

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Europe *in a Hurry*

How one crowded peninsula shaped the world

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The Whole Thing in One Page

Europe looks obvious on a school map. It is not. In the west, north and south, seas make the edges easy. In the east, Europe runs into Asia across one continuous landmass, and every familiar dividing line, from the Urals to the Caucasus and Turkish straits, is a convention. Europe is less a natural container than a historical argument about who belongs inside it.

Yet the argument produced something unusually consequential. Europe packed many peoples, ports, courts, churches, cities and states into a small, well-connected space. Political unity repeatedly failed, but isolation failed too. Armies crossed frontiers. Merchants ignored them. Clerics, scholars, migrants, refugees and printers carried ideas across them. Roman law and Christianity created shared languages of authority. Byzantium preserved an eastern Roman world. Islamic societies around the Mediterranean transmitted and extended mathematics, medicine, philosophy and commerce. Slavic, Baltic, Jewish, Ottoman and steppe histories were part of Europe's formation, not scenery beyond a western core.

That density created both opportunity and danger. Rulers competed for soldiers, taxes, credit, ships, craftsmen and knowledge. Cities bargained for privileges. Merchants learned to work across jurisdictions. Universities and printers moved ideas faster than rulers could contain them. Competition sometimes rewarded experimentation, but it also rewarded conquest. The same Europe that multiplied institutions and rival centres of power multiplied war.

From the fifteenth century, Atlantic states pushed that rivalry across oceans. European power grew through navigation, gunnery and finance, but also through American disease catastrophes, alliances with local enemies, plantation slavery, coerced labour, colonial monopolies and access to land and resources outside Europe. Industrialisation then changed the scale again. Coal, machines, capital, empire and disciplined factory labour allowed parts of Europe, beginning with Britain, to command quantities of energy and production that agrarian economies could not match.

Nationalism converted subjects into mass political populations and states into machines capable of schooling, taxing, conscripting and mobilising millions. That power made welfare states and mass democracy possible. It also helped make the two world wars possible. Europe's own instruments of administration, science, transport and industry were recruited into dictatorship, total war and genocide.

After 1945, western Europeans tried something new. They did not abolish states. They made certain forms of rivalry harder by binding states into institutions, markets and law, under an American security umbrella and beside a Soviet bloc that organised eastern Europe by coercion. The Cold War ended, the European Union expanded, borders opened, and old questions returned in new forms. The EU now has 27 members, but Europe is larger than the EU. The euro, Schengen, NATO and the Council of Europe all draw different maps. Russia's war against Ukraine has made the question of where Europe ends and what membership means brutally current again.

Europe shaped the world because it never became one thing. Its power came from a volatile combination of connection and division, borrowing and rivalry, extraction and invention. Its modern institutions are an attempt to keep the connection while disciplining the rivalry. Whether that bargain can hold is still open.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

Stand on the bridge between Strasbourg in France and Kehl in Germany and a tram crosses the Rhine as part of an ordinary urban route. The river once marked one of Europe's most fought-over frontiers. Alsace changed hands repeatedly between French and German states. In 1870, 1914 and 1939, the region sat inside conflicts that drew millions of men into war. Since 2017, a passenger has been able to ride across the same river on a local ticket.

That tram is not evidence that history ended. It is evidence that institutions can change what a border does. The line remains. Laws, languages and elections still differ on either side. But the cost of crossing has been reduced so far that most days nobody thinks about it. Europe's modern experiment is full of such quiet engineering: common product rules, mutual recognition, courts, passport-free travel across much of the continent, shared currencies for some countries, and thousands of technical agreements that turn former strategic frontiers into administrative seams.

The scale matters. The European Union had 27 member states and an estimated 452.0 million people on 1 January 2026. Twenty-one EU countries use the euro after Bulgaria joined the currency on 1 January 2026. The Schengen area contains 29 countries, including four that are not in the EU. The Council of Europe, a separate human-rights organisation, has 46 member states. NATO has yet another map. These memberships show there is no single institutional definition of Europe.

That would be a curiosity if Europe had remained a regional story. It did not. European empires redrew borders on every inhabited continent. European languages became world languages. European legal forms, universities, corporations, nation-states, industrial methods and political ideologies travelled with trade, conquest, migration and imitation. Capitalism, socialism, liberalism, nationalism and fascism all took recognisably modern form in Europe, though none can be understood as a sealed European invention. The twentieth century's two world wars began as European conflicts and became global catastrophes. The post-1945 international order was built partly to stop Europe doing that again.

The more uncomfortable reason to care is that Europe offers no tidy moral lesson. Its political fragmentation helped create room for bargaining, mobility and institutional competition, but the same fragmentation produced centuries of war. Its cities could be unusually autonomous while countryside labourers remained poor and constrained. Its states developed sophisticated law and finance while building slave economies overseas. Its Enlightenment language of universal rights coexisted with racial hierarchy

and imperial rule. Its national movements could liberate populations from empires and then exclude minorities inside the new nation.

That contradiction is more useful than a triumphal story or a guilt catalogue. Europe matters because it shows how the same capacities can generate opposite outcomes. Administrative power can vaccinate a population or deport one. Industrial capacity can raise living standards or mechanise war. National solidarity can sustain democracy or demand ethnic conformity. International institutions can reduce conflict without erasing the identities that once fed it.

The present keeps the questions open. The United Kingdom left the EU on 31 January 2020. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine began on 24 February 2022. Finland joined NATO in 2023 and Sweden in 2024, ending long traditions of military non-alignment. Ukraine's EU accession process moved into opened negotiation clusters in 2026 while the war continued. These are not side stories to an otherwise settled continent. They are the latest version of the old European argument about borders, security, sovereignty and belonging.

By the end of this hour, the map should look less obvious and more intelligible. Europe is not a civilisation moving in a straight line from Greece to Brussels. It is a crowded zone in which inherited institutions, outside influences, competitive states, empires, energy systems and mass politics repeatedly recombined. Once you can see that machinery, the continent stops looking like a list of countries and starts looking like a system.

The Core Ideas

1. A peninsula of peninsulas, with no final edge

Europe's first problem is geographical: it is easy to recognise and difficult to define.

The western half looks like a continent because water cuts it into a remarkable set of shapes. The Iberian, Italian, Balkan and Scandinavian

peninsulas project into seas. Britain, Ireland, Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, Crete and thousands of smaller islands sit close enough to continental coasts to trade, raid and migrate across them. The Mediterranean, North Sea, Baltic and Black Sea are barriers when storms or hostile fleets intervene, but roads when ships can move safely. Major rivers such as the Rhine, Danube, Elbe, Vistula, Dnieper and Volga connect interiors to wider commercial and political zones.

This geography did not mechanically create political fragmentation, but it made durable continent-wide rule hard. Rome came closest in antiquity, yet even Rome never absorbed the far north and much of the east. Medieval empires overlapped with kingdoms, city-republics, principalities, bishoprics and leagues. The Habsburgs assembled a dynastic patchwork rather than a uniform state. Napoleon dominated much of the continent for a few years. Nazi Germany conquered widely and catastrophically. Soviet power controlled an eastern bloc after 1945 without absorbing western Europe. No project produced a lasting government of the whole continent.

The failure of unity mattered because Europe was too connected for the pieces to develop separately. Italian bankers financed northern rulers. Flemish cloth depended on English wool. Baltic grain fed western cities. The Danube carried people and goods through German, Hungarian, Ottoman and Balkan worlds. Genoese merchants worked in the Black Sea. Jewish communities linked distant markets and intellectual centres while living under shifting regimes of toleration and persecution. Migrants moved into towns, armies and frontier zones. Ideas crossed borders with monks, diplomats, students, exiles and merchants.

The east exposes the weakness of the map. Europe and Asia form one landmass. The Ural Mountains are modest compared with the Alps or Himalayas, and the usual Europe-Asia line was standardised late. Russia can be described as European, Asian or Eurasian depending on the question. Turkey is geographically divided by the straits but historically bound to the Balkans, Mediterranean and Middle East. The Caucasus can be placed on either side by different conventions. Even Cyprus, politically

inside the EU, lies east of much of Anatolia.

So the useful unit is not a continent sealed by nature. It is a dense historical zone with fuzzy edges. That helps prevent two recurring mistakes. One is treating western Europe as the continent and adding the east later. The other is treating Europe's internal boundaries as permanent. Poland disappeared as a sovereign state for more than a century and returned. Germany and Italy became unified states only in the nineteenth century. Yugoslavia formed and dissolved in the twentieth. Czechoslovakia did both more peacefully. Borders that look inevitable on today's map are often younger than railways.

Europe's condition, then, was plurality under pressure from proximity. People could escape one ruler and meet another. Rulers could copy rivals. Wars could spread quickly. Markets could cross jurisdictions. Religions could divide populations without cleanly dividing space. That condition does not explain everything that follows, but it supplies the stage on which nearly everything happened.

