

Western Civilization: A Concise History

WESTERN CIVILIZATION: A CONCISE HISTORY

CHRISTOPHER BROOKS

NSCC



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This open textbook combines the three volumes of *Western Civilization: A Concise History*, written by Chris Brooks into one open textbook.

The original work is available from [Chris Brooks' Portland University web page](#).

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ABOUT THE BOOK

The Pressbooks edition of *Western Civilization: A Concise History* was created by NSCC Pressbooks Team. Originally published as three volumes, this Pressbooks edition combines all three into one resource, separated by sections that match the original volumes.

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The three books cover the history of Western Civilization from approximately 8,000 BCE to 2017 CE. It is available in three volumes covering the following time periods and topics:

- Volume 1: from the origins of civilization in Mesopotamia c. 8,000 BCE through the early Middle Ages in Europe c. 1,000 CE. Volume 1 covers topics including Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, the Islamic caliphates, and the early European Middle Ages.
- Volume 2: from the early Middle Ages to the French Revolution in 1789 CE. Volume 2 covers topics including the High Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the European conquest of the Americas, the Reformation, the Scientific Revolution, and the Enlightenment.
- Volume 3: from the Napoleonic era to the recent past. Volume 3 covers topics including the Industrial Revolution, the politics of Europe in the nineteenth century, modern European imperialism, the world wars, fascism, Nazism, and the Holocaust, the postwar era, the Cold War, and recent developments in economics and politics.

The three volumes are available on the [Open Textbook Library website](#).

THE IDEA OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Introduction

What is “Western Civilization”? Furthermore, who or what is part of it? Like all ideas, the concept of Western Civilization itself has a history, one that coalesced in college textbooks and curriculums for the first time in the United States in the 1920s. In many ways, the very idea of Western Civilization is a “loaded” one, opposing one form or branch of civilization from others as if they were distinct, even unrelated. Thus, before examining the events of Western Civilization’s history, it is important to unpack the history of the concept itself.

Where is the West?

The obvious question is “west of what”? Likewise, where is “the east”? Terms used in present-day geopolitics regularly make reference to an east and west, as in “Far East,” and “Middle East,” as well as in “Western” ideas or attitudes. The obvious answer is that “the West” has something to do with Europe. If the area including Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Israel – Palestine, and Egypt is somewhere called the “Middle” or “Near” East, doesn’t that imply that it is just to the east of something else?

In fact, we get the original term from Greece. Greece is the center-point, east of the Balkan Peninsula was east, west of the Balkans was west, and the Greeks were at the center of their self-understood world. Likewise, the sea that both separated and united the Greeks and their neighbors, including the Egyptians and the Persians, is still called the Mediterranean, which means “sea in the middle of the earth” (albeit in Latin, not Greek – we get the word from a later “Western” civilization, the Romans). The ancient civilizations clustered around the Mediterranean treated it as the center of the world itself, their major trade route to one another and a major source of their food as well.

To the Greeks, there were two kinds of people: Greeks and barbarians (the Greek word is *barbaros*). Supposedly, the word barbarian came from Greeks mocking the sound of non-Greek languages: “bar-bar-bar-bar.” The Greeks traded with all of their neighbors and knew perfectly well that the Persians and the Egyptians and the Phoenicians, among others, were not their inferiors in learning, art, or political organization, but the fact remains that they were not Greek, either. Thus, one of the core themes of Western Civilization is that right from its inception, of the east being east of Greece and the west being west of Greece, and of the world being divided between Greeks and barbarians, there was an idea of who is central and superior, and who is out on the edges and inferior (or at least not part of the best version of culture).

In a sense, then, the Greeks invented the idea of west and east, but they did not extend the idea to anyone but themselves, certainly including the “barbarians” who inhabited the rest of Europe. In other words, the Greeks did not have a concept of “Western Civilization,” just Greek vs. barbarian. Likewise, the Greeks did not invent “civilization” itself; they inherited things like agriculture and writing from their neighbors. Neither was there ever a united Greek empire: there was a great Greek civilization when Alexander the Great conquered what he thought was most of the world, stretching from Greece itself through Egypt, the Middle East, as far as western India, but it collapsed into feuding

kingdoms after he died. Thus, while later cultures came to look to the Greeks as their intellectual and cultural ancestors, the Greeks themselves did not set out to found “Western Civilization” itself.

Mesopotamia

While many traditional Western Civilization textbooks start with Greece, this one does not. That is because civilization is not Greek in its origins. The most ancient human civilizations arose in the Fertile Crescent, an area stretching from present-day Israel – Palestine through southern Turkey and into Iraq. Closely related, and lying within the Fertile Crescent, is the region of Mesopotamia, which is the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in present-day Iraq. In these areas, people invented the most crucial technology necessary for the development of civilization: agriculture. The Mesopotamians also invented other things that are central to civilization, including:

Cities: note that in English, the very word “civilization” is closely related to the word “civic,” meaning “having to do with cities” as in “civic government” or “civic duty.” Cities were essential to sophisticated human groups because they allowed specialization: you could have some people concentrate all of their time and energy on tasks like art, building, religious worship, or warfare, not just on farming.

Bureaucracy: while it seems like a prosaic subject, bureaucracy was and remains the most effective way to organize large groups of people. Civilizations that developed large and efficient bureaucracies grew larger and lasted longer than those that neglected bureaucracy. Bureaucracy is, essentially, the substitution of rules in place of individual human decisions. That process, while often frustrating to individuals caught up in it, does have the effect of creating a more efficient set of processes than can be achieved through arbitrary decision-making. Historically, bureaucracy was one of the most important “technologies” that early civilizations developed.

Large-scale warfare: even before large cities existed, the first towns were built with fortifications to stave off attackers. It is very likely that the first kings were war leaders allied with priests.

Mathematics: without math, there cannot be advanced engineering, and without engineering, there cannot be irrigation, walls, or large buildings. The ancient Mesopotamians were the first people in the world to develop advanced mathematics in large part because they were also the most sophisticated engineers of the ancient world.

Astronomy: just as math is necessary for engineering, astronomy is necessary for a sophisticated calendar. The ancient Mesopotamians began the process of systematically recording the changing positions of the stars and other heavenly bodies because they needed to be able to track when to plant crops, when to harvest, and when religious rituals had to be carried out. Among other things, the Mesopotamians were the first to discover the 365 (and a quarter) days of the year and set those days into a fixed calendar.

Empires: an empire is a political unit comprising many different “peoples,” whether “people” is defined linguistically, religiously, or ethnically. The Mesopotamians were the first to conquer and rule over many different cities and “peoples” at once.

The Mesopotamians also created systems of writing, of organized religion, and of literature, all of which would go on to have an enormous influence on world history, and in turn, Western Civilization. Thus, in considering Western Civilization, it would be misleading to start with the Greeks and skip places like Mesopotamia, because those areas were the heartland of civilization in the whole western part of Eurasia.

Greece and Rome

Even if we do not start with the Greeks, we do need to acknowledge their importance. Alexander the Great was one of the most famous and important military leaders in history, a man who started conquering “the world” when he was eighteen years old. When he died his empire fell apart, in part because he did not say which of his generals was to take over after his death. Nevertheless, the empires he left behind were united in important ways, using Greek as one of their languages, employing Greek architecture in their buildings, putting on plays in the Greek style, and of course, trading with one another. This period in history was called the Hellenistic Age. The people who were part of that age were European, Middle Eastern, and North African, people who worshiped both Greek gods and the gods of their own regions, spoke all kinds of different languages, and lived as part of a hybrid culture. Hellenistic civilization demonstrates the fact that Western Civilization has always been a blend of different peoples, not a single encompassing group or language or religion.

Perhaps the most important empire in the ancient history of Western Civilization was ancient Rome. Over the course of roughly five centuries, the Romans expanded from the city of Rome in the middle of the Italian peninsula to rule an empire that stretched from Britain to Spain and from North Africa to Persia (present-day Iran). Through both incredible engineering, the hard work of Roman citizens and Roman subjects, and the massive use of slave labor, they built remarkable buildings and created infrastructure like roads and aqueducts that survive to the present day.

The Romans are the ones who give us the idea of Western Civilization being something *ongoing* – something that had started in the past and continued into the future. In the case of the Romans, they (sometimes grudgingly) acknowledged Greece as a cultural model; Roman architecture used Greek shapes and forms, the Roman gods were really just the Greek gods given new names (Zeus became Jupiter, Hades became Pluto, etc.), and educated Romans spoke and read Greek so that they could read the works of the great Greek poets, playwrights, and philosophers. Thus, the Romans deliberately adopted an older set of ideas and considered themselves part of an ongoing civilization that blended Greek and Roman values. Like the Greeks before them, they also divided civilization itself in a stark binary: there was Greco-Roman culture on the one hand and barbarism on the other, although they made a reluctant exception for Persia at times.

The Romans were largely successful at assimilating the people they conquered. They united their provinces with the Latin language, which is the ancestor of all of the major languages spoken in Southern Europe today (French, Italian, Spanish, Romanian, etc.), Roman Law, which is the ancestor of most forms of law still in use today in Europe, and the Roman form of government. Along with those factors, the Romans brought Greek and Roman science, learning, and literature. In many ways, the Romans believed that they were bringing civilization itself everywhere they went, and because they made the connection between Greek civilization and their own, they played a significant role in inventing the idea of Western Civilization as something that was ongoing.

That noted, the Romans did not use the term “Western Civilization” and as their empire expanded, even the connection between Roman identity and Italy itself weakened. During the period that the empire was at its height the bulk of the population and wealth was in the east, concentrated in Egypt, Anatolia (the region corresponding to the present-day nation of Turkey) and the Levant. This shift to the east culminated in the move of the capital of the empire from the city of Rome to the Greek town of Byzantium, renamed Constantinople by the empire who ordered the move: Constantine. Thus, while the Greco-Roman legacy was certainly a major factor in the development of the *idea* of Western Civilization much later, “Roman” was certainly not the same thing as “western” at the time.

The Middle Ages and Christianity

Another factor in the development of the idea of Western Civilization came about after Rome ceased to exist as a united empire, during the era known as the Middle Ages. The Middle Ages were the period between the fall of Rome, which happened around 476 CE, and the Renaissance, which started around 1300 CE. During the Middle Ages, another concept of what lay at the heart of Western Civilization arose, especially among Europeans. It was not just the connection to Roman and Greek accomplishments, but instead, to religion. The Roman Empire had started to become Christian in the early fourth century CE when the emperor Constantine converted to Christianity. Many Europeans in the Middle Ages came to believe that, despite the fact that they spoke different languages and had different rulers, they were united as part of “Christendom”: the kingdom of Christ and of Christians.

Christianity obviously played a hugely important role in the history of Western Civilization. It inspired amazing art and music. It was at the heart of scholarship and learning for centuries. It also justified the aggressive expansion of European kingdoms. Europeans truly believed that members of other religions were infidels (meaning “those who are unfaithful,” those who worshipped the correct God, but in the wrong way, including Jews and Muslims, but also Christians who deviated from official orthodoxy) or pagans (those who worshipped false gods) who should either convert or be exterminated. For instance, despite the fact that Muslims and Jews worshiped the same God and shared much of the same sacred literature, medieval Europeans had absolutely no qualms about invading Muslim lands and committing horrific atrocities in the name of their religion. Likewise, medieval anti-Semitism (prejudice and hatred directed against Jews) eventually drove many Jews from Europe itself to take shelter in the kingdoms and empires of the Middle East and North Africa. Historically it was much safer and more comfortable for Jews in places like the predominantly Muslim Ottoman Empire than it was in most of Christian Europe.

A major irony of the idea that Western Civilization is somehow inherently Christian is that Islam is unquestionably just as “Western.” Islam’s point of origin, the Arabian Peninsula, is geographically very close to that of both Judaism and Christianity. Its holy writings are also closely aligned to Jewish and Christian values and thought. Perhaps most importantly, Islamic kingdoms and empires were part of the networks of trade, scholarship, and exchange that linked together the entire greater Mediterranean region. Thus, despite the fervor of European crusaders, it would be profoundly misleading to separate Islamic states and cultures from the rest of Western Civilization.

The Renaissance and European Expansion

Perhaps the most crucial development in the idea of Western Civilization in the pre-modern period was the Renaissance. The idea of the “Middle Ages” was invented by thinkers during the Renaissance, which started around 1300 CE. The great thinkers and artists of the Renaissance claimed to be moving away from the ignorance and darkness of the Middle Ages – which they also described as the “dark ages” – and returning to the greatness of the Romans and Greeks. People like Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Christine de Pizan, and Petrarch proudly connected their work to the work of the Romans and Greeks, claiming that there was an unbroken chain of ideas, virtues, and accomplishments stretching all the way back thousands of years to people like Alexander the Great, Plato, and Socrates.

During the Renaissance, educated people in Europe roughly two thousand years after the life of the Greek philosopher Plato based their own philosophies and outlooks on Plato’s philosophy, as well as that of other Greek thinkers. The beauty of Renaissance art is directly connected to its inspiration in Roman and Greek art. The scientific discoveries of

the Renaissance were inspired by the same spirit of inquiry that Greek scientists and Roman engineers had cultivated. Perhaps most importantly, Renaissance thinkers proudly linked together their own era to that of the Greeks and Romans, thus strengthening the concept of Western Civilization as an ongoing enterprise.

In the process of reviving the ideas of the Greeks and Romans, Renaissance thinkers created a new program of education: “humanist” education. Celebrating the inherent goodness and potentialities of humankind, humanistic education saw in the study of classical literature a source of inspiration for not just knowledge, but of morality and virtue. Combining the practical study of languages, history, mathematics, and rhetoric (among other subjects) with the cultivation of an ethical code the humanistics traced back to the Greeks, humanistic education ultimately created a curriculum meant to create well-rounded, virtuous individuals. That program of education remained intact into the twentieth century, with the study of the classics remaining a hallmark of elite education until it began to be displaced by the more specialized disciplinary studies of the modern university system that was born near the end of the nineteenth century.

