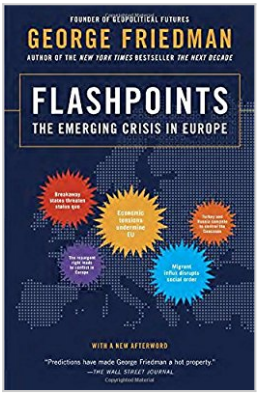

Flashpoints: The Emerging Crisis in Europe

By George Friedman

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New York Times bestselling author and geopolitical forecaster George Friedman delivers a fascinating portrait of modern-day Europe, with special focus on significant political, cultural, and geographical flashpoints where the conflicts of the past are smoldering once again.

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Editorial Review

Review
“There is a temptation, when you are around George Friedman, to treat him like a Magic 8-Ball.” —*The New York Times Magazine*

“In *Flashpoints*, Friedman combines analysis with prophecy. . . . Some personal biography woven into poignant narratives helps reveal how geography and history have always shaped Europe’s future.” —*Winnipeg Free Press*

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“Considering how right [Friedman’s] been over the years, he’s worth listening to.” —*San Antonio Express-News*

“Insightful. . . . Friedman vividly describes a region where memories are long, perceived vulnerabilities are everywhere, and major threats have emerged rapidly and unexpectedly many times before.” —*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author
GEORGE FRIEDMAN is founder and chairman of Geopolitical Futures, which specializes in geopolitical forecasting. Prior to this Friedman was chairman of the global intelligence company Stratfor, which he founded in 1996. Friedman is the author of six books, including the *New York Times* bestsellers *The Next Decade* and *The Next 100 Years.* He lives in Austin, Texas.

1

A European Life

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 the journey was Vienna. We were escaping the communists. There were four of us: my father, Emil, thirty-seven, my mother, Friderika, known as Dusi, thirty-five, my sister Agnes, eleven, and me, age six months. There was also a smuggler, whose name and provenance have been lost to us, deliberately, I think, as our parents regarded the truth of such things as potentially deadly and protected us from it at all costs.

We had come from Budapest by train to the Hungarian village of Almasfuzito, on the Danube northwest of the capital. Budapest, where my sister and I were born. My parents had migrated there with their families, met, fallen in love, and then were sucked into the abyss of Europe in the first half of the twentieth century. My mother was born in 1914 in a town near Bratislava, then called Pozsony and part of Hungary, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My father was born in the town of Nyirbator in eastern Hungary in 1912.

They were born just before World War I. In 1918, the war ended and the structure of Europe cracked, wrecked by that war. Four imperial houses—the Ottomans, Hapsburgs, Hohenzollerns, and Romanovs—fell, and everything that had been solid between the Baltic Sea and Black Sea was in flux. Wars, revolutions, and diplomacy redrew the map of the region, inventing some countries and suppressing others. Munkács, the town my father’s father came from, was now in Ukraine, part of the Soviet Union. Pozsony was now called

Bratislava, a city now part of a newly invented country fusing the Czechs and Slovaks.

My parents were Jews and for them the movement of borders was like the coming of weather. Pleasant or unpleasant, it was to be expected. There was something interesting about Hungarian Jews: they spoke Hungarian. The rest of the Jews in the east of Europe spoke Yiddish, fusing German with several other languages. Yiddish used the Hebrew alphabet, to further confuse matters. Yiddish-speaking Jews did not tend to see themselves as part of the countries in which they lived, and their hosts generally agreed, usually emphatically. Geography was a convenience, not something that defined them. Using Yiddish as their primary tongue represented their tenuous connection to their society, something that was both resented and encouraged by those with whom they lived.

But generally speaking, Hungarian Jews used Hungarian as their only language. It was my sister's and my first language. Some, such as my father, knew Yiddish as a second language, but my mother didn't know Yiddish at all. Their mother tongue was Hungarian, and when the borders shifted, my mother's family, all twelve of them supported by her father, who was a tailor, moved south to Budapest. In the same period the rest of my father's family moved west, out of what had become Ukraine, and into what was left of Hungary after the war. The point is that while the normal anti-Semitism of Europe flourished in Hungary as well, there was nonetheless a more intimate connection between Hungary and its Jews, far from simple or easy, but still there.