2. Rome and Christianity supplied common grammars

Europe did not inherit one political system from Rome. It inherited a vocabulary of authority that later societies kept reusing.

The Roman Empire joined the Mediterranean and much of western and central Europe inside one immense political order. Roads, cities, taxation, military service, law and imperial administration connected regions on a scale Europe would not match again for centuries. Latin spread through the western provinces and later developed into the Romance languages. Roman citizenship became a status far beyond the city that created it. Roman law outlived Roman emperors in the west because later jurists, rulers and universities rediscovered, taught and adapted it.

But Rome did not fall once, everywhere. Western imperial government fragmented in the fifth century. The eastern empire, centred on Constantinople, survived for another thousand years and called itself

Roman. Modern labels such as Byzantine are useful, but they can hide continuity. Its emperors, church, law, diplomacy and Greek-speaking culture shaped the Balkans, eastern Mediterranean and Slavic worlds long after western Europeans had built new kingdoms on former Roman territory.

Christianity created another layer of connection. It began inside the Roman Empire and inherited much of its geography, but after western imperial rule disappeared the Latin Church became one of the few institutions operating across many kingdoms. Bishops, monasteries, canon law, pilgrimage and Latin literacy linked territories that had no common government. In the east, Orthodox Christianity grew through Constantinople and local churches, with Greek and Slavonic traditions rather than Latin ones. The missions associated with Cyril and Methodius helped create a Slavonic literary and liturgical world whose descendants remain central to eastern and southeastern Europe.

The split between Latin Catholic and Greek Orthodox Christianity was gradual, despite the conventional date of 1054. The Crusades deepened hostility, especially after western crusaders sacked Constantinople in 1204. Ottoman conquest later placed large Orthodox Christian populations under Muslim rule. The result was not a Christian Europe facing a wholly external Islam. Muslim-ruled Iberia, Sicily at different periods, Ottoman southeastern Europe, and long-lived Muslim communities in the Balkans were parts of European history. So were Jewish communities whose scholarship, trade, migration and persecution connected Christian and Islamic societies.

Rome and Christianity therefore gave Europe shared reference points without producing a single civilisation. Medieval rulers could claim Roman titles while fighting each other. Popes and emperors could invoke universal authority while bargaining with local powers. Orthodox and Catholic Christians shared scriptures while developing separate institutions and political worlds. Muslim rulers governed European territories for centuries. Legal systems mixed Roman concepts with customary law, royal law, church law and urban privilege.

That mixture mattered later. The idea that legitimate authority should be

written, argued, codified and justified had multiple sources, but Roman and Christian institutions gave Europe large stores of reusable concepts. So did their conflicts. Disputes over whether popes, emperors, kings, councils or communities possessed final authority made plural jurisdiction a normal condition. Europe's later constitutionalism did not emerge fully formed from medieval quarrels, but it grew in a world where power was often divided among institutions that claimed different kinds of legitimacy.

The inheritance was a grammar, not a constitution: laws, offices, churches, titles, languages and arguments that later Europeans could rearrange. That distinction is essential. A grammar can survive the death of the state that first used it.

3. Europe was porous before it was powerful

The old civilisational story runs westward: Greece invents, Rome preserves, medieval Europe sleeps, the Renaissance rediscovers, and modern Europe advances. The traffic was far messier.

Take the symbols on a calculator. Europeans call them Arabic numerals because they reached Latin Europe through Arabic-speaking scholarship. Their deeper origins lie in India. Paper was invented in China, spread through the Islamic world and entered Europe through multiple routes before European mills and printers made it cheap enough to transform administration and reading. Gunpowder also originated in China. The magnetic compass developed through Asian and Mediterranean histories that resist one clean line of invention. Greek philosophy survived partly because Byzantine scholars kept copying it and because Arabic-speaking thinkers translated, criticised and extended it.

Translation changed what it transmitted. Scholars working in Baghdad did not operate as a storage service for Europe. Figures such as al-Khwarizmi helped build algebra and mathematical methods. Ibn Sina's medical works became standard in European universities. Ibn Rushd's commentaries shaped Latin debates about Aristotle. Jewish scholars often worked between Arabic, Hebrew and Latin intellectual worlds. When texts moved

into Latin, they arrived with layers of interpretation produced elsewhere.

Commerce was just as entangled. Venice and Genoa traded deep into the eastern Mediterranean and Black Sea. Italian merchants bought spices, silk and other goods carried through Asian and Islamic networks. The Mongol empires, despite terrifying conquest, opened and secured long-distance routes across Eurasia for periods of time. The Black Death probably reached Europe through those same connected worlds in the fourteenth century, killing on a scale that shattered communities and labour systems. Connection brought wealth, knowledge and disease together.

The Ottoman Empire belongs inside this story. From the fourteenth century onward it became a major European power, ruling much of southeastern Europe and contesting central European territory with Habsburg rulers. Ottoman cities, ports, tax systems, armies and diplomatic relations were woven into continental politics. The Balkans were not waiting outside Europe until modern nation-states appeared. Muslim, Orthodox Christian, Catholic and Jewish populations lived under overlapping imperial arrangements that shaped later identities and conflicts.

Europe's porousness also worked through people moving under duress. Sephardic Jews expelled from Spain and Portugal found homes in Ottoman cities and elsewhere. French Protestants fled after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and carried skills into rival states. Religious refugees, mercenaries, artisans and merchants repeatedly moved knowledge across borders. States complained about losing useful people because useful people could leave.

The printing press illustrates the mechanism. Movable-type printing in Europe is associated with Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-fifteenth century, but paper, ink, metallurgy, alphabetic scripts, urban markets and commercial credit all predated his press. What became transformative was the combination. Printers could reproduce texts faster and more cheaply than manuscript copying. Because Europe contained many jurisdictions, censorship in one territory did not guarantee silence. A banned book could be printed elsewhere and smuggled back. Luther's arguments spread

through an existing commercial print system and then expanded it.

Europe's later power therefore cannot be explained by cultural self-sufficiency. It became strong partly because it was open to useful things from elsewhere and because its internal divisions gave those things multiple points of entry. Borrowing was not a prelude to invention. It was one of the mechanisms of invention.

4. Competition rewarded adaptation and coercion

Europe's political plurality became unusually consequential when states learned to extract more money, field larger forces and borrow at lower cost.

War was expensive. A medieval king could summon obligations from nobles and hire troops for limited campaigns. Early modern warfare demanded more. Fortifications designed to resist cannon cost heavily. Artillery, fleets, garrisons and permanent armies had to be supplied for long periods. Governments that could tax reliably, sell debt and persuade creditors that repayment would continue gained an advantage over governments that could not.

This is where commerce and coercion met. Italian city-states developed sophisticated public finance. The Dutch Republic combined merchant wealth, taxation and credit to survive against much larger rivals. England after the late seventeenth century built institutions that allowed the state to borrow extensively while Parliament authorised taxation. None of these systems was frictionless or democratic in the modern sense. Their importance was that political institutions could make military power financially durable.

Competition also operated below the level of states. Towns negotiated charters. Merchant groups demanded predictable rules. Universities sought privileges. Religious minorities sometimes moved to jurisdictions offering better terms, though toleration was uneven and often reversible. Skilled workers could be recruited by rival rulers. A prince who expelled productive subjects for religious reasons might strengthen a neighbour. A city that made trade too difficult could lose commerce to another port.

That mobility did not mean Europe was a free market of governments. Serfdom remained severe in much of central and eastern Europe long after it weakened in parts of the west. Guilds restricted entry. Religious persecution could be murderous. Peasants faced landlords, taxes and conscription. Many people could not move. Political competition often encouraged rulers to squeeze subjects harder, not treat them better.

The military side is equally double-edged. European states experimented with fortifications, drill, firearms, naval logistics and bureaucratic supply because defeat could be fatal. Successful methods were copied quickly. Yet the result was not peaceful innovation. The Thirty Years' War devastated large parts of central Europe. France's wars under Louis XIV consumed huge resources. Rival empires fought across oceans as well as within Europe. The ability to adapt militarily increased the capacity to kill.

The Peace of Westphalia in 1648 did not invent the sovereign state, despite the textbook myth. The treaties helped settle a particular set of wars and adjusted constitutional relations inside the Holy Roman Empire, but European politics remained full of dynastic claims, composite monarchies, empires, church jurisdictions and local privileges. The territorial nation-state arrived unevenly and much later.

Competition mattered most when joined to institutions that could absorb and reproduce change. Printers spread military manuals and scientific work. Academies and learned societies created networks of correspondence. States sponsored surveys, navigation and cartography. Merchants demanded better information about prices, routes and risk. The Scientific Revolution cannot be reduced to interstate rivalry, but it took place inside an environment where patrons, universities, courts, churches and cities overlapped enough that intellectual life had more than one centre.