It was not Renaissance ideas, however, that had the greatest impact on the globe at the time. Instead, it was European soldiers, colonists, and most consequentially, diseases. The first people from the Eastern Hemisphere since prehistory to travel to the Western Hemisphere (and remain – an earlier Viking colony did not survive) were European explorers who, entirely by accident, “discovered” the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century CE. It bears emphasis that the “discovery” of the Americas is a misnomer: millions of people already lived there, as their ancestors had for thousands of years, but geography had left them ill-prepared for the arrival of the newcomers. With the European colonists came an onslaught of epidemics to which the Native peoples of the Americas had no resistance, and within a few generations the immense majority – perhaps as many as 90% – of Native Americans perished as a result. The subsequent conquest of the Americas by Europeans and their descendents was thus made vastly easier. Europeans suddenly had access to an astonishing wealth of land and natural resources, wealth that they extracted in large part by enslaving millions of Native Americans and Africans.

Thanks largely to the European conquest of the Americas and the exploitation of its resources and its people, Europe went from a region of little economic and military power and importance to one of the most formidable in the following centuries. Following the Spanish and Portuguese conquest of Central and South America, the other major European states embarked on their own imperialistic ventures in the following centuries. “Trade empires” emerged over the course of the seventeenth century, first and foremost those of the Dutch and English, which established the precedent that profit and territorial control were mutually reinforcing priorities for European states. Driven by that conjoined motive, European states established huge, and growing, global empires. By 1800, roughly 35% of the surface of the world was controlled by Europeans or their descendants.

The Modern Era

Most of the world, however, was off limits to large-scale European expansion. Not only were there prosperous and sophisticated kingdoms in many regions of Africa, but (in an ironic reversal of the impact of European diseases on Americans) African diseases ensured that would-be European explorers and conquerors were unable to penetrate beyond the coasts of most of sub-Saharan Africa entirely. Meanwhile, the enormous and sophisticated empires and kingdoms of China, Japan, Southeast Asia, and South Asia (i.e. India) largely regarded Europeans as incidental trading partners of

relatively little importance. The Middle East was dominated by two powerful and “western” empires of its own: Persia and the Ottoman Empire.

The explosion of European power, one that coincided with the fruition of the idea that Western Civilization was both distinct from and *better* than other branches of civilization, came as a result of a development in technology: the Industrial Revolution. Starting in Great Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century, Europeans learned how to exploit fossil fuels in the form of coal to harness hitherto unimaginable amounts of energy. That energy underwrote a vast and dramatic expansion of European technology, wealth, and military power, this time built on the backs not of outright slaves, but of workers paid subsistence wages.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution underwrote and enabled the transformation of Europe from regional powerhouse to global hegemon. By the early twentieth century, Europe and the American nations founded by the descendents of Europeans controlled roughly 85% of the globe. Europeans either forced foreign states to concede to their economic demands and political influence, as in China and the Ottoman Empire, or simply conquered and controlled regions directly, as in South Asia (i.e. India) and Africa. None of this would have been possible without the technological and energetic revolution wrought by industrialism.

To Europeans and North Americans, however, the reason that they had come to enjoy such wealth and power was not because of a (temporary) monopoly of industrial technology. Instead, it was the inevitable result of their inherent biological and cultural superiority. The idea that the human species was divided into biologically distinct races was not entirely invented in the nineteenth century, but it became the predominant outlook and acquired all the trappings of a “science” over the course of the 1800s. By the year 1900, almost any person of European descent would have claimed to be part of a distinct, superior “race” whose global dominance was simply part of their collective birthright.

That conceit arrived at its zenith in the first half of the twentieth century. The European powers themselves fell upon one another in the First World War in the name of expanding, or at least preserving, their share of global dominance. Soon after, the new (related) ideologies of fascism and Nazism put racial superiority at the very center of their worldviews. The Second World War was the direct result of those ideologies, when racial warfare was unleashed for the first time not just on members of races Europeans had already classified as “inferior,” but on European ethnicities that fascists and Nazis now considered inferior races in their own right, most obviously the Jews. The bloodbath that followed resulted in approximately 55 million deaths, including the 6 million Jewish victims of the Holocaust and at least 25 million citizens of the Soviet Union, another “racial” enemy from the perspective of the Nazis.

Western Civilization Is “Born”

It was against the backdrop of this descent into what Europeans and Americans frequently called “barbarism” – the old antithesis of the “true” civilization that started with the Greeks – that the history of Western Civilization first came into being as a textbook topic and, soon, a mainstay of college curriculums. Prominent scholars in the United States, especially historians, came to believe that the best way to defend the elements of civilization with which they most strongly identified, including certain concepts of rationality and political equality, was to describe all of human existence as an ascent from primitive savagery into enlightenment, an ascent that may not have strictly speaking started in Europe, but which enjoyed its greatest success there. The early proponents of the “Western Civ” concept spoke and wrote explicitly of European civilization as an unbroken ladder of ideas, technologies, and cultural achievements that led to the present.

Along the way, of course, they included the United States as both a product of those European achievements and, in the twentieth century, as one of the staunchest defenders of that legacy.

That first generation of historians of Western Civilization succeeded in crafting what was to be the core of history curriculums for most of the twentieth century in American colleges and universities, not to mention high schools. The narrative in the introduction in this book follows its basic contours, without all of the qualifying remarks: it starts with Greece, goes through Rome, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, then on to the growth in European power leading up to the recent past. The traditional story made a hard and fast distinction between Western Civilization as the site of progress, and the rest of the world (usually referred to as the “Orient,” simply meaning “east,” all the way up until textbooks started changing their terms in the 1980s) which invariably lagged behind. Outside of the West, went the narrative, there was despotism, stagnation, and corruption, so it was almost inevitable that the West would eventually achieve global dominance.

This was, in hindsight, a somewhat surprising conclusion given when the narrative was invented. The West’s self-understanding as the most “civilized” culture had imploded with the world wars, but the inventors of Western Civilization as a concept were determined to not only rescue its legacy from that implosion, but to celebrate it as the *only* major historical legacy of relevance to the present. In doing so, they reinforced many of the intellectual dividing lines created centuries earlier: there was true civilization opposed by barbarians, there was an ongoing and unbroken legacy of achievement and progress, and most importantly, only people who were born in or descended from people born in Europe had played a significant historical role. The entire history of most of humankind was not just irrelevant to the narrative of European or American history, it was irrelevant to the history of the modern world for *everyone*. In other words, even Africans and Asians, to say nothing of the people of the Pacific or Native Americans, could have little of relevance to learn from their own history that was not somehow “obsolete” in the modern era. And yet, this astonishing conclusion was born from a culture that unleashed the most horrific destruction (*self*-destruction) ever witnessed by the human species.

The Approach of This Book (with Caveats)

This textbook follows the contours of the basic Western Civilization narrative described above in terms of chronology and, to an extent, geography because it was written to be compatible with most Western Civilization courses as they exist today. It deliberately breaks, however, from the “triumphalist” narrative that describes Western Civilization as the most successful, rational, and enlightened form of civilization in human history. It casts a wider geographical view than do traditional Western Civilization textbooks, focusing in many cases on the critical historical role of the Middle East, not just Europe. It also abandons the pretense that the history of Western Civilization was generally progressive, with the conditions of life and understanding of the natural world of most people improving over time (as a matter of fact, they did not).

The purpose of this approach is not to disparage the genuine breakthroughs, accomplishments, and forms of “progress” that did originate in “the West.” Technologies as diverse and important as the steam engine and antibiotics originated in the West. Major intellectual and ideological movements calling for religious toleration, equality before the law, and feminism all came into being in the West. For better and for worse, the West was also the point of origin of true globalization (starting with the European contact with the Americas, as noted above). It would be as misleading to

dismiss the history of Western Civilization as unimportant as it is to claim that only the history of Western Civilization *is* important.

Thus, this textbook attempts to present a balanced account of major events that occurred in the West over approximately the last 10,000 years. “Balance” is in the eye of the reader, however, so the account will not be satisfactory to many. The purpose of this introduction is to make explicit the background and the framework that informed the writing of the book, and the author chooses to release it as an Open Education Resource in the knowledge that many others will have the opportunity to modify it as they see fit.

Finally, a note on the *kind* of history this textbook covers is in order. For the sake of clarity and manageability, historians distinguish between different areas of historical study: political, intellectual, military, cultural, artistic, social, and so on. Historians have made enormous strides in the last sixty years in addressing various areas that were traditionally neglected, most importantly in considering the histories of the people who were *not* in power, including the common people of various epochs, of women for almost all of history, and of slaves and servants. The old adage that “history is written by the winners” is simply *untrue* – history has left behind mountains of evidence about the lives of those who had access to less personal autonomy than did social elites. Those elites did much to author some of the most familiar historical narratives, but those traditional narratives have been under sustained critique for several decades.

This textbook tries to address at least some of those histories, but here it will be found wanting by many. Given the vast breadth of history covered in its chapters, the bulk of the consideration is on “high level” political history, charting a chronological framework of major states, political events, and political changes. There are two reasons for that approach. First, the history of politics lends itself to a history of events linked together by causality: first something happened, and then something else happened because of it. In turn, there is a fundamental coherence and simplicity to textbook narratives of political history (one that infuriates many professional historians, who are trained to identify and study complexity). Political history can thus serve as an accessible starting place for newcomers to the study of history, providing a relatively easy-to-follow chronological framework.

The other, related, reason for the political framing of this textbook is that history has long since declined as a subject central to education from the elementary through high school levels in many parts of the United States. It is no longer possible to assume that anyone who has completed high school already has some idea of major (measured by their impact at the time and since) events of the past. This textbook attempts to use political history as, again, a starting point in considering events, people, movements, and ideas that changed the world at the time and continue to exert an influence in the present.

To be clear, not all of what follows has to do with politics in so many words. Considerable attention is also given to intellectual, economic, and to an extent, religious history. Social and cultural history are covered in less detail, both for reasons of space and the simple fact that the author was trained as an intellectual historian interested in political theory. These, hopefully, are areas that will be addressed in future revisions.

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Notes on the Second Edition

The second edition of this textbook attempts to redress some of the “missing pieces” noted in the conclusion of the introduction above. First, greater emphasis is placed on the history of the Middle East, especially in the period after the collapse of the political authority of the Abbasid Caliphate in the ninth century CE. The textbook now addresses the

histories of Persia (Iran) and the Ottoman Empire in considerable detail, emphasizing both their own political, religious, and economic developments and their respective relationships with other cultures. Second, much greater focus is given to the history of gender roles and to women's history.

From the perspective of the author, the new material on the Middle East integrates naturally with the narrative because it remains focused mostly on political history. The material on gender and women's history requires a shift in the overall approach of the textbook in that women were almost entirely excluded from traditional "high-level" political histories precisely because so few women were ever in positions of political authority until the recent past. The shift in focus to include more women's history necessarily entails greater emphasis not just on gender roles, but on the social history of everyday life, stepping away at times from the political history framework of the volumes as a whole. The result is a broader and more robust historical account than that of the earlier edition, although the overarching narrative is still driven by political developments.

Finally, a note on grammatical conventions: in keeping with most American English approaches, the writing errs on the side of capitalizing proper nouns. For example, terms like "the Church" when referring to the Catholic Church in its institutional presence, specific regions like "Western Europe," and historical eras like "the Middle Ages" and "the Enlightenment" are all capitalized. When possible, the names of individuals are kept as close to their authentic spelling and/or pronunciation as possible, hence "Chinggis Khan" instead of "Genghis Khan," "Wilhelm I" instead of "William I," and "Nikolai I" instead of "Nicholas I." Some exceptions have been made to avoid confusion where there is a prevailing English version, as in "Joseph Stalin" instead of the more accurate "Iosif Stalin." Diacritical marks are kept when possible in original spellings, as in the term "Führer" when discussing Adolf Hitler. Herculean efforts have gone into reducing the number of semicolons throughout the text, to little avail.

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SECTION 1

CHAPTER 1: THE ORIGINS OF CIVILIZATION

Introduction

What is “civilization”? In English, the word encompasses a wide variety of meanings, often implying a culture possessing some combination of learning, refinement, and political identity. As described in the introductory chapter, it is also a “loaded” term, replete with an implied division between civilization and its opposite, barbarism, with “civilized” people often eager to describe people who are of a different culture as being “uncivilized” in so many words. Fortunately, more practical and value-neutral definitions of the term also exist. Civilization as a historical phenomenon speaks to certain foundational technologies, most significantly agriculture, combined with a high degree of social specialization, technological progress (albeit of a very slow kind in the case of the pre-modern world), and cultural sophistication as expressed in art, learning, and spirituality.

In turn, the study of civilization has been the traditional focus of history, as an academic discipline, since the late nineteenth century. As academic fields became specialized over the course of the 1800s CE, history identified itself as the study of the past based on written artifacts. A sister field, archeology, developed as the study of the past based on non-written artifacts (such as the remains of bodies in grave sites, surviving buildings, and tools). Thus, for practical reasons, the subject of “history” as a field of study begins with the invention of writing, something that began with the earliest civilization itself, that of the Fertile Crescent (described below). That being noted, history and archeology remain closely intertwined, especially since so few written records remain from the remote past that most historians of the ancient world also perform archeological research, and all archeologists are also at least conversant with the relevant histories of their areas of study.

Hominids

Human beings are members of a species of hominid, which is the same biological classification that includes the advanced apes like chimpanzees. The earliest hominid ancestor of humankind was called *Australopithecus*: a biological species of African hominid (note: hominid is the biological “family” that encompasses great apes – *Australopithecus*, as well as *Homo Sapiens*, are examples of biological “species” within that family) that evolved about 3.9 million years ago. *Australopithecus* was similar to present-day chimpanzees, loping across the ground on all fours rather than standing upright, with brains about one-third the size of the modern human brain. They were the first to develop tool-making technology, chipping obsidian (volcanic glass) to make knives. From *Australopithecus*, various other hominid species evolved, building on the genetic advantages of having a large brain and being able to craft simple tools.