Hungary in the interwar period was not an unpleasant place—once the chaos of a communist regime followed by an anticommunist regime was completed to the usual European accompaniment of slaughter. Independent for the first time in centuries, it was governed by an admiral of a navy that no longer existed, who was regent to a nonexistent king. Miklós Horthy should have had as his family motto "Go with the Flow." The flow in Hungary in the 1920s and part of the 1930s was liberal, but not immoderately. This meant that my father, a country boy from the east, could move to Budapest, learn the printing trade, and open a print shop by the time he was twenty years old. For this time and place that was extraordinary, but it was an extraordinary time. Deep into the 1930s it was possible to believe that World War I had so chastened Europe that its darker instincts had been purged.

But demons are not so easy to purge. World War I had settled nothing. The war was fought over the status of Germany, which ever since its unification in 1871 had thrown the balance and stability of Europe into chaos. A powerful and wealthy nation had been created, but it was also a desperately insecure nation. Caught between France and Russia, with Britain subtly manipulating all players, Germany knew it could never survive a simultaneous attack from both sides. Germany also knew that both France and Russia were sufficiently afraid of it that a simultaneous attack could not be discounted. Thus, Germany's strategy had to be to defeat first one and then mass its forces to defeat the other. In 1914 Germany had tried to implement this strategy but instead had lost.

My grandfather fought in World War I, a soldier in the Austro-Hungarian army. He fought on the Russian front, leaving my father at the age of two. He returned from the war, but like so many others, he returned broken in spirit and body. Those whom the war didn't kill, it twisted into men utterly unlike those who had left home. He died shortly after coming home, possibly of tuberculosis.

Rather than settling Germany's status, World War I simply coupled geopolitical fear with ideological rage. Germany's defeat was explained as being a result of treachery. And if there was treachery, then someone had been treacherous. It was a complex plot, but Germany settled on the Jews as the malevolent conspirators, a decision that had particular implications for my family.

Geopolitically, Hitler's desire to secure German interests meant that the "flow" Horthy now had to "go with" came from Berlin. Ideologically, my parents now found themselves the major threat to the German nation. For a Jew living in Hungary it had not been a bad deal to this point. But it was now becoming a terrible one.

This left my parents with a choice that had been facing Europeans for over a century—staying or going to America. My mother's sister lived in New York. I never knew how they did it, but somehow my parents managed to obtain visas to the United States in 1938. A visa like this was worth more than gold. For those who could see what was coming, it was life itself.

My father was a clever man, but he did not see what was coming. He had grown up with anti-Semites, and he knew the beatings and abuse that involved. By 1938 he had a profitable printing business in Budapest. To give that up and start over in a country whose language he could not speak was not something he was eager to do. The geopolitical reality demanded that he find an exit from the European madhouse. His personal needs dictated that he stay and tough it out. By the time it became clear that this was not your daddy's anti--Semitism, it was too late.

The result for my family was catastrophic. In Hungary, Horthy protected the nation by submitting to the German will. Hungary remained internally free so long as it cooperated with German adventures. Having defeated France in a six-week campaign, Germany now turned its attention to the Soviet Union, confidently expecting a rapid victory. Horthy, going with the flow, committed Hungary's army to the war, expecting as a reward to have returned to it the regions my family had to flee after World War I. But for the reward to be permanent, there had to be blood. Horthy understood this.

My father was conscripted into the Hungarian army. At first he was simply a soldier. But if the Hungarians were to fight alongside Germans, it was clear that Jews could not simply be soldiers. My father was transferred with other Jews to labor battalions whose assignment was, for example, to clear minefields the old-fashioned way, by walking through them. All soldiers were expected to be willing to die. Those in the labor battalions were expected to die. Horthy was no more of an anti-Semite than good manners required, and this was not something he may have wanted himself, but his duty was to preserve an independent Hungary, and if putting Jews into labor battalions was what was needed, he was going to do what was needed.

For my father and many of the men in my family, that meant a march from Hungary's eastern border through the Carpathians, toward Kursk and Kiev, all the way to the River Don, to a place called Voronezh. Most of the men in my family were dead by then, but so were many regular army troops. The Soviet Union only seemed weak. Its strength was discovered in the fall of 1942, when the Soviets, having massed enormous forces east of the Don, counterattacked against the German Sixth Army, which had taken most of the city of Stalingrad. Germany's goal was to choke off the approaches to the Caucasus, because on the other side of the Caucasus was the city of Baku, where the Swedish Nobel brothers had discovered and exploited a massive pool of oil in the late nineteenth century. Baku was still the source of most of the Soviets' oil, and Hitler wanted desperately to take it from them. The Germans knew that if they took Stalingrad and the land between the Don and Volga Rivers, Baku was theirs and the war was over.