This is the strongest case for Europe's fragmentation, and it needs its limit attached. China, the Ottoman Empire, Mughal India and other large states also produced sophisticated administration, technology and markets. Political scale does not determine creativity. Europe's competition became globally decisive only when other conditions arrived: Atlantic empires,

colonial resources, new energy sources, industrial technology and states capable of mobilising mass populations. Competition was an accelerator. It was not the fuel.

5. The Atlantic turned European rivalry into a world system

In 1492, Christopher Columbus reached Caribbean islands inhabited by societies with their own histories. Europeans later called the event a discovery because they wrote the maps that became globally dominant. For the people already there, it began something closer to invasion, epidemic and political collapse.

European overseas expansion did not begin with superior civilisation overwhelming passive societies. Portuguese sailors pushed down the African coast through accumulated knowledge of ships, winds, navigation and fortification. Spanish conquerors in the Americas benefited from steel weapons and horses, but their victories depended heavily on Indigenous allies and on epidemic diseases to which local populations had no inherited immunity. Hernán Cortés did not defeat the Mexica Empire with a few hundred Spaniards alone. He entered a political world already full of enemies, tributaries and rival powers.

What Europe gained was enormous. American silver entered Spanish imperial finances and global trade, flowing through Europe and onward to Asian markets. Plantation zones in the Caribbean and Americas produced sugar, tobacco, coffee and later cotton through coerced labour on a huge scale. European merchants and states built systems that transported millions of captive Africans across the Atlantic. Ports such as Liverpool, Nantes, Lisbon and Amsterdam connected manufacturing, shipping, insurance, finance and colonial commodities.

The relationship between empire and European development is contested because it resists a simple verdict. European states already possessed commercial and military capacities before overseas empires grew. Industrialisation cannot be explained as colonial plunder converted directly

into factories. Yet empire was not peripheral. Colonial land, slave labour, raw materials, markets and profits altered European economies and state power. Cotton is the clearest example: British textile industrialisation depended on a fibre increasingly produced by enslaved labour in the Americas, while mechanised spinning and weaving transformed British factories.

Empire also changed European knowledge. Botanical gardens classified plants gathered across colonies. Naval surveys mapped coasts. Museums filled with objects taken, bought or excavated abroad. Racial categories hardened through slavery, imperial administration and pseudo-scientific attempts to rank populations. European claims about universal civilisation developed beside systems built on legal inequality.

There is another consequence that often disappears inside national histories. Overseas empire externalised part of Europe's competition. France and Britain could fight in North America, the Caribbean, India and at sea. Iberian states extracted wealth from American territories. The Netherlands built a commercial empire through chartered companies and armed trade. Later, European powers partitioned much of Africa and expanded control across Asia and the Pacific. Rivalry that once concentrated on European frontiers acquired global battlefields and resource bases.

The costs also fell inside Europe. Imperial warfare taxed European populations. Sailors died in large numbers. Commodity booms could enrich one region while dislocating another. Returning colonial wealth shaped politics and inequality. Anti-colonial movements later forced European societies to confront the gap between the rights they claimed at home and the hierarchies they enforced abroad.

By the nineteenth century, European global power looked so dominant that contemporaries invented stories explaining it as the natural outcome of racial or cultural superiority. Those stories reversed cause and justification. Military and industrial power helped Europeans impose the classifications that declared their rule evidence of superiority. Empire then reproduced

those claims through schools, censuses, law and scholarship.

Atlantic expansion did not create Europe. It changed the scale on which European competition operated and supplied resources that mattered greatly to the industrial world that followed.

6. Coal, factories and nations mobilised society

For most of human history, economic output depended on the annual flow of energy from crops, wood, animals, wind and water. Industrialisation broke that constraint by tapping fossil energy stored over geological time.

Britain went first. The reasons remain debated, and no single explanation survives scrutiny. It had accessible coal near centres of demand, high wages in some sectors, expanding Atlantic commerce, property and financial institutions capable of funding investment, a large domestic market joined by coastal shipping, and an empire supplying raw materials and markets. Inventors improved steam engines because pumping water from coal mines and saving labour could pay. Textile machinery increased output. Iron, coal and steam began reinforcing one another.

The transformation was regional before it was European. Large parts of eastern and southern Europe remained overwhelmingly agrarian while Britain industrialised. Belgium followed early. Parts of France, Germany and northern Italy accelerated later. Railways then compressed distance, joined markets and gave states new military and administrative reach. Coalfields, ports and factory towns grew rapidly. So did smoke, sewage, dangerous machinery and labour discipline.

Industrialisation changed class relations as much as production. Workers who owned little beyond their labour became concentrated in towns and factories. Employers could control time with bells, shifts and clocks. Women and children worked in many industries under conditions later reformers attacked. Labour movements, mutual-aid societies and trade unions organised against employers and states. Socialist politics emerged from arguments about who owned capital, who received the gains from productivity and whether political equality meant much without economic

power.

Mass politics arrived through another mechanism: the nation. Older languages, kingdoms and local identities were real, but the modern nation expected millions of strangers to imagine themselves as one political people. States helped manufacture that intimacy. Schools standardised language and history. Conscription mixed regions. Newspapers produced common political time. Railways and post offices made capitals feel closer. Censuses sorted people into categories. Maps coloured territory as belonging to one state and therefore, increasingly, one nation.

Nationalism could attack empires from below. Greeks, Italians, Germans, Poles, Czechs, Serbs and others used national claims in different ways against dynastic and imperial orders. It could also be imposed from above, as governments tried to turn peasants who spoke dialects and identified locally into Frenchmen, Italians or Hungarians. Minorities complicated the project because language, religion and settlement did not fit clean territorial blocks.

The nineteenth-century state became stronger because industry, bureaucracy and nationalism fed each other. Railways moved troops. Factories produced weapons. Mass literacy made propaganda and administration easier. Tax systems penetrated society more deeply. Public health and schooling expanded state capacity. Wider franchises brought more men, and eventually women, into electoral politics. Welfare programmes began binding citizens to states through benefits as well as obligations.

European imperialism intensified at the same time. Industrial weapons and steam transport widened military asymmetries. European powers seized territory, demanded trade access and justified domination through racial doctrines and a language of civilisation. By 1900, European states controlled or heavily influenced extraordinary stretches of the world, yet their position was less secure than it looked. Industrialisation was spreading. The United States had become an economic giant. Japan had demonstrated that rapid state-led transformation could produce a non-European great power.

The most dangerous development was inside Europe. Industrial economies and mass national states could now mobilise millions of men, move them by rail, supply them with machine guns and artillery, finance years of war and persuade populations that sacrifice was national duty. The capacities that had made states richer and citizens more politically included also made continental war harder to limit.

7. Europe tried to disarm the machinery it had built

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 did not cause the First World War by itself. It triggered a crisis inside a system already loaded with alliances, arms races, imperial rivalries, military plans and nationalist fears. Governments still chose escalation. What made those choices catastrophic was the machine built during the previous century.

Rail timetables moved armies by the million. Industrial plants supplied shells, rifles and artillery. Mass taxation and borrowing kept states in the field. Newspapers and schools had helped turn populations into national publics that governments could mobilise. The war killed on an industrial scale and destroyed the German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman imperial orders. New or enlarged national states appeared across central and eastern Europe, but populations remained mixed. Borders did not solve identity.

The interwar settlement failed to stabilise the continent. Economic crisis, fear of communism, resentment of Versailles, political violence and weak democratic institutions created openings for authoritarian movements. Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany made dictatorship modern rather than archaic. Nazi rule then fused racial ideology with a powerful industrial state. The Holocaust was the systematic persecution and murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators. Railways, property records, police files, ministries, firms and technologies of mass administration helped turn persecution into continent-wide genocide. Millions of other people were also murdered by Nazi rule and warfare,

including Roma, disabled people, Soviet prisoners of war and civilians targeted across occupied Europe.

By 1945 Europe had disproved its own civilising mythology. Cities lay ruined. Tens of millions were dead across the wider war. Borders shifted again. Millions of people were expelled, displaced or returned under coercion. European empires weakened as anti-colonial movements demanded independence. The continent that had projected power outward was divided between two superpowers whose centres lay in Washington and Moscow.

Western integration emerged from that collapse. The European Coal and Steel Community, established by treaty in 1951, placed industries central to war inside a common framework among six states. The Treaties of Rome in 1957 created the European Economic Community. Integration expanded through markets, law, institutions and later a common currency. It worked because national governments saw benefits in it. Post-war growth, American security through NATO, fear of Soviet power, domestic welfare settlements and the memory of catastrophe all supported the process.

Eastern Europe followed another path. Communist governments under Soviet dominance transformed property, industry and politics. The Warsaw Pact formalised military alignment. Dissent survived, from Hungary in 1956 to Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland's Solidarity movement in the 1980s, but Soviet power sharply limited sovereignty. The Berlin Wall became the physical shorthand for a continent divided into rival systems.