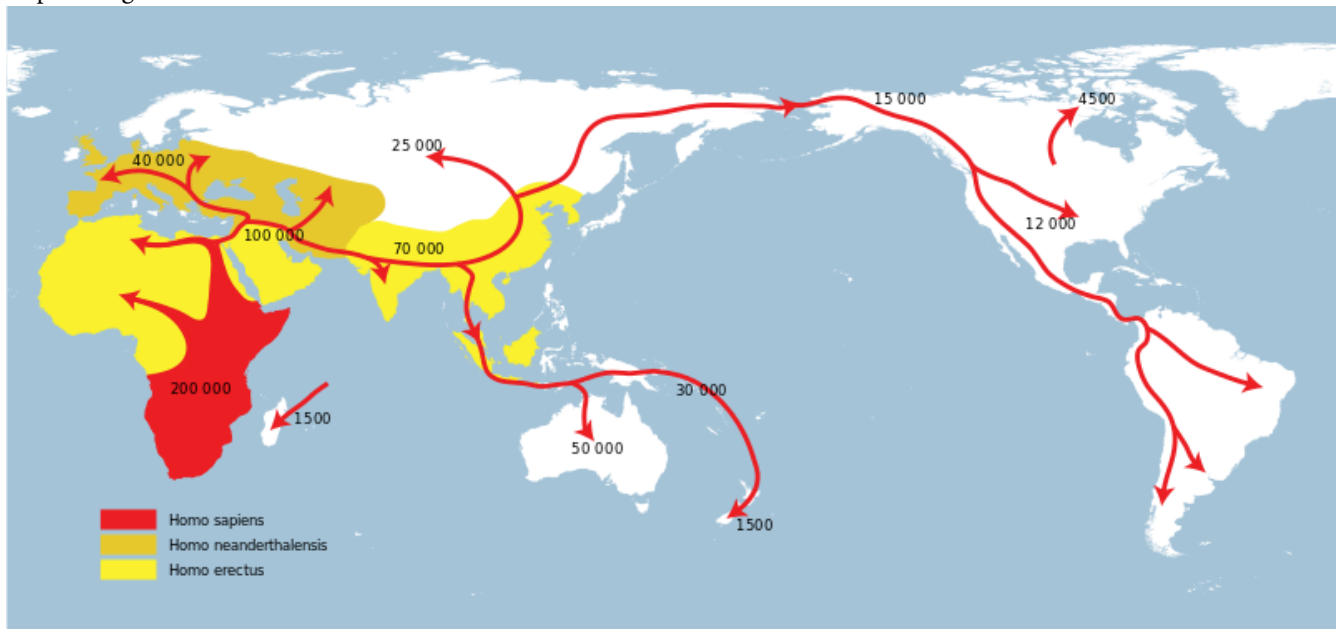
One noteworthy descendent of *Australopithecus* was *Homo Erectus*, which gets its name from the fact that it was the first hominid to walk upright. It also benefited from a brain three-fourths the size of the modern human equivalent. *Homo Erectus* developed more advanced stone tool-making than had *Australopithecus*, and survived until about 200,000 years ago, by which time the earliest *Homo sapiens* – humans – had long since evolved alongside them.

Homo sapiens emerged in a form biologically identical to present-day humankind by about 300,000 years ago

(fossil evidence frequently revises that number – the oldest known specimen was discovered in Morocco in 2017). Armed with their unparalleled craniums, Homo sapiens created sophisticated bone and stone implements, including weapons and tools, and also mastered the use of fire. They were thus able to hunt and protect themselves from animals that had far better natural weapons, and (through cooking) eat meat that would have been indigestible raw. Likewise, animal skins served as clothes and shelter, allowing them to exist in climates that they could not have settled otherwise.

Homo sapiens was split between two distinct types, physically different but able to interbreed, Neanderthals and Homo sapiens sapiens (the latter term means “the wisest man” in Greek). Neanderthals enjoyed a long period of existence between about 400,000 and 70,000 years ago, spreading from Africa to the Middle East and Europe. They were physically larger and stronger than Homo sapiens sapiens and were able to survive in colder conditions, which was a key asset during the long ice age that began around 100,000 years ago. Neanderthals congregated in small groups, apparently interacting only to exchange breeding partners (naturally, we have no idea how these exchanges were negotiated – the evidence of their lifestyle is drawn from fossils and archeology).

Homo sapiens sapiens were weaker and less able to deal with harsh conditions than neanderthals, staying confined to Africa for thousands of years after Neanderthals had spread to other regions. They did enjoy some key advantages, however, having longer limbs and congregating in much larger groups of up to 100 individuals. A recent archeological discovery (in 2019) demonstrated that Homo sapiens sapiens reached Europe and the Near East by 210,000 years ago, but that wave of migrants subsequently vanished. As conditions warmed by about 70,000 years ago another wave of Homo sapiens sapiens spread to the Middle East and Europe and started both interbreeding with and – probably – slowly killing off the Neanderthals, who vanished soon after. By that time, Homo sapiens sapiens was already in the process of spreading all over the world.

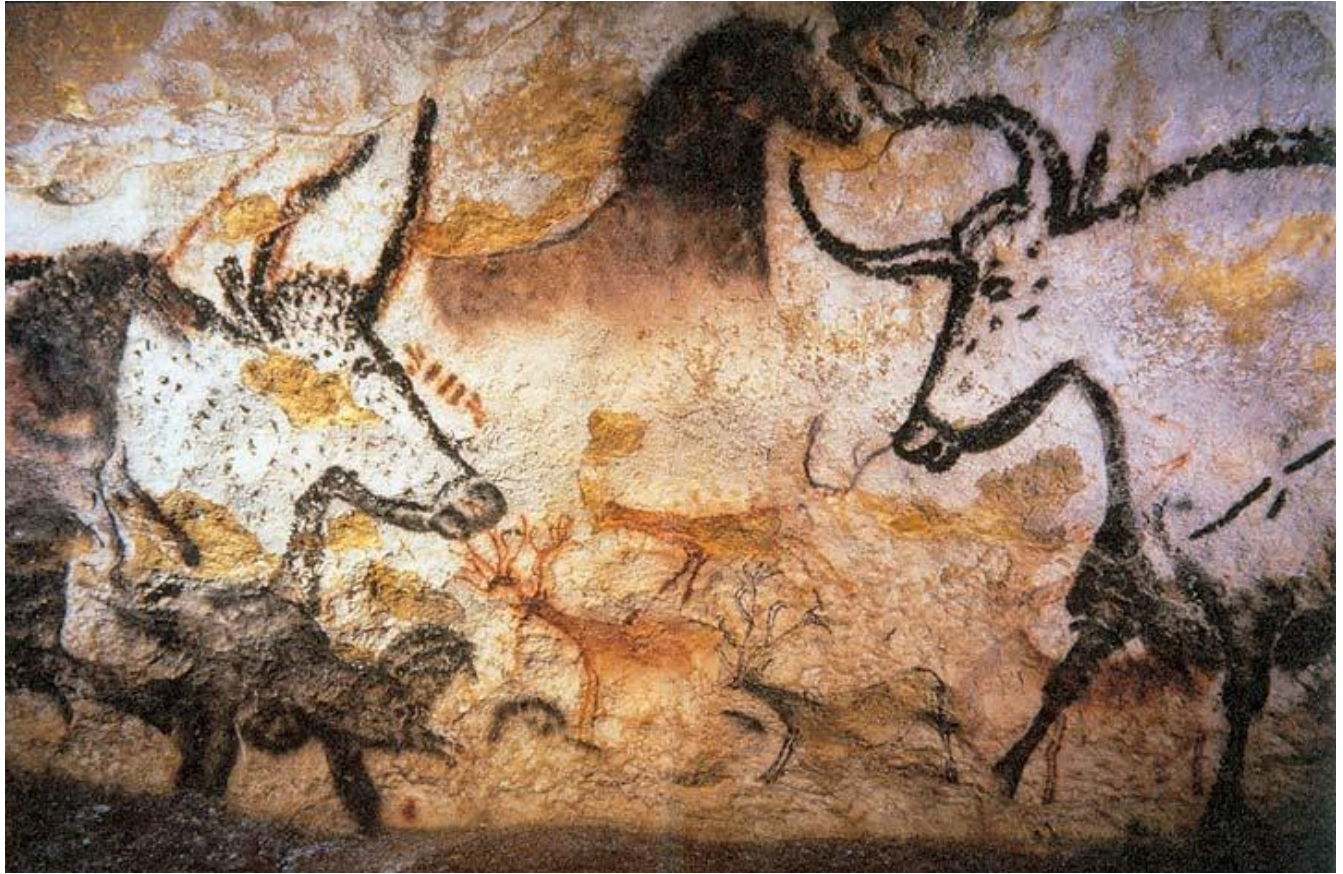


Of the advanced hominids, only homo sapiens spread around the entire globe.

That massive global emigration was complete by about 40,000 years ago (with the exception of the Americas, which took until about 15,000 years ago). During an ice age, humans traveled overland on the Bering Land Bridge, a chunk of land that used to connect eastern Russia to Alaska, and arrived in the Americas. Later, very enterprising ancient humans built seagoing canoes and settled in many of the Pacific Islands. Thus, well before ancient humans had developed

the essential technologies that are normally connotated with civilization, they had already accomplished transcontinental and transoceanic voyages and adapted to almost every climate on the planet.

Likewise, the absence of advanced technologies was not an impediment to the attempt to understand the world. One astonishing outgrowth of Homo sapiens' brain power was the creation of both art and spirituality. Early Homo sapiens painted on the walls of caves, most famously in what is today southern France, and at some point they also began the practice of burying the dead in prepared grave sites, indicating that they believed that the spirit somehow survived physical death. Artifacts that have survived from prehistory clearly indicate that Homo sapiens was not only creating physical tools to prosper, but creating art and belief systems in an attempt to make sense of the world at a higher level than mere survival.



Part of the Lascaux cave paintings in southern France.

Civilization and Agriculture

Thus, human beings have existed all over the world for many thousands of years. Human *civilization*, however, has not. The word civilization is tied to the Greek word for city, along with words like “civil” and “civic.” The key element of the definition is the idea that a large number of people come together in a group that is too large to consist only of an extended family group. Once that occurred other discoveries and developments, from writing to mathematics to organized religion, followed.

Up until that point in history, however, cities had not been possible because there was never enough food to sustain a large group that stayed in a single place for long. Ancient humans were hunter-gatherers. They followed herds

of animals on the hunt and they gathered edible plants as well. This way of life fundamentally *worked* for hundreds of thousands of years – it was the basis of life for the very people who populated the world as described above. The problem with the hunter-gatherer lifestyle, however, is that it is extremely precarious: there is never a significant surplus of caloric energy, that is, of food, and thus population levels among hunting-gathering people were generally static. There just was not enough food to sustain significant population growth.

Starting around 9,500 BCE, humans in a handful of regions around the world discovered agriculture, that is, the deliberate cultivation of edible plants. People discovered that certain seeds could be planted and crops could be reliably grown. Sometimes after that, people in the same regions began to domesticate animals, keeping herds of cattle, pigs, sheep, and goats in controlled conditions, defending them from predators, and eating them and using their hides. It is impossible to overstate how important these changes were. Even fairly primitive agriculture can produce fifty times more caloric energy than hunting and gathering does. The very basis of human life is how much energy we can derive from food; with agriculture and animal domestication, it was possible for families to grow much larger and overall population levels to rise dramatically.

One of the noteworthy aspects of this transition is that hunting-gathering people actually had much more leisure time than farmers did (and were also healthier and longer-lived). Archaeologists and anthropologists have determined that hunter-gatherer people generally only “worked” for a few hours a day, and spent the rest of their time in leisure activities. Meanwhile, farmers have always worked incredibly hard for very long hours; in many places in the ancient world, there were groups of people who remained hunter-gatherers despite knowing about agriculture, and it is quite possible they did that because they saw no particular advantage in adopting agriculture. There were also many areas that practiced both – right up until the modern era, many farmers also foraged in areas of semi-wilderness near their farms.

Agriculture was developed in a few different places completely independently. According to archeological evidence, agriculture did not start in one place and then spread; it started in a few distinct areas and then spread from those areas, sometimes meeting in the middle. For example, agriculture developed independently in China by 5000 BCE, and of course agriculture in the Americas (starting in western South America) had nothing to do with its earlier invention in the Fertile Crescent.

The most important regions for the development of Western Civilization were Mesopotamia and Egypt, because it was from those regions that the different technologies, empires, and ideas that came together in Western Civilization were forged. Thus, it is important to emphasize that the original heartland of Western Civilization was not in Greece or anywhere else in Europe; it was in the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the different elements of Western Civilization, things like scientific inquiry, the religions of the book (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), engineering, and mathematics, were originally conceived in Mesopotamia and Egypt.



The earliest sites of agriculture emerged in the Fertile Crescent, the region encompassing Egypt along the Nile river, the Near East, and Mesopotamia

Early agriculture, the kind of agriculture that made later advances in civilization possible, consisted of people simply planting seeds by hand or with shovels and picks. There were some important technological discoveries that took place over time that allowed much greater crop yields, however. They included:

Crop rotation, which people discovered sometime around 8000 BCE. Crop rotation is the process of planting a different kind of crop in a field each year, then “rotating” to the next field in the next year. Every few years, a field is allowed to “lie fallow,” meaning nothing is planted and animals can graze on it. This process serves to return nutrients to the soil that would otherwise be leached out by successive years of planting, and it greatly increases yields overall.

The metal plow, which people invented around 5000 BCE. Plows are hugely important; they opened up areas to cultivation that would be too rocky or the soil too hard to support crops normally.

Irrigation, which happened in an organized fashion sometime around the same time in Mesopotamia.

The early civilization of Mesopotamia consisted of fairly small farming communities. A common theory is that they may have originally come together in order to coordinate the need for irrigation systems; the Tigris and Euphrates rivers are notorious for flooding unpredictably, so it took a lot of human effort to create the dikes and canals necessary to divert floodwaters and irrigate the farmlands near the rivers. Recent archaeological evidence suggests other motives, however, including the need for protection from rival groups and access to natural resources that were concentrated in a specific area.

Of the areas in which agriculture developed, the Fertile Crescent enjoyed significant advantages. Many nutritious staple crops like wheat and barley grew naturally in the region. Several of the key animal species that were first domesticated by humans were also native to the region, including goats, sheep, and cows. The region was also much more temperate and fertile than it is today, and the transition from hunting and gathering to large-scale farming was possible in Mesopotamia in a way that it was not in most other regions of the ancient world.

The food surplus that agriculture made possible in the Fertile Crescent eventually led to the emergence of the first large settlements. Some of the earliest that were large enough to qualify as towns or even small cities were Jericho in Palestine, which existed by about 8000 BCE, and Çatal Höyük in Turkey, which existed by about 7500 BCE. There were certainly many others in the Fertile Crescent, but due to their antiquity the remains of only a few – Jericho and Çatal Höyük most importantly – have survived to be studied by archaeologists.

