to further our understanding of the forces of change. Here we shall try to strike a different balance. We shall not forget that the end of one epoch and the birth of another were events happening simultaneously within the same contracting world; but it is with the new epoch growing to maturity in the shadow of the old that we shall be primarily concerned.

Every day that passes brings new indications that the long period of transition with which this book is primarily concerned has ended, and that the events of the very recent past belong to a new and unsurveyable phase of history. For that reason no attempt will be made to deal with this here, still less to forecast the shape of things to come. This does not mean that I am unaware that many areas of the world have more to be said about them — but it does mean that the point —

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roughly the end of the fifties — I have taken as a terminus; it means only that as yet they are hardly ready for historical appraisal. The sort of writing which attempts to wring the last ounce of meaning out of developments such as the ideological conflict between China and the U.S.S.R. or the political instability of newly emancipated Africa oversteps the limits of historical analysis; the range of possibilities is still so great that any attempt to discuss them is bound to be hypothetical and speculative.

If we wish to mark the opening of this new period — which is, of course, the period of 'contemporary' history in the strict sense of the word — the end of 1960 or the beginning of 1961 is as good a date as any and it is tempting to take the start of the Kennedy administration in the United States as a convenient point for registering the break. This was the first occasion on which decision-making at the highest level passed into the hands of a generation which had not been involved in politics before 1959 and which was not conditioned — in the way, for example, that Sir Anthony Eden’s reactions had been conditioned in 1956 — by 'pre-war' attitudes and experience. Nevertheless it would be a mistake to pay too much attention to the personal factor. It was rather a question of cumulative trends which came to a head around the time of Kennedy’s accession to power, and so far as his administration registered a change, it would be wise to regard it as a reflection rather than as a cause of a new situation. By the end of 1960 it was clear that the world had been taking shape since the end of 1957, had reached the stage of crisis in the same time, in every quarter of the globe. The problems that had emerged which had shown some connexion with the problems of the immediate transition.

I am ready by singling out the 'sparking-point' in modern Asian history, it is easy to see if international politics were operating in a new context. The 'cold war', which had been of great interest, The New States of Asia (London, 1965), p. 75.
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A world of great regional blocks seemed to be arising, different in almost all its preconditions from the world of nation-states of thirty or forty years earlier— a world in which communism and capitalism would figure more as alternative systems than as conflicting ideologies, and in which the great overriding issues, from which no one could contract out, would be the problems of poverty, backwardness, and overpopulation.

It is none of our business to try to depict the lines of development of this new world or the probable impact of other more fundamental changes. There is every likelihood that atomic energy, electronics, and automation will affect our lives even more fundamentally than the industrial revolution and the scientific changes at the close of the nineteenth century. As yet, however, we cannot hope to measure their impact and it would be unprofitable to attempt to do so. But it is only necessary to compare the world situation at mid-century and the world situation today to realize that we have crossed the threshold of a new age. In 1949, for example, the expansion of communism into China and eastern Europe could still be thought of as a temporary, reversible advance; when Dulles died ten years later it was clear that it was there to stay, and the hope of forcing it back, which was a dominant theme of the period from 1947 to 1958, had given way to speculation on the possibility of evolution within the communist world as the basis for a modus vivendi.

Such changes were more than superficial. They marked the starting-point of new lines of development leading into a new era. When communism, which down to 1959 had been confined as a political system to one country and to about eight per cent of the world’s inhabitants, became the political system of almost one-third of the population of the globe, and when capitalism, which between the wars had directly or indirectly controlled nine-tenths of the world’s surface, was reduced by the rapid expanding bloc to a minority position in the world as a whole and in

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the United Nations—which was the case by 1960—the old political framework was irretrievably shattered. It was not that the new ideas triumphed—for the most part they did not—but rather that the sheer attrition of events made it necessary to come to terms with new circumstances. Even then, of course, there was a residue of problems left over from the old world. But the balance had changed and the order of priorities was no longer the same. Nothing is more noticeable around 1958 than the liquidation of what, up to that time, had been regarded as the essential problems of the twentieth century. By comparison with the insistent problems of over-population and under-development in Asia and Africa, issues such as German unification fell into the background, and the permanence of the Oder-Neisse frontier was tacitly accepted. In this respect, as in many others, the new world seemed to be moving in directions almost the contrary of the old. The problems anchored in the European past were losing urgency, the values of the age of European nationalism were crumbling, and the focus of interest had passed from the Atlantic, where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization had become an almost meaningless survival, to the Pacific. In 1959 Asia and Africa had been continents at the end of colonialism; a decade later they had passed into the post-colonial age, and with the end of colonialism a new phase of world history had begun.

Whether this new phase represents a step back or not, of course, the relevant point. Many of the expectations bound up with the ending of the cold war were extravagant and unlikely to be realized, a long series of coups, beginning with the coup in Pakistan in 1958 and continuing particularly in the upheavals in Nigeria and Ghana.

At the end of 1962 Adlai Stevenson admitted that, due to the division of the world into two new countries, the United States and the western bloc, the world had come into control the United Nations; cf. R. R. Palmer, The United States in World Affairs, 1960 (New York, 1961),