The revolutions of 1989 and Soviet collapse in 1991 removed that division faster than most people expected. Germany reunified. Former communist states reoriented towards the EU and NATO. The EU's 2004 enlargement brought ten countries in at once, most from central and eastern Europe. Schengen removed routine internal border controls across much of the continent. The euro reduced monetary borders among participating states. For a time, integration appeared to have solved the old European security problem.

It had not abolished politics. The eurozone crisis exposed tensions between shared currency and national fiscal responsibility. Migration divided electorates. Brexit showed that membership could be reversed. Democratic backsliding in some states raised questions about whether common law could discipline national governments. Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 and full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 restored large-scale interstate war to Europe and pushed Finland and Sweden into NATO.

The loop now closes. Europe's original condition was dense connection without durable political unity. For centuries, that condition rewarded adaptation and made rivalry dangerous. The post-1945 order did not try to eliminate states or identities. It tried to bind their competition with law, markets, alliances and repeated negotiation. That system remains incomplete because Europe itself remains undefined. The EU has 27 members; the Council of Europe has 46; NATO reaches across the Atlantic; Ukraine is fighting a war while negotiating its European institutional future; Russia remains geographically and historically bound to Europe while politically at war with much of its post-Cold War order.

Europe's latest experiment is therefore not unity. It is controlled plurality. The continent that became powerful by competing is now testing how much competition can be governed without extinguishing the differences that made integration necessary in the first place.

How It Actually Works

Rome makes the first large European frame

The story begins before anyone thought of Europe as a political community. Greeks used the word Europe for part of the world they distinguished from Asia and Libya, but their boundaries shifted and the term carried little of its modern political meaning. Rome mattered more because it created the first durable institutional frame covering the Mediterranean and much of western and southern Europe.

By the second century CE, Roman rule connected Britain to North Africa

and Spain to Syria. The empire's centre of gravity was Mediterranean, not European in the modern sense. North Africa and the Levant were integral provinces. Germanic lands beyond the Rhine and Danube were partly outside. Yet the later European map inherited Roman roads, cities, church structures, legal memory and languages unevenly across the territories Rome had ruled.

From the third century, the empire faced civil wars, fiscal strain, frontier pressure and political division. Constantine founded Constantinople in 330. The empire was repeatedly governed in eastern and western halves. Western imperial authority fragmented during the fifth century as rulers, armies and federate groups created successor kingdoms. In 476, the deposition of Romulus Augustulus later became a neat date for the fall of Rome in the west, but the eastern Roman Empire continued.

The collapse was real where taxation, cities, long-distance exchange and central administration contracted. It was not a continent-wide switch into darkness. New kingdoms in Italy, Gaul, Iberia and Britain combined Roman practices with new ruling elites. Christianity survived the western political break and became more important as an organising institution.

Several medieval Europes grow together

Between roughly 500 and 1000, Europe contained several political worlds. The Byzantine Empire remained a sophisticated state centred on Constantinople. Islamic expansion from the seventh century transformed the Mediterranean, creating Muslim-ruled societies in Iberia and later Sicily while linking Europe to commercial and intellectual networks stretching across North Africa, the Middle East and beyond. In the north and west, Frankish rulers built a large kingdom. Charlemagne was crowned emperor in Rome in 800, an act that revived the western imperial title without recreating the Roman Empire.

Further east, Slavic-speaking societies formed states and Christian traditions in different directions. Poland and Hungary joined Latin Christianity. Kyivan Rus accepted Christianity from Byzantium in 988, linking

the eastern Slavic world to Orthodox traditions. Scandinavians raided, traded and settled from the North Atlantic to rivers leading towards the Black Sea and Caspian. Vikings were therefore both violent outsiders and participants in European state and trade formation.

After 1000, population, cultivation, towns and trade expanded in many regions. Latin Christian institutions became denser. The Holy Roman Empire developed across central Europe as a layered order of emperors, princes, bishops and cities. It was neither a modern German nation-state nor a meaningless relic. Its political complexity endured for centuries because local rights and imperial frameworks could coexist.

Most Europeans, however, did not live in courts or merchant houses. They lived from land, family labour and local rights that varied sharply by region. A village might owe rent, labour days and dues to a lord while also using common pasture and appearing before local courts. Town walls could mark legal as well as physical boundaries: a person entering a chartered town might encounter different taxes, markets and obligations. In western regions, urban growth and labour scarcity gradually weakened some forms of personal dependence. Farther east, powerful landowners later strengthened labour obligations on peasants supplying grain to western markets. Europe was becoming more commercially connected while social freedom diverged. That combination matters because trade integration did not produce one social model. It could enlarge a merchant's choices while narrowing a peasant's.

The Crusades from the late eleventh century joined religious zeal, aristocratic violence, pilgrimage and political ambition. Crusaders established states in the eastern Mediterranean, attacked Jewish communities in Europe and, in 1204, sacked Christian Constantinople. The event helps explain why a simple Christian-versus-Muslim map of medieval Europe fails. Confessional boundaries did not erase rivalries within Christianity.

Crisis makes labour and authority negotiable

The fourteenth century brought severe shocks. Famine struck parts of Europe. The Black Death arrived in the late 1340s and killed an enormous share of the population, though exact regional mortality remains uncertain. Labour became scarcer in many western regions, strengthening workers' bargaining power and weakening some forms of servile obligation. In parts of central and eastern Europe, landlords later tightened control over peasant labour instead. One demographic shock produced different institutional responses.

Political authority was also becoming more literate and fiscal. Kings relied increasingly on written administration, representative assemblies, taxes and professional law. Towns accumulated charters and commercial institutions. Italian city-states developed banking and public debt. The Hanseatic League linked merchants and ports around the Baltic and North Sea without becoming a territorial state.

The Renaissance emerged from this urban and commercial world, especially in Italian cities, through renewed engagement with classical texts, new artistic patronage and humanist scholarship. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 did not create the Renaissance, but Greek-speaking scholars and manuscripts contributed to western intellectual life. The Ottoman conquest also confirmed that southeastern Europe was being reorganised by a major Muslim empire whose capital was the former Roman one.

Around the same period, European printers adopted movable type on a commercial scale. Books became cheaper and more numerous. Printed maps, pamphlets and vernacular texts widened the audience for ideas. The technology did not make Europe tolerant. It made arguments easier to reproduce.

Reformation and ocean expansion break old limits

In 1517 Martin Luther challenged the sale of indulgences and broader church authority. Printing helped his arguments spread quickly. What followed was not one reform but a long fragmentation of western Christianity into rival confessions and churches. Rulers chose sides for theological, dynastic and political reasons. States and churches tried to discipline populations through schooling, worship and censorship. Religious wars culminated in the seventeenth century's central European catastrophes, especially the Thirty Years' War.

At the same time, Atlantic voyages transformed the scale of European politics. Portuguese fleets established routes around Africa into the Indian Ocean. Castile sponsored Columbus's 1492 voyage across the Atlantic. Spanish conquest destroyed major American empires with the help of local allies and epidemic disease. Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France and Britain built overseas systems with different combinations of settlement, plantation, trade, company rule and direct conquest.

Silver from the Americas entered global trade. Enslaved Africans were forced across the Atlantic in vast numbers. Sugar plantations turned tropical land and coerced labour into extraordinary wealth. European companies acquired quasi-state powers, including the ability to make war. The continent's rivalries now extended through Caribbean islands, Indian ports, African forts and North American colonies.

Within Europe, the Dutch Republic's seventeenth-century commercial power and Britain's later financial development showed how credit could reinforce state capacity. The balance of power became a habit: rulers allied against any power that looked capable of dominating the continent. The system did not produce peace. It made alliances fluid and prevented durable hegemony.

Revolutions turn subjects into citizens

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment criticised inherited authority using arguments about reason, rights, toleration and political economy. These ideas emerged inside societies still organised by monarchy, privilege, empire and slavery. The gap mattered.

The French Revolution opened that gap in 1789. The National Assembly abolished many legal privileges, issued the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, and reordered political legitimacy around the nation. Revolution then moved through constitutional experiment, war, republic, Terror and dictatorship. Napoleon spread new legal and administrative systems across much of Europe while ruling an empire built by conquest.

After his defeat in 1815, European rulers tried to restore order, but they could not restore the old political world intact. Liberalism and nationalism became durable movements. Revolutions in 1830 and 1848 challenged regimes across the continent. National unification transformed Italy and Germany. Older empires such as the Habsburg and Ottoman realms faced national claims from many directions.

Meanwhile industrialisation remade the material base of power. Steam engines multiplied the useful energy available from coal. Railways joined markets, towns and military logistics. Factory production concentrated workers and capital. Industrial cities grew faster than sanitation. Class politics sharpened. Marx and other socialists argued that political liberty without economic transformation left power with owners of capital.