From their remains it becomes possible to piece together certain facts about ancient societies on the cusp of civilization. First, it is clear that the earliest settlements (already) had significant social divisions. Hunter-gatherer societies have very few social divisions; there may be chiefs and shamans, but all members of the group are roughly equal in social power. One of the traits of civilization is the increasing complexity of social divisions, and with them, of social hierarchy. In Çatal Höyük, tombs have revealed that some people were buried with jewelry and wealth, while others were buried with practically nothing. It is very clear that even at such an ancient time, there were already major divisions between rich and poor.

That wealth was based on access to natural resources. Çatal Höyük was built on a site that had a large deposit of obsidian (also called volcanic glass). Obsidian could be chipped to create extremely sharp tools and weapons. Tools made from Çatal Höyük's obsidian have been discovered by archaeologists hundreds of miles from Çatal Höyük itself; thus, it is clear that Çatal Höyük was already part of long-distance trade networks, trading obsidian for other goods with other towns and villages. In essence, Çatal Höyük's trade in obsidian proves that specialized manufacturing (in this case, of obsidian tools) and trade networks have been around since the dawn of civilization itself.

In turn, the social divisions revealed in Çatal Höyük's graves reveal another key aspect of civilization: specialization. Social divisions themselves are only possible when there is a food surplus. If everyone has to work all the time to get enough food, there is little time left over for anyone to specialize in other activities. The reason that hunter-gatherer societies produce little in the way of scholarship or technology is that they do not have the resources for people to specialize in those areas. When agriculture made a food surplus possible for the first time in history, however, not everyone had to work on getting enough food, and soon, certain people managed to lay claim to new areas of expertise. Even in a settlement as ancient as Çatal Höyük, there were craftsmen, builders, and perhaps most interestingly, priests. In the ruins of the settlement archaeologists have found dozens of shrines to ancient gods and evidence of there being a priesthood.

The existence of a priesthood and organized worship in Çatal Höyük is striking, because it means that people were trying in a systematic way to understand how the world worked. In turn, priests were probably the world's first intellectuals, people who use their minds for a living. Priests probably directed the efforts to build irrigation systems and

made the decisions about building and rebuilding the town since they had a monopoly on explaining the larger forces at work in human life. Especially in a period like the ancient past when natural forces – forces like floods and disease – were vastly more powerful than the ability of humans to control them, priests were the only people who could offer an explanation.

Not just in Mesopotamia, but all around the ancient world, there is significant evidence of religious belief systems centered on two major themes: fertility and death. One example of this are the “Venus figurines” depicting pregnant women with exaggerated physical features. Similar figures can be seen from all over the ancient Middle East and Europe, demonstrating that ancient peoples hoped to shape the forces that were most important to them. Early religions hoped to ensure fertility and stave off the many natural disasters that ancient peoples had no control over.



An example of a “Venus figurine” excavated at Çatal Höyük.

The earliest surviving work of literature in the world, the Mesopotamian story known as The Epic of Gilgamesh, was obsessed with the theme of human mortality. Ancient peoples already sensed that human beings were in the process of accomplishing things that had never been accomplished before, namely the construction of large settlements,

the creation of new technologies, and the invention of organized religions, and yet they also sensed that the human experience could be fraught with misery, despair, and what seemed like totally unfair and arbitrary disasters. And, as the Epic of Gilgamesh demonstrates, ancient peoples were well aware that no matter how great the accomplishments of a person during life, that person would inevitably die. That concern – the challenge of making sense of human existence in the face of death – is sometimes referred to by philosophers “the human condition,” and it is one that ancient peoples grappled with in their religious systems.

Mesopotamia

Mesopotamia, on the eastern end of the Fertile Crescent, was the cradle of Western Civilization. It has the distinction of being the very first place on earth in which the development of agriculture led to the emergence of the essential technologies of civilization. Many of the great scientific advances to follow, including mathematics, astronomy, and engineering, along with political networks and forms of organization like kingdoms, empires, and bureaucracy all originated in Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia is a region in present-day Iraq. The word Mesopotamia is Greek, meaning “between the rivers,” and it refers to the area between the Tigris and Euphrates, two of the most important waterways in the ancient world. It is no coincidence that it was here that civilization was born: like nearby Egypt and the Nile river, early agriculture relied on a regular supply of water in a highly fertile region. The ancient Mesopotamians had everything they needed for agriculture, they just had to figure out how to cultivate cereals and grains (natural varieties of which naturally occurred in the area, as noted in the last chapter) and how to manage the sudden floods of both rivers.

Mesopotamia’s climate was much more temperate and fertile than it is today. There is a great deal of evidence (e.g. in ancient art, in archeological discoveries of ancient settlements, etc.) that Mesopotamia was once a grassland that could support both large herds of animals and abundant crops. Thus, between the water provided by the rivers and their tributaries, the temperate climate, and the prevalence of the plant and animal species in the area that were candidates for domestication, Mesopotamia was better suited to agriculture than practically any other region on the planet.

While the Tigris and Euphrates provided abundant water, they were highly unpredictable and given to periodic flooding. The southern region of Mesopotamia, Sumer, has an elevation decline of only 50 meters over about 500 kilometers of distance, meaning the riverbeds of both rivers would have shifted and spread out over the plains in the annual floods. Over time, the inhabitants of villages realized that they needed to work together to build larger-scale levees, canals, and dikes to protect against the floods. One theory regarding the origins of large-scale settlements is that, when enough villages got together to work on these hydrological systems, they needed some kind of leadership to direct the efforts, leading to systems of governance and administration. Thus, the earliest cities in the world may have been born not just out of agriculture, but out of the need to manage the natural resource of water.

The first settlements that straddled the line between “towns” and real “cities” existed around 4000 BCE, but a truly urban society in Mesopotamia was in place closer 3000 BCE, wherein a few dozen city-states managed the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates. A note on the chronology: the town of Çatal Höyük discussed above existed over four *thousand* years before the first great cities in Mesopotamia. It is important to bear this in mind, because when considering ancient history (in this case, in a short chapter of a textbook), it can seem like it all happened quite rapidly, that people discovered agriculture and soon they were building massive cities and developing advanced technology. That simply was not the

case: compared to the hundreds of thousands of years preceding the discovery of agriculture, things moved “quickly,” but from a modern perspective, it took a very long time for things to change.

One compelling theory about the period between the invention of agriculture and the emergence of large cities (again, between about 8,000 BCE and 4000 BCE) is that a hybrid lifestyle of farming and gathering appears to have been very common in the large wetlands along the banks of the Euphrates and Tigris. Given the richness of dietary options in the region at the time, people lived in small communities for millennia without feeling compelled to build larger settlements. Somehow, however, a regime eventually emerged that imposed a new form of social organization and hierarchy, introducing taxation, large-scale building projects, and unfree labor (i.e. both slavery and forms of indentured labor). In turn, this appears to have occurred in the areas that grew cereal grains like wheat and barley extensively, because cereal grains were easy to collect and store, making them easy to tax.

The result of these new hierarchies were the first true cities emerged in the southern region of Sumer. There, the two rivers join in a large delta that flows into the Persian Gulf. Farther up the rivers, the northern region of Mesopotamia was known as Akkad. The division is both geographical and lingual: ancient Sumerian is not related to any modern language, but the Akkadian family of languages was Semitic, related to modern languages like Arabic and Hebrew. Urban civilization eventually flourished in both regions, starting in Sumer but quickly spreading north.

One early Sumerian city was Uruk, which was a large city by 3500 BCE. Uruk had about 50,000 people in the city itself and the surrounding region. It was a major center for long-distance trade, with its trade networks stretching all across the Middle East and as far east as the Indus river valley of India, with merchants relying on caravans of donkeys and the use of wheeled carts. Trade linked Mesopotamia and Anatolia (the region of present-day Turkey) as well. The economy of Uruk was what historians call “redistributive,” in which a central authority has the right to control all economic activity, essentially taxing all of it, and then re-distributing it as that authority sees fit. Practically speaking, this entailed the collection of foodstuffs and wealth by each city-state’s government, which then used it to “pay” (sometimes in daily allotments of food and beer) workers tasked with constructing walls, roads, temples, and palaces.



The influence of Sumerian civilization was felt all over the Mesopotamian region. The above map depicts the “Urukean expansion,” a period in the fourth millennium BCE in which Sumerian material culture (and presumably Sumerian people) spread hundreds of miles from Sumer itself.

Political leaders in ancient Mesopotamia appear to have been drawn from both priesthoods and the warrior elite, with the two classes working closely together in governing the cities. Each Mesopotamian city was believed to be “owned” by a patron god, a deity that watched over it and would respond to prayers if they were properly made and accompanied by rituals and sacrifices. The priests of Uruk predicted the future and explained the present in terms of the will of the gods, and they claimed to be able to influence the gods through their rituals. They claimed all of the economic output of Uruk and its trade network because the city’s patron god “owned” the city, which justified the priesthood’s control. They did not only tax the wealth, the crops, and the goods of the subjects of Uruk, but they also had a right to demand labor, requiring the common people (i.e. almost everyone) to work on the irrigation systems, the temples, and the other major public buildings.

Meanwhile, the first kings were almost certainly war leaders who led their city-states against rival city-states and against foreign invaders. They soon ascended to positions of political power in their cities, working with the priesthood to maintain control over the common people. The Mesopotamian priesthood endorsed the idea that the gods had chosen the kings to rule, a belief that quickly bled over into the idea that the kings were at least in part divine themselves. Kings

had superseded priests as the rulers by about 3000 BCE, although in all cases kings were closely linked to the power of the priesthood. In fact, one of the earliest terms for “king” was *ensis*, meaning the representative of the god who “really” ruled the city. Thus, the typical early Mesopotamian city-state, right around 2500 BCE, was of a city-state engaged in long-distance trade, ruled by a king who worked closely with the city’s priesthood and who frequently made war against his neighbors.

Belief, Thought and Learning

The Mesopotamians believed that the gods were generally cruel, capricious, and easily offended. Humans had been created by the gods not to enjoy life, but to toil, and the gods would inflict pain and suffering on humans whenever they (the gods) were offended. A major element of the power of the priesthood in the Mesopotamian cities was the fact that the priests claimed to be able to soothe and assuage the gods, to prevent the gods from sending yet another devastating flood, epidemic, or plague of locusts. It is not too far off to say that the most important duty of Mesopotamian priests was to beg the gods for mercy.

All of the Mesopotamian cities worshiped the same gods, referred to as the Mesopotamian pantheon (pantheon means “group of gods.”) As noted above, each city had its own specific patron deity who “owned” and took particular interest in the affairs of that city. In the center of each city was a huge temple called a ziggurat, or step-pyramid, a few of which still survive today. Unlike the Egyptian pyramids that came later, Mesopotamian ziggurats were not tombs, but temples, and as such they were the centerpieces of the great cities. They were not just the centers of worship, but were also banks and workshops, with the priests overseeing the exchange of wealth and the production of crafts.

Alongside the development of religious belief, science made major strides in Mesopotamian civilization. The Mesopotamians were the first great astronomers, accurately mapping the movement of the stars and recording them in star charts. They invented functional wagons and chariots and, as seen in the case of both ziggurats and irrigation systems, they were excellent engineers. They also invented the 360 degrees used to measure angles in geometry and they were the first to divide a system of timekeeping that used a 60-second minute. Finally, they developed a complex and accurate system of arithmetic that would go on to form the basis of mathematics as it was used and understood throughout the ancient Mediterranean world.

At the same time, however, the Mesopotamians employed “magical” practices. The priests did not just conduct sacrifices to the gods, they practiced the art of divination: the practice of trying to predict the future. To them, magic and science were all aspects of the same pursuit, namely trying to learn about how the universe functioned so that human beings could influence it more effectively. From the perspective of the ancient Mesopotamians, there was little that distinguished religious and magical practices from “real” science in the modern sense. Their goals were the same, and the Mesopotamians actively experimented to develop both systems in tandem.

The Mesopotamians also invented the first systems of writing, first developed in order to keep track of tax records sometime around 3000 BCE. Their style of writing is called *cuneiform*; it started out as a pictographic system in which each word or idea was represented by a symbol, but it eventually changed to include both pictographs and syllabic symbols (i.e. symbols that represent a sound instead of a word). While it was originally used just for record-keeping, writing soon evolved into the creation of true forms of literature.



An example of cuneiform script, carved into a stone tablet, dating from c. 2400 BCE.

The first known author in history whose name and some of whose works survive was a Sumerian high priestess, Enheduanna. Daughter of the great conqueror Sargon of Akkad (described below), Enheduanna served as the high priestess of the goddess Innana and the god of the moon, Nanna, in the city of Ur after its conquest by Sargon's forces. Enheduanna wrote a series of hymns to the gods that established her as the earliest poet in recorded history, praising Innana and, at one point, asking for the aid of the gods during a period of political turmoil.

Enheduanna did not record the first known work of prose, however, whose author or authors remain unknown. Remembered as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the earliest surviving work of literature, it is the best known of the surviving Mesopotamian stories. The Epic describes the adventures of a partly-divine king of the city of Uruk, Gilgamesh, who is joined by his friend Enkidu as they fight monsters, build great works, and celebrate their own power and greatness. Enkidu is punished by the gods for their arrogance and he dies. Gilgamesh, grief-stricken, goes in search of immortality when he realizes that he, too, will someday die. In the end, immortality is taken from him by a serpent, and humbled, he returns to Uruk a wiser, better king.

Like Enheduanna's hymns, which reveal at times her own personality and concerns, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a fascinating story in that it speaks to a very sophisticated and recognizable set of issues: the qualities that make a good leader, human failings and frailty, the power and importance of friendship, and the unfairness of fate. Likewise, a central focus of the epic is Gilgamesh's quest for immortality when he confronts the absurdity of death. Death's seeming unfairness is a distinctly philosophical concern that demonstrates an advanced engagement with human nature and the human condition present in Mesopotamian society.