However, the Soviets did not counterattack in Stalingrad. Instead they attacked to the north and to the south, enveloping the German Sixth Army and starving it into surrender and annihilation. My father's problem was that the Soviets' northern thrust was aimed directly at him—they knew that Germany's allies were the weak link. By the winter of 1942 the Germans depended on Italian, Romanian, Hungarian, and other allies who did not want to die for Hitler's historical vision of a Greater Germany. Therefore, when the Soviets launched their attack with massive barrages, the Hungarians broke ranks willingly. My father told me of the feared "Stalin Organ," a multiple-launch rocket system that could launch a dozen rockets from a battery, all landing within seconds of each other. Those rockets haunted his dreams for the rest of his life.

Then began the long retreat of the Hungarians from Voronezh to Budapest, a distance of over a thousand miles through the Russian winter of 1942–43. The death toll was appalling, but the Jewish death toll was almost total. My father walked back through the snows without winter clothing, without food beyond what he could scavenge, and with the knowledge that encountering German SS troops to the rear meant certain

death. He explained his survival in three ways. First, he imagined his daughter, my sister, a few meters ahead of him. He was always going to pick her up. Second, city boys were soft. He was a farm boy, hardened from birth. Finally, it was luck. Enormous luck.

Hitler needed Baku. If he was to defeat the Soviets, Baku was a geopolitical necessity. It was no accident that the Germans had to take Stalingrad and no accident that the Soviets couldn't let them. It was not accidental that Germany's allies were on the flanks and not in the center, nor was it accidental that the Soviet offensive focused on them. It was not accidental that my father was at ground zero, because wherever the Hungarians were was to be ground zero, and wherever the Hungarians were, the Jews would be the most exposed. What was accidental was that my father survived. Impersonal forces define the larger pieces of history. It is the small things, the precious things, that are defined by will, character, and mere chance.

When my father finally reached his home in Budapest in 1943, Hungary still retained its sovereignty from Germany. Sovereignty matters. It meant that while Hungarian foreign policy was shaped by the power of Germany, there was some space, small and decreasing, for Hungary to govern itself. For the Jews it meant that while conditions were extraordinarily difficult, more difficult than for other Hungarians, who also were facing deep problems, they were not confronted by the full fury of Germany's anti-Semitism. My mother and sister were alive, and even the print shop still functioned in a way. They had a place to live and food to eat. Horthy was able to preserve that. Perhaps he could have done more, but perhaps trying would have brought the full fury of the Nazis to bear much earlier than occurred. In Europe at this time, retaining a space for Jews to survive, however precariously, was no small achievement for Horthy, or a trivial matter for my family. It was very different living in a sovereign Hungary than in occupied Poland. The sovereign nation--state could and did make the difference between life and death. I judge a man like Horthy not by the good he might have done, but by the evil that he did not commit and others did. It could have been much worse in Hungary, and much earlier. Others have judged him more harshly, my father and mother much less so. The argument still rages, but what is clear is that at the time, what he did was a matter of life and death. He, like the rest, was caught in the grip of European history gone mad, with few choices, all bad.

This was apparent when, in 1944, following his policy of going with the flow, Horthy opened secret negotiations with the Soviets over switching sides in a war that Germany was going to lose. German intelligence detected this, and Hitler summoned him to a meeting, where he threatened to occupy Hungary and demanded the deportation of Hungary's Jews, nearly a million. Horthy conceded the deportation of 100,000. In Europe at that time, this was what humanitarianism had degenerated into. A man who collaborated in killing only 100,000 but kept perhaps 800,000 others alive a bit longer was doing the best that could have been expected of him. In due course the Germans took Hungary over, and even that little was impossible. The flow of history that Horthy went with had overwhelmed Hungary. The truth was that Horthy was finished, that the fate of Hungary would now be determined by Hitler and the Hungarian fascists, and my family, along with Horthy, had run out of time.

Adolf Eichmann was sent to Hungary to oversee the "final solution" in the largest still-existing community of Jews in Europe. In the midst of a desperate war that Germany was losing, scarce manpower and transport facilities were diverted to move hundreds of thousands of Hungarian Jews north to Auschwitz and other camps, to be exterminated.

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