By the late nineteenth century, governments were extending schooling, suffrage, public health, pensions and social insurance while also expanding police, conscription and colonial rule. Mass citizenship and mass administration developed together.

The timing remained uneven. Manchester, the Ruhr and Belgian coal districts belonged to an industrial Europe of mills, mines and rail junctions. Large parts of the Balkans, Iberia, southern Italy and the Russian Empire remained more rural and poorer. Seasonal workers and permanent migrants

moved towards cities, mines and overseas destinations. Millions of Europeans left for the Americas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Others moved within empires and across nearby borders. Europe's population growth therefore did not remain inside Europe, and industrialisation did not spread as a smooth wave from west to east. Regional gaps became political facts, feeding arguments over tariffs, land reform, socialism, emigration and national development.

Empire reaches its peak as Europe becomes most dangerous

European empires expanded dramatically in Africa and Asia during the nineteenth century. Industrial weapons, steam transport, financial capacity and medical advances widened asymmetries, but conquest still depended on local alliances, intermediaries and existing political divisions. The Berlin Conference of 1884 to 1885 regulated aspects of European claims in Africa without consulting African societies. On maps, European colours spread rapidly.

Inside Europe, the same period produced rigid alliances and arms races. Germany's unification altered the balance of power. Austria-Hungary struggled with competing national claims. Russia modernised unevenly while remaining an autocratic empire. France feared German power. Britain guarded sea power and empire. The Balkans became especially unstable as Ottoman authority receded and new states pursued overlapping territorial claims.

When crisis came in 1914, Europe's dense alliance system turned a Balkan assassination into a continental war and then a global one. The First World War broke empires, radicalised politics and left debts, grievances and new borders. The Russian Revolution created the Soviet Union and made communism both an alternative political model and a fear shaping European conservatives.

The Great Depression after 1929 weakened democratic systems. Mussolini's Italy had already established fascist dictatorship. Hitler's Nazi

movement took power in Germany in 1933, dismantled democracy, persecuted political enemies and Jews, rearmed, and pursued racial empire. The Second World War in Europe began with Germany's invasion of Poland in 1939. Occupation and collaboration varied by country. The Holocaust escalated from exclusion and dispossession to organised mass murder across the continent.

Europe ended the war physically devastated and morally discredited. Its empires soon faced accelerated decolonisation. The old great powers were no longer the world's dominant centres.

Two Europes rebuild under superpower pressure

After 1945, the United States and Soviet Union shaped Europe's security order. Western European governments rebuilt democracies and mixed economies under American security protection and, through the Marshall Plan, substantial US aid. Western welfare states expanded. Communist governments took power across eastern Europe under Soviet dominance, nationalising major sectors and suppressing political opposition.

The North Atlantic Treaty was signed in 1949. The Council of Europe was also founded that year as a separate organisation committed to democracy, human rights and the rule of law. Western economic integration then deepened. The Coal and Steel Community linked six states in 1951. The 1957 Treaties of Rome created the European Economic Community. The logic was practical as much as idealistic: larger markets, reconstruction, security and stronger national economies.

The Cold War line ran through Germany. The Berlin Wall, built in 1961, became its clearest symbol. Yet both halves of Europe changed profoundly. Southern European dictatorships in Greece, Portugal and Spain fell during the 1970s. Western societies became richer and more consumer-oriented. Migration from former colonies and recruited labour forces reshaped cities. Eastern bloc societies achieved mass education and industrialisation while enduring political repression, shortages and restricted movement.

Dissent accumulated. Hungary's 1956 uprising was crushed. The Prague

Spring of 1968 was ended by Warsaw Pact invasion. Poland's Solidarity movement demonstrated in the 1980s that communist governments could no longer rely on social passivity. When Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev stopped using force to preserve eastern European regimes, they fell with astonishing speed in 1989. The Berlin Wall opened on 9 November.

Integration expands, and the border question returns

The Maastricht Treaty, which came into force in 1993, created the European Union and formalised EU citizenship. The euro entered financial use in 1999 and notes and coins in 2002. The Schengen system removed routine passport checks across many internal borders, though not all EU states participate and several non-EU states do. Enlargement after the Cold War shifted the EU's centre eastward, especially with the ten-country accession of 2004.

The success created new tensions. A single market and common rules reduced economic barriers, but political authority remained divided. The euro bound monetary policy without creating a fully federal fiscal state. The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent eurozone crisis exposed that mismatch. The refugee and migration pressures of the 2010s exposed disagreements over border control and burden sharing. Populist parties attacked elites and integration from different ideological directions.

Demography added another pressure. Much of Europe aged as fertility fell and life expectancy rose, while labour markets increasingly relied on migration from within and beyond the continent. Free movement let millions of EU citizens study, work and settle across national borders, producing both ordinary integration and political backlash. Cities such as London, Paris, Berlin, Madrid and Milan became more diverse through post-colonial migration, refugee movements and labour demand. Meanwhile, some eastern and southeastern regions lost young workers to richer western states. Integration could therefore widen opportunity for individuals while draining skills and population from particular places. The same open border could look like freedom from one side and abandonment from another.

Brexit was the sharpest institutional reversal. The United Kingdom voted in 2016 to leave the EU and withdrew on 31 January 2020. Yet it did not leave Europe, NATO or the wider networks linking its economy and security to the continent. The distinction between Europe and the EU became impossible to ignore.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 changed the security environment more dramatically. European states imposed sanctions, increased defence spending and supported Ukraine. Finland joined NATO in 2023, Sweden in 2024. Ukraine had already become an EU candidate and continued its accession process during the war, with the first negotiating cluster opened in June 2026 and the external-relations cluster opened in July.

This sequence brings the story back to its starting problem. Europe has layers of membership rather than one border. In 2026 the EU has 27 states, the euro 21, Schengen 29, the Council of Europe 46 and NATO 32 members across Europe and North America. Some states belong to all relevant European institutions; some to several; some to few. Russia is outside the post-1991 European security and rights consensus in critical respects but cannot be removed from Europe's geography or history by declaration.

The practical map is therefore full of partial memberships. A student can cross one border without a passport, pay with a different currency at the next, remain under the same human-rights convention, and enter a country covered by a different military guarantee. That layered order can look untidy beside a nation-state map. Its untidiness is the design: governments share authority in selected fields without transferring every function to one centre.

How we know

Europe leaves an unusually large written record, but the record is uneven. States, churches, courts, armies and firms preserved documents because they had bureaucracies. Poor households, migrants, women outside elite institutions, persecuted minorities and colonised populations often appear through records produced by authorities dealing with them. Archaeology, material culture, demographic reconstruction, environmental evidence and genetics widen the picture, but each brings its own limits.

The labels are also retrospective. Medieval people did not live inside neat categories called feudalism, eastern Europe or the Renaissance. Europe itself changed meaning across time. Historians therefore reconstruct both events and the boxes later generations used to organise them.

The largest causal questions remain open. Scholars dispute how much European global dominance depended on political competition, institutions, wages, coal, colonial resources, slavery, military technology or contingency. The safest conclusion is not that one theory won. It is that Europe's rise required several mechanisms to coincide, and that many of the most important resources and ideas came from beyond Europe.

What People Get Wrong

“Europe is a continent with natural borders”

The Atlantic, Arctic and Mediterranean make much of Europe's outline look physical. The eastern edge does not. Europe and Asia share one continuous landmass, and the familiar boundary along the Urals, Ural River, Caspian, Caucasus, Black Sea and Turkish straits is a convention assembled over time.

That matters because maps can turn political choices into apparent facts. Russia lies across both sides of the conventional divide. Turkey does too. Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan sit in a region that different institutions and atlases classify differently. Cyprus is geographically close to Asia but

politically embedded in European institutions. The question “Is this country European?” often sounds geographic while carrying cultural, religious, strategic or political assumptions.

The correction is not that Europe is imaginary. Continents are useful categories. The correction is that this one has fuzzy edges and has always been partly made by history. Once that is clear, arguments over enlargement, Russia, Turkey, the Caucasus and Ukraine become easier to read. They are disputes about belonging, not exercises in locating a line nature already drew.

“Europe is the West”

This equation quietly deletes half the subject. The modern idea of “the West” usually combines western Europe with North America and sometimes other liberal democracies. Europe is a different category.

Byzantium was European history. Orthodox Christianity was European history. Poland-Lithuania, Kyivan Rus, Muscovy, the Balkans and the Ottoman domains in southeastern Europe were European history. So were communist eastern Europe and Yugoslavia. None fits comfortably inside a story that moves from Greece to Rome to France and Britain, then crosses the Atlantic to the United States.

The habit became especially powerful during the Cold War, when “Western Europe” acquired a political meaning opposed to the Soviet bloc. After 1989, institutions expanded eastward, but the older mental map survived. It still shows up when western European experiences are described as European while eastern histories are treated as regional exceptions.

The correction changes the chronology. Europe was never one road heading west. It was a field of interacting Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Slavic, Germanic, Romance, Baltic, Mediterranean and steppe worlds, with several centres at once.