Along with literature, the other great written accomplishments of the Mesopotamians were their systems of law. The most substantial surviving law code is that of the Babylonian king Hammurabi, dating from about 1780 BCE. Hammurabi's law code went into great detail about the rights and obligations of Babylonians. It drew legal distinctions between the "free men" or aristocratic citizens, commoners, and slaves, treating the same crimes very differently. The laws speak to a deep concern with fairness – the code tried to protect people from unfair terms on loans, it provided redress for damaged property, it even held city officials responsible for catching criminals. It also included legal protections for women in various ways. While women were unquestionably secondary to men in their legal status, the Code still afforded them more rights and protections than did many codes of law that emerged thousands of years later.

War and Empire

Mesopotamia represents the earliest indications of large-scale warfare. Mesopotamian cities always had walls – some of which were 30 feet high and 60 feet wide, essentially enormous piles of earth strengthened by brick. The evidence (based on pictures and inscriptions) suggests, however, that most soldiers were peasant conscripts with little or no armor and light weapons. In these circumstances, defense almost always won out over offense, making the actual conquest of foreign cities very difficult if not impossible, and hence while cities were around for thousands of years (again, from about 3500 BCE), there were no *empires* yet. Cities warred on one another for territory, captives, and riches, but they rarely succeeded in conquering other cities outright. War was instead primarily about territorial raids and perhaps noble combats meant to demonstrate strength and power.

Over the course of the third millennium BCE, chariots became increasingly important in warfare. Early chariots were four-wheeled carts that were clumsy and hard to maneuver. They were still very effective against hapless peasants with spears, however, so it appears that when rival Mesopotamian city-states fought actual battles, they consisted largely of massed groups of chariots carrying archers who shot at each other. Noble charioteers and archers could win glory for their skill, even though these battles were probably not very lethal (compared to later forms of war, at any rate).

The first time that a single military leader managed to conquer and unite many of the Mesopotamian cities was in about 2340 BCE, when the king Sargon the Great, also known as Sargon of Akkad (father of Enheduanna, described above), conquered almost all of the major Mesopotamian cities and forged the world's first true empire, in the process uniting the regions of Akkad and Sumer. His empire appears to have held together for about another century, until somewhere around 2200 BCE. Sargon also created the world's first standing army, a group of soldiers employed by the state who did not have other jobs or duties. One inscription claims that “5,400 soldiers ate daily in his palace,” and there are pictures not only of soldiers, but of siege weapons and mining (digging under the walls of enemy fortifications to cause them to collapse).



The expansion of Sargon's empire, which eventually stretched from present-day Lebanon to Sumer.

Sargon himself was born an illegitimate child and was, at one point, a royal gardener who worked his way up in the palace, eventually seizing power in a coup. He boasted about his lowly origins and claimed to protect and represent the interests of common people and merchants. Sargon appointed governors in his conquered cities, and his whole empire was designed to extract wealth from all of its cities and farmlands and pump it back to the capital of Akkad, which he built somewhere near present-day Baghdad. While his descendents did their best to hold on to power, the resentment of the subject cities eventually resulted in the empire's collapse.

The next major Mesopotamian empire was the "Ur III" dynasty, named after the city-state of Ur which served as its capital and founded in about 2112 BCE. Just as Sargon had, the king Ur-Nammu conquered and united most of the city-states of Mesopotamia. The most important historical legacy of the Ur III dynasty was its complex system of bureaucracy, which was more effective in governing the conquered cities than Sargon's rule had been.

Bureaucracy (which literally means "rule by office") is one of the most underappreciated phenomena in history, probably because the concept is not particularly exciting to most people. The fact remains that there is no more efficient way yet invented to manage large groups of people: it was viable to coordinate small groups through the personal control and influence of a few individuals, but as cities grew and empires formed, it became untenable to have everything boil down to personal relationships. An efficient bureaucracy, one in which the individual people who were part of it were less important than the system itself (i.e. its rules, its records, and its chain of command), was always essential in large political units.

The Ur III dynasty is an example of an early bureaucratic empire. Historians have more records of this dynasty than any other from this period of ancient Mesopotamia thanks to its focus on codifying its regulations. The kings of Ur III were very adept at playing off their civic and military leaders against each other, appointing generals to direct troops in other cities and making sure that each governor's power relied on his loyalty to the king. The administration of the Ur III dynasty divided the empire into three distinct tax regions, and its tax bureaucracy collected wealth without alienating

the conquered peoples as much as Sargon and his descendants had (despite its relative success, Ur III, too, eventually collapsed, although it was due to a foreign invasion rather than an internal revolt).

Finally, there was the great empire of Hammurabi (which lasted from 1792 – 1595 BCE), the author of the code of laws noted above. By about 1780 BCE, Hammurabi conquered many of the city-states near Babylon in the heart of Mesopotamia. He was not only concerned with laws, but also with ensuring the economic prosperity of his empire; while it is impossible to know how sincere he was about it, he wanted to be remembered as a kind of benevolent dictator who looked after his subjects. The Babylonian empire re-centered Mesopotamia as a whole on Babylon. It lasted until 1595 BCE when it was defeated by an empire from Anatolia known as the Hittites.

What all of these ancient empires had in common beyond a common culture was that they were very precarious. Their bureaucracies were not large enough or organized enough to manage large populations easily, and rebellions were frequent. There was also the constant threat of what the surviving texts refer to as “bandits,” which in this context means the same thing as “barbarians.” To the north of Mesopotamia is the beginning of the great steppes of Central Asia, the source of limitless and almost nonstop invasions throughout ancient history. Nomads from the steppe regions were the first to domesticate horses, and for thousands of years only steppe peoples knew how to fight directly from horseback instead of using chariots. Thus, the rulers of the Mesopotamian city-states and empires all had to contend with policing their borders against a foe they could not pursue, while still maintaining control over their own cities.

This precarity was responsible for the fact that these early empires were not especially long-lasting, and were unable to conquer territory outside of Mesopotamia itself. What came afterwards were the first early empires that, through a combination of governing techniques, beliefs, and technology, were able to grow much larger and more powerful.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Homo sapiens map](#) – NordNordWest

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[Sumerian expansion map](#) – Sémhur

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CHAPTER 2: EGYPT

As noted in the last chapter, the Mesopotamians regarded the gods as cruel and arbitrary and thought that human existence was not a very pleasant experience. This attitude was not only shaped by all of the things that ancient people did not understand, like disease, weather, and death itself, but by the simple fact that it was often difficult to live next to the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flooded unpredictably and necessitated constant work in order to be useful for irrigation. Likewise, the threat of invasion from both rival cities and from foreigners (both “barbarians” and more organized groups) threatened to disrupt whatever stability existed. Life for most Mesopotamians, especially the vast majority who were common farmers, was not easy.

Things were a bit different in the other great ancient civilization of the eastern Mediterranean: Egypt, whose civilization developed along the banks of the Nile river. The Nile is the world’s longest river, stretching over 4,000 miles from its mouth in the Mediterranean to its origin in Lake Victoria in Central Africa. Because of consistent weather patterns, the Nile floods every year at just about the same time (late summer), depositing enormous amounts of mud and silt along its banks and making it one of the most fertile regions in the world. The essential source of energy for the Egyptians was thus something that could be predicted and planned for in a way that was impossible in Mesopotamia. There is a direct connection between this predictability and the incredible stability of Egyptian civilization, which (despite new kings and new dynasties and the occasional foreign invasion) remained remarkably stable and consistent for thousands of years.

The Egyptians themselves called the Nile valley “Kemet,” the Black Land, because of the annually-renewed black soil that arrived with the flood. For the most part, this *was* ancient Egypt: a swath of land between 10 and 20 miles wide (and in some places merely 1 or 2 miles wide) made up of incredibly fertile soil that relied on the floods of the Nile. This land was so agriculturally productive that Egyptian peasants could bring in harvests three times as bountiful of those in other regions like Mesopotamia. In turn, this created an enormous surplus of wealth for the royal government, which had the right to tax and redistribute it (as did the Mesopotamian states to the east). Beyond that strip of land were deserts populated by people the Egyptians simply dismissed as “bandits” – meaning nomads and tribal groups, not just robbers.



Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom came into being with the unification of Lower Egypt, where the Nile empties into the Mediterranean, and Upper Egypt, where the Nile leads into Nubia (present-day Sudan).

There were three major periods in ancient Egyptian history, the time during which Egypt was not subject to foreign powers and during which it developed its distinctive culture and built its spectacular examples of monumental architecture: the Old Kingdom (2680 – 2200 BCE), the Middle Kingdom (2040 – 1720 BCE), and the New Kingdom (1550 – 1150 BCE). There were also two “intermediate periods” between the Old and Middle Kingdoms (The First Intermediate Period, 2200 – 2040 BCE) and Middle and New Kingdoms (The Second Intermediate Period, 1720 – 1550 BCE). These were periods during which the political control of the ruling dynasty broke down and rival groups fought for control. The very large overarching story of ancient Egyptian history is that each of the different major kingdoms was quite stable and relatively peaceful, while the intermediary periods were troubled, violent, and chaotic. The remarkable thing about the history overall is the simple fact of its longevity; even compared to other ancient cultures (Mesopotamia, for instance), Egyptian politics were incredibly consistent.

The concept of these different periods was created by Manetho, an Egyptian priest who, in about 300 BCE,

recorded the “definitive” history of the ancient kings and created the very notion of the old, middle, and new kingdoms. While that periodization overlooks some of the specifics of Egyptian history, it is still the preferred method for dating ancient Egypt to this day because of its simplicity and clarity.

Also, a note on nomenclature: the term “pharaoh” means “great house,” the term used for the royal palace and its vast supporting bureaucracy. It came to be used to refer to the king himself starting in the New Kingdom period; it would be as if the American president was called “the White House” in everyday language. This chapter will use the term “king” for the kings of Egypt leading up to the New Kingdom, then “pharaoh” for the New Kingdom rulers to reflect the accurate use of the term.

The Political history of ancient Egypt

Egypt was divided between “Upper Egypt,” the southern stretch of the Nile Valley that relied on the Nile floods for irrigation, and “Lower Egypt,” the enormous delta region where the Nile meets the Mediterranean. The two regions had been politically distinct for centuries, but (according to both archeology and the dating system created by Manetho) in roughly 3100 BCE Narmer, a king of Upper Egypt, conquered Lower Egypt and united the country for the first time. The date used for the founding of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, 2680 BCE, is when the third royal dynasty to rule all of Egypt established itself. Its king, Djoser, was the first to commission an enormous tomb to house his remains when he died: the first pyramid. The Old Kingdom represented a long, unbroken line of kings that presided over the first full flowering of Egyptian culture, architecture, and prosperity.

The Old Kingdom united Egypt under a single ruling house, developed systems of record-keeping, and formed an all-important caste of scribes, the royal bureaucrats who mastered hieroglyphic writing. Likewise, the essential characteristics of Egyptian religion emerged during the Old Kingdom, especially the idea that the king was actually a god and that his rule ensured that the world itself would continue – the Egyptians thought that if there was no king or the proper prayers were not recited by the priests, terrible chaos and destruction would reign on earth.

The Old Kingdom was stable and powerful, although its kings did not use that power to expand their borders beyond Egypt itself. Instead, all of Old Kingdom society revolved around the production of agricultural surpluses from the Nile, efficiently cataloged and taxed by the royal bureaucracy and “spent” on building enormous temples and, in time, tombs. The pyramids of Egypt were all built during the Old Kingdom, and their purpose was to house the bodies of the kings so that their spirits could travel to the land of the dead and join their fellow gods in the afterlife (thereby maintaining *ma’at* – sacred order and balance).



A present-day picture of the Great Pyramid, outside of Cairo.

The pyramids are justly famous as the ultimate example of Egyptian prosperity and ingenuity. The Great Pyramid of Khufu, the single largest pyramid of the period, contained over 2.5 million stone blocks, each weighing approximately 2.5 tons. The sheer amount of energy expended on the construction of the pyramids is thus staggering; it was only the incredible bounty of the Nile and its harvests that enabled the construction of the pyramids by providing the calories consumed by the workers and draught animals, the wealth used to employ the supporting bureaucracy, and the size of the population that sustained the entire enterprise. Likewise, while the details are now lost, the Old Kingdom's government must have been highly effective at tax collection and the distribution of food, supplies, and work teams. Pyramids on the scale of the Old Kingdom would have been all but impossible anywhere else in the world at the time.

A major factor in the stability of Old Kingdom Egypt was that it was very isolated. Despite its geographical proximity to Mesopotamia and Anatolia, Egypt at the time was largely separated from the civilizations of those regions. The Sinai Peninsula, which divides Egypt from present-day Palestine and Israel, is about 120 miles of desert. With a few violent exceptions, no major incursions were able to cross over Sinai, and contact with the cultures of Mesopotamia and the Near East was limited as a result. Likewise, even though Egypt is on the Mediterranean, sailing technology was so primitive that there was little contact with other cultures via the sea.

Around 2200 BCE, two hundred years after the last pyramids were built, the Old Kingdom collapsed, leading to the First Intermediate Period. The reason for the collapse is not clear, but it probably had to do with the very infrequent occurrence of drought. There are written records from this period of instability, known as the First Intermediate Period, that make it clear that Egyptians knew very well that things had been fundamentally upset and imbalanced, and they did not know what to do about it. The kings were supposed to oversee the harmony of life and yet the royal dynasty had collapsed without a replacement. This disrupted the entire Egyptian worldview.

In turn, this disruption prompted a development in Egyptian religion. The Egyptian religion of the Old Kingdom had emphasized life on earth; even though the pyramids were tombs built to house the kings and the things they would need on their journey to the afterlife, there are no records with details about how most people would fare after they died. This changed during the First Intermediate Period, when the Egyptians invented the idea that the suffering of the present life might be overcome in a more perfect world to come. After death, the soul would be brought before a judge of the gods, who would weigh the heart on scales against the ideals of harmony and order. At this point, the heart might betray the soul, telling the god all of the sins its owner had committed in life. The lucky and virtuous person, though, would see their heart balance against the ideal of order and the soul would be rewarded with eternal life. Otherwise, their heart would be tossed to a crocodile-headed demon and devoured, the soul perishing in the process.

Monumental building ceased during the Intermediate Period – there were no more pyramids, palaces, or temples being built. A major social change that occurred was that royal officials away from the capital started to inherit titles, and thus it was the first time there was a real noble class with its own inherited power and land. Some historians have argued that a major cause of the collapse of royal authority was the growth in power of the nobility: in other words, royal authority did not fall apart first and lead to elites seizing more power, elites seized power and thereby weakened royal authority. The irony of the period is that the economy of Egypt actually diversified and expanded. It seems to have been a time in which a new elite commissioned royal-inspired goods and hence supported emerging craftspeople.