“Rome fell and Europe entered a thousand-year dark age”

Western Roman government did collapse, and the consequences were severe in many places. Tax systems shrank. Some cities contracted. Long-distance trade became thinner. Literacy narrowed. Political violence remained common. The mistake is turning those changes into a continent-wide millennium of stagnation.

The eastern Roman Empire survived. Islamic Iberia developed rich urban and intellectual cultures. Carolingian rulers rebuilt large political structures. Monasteries preserved and produced texts. From around 1000, towns, trade and population expanded across much of Europe. Universities appeared. Gothic cathedrals required sophisticated engineering and finance. Italian cities developed complex banking and public debt. The medieval centuries also produced new legal institutions, representative bodies and forms of local self-government.

The “dark age” model became persuasive because Renaissance writers liked to contrast themselves with the centuries in between antiquity and their own revival, and later narratives reinforced the contrast. It survives because a single dramatic fall is easier to remember than uneven transformation.

The better picture keeps the losses without freezing a thousand years into one condition. Rome’s western collapse was a major break. Medieval Europe was what people built afterwards.

“Europe invented modernity by itself”

Europe produced institutions and technologies that reshaped the world. It did not produce them inside a sealed room.

The alphabet came from eastern Mediterranean predecessors. Christianity came from the eastern Roman world and Judaea. Indian numerical notation reached Latin Europe through Arabic-speaking scholarship. Paper came from China through long chains of transmission. Gunpowder came from China. Classical Greek work survived through Byzantine copying and Arabic

translation as well as western manuscript traditions. Mediterranean merchants depended on Asian and African trade networks for goods that European consumers wanted.

Even industrialisation, Europe's most consequential economic transformation, was global in its inputs. British cotton mills consumed raw fibre produced on slave plantations in the Americas. Atlantic trade opened markets and supplied commodities. Coal was local, but the economy using it was not.

The myth remains attractive because later European power made earlier borrowing look like dependence and later invention look like essence. That reverses the normal history of innovation. Successful societies borrow relentlessly, then recombine what they borrow with local institutions and needs.

Europe's achievement becomes more intelligible, not smaller, once borrowing is restored to the story. Its strength lay partly in absorbing things from elsewhere and finding new uses for them.

“The Peace of Westphalia created the modern sovereign state in 1648”

It is a wonderfully clean story: medieval religious chaos ends, ambassadors sign treaties, and the modern system of sovereign territorial states begins. It is also too clean to be useful.

The Peace of Westphalia ended the Thirty Years' War and adjusted relations among rulers and territories within the Holy Roman Empire. It mattered. But European sovereignty developed over centuries before and after 1648. Dynastic monarchies still ruled scattered territories. The Holy Roman Empire remained in existence until 1806. Popes, estates, cities, nobles and local jurisdictions retained powers that do not fit a simple model of absolute territorial states. Empires remained central to European politics into the twentieth century.

The myth became popular because international-relations theory wanted a

starting date for a system defined by sovereign states. A date makes a model teachable. History rarely cooperates so neatly.

The correction matters beyond pedantry. States are built, not declared into existence by treaty. Taxation, administration, armies, law, borders and political loyalty had to be constructed over long periods. The state system was an accumulation of practices, not a birthday party in Münster and Osnabrück.

“Empire was peripheral to Europe’s rise”

One version of European history keeps the main story inside the continent: science, markets, states, Enlightenment, factories. Empire then appears as an ugly external chapter. That arrangement is historically convenient and causally weak.

Overseas conquest changed European finance, consumption, war and production. American silver entered global markets. Plantation slavery produced sugar and cotton for European consumers and industries. Chartered companies linked commerce to armed force. Colonial states redirected land, labour and taxation. Imperial ports grew wealthy. Scientific collecting and racial classification developed inside imperial systems. Rivalries between European powers were fought in the Caribbean, North America, Africa and Asia.

This does not mean colonial extraction alone caused European industrialisation. Britain had coal, wages, engineering traditions, institutions and domestic markets that cannot be reduced to empire. Nor does every imperial venture produce wealth at home. The correction is about proportion: Europe’s rise was a continental and global process at the same time.

Removing empire from the causal story leaves the raw materials, markets, coercion and geopolitical scale unexplained. Treating empire as the whole explanation leaves European institutions and energy systems unexplained. Both are shortcuts.

“The European Union is Europe”

The EU is Europe’s most developed political and economic union. It is still one institution among several, and its boundaries do not define the continent.

In 2026 the EU has 27 members. The euro area has 21. Schengen has 29 countries, including Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland, which are outside the EU. The Council of Europe has 46 member states. NATO has 32 members across Europe and North America. The United Kingdom left the EU in 2020 but remains plainly European. Norway is deeply integrated with the EU market without being a member. Switzerland is outside both the EU and NATO. Ukraine is an EU candidate at war while moving through accession negotiations.

The confusion is understandable because EU law, institutions and symbols are so visible. But treating Europe and the EU as synonyms hides the central political problem of the continent: identity and institution do not share one border.

That mismatch is not a temporary administrative nuisance. It is the modern form of an old condition. Europe has usually contained overlapping jurisdictions, loyalties and boundaries. Brussels did not end that history. It organised one powerful layer of it.

Use It

Read maps as arguments

A political map looks finished because the lines are thin, coloured and precise. Europe teaches the opposite lesson. Borders can be recent, disputed, layered or institution-specific.

When looking at any region, ask what kind of map you are seeing. Is it a state map, language map, legal map, trade map, military map, religious map or migration map? Those layers often fail to coincide. Switzerland belongs to Schengen but not the EU. Ireland belongs to the EU but is outside

Schengen. Cyprus belongs to the EU but not Schengen. NATO crosses the Atlantic. The Council of Europe extends beyond the EU.

The same lens works outside Europe. A single border can separate tax systems while leaving families, languages, supply chains or ecosystems continuous. Maps become more informative when you stop asking where the real line is and start asking what each line governs.

Ask what can cross a border faster than rulers can stop it

Europe's political divisions mattered because information, people, money and technology often moved across them.

A persecuted craftsman could take skills to another state. A printer could publish a banned book across a frontier. Merchants could shift routes. Capital could move towards governments considered more trustworthy. Military techniques spread through war, espionage and imitation. Refugees carried knowledge without intending to become agents of innovation.

This gives a useful test for any competitive system. Competition produces adaptation only if useful things can travel. If every jurisdiction is sealed, rivals may repeat the same mistakes. If ideas and people move freely enough, one experiment can become everybody's option.

The question is therefore not whether fragmentation is good. It is whether fragmentation coexists with transmission. Europe's productive periods usually combined the two. Its destructive periods often combined the same transmission with escalating coercion. Speed of diffusion can spread weapons and hatred as efficiently as useful knowledge.

Separate invention from scale

A clever device does not change the world merely because it exists. It needs energy, capital, materials, institutions, skilled labour, demand and a mechanism for diffusion.

Europe's industrial story makes this visible. Steam engines mattered

because coal could feed them, mines and factories had reasons to buy them, finance could fund fixed capital, mechanics could improve them, and railways and shipping spread their effects. Cotton machinery mattered because there was raw cotton, labour, consumer demand and access to global markets.

Use that distinction whenever someone credits history to one inventor, one technology or one culture. Ask who supplied the inputs, who financed deployment, what bottleneck the invention solved, and what let it scale. The origin of an idea and the system that makes it consequential are different historical questions.

Count the costs outside the frame

European prosperity is often measured inside European borders while the costs of empire, slavery, extraction and war occurred elsewhere. That produces a misleading balance sheet.

The remedy is not to assume every gain at the centre came from loss at the periphery. It is to widen the accounting. If cotton mills prosper, ask where cotton came from and under what labour regime. If a port grows, ask what cargo moved through it. If a state builds fiscal capacity through colonial trade, ask who paid the taxes and who lacked political rights. If infrastructure appears in a colony, ask what it was designed to move and who controlled it.

This lens applies to modern supply chains too. Benefits and costs often sit in different jurisdictions. The side with the finished product can look more productive, cleaner or richer partly because labour, pollution or risk is elsewhere.

Look for rules that make trust cheaper

Europe's integration is easy to describe in emotional language about reconciliation. The machinery is more mundane and more revealing. Shared standards, courts, customs rules, banking arrangements, competition law and mutual recognition make it cheaper for strangers in different states to transact without renegotiating basic expectations each time.

That suggests a lens for institutions elsewhere. Do not ask first whether people share a strong identity. Ask what repeated uncertainty the institution removes. A common railway gauge, accounting rule or court procedure can create cooperation before anyone feels part of the same political community. Over time, practical dependence may strengthen identity, but the sequence can run in either direction.

The European case also shows the limit. Rules work only while governments and citizens accept the authority behind them. A technical agreement can reduce friction; it cannot by itself settle disputes over redistribution, borders, war or democratic legitimacy. Trust can be engineered at the margin, not commanded in full.

This distinction helps explain why integration often advances fastest in dull fields. Standards for food, chemicals, aircraft parts or bank transfers attract less emotional attention than flags and constitutions, yet they can bind economies tightly. Political union is often built from accumulated routines before it is expressed as identity.

Distinguish nation, state and civilisation

Much bad political reasoning begins by treating three different things as one.

A state is an institution with territory, law and coercive authority. A nation is a political community whose members imagine a shared peoplehood. A civilisation is a much looser claim about culture, history and inheritance. They can overlap, but they need not.

Europe contains states with multiple national identities, nations spread across states, and people who identify as European without wanting a

European federal state. The United Kingdom is one state containing several national traditions. Belgium contains major linguistic communities. Switzerland built a durable state without one national language. The EU creates citizenship and law without becoming a nation in the ordinary sense.

Whenever someone says a border is natural because a nation, religion or civilisation demands it, separate the categories first. History becomes less combustible once unlike claims stop borrowing each other's authority.

The limits

Europe cannot be reduced to one causal formula. Geography mattered, but similar geographies produced different politics. Competition mattered, but it often destroyed wealth and lives. Christianity connected societies while dividing them. Empire supplied resources and power without automatically causing industrialisation. Coal transformed energy constraints, but technology, wages, capital and institutions shaped how it was used. Nationalism built solidarity and exclusion at the same time.

The evidence is also uneven. Literate states and elites left dense archives. Ordinary people appear less consistently. Colonial records often describe subject populations through the categories of conquerors. National histories were later written backwards from states that survived, making failed alternatives look less plausible than they once were.

Most important, Europe's global dominance was historically brief. By 1900 it looked permanent. Within half a century the continent had wrecked itself in two wars, lost much of its imperial control and become strategically dependent on American and Soviet power. Any theory that makes European supremacy look inevitable has already failed a basic test.

The one thing to keep

Keep the mismatch between connection and control.

Europe's history becomes clearer once you see a place dense enough that everything travels and divided enough that no ruler can permanently command the whole. Roman law survives without Rome. Christianity

crosses kingdoms and then splits them. Printing outruns censorship. Merchants cross dynastic frontiers. Military innovations spread between enemies. Nationalism turns languages into political claims that rarely fit the map cleanly. Industrial power enlarges states until their wars become continental catastrophes.

After 1945, Europeans did not solve that mismatch by becoming one people. They built institutions that made some kinds of crossing easier and some kinds of coercion harder. The result is untidy because the underlying continent is untidy: overlapping states, markets, alliances, currencies, legal orders and identities.

That is a better way to understand Europe than a civilisational family tree. The continent shaped the world through combinations that were unstable, borrowed and often violent. Its most interesting modern achievement is not unity. It is the attempt to make permanent disagreement compatible with peace.

Terms

Europe. A geographic and historical category with clear maritime edges in several directions and a conventional eastern boundary. It can describe land, identity or institutions, so arguments about belonging are rarely geographic alone.

Eurasia. The continuous landmass containing Europe and Asia. It reminds us that Europe and Asia are divided by convention, not ocean.

Romanisation. The uneven adoption of Roman language, law, institutions and identities across imperial territories, mixed with local cultures.

Byzantine Empire. The modern name for the eastern Roman Empire centred on Constantinople, surviving until 1453. Its inhabitants generally understood themselves as Romans.

Christendom. The idea of a Christian social and political world, especially in medieval Europe, with distinct Latin and Orthodox forms.

Orthodoxy. In this book, primarily the eastern Christian tradition that developed around Constantinople and other patriarchates. Its history is central to the Balkans, eastern Europe and Russia.

Holy Roman Empire. A long-lived political order in central Europe, conventionally dated from 962 to 1806. It joined emperors, princes, bishops, cities and other territories in a layered constitutional system rather than a modern nation-state.

Feudalism. A contested modern label used for several medieval relationships involving land, lordship, obligation and dependent labour. Historians disagree because the term can hide major regional and chronological differences.

Serfdom. A condition tying peasants to land or lords through labour and dues. It weakened in parts of the west but persisted or intensified farther east.

Hanseatic League. A loose network of merchant towns and trading interests around the Baltic and North Sea, especially powerful in the later Middle Ages. It shows that economic organisation could cross political borders without forming a territorial state.

Renaissance. A later label for renewed classical learning, humanism and artistic innovation from the late medieval into early modern centuries, varying by region.

Reformation. The sixteenth-century fragmentation of western Christianity associated with Luther, Calvin and other reformers, followed by new churches, confessional states and long political conflicts.

Confessionalisation. The process by which early modern churches and states organised populations around rival Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed and other confessions through worship, schooling, discipline and administration.

Ottoman Empire. A major empire centred on Constantinople after 1453 and ruling large parts of southeastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. It was part of European politics for centuries, not an external interruption.

Balance of power. The use of shifting alliances to prevent one state dominating others. It was a strategy, not a guarantee of peace.

Sovereignty. Supreme political authority claimed over a territory and population. European sovereignty developed over centuries and remained layered and contested long after the Peace of Westphalia.

Mercantilism. A later label for early modern policies that tried to strengthen state power through trade regulation, protected industries, shipping, bullion accumulation and colonial control. It was never one uniform doctrine.

Atlantic system. The interlocking movement of people, goods, capital and coercion across Europe, Africa and the Americas after the fifteenth century, including colonial trade, plantation slavery and imperial warfare.

Columbian Exchange. The large-scale transfer of plants, animals, diseases and people between the Americas and Afro-Eurasia after sustained Atlantic contact. Disease had especially catastrophic effects on Indigenous American populations.

Triangular trade. A simplified term for Atlantic trading patterns linking Europe, Africa and the Americas. Real routes were more complex, but the phrase is commonly used for commerce involving manufactured goods, enslaved Africans and plantation commodities.

Industrial Revolution. The transformation beginning in eighteenth-century Britain in which mechanisation, fossil energy, factories and new transport systems sharply increased productive capacity. It spread unevenly across Europe and the world.

Great Divergence. The debate over when, how and why parts of western Europe pulled ahead economically from advanced regions of Asia. Explanations include wages, institutions, coal, empire, trade, technology and contingency.

Nation. A political community whose members understand themselves as a people with shared identity and often a claim to collective self-rule. Nations can be built from older languages and loyalties without being timeless.

Nationalism. The doctrine or movement that treats the nation as a primary political community and often argues that political borders should reflect national identity. It can support liberation, unification, exclusion or empire.

Nation-state. A state claiming to represent a nation and align political territory with national community. Populations rarely fit borders perfectly.

Fascism. A family of authoritarian ultranationalist movements that rejected liberal democracy and socialism, exalted hierarchy and violence, and sought mass mobilisation under dictatorial rule. Italian Fascism and German Nazism were related but not identical.

Holocaust. Nazi Germany's systematic, state-sponsored persecution and killing of six million European Jews, carried out with allies and collaborators during the Nazi era and Second World War.

Cold War. The geopolitical, military and ideological confrontation after the Second World War centred on the United States and Soviet Union. Europe was divided into western and Soviet-led blocs until the communist regimes of eastern Europe fell in 1989 and the Soviet Union dissolved in 1991.

Schengen area. A passport-free travel zone covering most EU states and several non-EU countries. Membership is separate from EU membership and from use of the euro.

European Union. A political and economic union of 27 European states in 2026, built through treaties, common institutions, a single market and shared law. It is the most integrated European institution but does not define Europe's full geographic or cultural extent.

Go Deeper

The panoramic history

Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford University Press, 1996). Enormous rather than hurried, but valuable because it resists making western Europe the whole subject and keeps Poland, Byzantium, Russia and the borderlands in view. Davies is strongest as an antidote to narrow national narratives and weakest when the sheer scale forces compression. Use it as a reference, dip into the regional chapters, and compare its judgements with newer specialist work. Its maps and chronological range are especially useful when a national story has made the continent feel more coherent than it was. Keep another atlas nearby. Davies is best used for orientation before a narrower specialist history of your choice.

The medieval correction

Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe: From the Breakup of the Western Roman Empire to the Reformation* (Yale University Press, 2016). The best next step if the phrase “Middle Ages” still feels like a thousand-year gap between Rome and modernity. Wickham moves across regions and social structures without pretending medieval Europe was one system. It is concise by academic standards, argumentative without being obscure, and especially useful on peasants, states and the unevenness hidden by period labels. If you read only one follow-up from this list, this is the most manageable.

The argument about European rise

Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton University Press, 2000). A demanding but transformative comparison of western Europe and advanced regions of China, with coal and New World resources central to the argument. Read it to see why Europe's economic rise cannot be explained by a timeless cultural advantage. The book sparked a large debate, so treat it as a major intervention rather than the last word. Pair its argument with Robert Allen if you want a stronger case for wages and energy inside Britain.