The Middle Kingdom was the next great Egyptian kingdom of the ancient world. The governor of the city of Thebes reunified the kingdom and established himself as the new king (Mentuhotep II, r. 2060 – 2010 BCE). One major change in Egyptian belief is that the Middle Kingdom rulers still claimed to be at least partly divine, but they also emphasized their humanity. They wrote about themselves as shepherds trying to maintain the balance of harmony in Egypt and to protect their people, rather than just as lords over an immortal kingdom. Their nobles had more power than had the nobility of the Old Kingdom as well, playing important political roles on their lands.

Starting during the Middle Kingdom, the kings made a major effort to extend Egyptian power and influence beyond the traditional “core” of the kingdom in Egypt itself. Egypt exerted military power and extracted wealth from the northern part of the kingdom of Nubia (in present-day Sudan) to the south, and also established at least limited ongoing contact with Mesopotamia as well. The kings actively encouraged immigration from outside of Egypt, but insisted that immigrants settle among Egyptians. They had the same policy with war captives, often settling them as farmers in the midst of Egyptians. This ensured speedy acculturation and helped bring foreign talent into Egypt.

While no more pyramids were ever built – it appears that the nearly obsessive focus on the spirit of the king after death was confined to the Old Kingdom – the Middle Kingdom was definitely a period of stability and prosperity for Egypt as a whole. A fairly diverse body of literature survived in the form of writings on papyrus, the form of paper made from Nile reeds monopolized by Egypt for centuries, that suggests that commerce was extensive, Egyptian religion celebrated the spiritual importance of ordinary people, and fairness and justice were regarded as major ethical imperatives.

Things spun out of control for the Middle Kingdom starting in about 1720 BCE, roughly 300 years after it had been founded, leading in turn to the Second Intermediate Period. Settlers from Canaan (present-day Jordan, Israel, Lebanon, and parts of Syria) had been streaming into Egypt for generations, initially settling and assimilating into Egyptian society. By about 1650 BCE, however, a group of Canaanites founded what was known as the “Hyksos” dynasty, an Egyptian term which simply means “leaders of foreigners,” after they overthrew the king and seized power in Lower Egypt. While they started as “foreigners,” the Hyksos quickly adopted the practices of the Egyptian kings they had overthrown, using Egyptian scribes to keep records in hieroglyphics, worshiping the local gods, and generally behaving like Egyptians.

The most significant innovation introduced by the Hyksos was the use of bronze (it should be noted that they introduced horses and chariots as well). There was very limited use of bronze in Egypt until the Second Intermediate Period, with both weapons and tools being crafted from copper or stone. Bronze, an alloy of copper and zinc or nickel, required technical skill and access to its component minerals to craft. The finished product was far harder and more durable than was copper alone, however, and with the advent of large-scale bronze use in Egypt thanks to the Hyksos, the possibilities for the growth of Egyptian power increased greatly. Bronze had already been in use for over a thousand years by the time it became common in Egypt, but when it finally arrived with Canaanite craftsmen it radically altered the balance of power. Up to that point, Egyptian technology, especially in terms of metallurgy, was quite primitive. Egyptian soldiers were often nothing more than peasants armed with copper knives, spears with copper heads, or even just clubs. Egypt's relative isolation meant that it had never needed to develop more advanced weapons, a fact that the Hyksos were able to take advantage of, belatedly bringing the large-scale use of bronze with them.

In 1550 BCE, the Second Intermediate Period ended when another Egyptian king, Ahmose I, expelled the Hyksos from Egypt. Thus began the New Kingdom, the most powerful to date. This was also when the Egyptian kings started calling themselves pharaohs, which means "great house," lord over all things. Using the new bronze military technology, the New Kingdom was (at times) able to expand Egyptian control all the way into Mesopotamia. Bronze was the key factor, but also important was the adoption of composite bows: bows that are made from strips of animal bone and sinew, glued together. A composite bow was much more powerful than a wooden one, and they greatly enhanced the power of the Egyptian military. Likewise, again thanks to the Hyksos, the New Kingdom was able to employ chariots in war for the first time. One in ten men was impressed into military service, supplemented with auxiliaries from conquered lands as well as mercenary forces.

While the Egyptians had always considered themselves to be the favored people of the gods, dwelling in the home of spiritual harmony in the universe, it was really during the New Kingdom that they actively campaigned to take over foreign lands. The idea was that divine harmony existed only in Egypt and had to be brought to the rest of the world, by force if necessary. By 1500 BCE, only 50 years after the founding of the new kingdom, Egypt had conquered Canaan and much of Syria. It then conquered northern Nubia. The pharaohs dispatched communities of Egyptians to settle conquered lands, both to pacify those lands and to exploit natural resources in order to increase royal revenue.

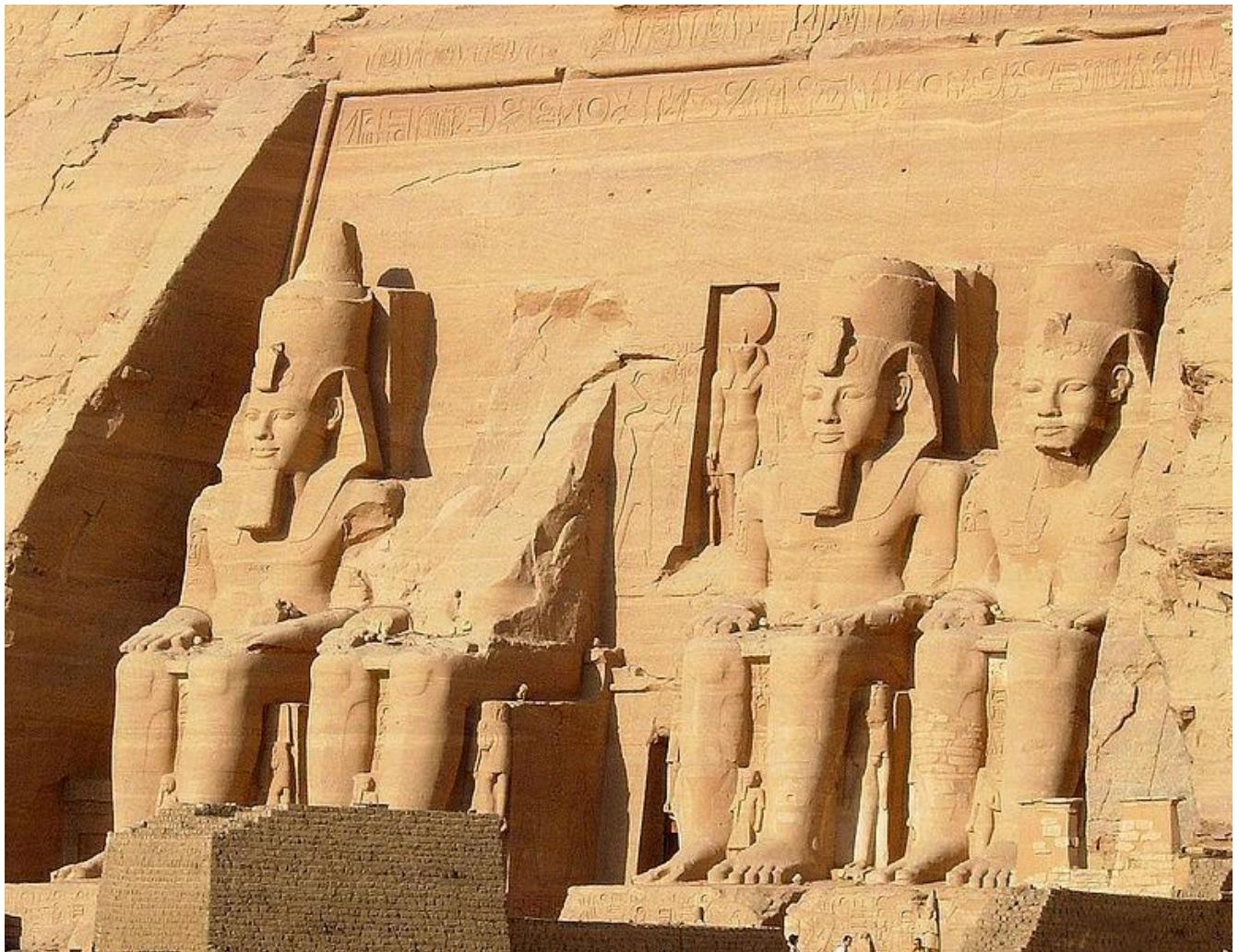
The New Kingdom pharaohs enlisted the leaders of the lands they had conquered as puppet kings, surrounded by Egyptian advisors. The pharaohs adopted the practice of bringing many foreign princes of the lands they had conquered back to Egypt. There, a prince would be raised as an Egyptian and educated to think of Egyptian civilization as both superior to others and their own. Thus, when they returned to rule after their fathers died, these princes would often be thoroughly assimilated to Egyptian culture and would naturally be more loyal to the pharaoh; using this technique, the New Kingdom was able to create several "puppet states," places with their own rulers who were loyal to Egypt, in the Near and Middle East.

The New Kingdom was also the great bureaucratic empire of Egypt. The pharaohs divided Egypt into two administrative regions: Upper Egypt, up the Nile and governed from the city of Thebes, and Lower Egypt, near the Nile delta where it drained into the Mediterranean and ruled from the city of Memphis. Regional administrators did the important work of drafting laborers, extracting taxation, and making sure that agriculture was on track. A single royal official of vast personal power, the vizier, supervised the whole system and personally decided when to open the locks on the Nile to allow the floodwaters out each year.

While royal officials and the priesthoods of the gods held significant power and influence during the New Kingdom, the king (now known as the pharaoh) still ruled as a living god. The pharaohs were still thought to be

divine, but that did not mean they simply bullied their subjects. Many letters have survived between pharaohs and their subordinates, as well as between pharaohs and other kings in foreign lands. They played tax breaks, gifts, and benefits off to encourage loyalty to Egypt rather than simply threatening people with divine power or armies.

In addition to the New Kingdom's expansionism, the governments pursued new forms of monumental architecture. While the construction of pyramids never occurred after the Old Kingdom, Egyptian kings remained focused on the creation of great buildings. They continued to build opulent tombs, but those were usually built into hillsides or in more conventional structures, rather than pyramids. The monumental architecture of the New Kingdom consisted of huge temples and statues, most notably the Great Temple at Abu Simbel in northern Nubia, built under the direction of the pharaoh Ramses II at some point around 1250 BCE. There, gigantic statues of the gods sit, and twice a year, the rising sun shines through the entrance and directly illuminates three of them, while the god of the underworld remains in shadow.



The imposing entrance to the Great Temple of Abu Simbel.

Detailed records of noteworthy pharaohs survive from the New Kingdom. The New Kingdom saw the only known female pharaoh, a woman who ruled from 1479 to 1458 BCE. Her name was Hatshepsut; she originally ruled as a regent (i.e. someone who is supposed to rule until the young king comes of age) for her stepson, but then claimed the title of pharaoh and ruled outright. She ruled for 20 years, waged war, and oversaw a period of ongoing prosperity. There were enormous building projects under her supervision, and it was also under her reign that large quantities of

sub-Saharan African goods started to be imported from Nubia: gold, incense, live elephants, panther skins, and other forms of wealth. When she died, however, her stepson Thutmose III took the throne. Decades after he became pharaoh, for reasons that are unclear, he tried to erase the memory of his mother's reign, perhaps driven by simple resentment over how long she had held power.

Another pharaoh of note was Amenhotep IV (r. 1353 – 1336 BCE). Amenhotep was infamous in his own lifetime for attempting an ill-considered full-scale religious revolution. He tried to focus all worship of the Egyptian people on an aspect of the sun god, Ra, called Aten. He went so far as to claim that Aten was the only god, something that seemed absurd to the resolutely polytheistic Egyptians. He renamed himself Akhenaten, which means “the one useful to Aten,” moved the capital to a new city he had built, sacked the temples of other gods, and even had agents chisel off references to the other gods from buildings and walls. All the while, he insisted that he and his queen, Nefertiti, be worshiped as gods themselves as the direct representatives of Aten. Historians do not know why he tried to bring about this religious revolution, but one reasonable theory is that he was trying to reduce the power of the priests, who had steadily become richer and more powerful over the centuries at the expense of the pharaohs themselves.

Akhenaten's attempted revolution was a disaster. In the eyes of common people and of later pharaohs, he had fundamentally undermined the very stability of Egypt. In the eyes of his subjects, the royal person was no longer seen as a reliable spiritual anchor – the pharaoh was supposed to be the great protector of the religious and social order, but instead one had tried to completely destroy it. This was the beginning of the end of the central position the pharaoh had enjoyed in the life of all Egyptians up until that point.

Akhenaten's son restored all of the old religious traditions. This was the young king Tutankhamun (“King Tut”) (r. 1336 – 1326), who is important for restoring the religion and, arguably, for the simple fact that his tomb was never looted by grave robbers before it was discovered by a British archaeologist in 1922 CE. It provided the single most significant trove of artifacts from the New Kingdom yet found when it was discovered, sparking an interest in ancient Egyptian history all over the world.



The sarcophagus of King Tutankhamun.

A new dynasty of pharaohs ruled the New Kingdom in the aftermath of Akhenaten's disastrous experiment, the most powerful of which was Ramses II (r. 1279 – 1213). Ramses campaigned against the growing power of an empire in the north called the Hittites, one of the major empires of the Bronze Age period (considered in more detail in the next chapter). He ruled for an astonishingly long time and reputedly sired some 160 children with wives and concubines. He also supervised the construction of the Great Temple of Abu Simbel noted above. Ramses was, however, the last of the great pharaohs, with all of those who followed working to stave off disaster more so than expand Egyptian power.

The New Kingdom collapsed in about 1150 BCE. This collapse was part of a much larger pattern across the ancient Middle East and North Africa: the collapse of the Bronze Age itself. In the case of Egypt, this took the form of the first of a series of foreign invasions, that of the “Sea People,” whose origins have never been determined despite concentrated scholarship on the question. Later, invaders referred to as “gangs of bandits” from what is today Libya, to the west of Egypt, further undermined the kingdom, and it finally fell into a long period of political fragmentation. A long period of civil war and conflict engulfed Egypt, and from that point on Egypt proved vulnerable to foreign

conquest. In the course of the centuries that followed Assyria, Persia, the Greeks, and the Romans would, one after the other, add Egypt to their respective empires.