Europe after the wreckage

Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (William Heinemann, 2005). Long, readable and unusually good at treating eastern and western Europe as one post-war story. It is the natural continuation of the final Core Idea, especially on reconstruction, communism, welfare states, 1968, 1989 and the moral afterlife of the Second World War. Its great strength is detail without losing the continental frame; its endpoint means later crises require newer sources. It remains the best single narrative for understanding why 1989 felt like both an ending and a beginning.

Notes and Sources

Notes on The Whole Thing in One Page

Europe as a category. Martin W. Lewis and Kären E. Wigen, *The Myth of Continents*, supports treating continental divisions as historical systems of classification rather than purely natural facts. Norman Davies provides the broad continental synthesis. The United Nations M49 system is one current statistical convention, not a settlement of cultural identity.

Plurality and connection. David Abulafia supports the Mediterranean as connective space. Peter H. Wilson, Charles Tilly, Hendrik Spruyt, Geoffrey Parker and Philip Hoffman provide differing accounts of political plurality,

state formation, warfare and adaptation. The final manuscript deliberately rejects a single-cause competition thesis.

Borrowing. Judith Herrin, Janet Abu-Lughod and Andrew Pettegree support the treatment of Byzantine continuity, wider Eurasian exchange and print. The histories of paper, numerals, gunpowder and classical transmission are presented as multi-stage processes rather than one-civilisation inventions.

Empire and industrialisation. Kenneth Pomeranz, Robert Allen, Sven Beckert, Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper are central to the treatment of coal, labour, global resources, slavery and empire. Their arguments differ, so the manuscript uses them to bound the causal debate rather than manufacture consensus.

Integration. Tony Judt, Alan Milward and Kiran Klaus Patel support the post-1945 account. Integration is treated as a reconstruction and constraint of national power, not the disappearance of the nation-state.

Notes on Why You Should Care

Strasbourg-Kehl tram. European Commission material on cross-border cooperation records the tram connection across the Rhine beginning service in 2017. The example is used as a concrete illustration of institutions changing the practical meaning of a border.

EU population and membership. Eurostat estimated the EU population at 452.0 million on 1 January 2026. Official EU sources list 27 member states. The Council of the European Union records Bulgaria's adoption of the euro on 1 January 2026, making it the 21st euro-area member. Official EU material lists 29 Schengen countries. The Council of Europe records 46 member states. These facts were rechecked on 10 August 2026.

Brexit, NATO and Ukraine. EU sources confirm that the United Kingdom left the EU on 31 January 2020. NATO records Finland joining on 4 April 2023 and Sweden on 7 March 2024. Council of the EU sources confirm that Ukraine opened the fundamentals accession cluster on 15 June 2026 and

the external-relations cluster on 14 July 2026. The invasion date, 24 February 2022, follows United Nations and EU usage for Russia's full-scale invasion.

Notes on the Core Ideas

Geography and boundaries. Lewis and Wigen is the principal corrective to naturalising the Europe-Asia border. The manuscript does not claim geography caused political plurality. It treats seas, peninsulas, rivers and fuzzy eastern boundaries as conditions interacting with institutions and historical contingency.

Rome and eastern continuity. Chris Wickham and Judith Herrin support the differentiated collapse of western Roman government and the survival of the eastern Roman Empire. Justinianic law is treated as a later reservoir for European legal thought, not an uninterrupted operating code across the Middle Ages.

Christianity. Wickham, Herrin and Wilson support the Latin and Orthodox institutional worlds. The date 1054 is not used as a single moment in which the churches suddenly separated. Ottoman rule is incorporated into European history rather than treated as outside it.

Transmission. Abu-Lughod and Herrin support the wider networks in which Europe operated. Arabic-speaking scholars are described as translators, critics and original contributors. The manuscript avoids the older claim that Islamic societies merely preserved Greek knowledge for later Europeans.

Political competition. Tilly, Spruyt, Parker and Hoffman explain different aspects of taxation, war, state forms and military adaptation. Their models are not treated as a universal law. Competition could increase fiscal capacity and innovation, but could also intensify coercion and destruction.

Westphalia. The manuscript follows the substantial scholarship rejecting 1648 as the birth date of modern sovereignty. The treaties mattered, especially within the Holy Roman Empire, but dynastic, imperial, ecclesiastical and local jurisdictions persisted.

Atlantic conquest and slavery. Burbank and Cooper and global imperial histories support the emphasis on local allies, disease, intermediaries and coercion. Beckert supports the relationship between cotton industrialisation and slave-produced raw material. The manuscript avoids a single exact number for the transatlantic slave trade because totals differ according to the stage counted.

Industrialisation. Allen's high-wage and cheap-energy account and Pomeranz's global comparison are both material to the final synthesis. Coal, wages, engineering, markets, capital, empire and contingency are presented as interacting conditions rather than interchangeable explanations.

Nationalism. Benedict Anderson and Eric Hobsbawm support the importance of print, schools, administration and mass politics in constructing modern national communities. The text distinguishes historical construction from falsity and recognises older languages and loyalties.

The Holocaust. The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum supports the definition used here: the systematic, state-sponsored persecution and murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators. Other victim groups are named without being folded into the specifically anti-Jewish genocide.

Integration. Milward supports the argument that European integration helped restore the capacities and legitimacy of western European nation-states. Judt and Patel supply the wider political history. Official EU treaty histories support the 1951, 1957 and Maastricht landmarks.

Notes on the chronological account

476 and continuity. The deposition of Romulus Augustulus is used as a conventional western landmark, not the end of Rome everywhere. Archaeological and historical evidence shows sharp regional variation in urban, fiscal and commercial contraction. Some Roman landholding, law and church structures survived under successor rulers, while other regions experienced far deeper institutional breaks. The label “fall” is useful only if it does not hide that unevenness.

Medieval plurality. Wickham, Herrin and Wilson support the accounts of Byzantium, Latin Europe, the Holy Roman Empire and eastern European state formation. The Christianisation of Kyivan Rus is conventionally dated to 988.

Black Death. The pandemic’s arrival in Europe in the late 1340s and enormous demographic impact are secure. Exact mortality varied by place and remains debated, so the narrative avoids one continent-wide percentage.

Renaissance and print. Pettegree supports the commercial development of European print. The fall of Constantinople in 1453 is not presented as the sole cause of Renaissance humanism.

Reformation. Luther’s 1517 challenge is a landmark, not a sufficient cause of Europe’s religious transformation. Confessional politics developed through decades of theological, dynastic and institutional conflict.

Atlantic empire. The account of conquest rejects both a handful-of-Europeans story and an explanation by disease alone. Local alliances, military technology, political divisions and epidemics worked together in different combinations.

French Revolution and nationalism. Hobsbawm and Anderson support the shift from dynastic legitimacy towards mass national politics. The manuscript distinguishes older political identities from modern mass nationalism.

World wars. Ian Kershaw and Mark Mazower support the twentieth-century sequence. Sarajevo is treated as a trigger within a wider system, not a sufficient cause of war. The Holocaust account follows USHMM terminology.

Post-war integration. Judt is the main synthesis for recovery, migration, welfare states, communist Europe and 1989. Milward and Patel support the institutional account. NATO, Council of Europe and EU dates are checked against the organisations' own records.

Recent institutional facts. Eurostat, the Council of the European Union, European Commission, NATO and Council of Europe sources were rechecked on 10 August 2026 for current membership, population, Bulgaria's euro adoption, Brexit, Finland and Sweden's NATO accession, and Ukraine's accession negotiations.

Notes on What People Get Wrong

Natural borders and “the West”. Lewis and Wigen supports the border correction. Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* helps explain how east-west distinctions were historically constructed. The correction does not deny real regional differences.

Dark Ages. Wickham and Herrin support the distinction between western Roman contraction, eastern continuity and later medieval growth.

Self-generated modernity. Abu-Lughod, Herrin and global histories of technology support the transmission correction. The point is not that Europe invented nothing, but that innovation was cumulative and cross-cultural.

Westphalia. Wilson and state-formation scholarship support the rejection of a 1648 sovereignty birthday.

Empire. Beckert, Pomeranz, Burbank and Cooper support the integration of empire into the European economic story while avoiding monocausal claims.

EU versus Europe. Official EU, Schengen, Council of Europe and NATO

sources support the institutional distinctions and current numbers.

Notes on Use It and Terms

The five lenses are analytical deductions from the evidence rather than claims attributed to a single historian. The terms follow standard historical usage with warnings where labels such as feudalism and mercantilism can imply more unity than the evidence supports. Current institutional membership figures were checked on 10 August 2026.

Notes on Go Deeper

Publication details for Davies, Wickham, Pomeranz and Judt were checked against publisher and bibliographic records. They were chosen because their emphases differ: continental breadth, medieval reconstruction, global economic comparison and post-war synthesis.

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