Continuities in Egyptian History

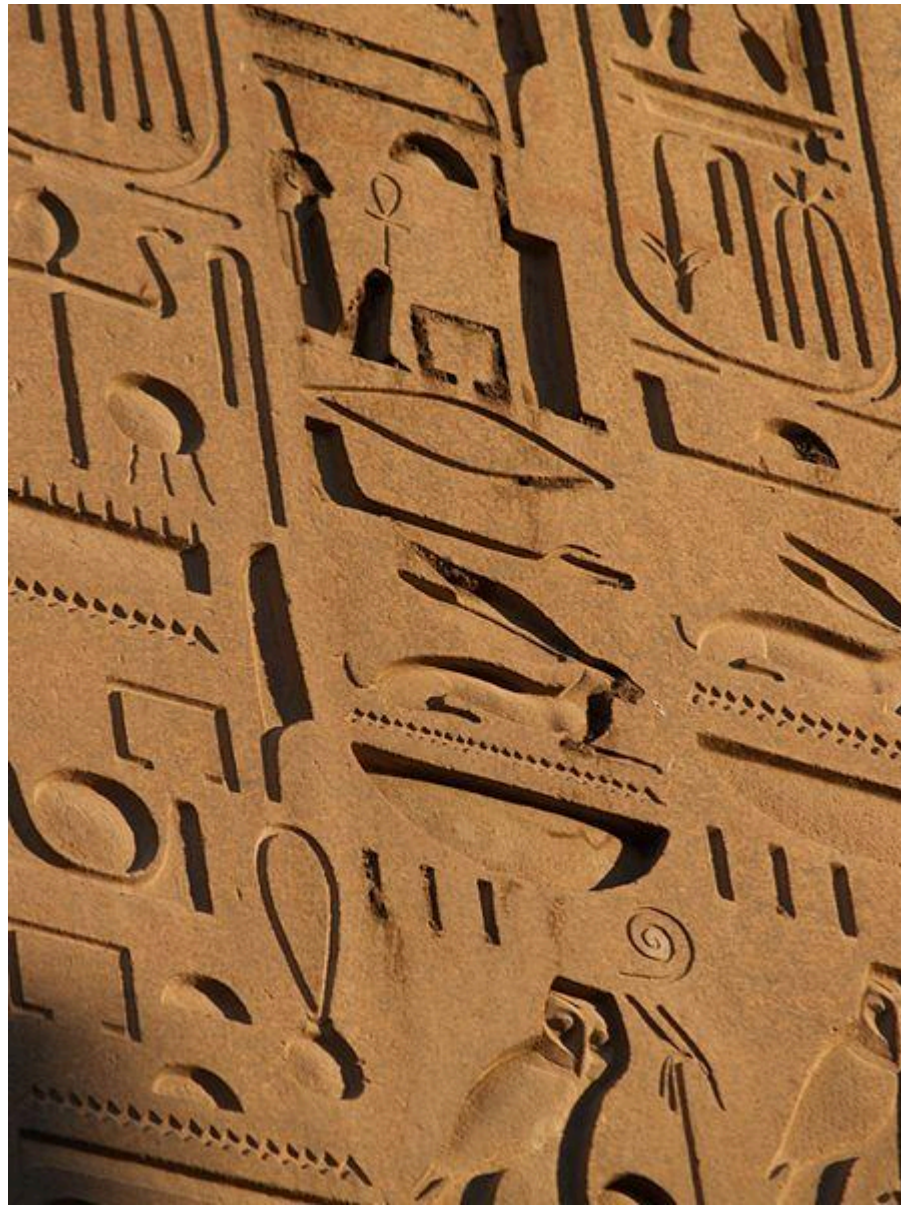
The long-term pattern in Egyptian history is that there were long periods of stability and prosperity disrupted by periodic invasions and disasters. Throughout the entire period, however, there were many cultural, spiritual, and intellectual traditions that stayed the same. In terms of the spiritual beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, those traditions most often focused on the identity and the role of the king in relation to the gods. In prosaic politics and social organization, they revolved around the role of the scribes. In terms of foreign relations, they evolved over time as Egypt developed stronger ongoing contacts with neighboring states and cultures.

The most important figure in Egyptian spiritual life was the king; he (or sometimes she) was believed to form a direct connection between the gods and the Egyptian people. Each king had five names – his birth name, three having to do with his divine status, and one having to do with rulership of the two unified kingdoms. One of the divine names referred to the divine kingship itself, temporarily linked to the current holder of that title: whoever happened to be king at the time.

The Egyptians had a colorful and memorable set of religious beliefs, one that dominated the lives of the kings, who claimed to be not just reflections of or servants of the gods, but gods themselves on earth. The central theme among the great epic stories of Egyptian religion was that there was a certain order and harmony in the universe that the gods had created, but that it was threatened by forces of destruction and chaos. It was the job of humans, especially Egyptians, to maintain harmony through proper rituals and through making sure that Egyptian society was stable. For Egyptians the world was divided between themselves and everyone else. This was not just a function of arrogance, however, but instead reflected a belief that the gods had designated the Egyptians to be the sacred keepers of order.

One peculiar aspect of the obsessive focus on the person of the king was the fact that the kings often married their sisters and daughters; the idea was that if one was a god, one did not want to pollute the sacred bloodline by having children with mere humans. An unfortunate side effect was, not surprisingly, that there were a lot of fairly deranged and unhealthy Egyptian royalty over the years, since the royal lines were, by definition, inbred. Fortunately for the Egyptian state, however, the backbone of day-to-day politics was the enormous bureaucracy staffed by the scribal class, a class that survived the entire period covered in this chapter.

More writing survives from ancient Egypt than any other ancient civilization of the Mediterranean region. There are two major reasons for that survival. First, Egypt's dry climate ensured that records kept on papyrus had a decent chance of surviving since they were unlikely to rot away. Thousands of papyri documents have been discovered that were simply dumped into holes in the desert and left there; the sand and the climate conspired to preserve them. Second, Egypt developed an important social class of scribes whose whole vocation was mastering the complex Egyptian writing systems and keeping extensive records of almost every aspect of life, from religious ritual to mundane record-keeping.



An example of hieroglyphics – the above depicts the sacred style used in temple and tomb carvings, as opposed to the “cursive” form used for everyday record keeping.

The writing of ancient Egypt was in hieroglyphics, which are symbols that were adapted over time from pictures. There were several different forms of hieroglyphics, including two distinct alphabets during the period covered in this chapter, all of which were very difficult to master. It took years of training to become literate in hieroglyphics, training that was only afforded to the scribes. Scribes recorded everything from tax records, to mercantile transactions, to the sacred prayers for the dead on the walls of the tombs of kings and nobles. They served as an essential piece of the continuity of Egyptian politics and culture for thousands of years. In other words, because they used the same language and the same alphabets of symbols, and because they recorded the rituals and transactions of Egyptian society, scribes were a kind of cultural glue that kept things going from generation to generation. In all three of the great dynasties and during the Intermediate Periods, it was the scribes who provided continuity.

As iconic as hieroglyphic writing, which remains famous because of the sheer amount of it that survived carved in stone in tombs and palaces, was the creation of monumental architecture by the Egyptian state, first exemplified by

the pyramids. Sometime around 2660 BCE the first pyramid was built for the king Djoser. Djoser was renowned in the Egyptian sources for his wisdom, and centuries after his death he became a legendary figure to later Egyptians. The architect who designed the pyramid, Imhotep, was later deified as a son of Ptah, the god who created the universe. Unlike Mesopotamian ziggurats, which were always temples, the pyramids were always tombs. The purpose of the pyramids was to house the king with all of the luxuries and equipment he would need in his journey to the afterlife, as well as to celebrate the king's legacy and memory.

The pyramids were constructed over a period of about 250 years, from 2660 to 2400 BCE. For a long time, historians thought that they were built by slaves, but it now seems very likely that they were built by free laborers employed by the king and paid by royal agents. Each building block weighed about 2.5 tons and had to be hauled up ramps with ropes and pulleys. As noted above, only Egypt's unique access to the bounty of the Nile provided enough energy for this to be viable. Egypt was the envy of the ancient world because of its incredible wealth, wealth that was the direct result of its huge surplus of grain, all fed by the Nile's floods. The pyramids were built year-round, but work was most intense in September, when the floods of the Nile were at their height and farmers were not able to work the fields. In short, nowhere else on earth *could* the pyramids have been built. There *had* to be a gigantic surplus of energy in the form of calories available to get it done.

Pyramid building itself was the impetus behind the massive expansion of bureaucracy in the Old Kingdom, since the state became synonymous with the diversion and redistribution of resources needed to keep an enormous labor force mobilized. The king could, in theory, requisition anything, mobilize anyone, and generally exercise total control, although practical limits were respected by the administration. Since there was no currency, "payment" to scribes usually took the form of fiefs (i.e. grants of land) that returned to the royal holdings after the official's death, a practice that atrophied after the fall of the Old Kingdom.

Like their neighbors in Mesopotamia, the Egyptians lived in a redistributive economy, an economy in which crops were taken directly from farmers (i.e. peasants) by the agents of the king and then redistributed. Appropriately enough, many of the surviving documents from ancient Egypt are tax records, carefully recorded in hieroglyphics by scribes. Peasants in Egypt were tied to the land they lived on and were thus serfs rather than free peasants. A serf is a farmer who is legally tied to the land he or she works on – they cannot leave the land to look for a better job elsewhere, living in a state very near to slavery. The peasants lived in "closed" villages in which people were not allowed to move in, nor were existing families supposed to move out.

Interestingly, unlike many other ancient societies, women in Egypt were nearly the legal equals of men. They had the legal right to own property, sue, and essentially exist as independent legal entities. This is all the more striking in that many of the legal rights that Egyptian women possessed were not available to women in Europe (or the United States) until the late 1800s CE, over three thousand years later. Likewise, Egyptian women enjoyed much more legal autonomy than did women in many other ancient societies, particularly that of the Greeks.

Even though the essential characteristic of Egyptian religion and social structure was continuity, its relationships with neighboring cultures did change over time. One important neighbor of Egypt was the kingdom of Nubia to the south, in present-day Sudan. Nubia was rich in gold, ivory, and slaves, seized from neighboring lands, making it a wealthy and powerful place in its own right. Egypt traded with Nubia, but also suffered from raids by warlike Nubian kingdoms. One of the key political posts in Egypt was the Keeper of the Gateway of the South, a military governor who tried to protect trade from these attacks. At the start of the Middle Kingdom, Mentuhotep II managed to not only reunite Egypt, but to conquer the northern portion of Nubia as well. Kings continued this pattern, holding on to Nubian territory and building a series of forts and garrisons to ensure the speedy extraction of Nubian wealth. (Much later, a Nubian king,

Piankhy, returned the favor by conquering Egypt – he claimed to be restoring a purer form of Egyptian rule than had survived in Egypt itself!)

Trade contact was not limited to Nubia, of course. Despite the fact that the Egyptians thought of themselves as being superior to other cultures and civilizations, they actively traded with not only Nubia but the various civilizations and peoples of the Near and Middle East. Starting in earnest with the Middle Kingdom, trade caravans linked Anatolia, Mesopotamia, and Egypt (and, later, Greece as well). There was a rich diplomatic exchange between the Egyptian kings and the kings of their neighboring lands – overall, they spent far more time trading with their neighbors and sending one another gifts than waging war. Likewise, as noted above in the section on the New Kingdom, military expansionism did not preclude Egypt’s membership in a “brotherhood” of other states during the Bronze Age.

That being said, by the time of the Middle Kingdom, there was an organized and fortified military presence on all of Egypt’s borders, with particular attention to Nubia and “Asia” (i.e. everything east of the Sinai Peninsula). One king described himself as the “throat-slitter of Asia,” and all the way through the New Kingdom, Egyptians tended to regard themselves as being the most important and “central” civilization in the world.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes its detailed consideration of Egypt with the fall of the New Kingdom not because Egyptian civilization vanished, but because it did not enjoy lasting stability under a native Egyptian dynasty again for most of the rest of ancient history. Instead, after the New Kingdom, Egypt was often torn between rival claimants to the title of pharaoh, and beginning with a civilization discussed in the next chapter, the Assyrians, Egypt itself was often conquered by powerful rivals. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Egypt remained the richest place in the ancient world because of the incredible abundance of the Nile, and whether it was the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, or the Arabs doing the conquering, Egypt was always one of the greatest prizes that could be won in conquest. Likewise, Egypt contributed not just wealth but its unique culture to the surrounding regions, serving as one of the founding elements of Western Civilization as a whole.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Egypt map](#) – Jeff Dahl

[Great Pyramid](#) – Kallerna

[Tutankhamun’s coffin](#) – D. Denisenkov

[Hieroglyphics](#) – Sherif217

CHAPTER 3: THE BRONZE AGE AND THE IRON AGE

The Bronze Age is a term used to describe a period in the ancient world from about 3000 BCE to 1100 BCE. That period saw the emergence and evolution of increasingly sophisticated ancient states, some of which evolved into real empires. It was a period in which long-distance trade networks and diplomatic exchanges between states became permanent aspects of political, economic, and cultural life in the eastern Mediterranean region. It was, in short, the period during which civilization itself spread and prospered across the area.

The period is named after one of its key technological bases: the crafting of bronze. Bronze is an alloy of tin and copper. An alloy is a combination of metals created when the metals bond at the molecular level to create a new material entirely. Needless to say, historical peoples had no idea why, when they took tin and copper, heated them up, and beat them together on an anvil they created something much harder and more durable than either of their starting metals. Some innovative smith did figure it out, and in the process ushered in an array of new possibilities.

Bronze was important because it revolutionized warfare and, to a lesser extent, agriculture. The harder the metal, the deadlier the weapons created from it and the more effective the tools. Agriculturally, bronze plows allowed greater crop yields. Militarily, bronze weapons completely shifted the balance of power in warfare; an army equipped with bronze spear and arrowheads and bronze armor was much more effective than one wielding wooden, copper, or obsidian implements.

An example of bronze's impact is, as noted in the previous chapter, the expansionism of the New Kingdom. The New Kingdom of Egypt conquered more territory than any earlier Egyptian empire. It was able to do this in part because of its mastery of bronze-making and the effectiveness of its armies as a result. The New Kingdom also demonstrates another noteworthy aspect of bronze: it was expensive to make and expensive to distribute to soldiers, meaning that only the larger and richer empires could afford it on a large scale. Bronze tended to stack the odds in conflicts against smaller city-states and kingdoms, because it was harder for them to afford to field whole armies outfitted with bronze weapons. Ultimately, the power of bronze contributed to the creation of a whole series of powerful empires in North Africa and the Middle East, all of which were linked together by diplomacy, trade, and (at times) war.

The Bronze Age States

There were four major regions along the shores of, or near to, the eastern Mediterranean that hosted the major states of the Bronze Age: Greece, Anatolia, Canaan and Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Those regions were close enough to one another (e.g. it is roughly 800 miles from Greece to Mesopotamia, the furthest distance between any of the regions) that ongoing long-distance trade was possible. While wars were relatively frequent, most interactions between the states and cultures of the time were peaceful, revolving around trade and diplomacy. Each state, large and small, oversaw diplomatic exchanges written in Akkadian (the international language of the time) maintaining relations, offering gifts, and demanding concessions as circumstances dictated. Although the details are often difficult to establish, we can assume that at least some immigration occurred as well.

One state whose very existence coincided with the Bronze Age, vanishing afterwards, was that of the Hittites. Beginning in approximately 1700 BCE, the Hittites established a large empire in Anatolia, the landmass that comprises present-day Turkey. The Hittite Empire expanded rapidly based on a flourishing bronze-age economy, expanding from Anatolia to conquer territory in Mesopotamia, Syria, and Canaan, ultimately clashing with the New Kingdom of Egypt. The Hittites fought themselves to a stalemate against the Egyptians, after which they reached a diplomatic accord to hold on to Syria while the Egyptians held Canaan.

Unlike the Egyptians, the Hittites had the practice of adopting the customs, technologies, and religions of the people they conquered and the people they came in contact with. They did not seek to impose their own customs on others, instead gathering the literature, stories, and beliefs of their subjects. Their pantheon of gods grew every time they conquered a new city-state or tribe, and they translated various tales and legends into their own language. There is some evidence that it was the Hittites who formed the crucial link between the civilizations of Mesopotamia and the civilizations of the Mediterranean, most importantly of the Greeks. The Hittites transmitted Mesopotamian technologies (including math, astronomy, and engineering) as well as Mesopotamian legends like the Epic of Gilgamesh, the latter of which may have gone through a long process of translation and re-interpretation to become the Greek story of Hercules. Simply put, the Hittites were the quintessential Bronze Age civilization: militarily powerful, economically prosperous, and connected through diplomacy and war with the other cultures and states of the time.



The Hittite state is depicted in pink and New Kingdom Egyptian territory in green on the map above. The island “Alasiya” is present-day Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean.

To the east of the Hittite Empire, Mesopotamia was not ruled by a single state or empire during most of

the Bronze Age. The Babylonian empire founded by Hammurabi was overthrown by the Kassites (whose origins are unknown) in 1595 BCE, the conquest following a Hittite invasion that sacked Babylon but did not stay to rule over it. Over the following centuries, the Kassites successfully ruled over Babylon and the surrounding territories, with the entire region enjoying a period of prosperity. To the north, beyond Mesopotamia (the land between the rivers) itself, a rival state known as Assyria both traded with and warred against Kassite-controlled Babylon. Eventually (starting in 1225 BCE), Assyria led a short-lived period of conquest that conquered Babylon and the Kassites, going on to rule over a united Mesopotamia before being forced to retreat against the backdrop of a wider collapse of the political and commercial network of the Bronze Age (described below).

Both the Kassites and the Assyrians were proud members of the diplomatic network of rulers that included New Kingdom Egypt and the Hittites (as well as smaller and less significant kingdoms in Canaan and Anatolia). Likewise, both states encouraged trade, and goods were exchanged across the entire region of the Middle East. Compared to some later periods, it was a time of relative stability and, while sometimes interrupted by short-term wars, mostly peaceful relations between the different states.

To the west, it was during the Bronze Age that the first distinctly Greek civilizations arose: the Minoans of the island of Crete and the Mycenaeans of Greece itself. Their civilizations, which likely merged together due to invasion after a long period of coexistence, were the basis of later Greek civilization and thus a profound influence on many of the neighboring civilizations of the Middle East in the centuries to come, just as the civilizations of the Middle East unquestionably influenced them. At the time, however, the Minoans and Mycenaeans were primarily traders and, in the case of the Mycenaeans, raiders, rather than representing states on par with those of the Hittites, Assyrians, or Egyptians.

Both the Minoans and Mycenaeans were seafarers. Whereas almost all of the other civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean were land empires, albeit ones who traded and traveled via waterways, the Greek civilizations were very closely tied to the sea itself. The Minoans ruled the island of Crete in the Mediterranean and created a merchant marine (i.e. a fleet whose purpose is primarily trade, not war) to trade with the Egyptians, Hittites, and other peoples of the area. One of the noteworthy archaeological traits of the Minoans is that there is very little evidence of fortifications of their palaces or cities, unlike those of other ancient peoples, indicating that they were much less concerned about foreign invasion than were the neighboring land empires thanks to the Minoans' island setting.

The Minoans built enormous palace complexes that combined government, spiritual, and commercial centers in huge, sprawling areas of building that were interconnected and which housed thousands of people. The Greek legend of the labyrinth, the great maze in which a bull-headed monster called the minotaur roamed, was probably based on the size and the confusion of these Minoan complexes. Frescoes painted on the walls of the palaces depicted elaborate athletic events featuring naked men leaping over charging bulls. Minoan frescoes have even been found in the ruins of an Egyptian (New Kingdom) palace, indicating that Minoan art was valued outside of Crete itself.

The Minoans traded actively with their neighbors and developed their own systems of bureaucracy and writing. They used a form of writing referred to by historians as Linear A that has never been deciphered. Their civilization was very rich and powerful by about 1700 BCE and it continued to prosper for centuries. Starting in the early 1400s BCE, however, a wave of invasions carried out by the Mycenaeans to the north eventually extinguished Minoan independence. By that time, the Minoans had already shared artistic techniques, trade, and their writing system with the Mycenaeans, the latter of which served as the basis of Mycenaean record keeping in a form referred to as Linear B. Thus, while the Minoans lost their political independence, Bronze-Age Greek culture as a whole became a blend of Minoan and Mycenaean influences.

The Minoans were, according to the surviving archaeological evidence, relatively peaceful. They traded with

their neighbors, and while there is evidence of violence (including human sacrifice) within Minoan society, there is no indication of large-scale warfare, just passing references from the Mycenaeans about Minoan mastery of the seas. In contrast, the Mycenaeans were extremely warlike. They traded with their neighbors but they also plundered them when the opportunity arose. Centuries later, the culture of the Mycenaeans would be celebrated in the epic poems (nominally written by the poet Homer, although it is likely “Homer” is a mythical figure himself) *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, describing the exploits of great Mycenaean heroes like Agamemnon, Achilles, and Odysseus. Those exploits almost always revolved around warfare, immortalized in Homer’s account of the Mycenaean siege of Troy, a city in western Anatolia whose ruins were discovered in the late nineteenth century CE.

From their ships, the Mycenaeans operated as both trading partners and raiders as circumstances would dictate; it is clear from the archeological evidence that they traded with Egypt and the Near East (i.e. Lebanon and Palestine), but equally clear that they raided and warred against both vulnerable foreign territories and against one another. There is even evidence that the Hittites enacted the world’s first embargo of shipping and goods against the Mycenaeans in retaliation for Mycenaean meddling in Hittite affairs.

The Mycenaeans relied on the sea so heavily because Greece was a very difficult place to live. Unlike Egypt or Mesopotamia, there were no great rivers feeding fertile soil, just mountains, hills, and scrubland with poor, rocky soil. There were few mineral deposits or other natural resources that could be used or traded with other lands. As it happens, there are iron deposits in Greece but its use was not yet known by the Mycenaeans. They thus learned to cultivate olives to make olive oil and grapes to make wine, two products in great demand all over the ancient world that were profitable enough to sustain seagoing trade. It is also likely that the difficult conditions in Greece helped lead the Mycenaeans to be so warlike, as they raided each other and their neighbors in search of greater wealth and opportunity.



The “Mask of Agamemnon,” a Mycenaean funerary mask discovered by a German archaeologist in the late nineteenth century.

The Mycenaeans were a society that glorified noble warfare. As war is depicted in the *Iliad*, battles consisted of the elite noble warriors of each side squaring off against each other and fighting one-on-one, with the rank-and-file of poorer soldiers providing support but usually not engaging in actual combat. In turn, Mycenaean ruins (and tombs) make it abundantly clear that most Mycenaeans were dirt-poor farmers working with primitive tools, lorded over by bronze-wielding lords who demanded labor and wealth. Foreign trade was in service to providing luxury goods to this elite social class, a class that was never politically united but instead shared a common culture of warrior-kings and their armed retinues. Some beautiful artifacts and amazing myths and poems have survived from this civilization, but it was also one of the most *predatory* civilizations we know about from ancient history.

The Collapse of the Bronze Age

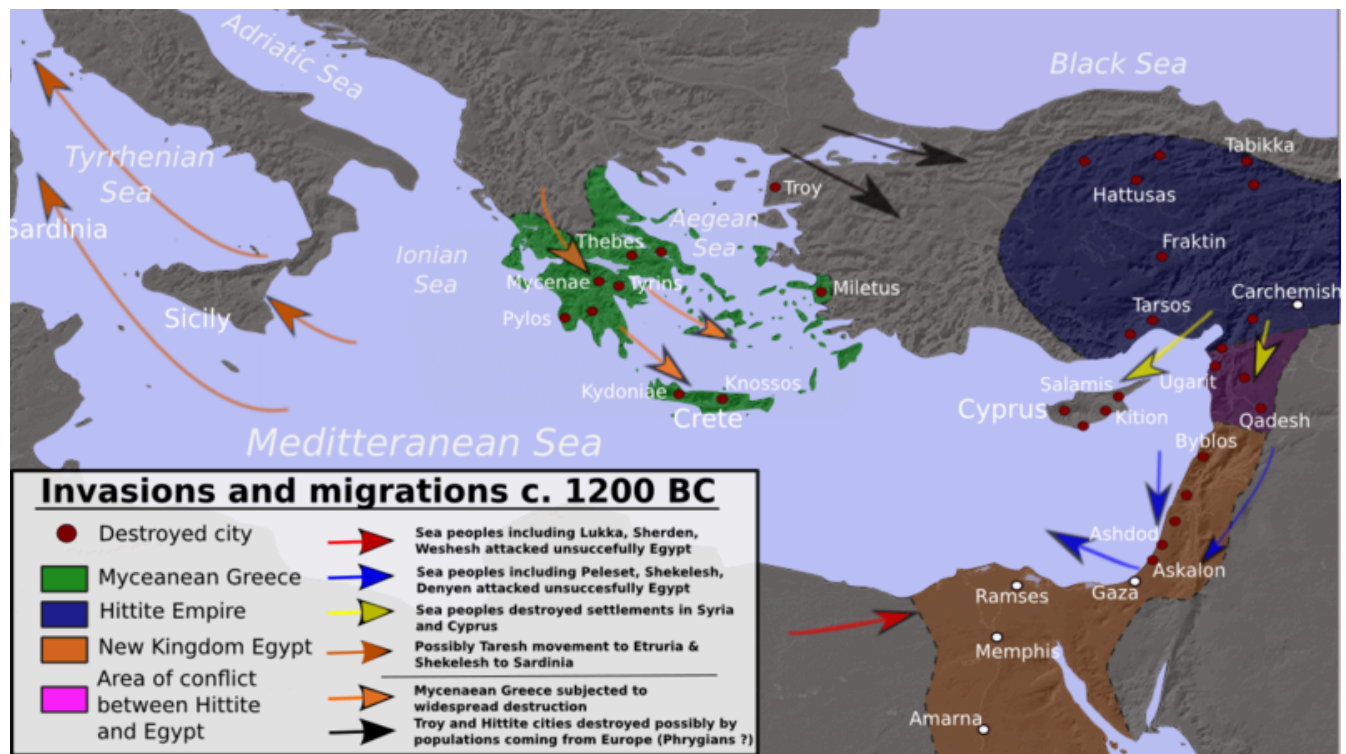
The Bronze Age at its height witnessed several large empires and peoples in regular contact with one another through both trade and war. The pharaohs of the New Kingdom corresponded with the kings and queens of the Hittite Empire and the rulers of the Kassites and Assyrians; it was normal for rulers to refer to one another as “brother” or “sister.” Each empire warred with its rivals at times, but it also worked with them to protect trade routes. Certain Mesopotamian languages, especially Akkadian, became international languages of diplomacy, allowing travelers and merchants to communicate wherever they went. Even the warlike and relatively unsophisticated Mycenaeans played a role on the periphery of this ongoing network of exchange.

That said, most of the states involved in this network fell into ruin between 1200 – 1100 BCE. The great empires collapsed, a collapse that it took about 100 years to recover from, with new empires arising in the aftermath. There is still no definitive explanation for why this collapse occurred, not least because the states that had been keeping records stopped doing so as their bureaucracies disintegrated. The surviving evidence seems to indicate that some combination of events – some caused by humans and some environmental – probably combined to spell the end to the Bronze Age.

Around 1050 BCE, two of the victims of the collapse, the New Kingdom of Egypt and the Hittite Empire, left clear indications in their records that drought had undermined their grain stores and their social stability. In recent years archaeologists have presented strong scientific evidence that the climate of the entire region became warmer and more arid, supporting the idea of a series of debilitating droughts. Even the greatest of the Bronze Age empires existed in a state of relative precarity, relying on regular harvests in order to not just feed their population, but sustain the governments, armies, and building projects of their states as a whole. Thus, environmental disaster could have played a key role in undermining the political stability of whole regions at the time.

Even earlier, starting in 1207 BCE, there are indications that a series of invasions swept through the entire eastern Mediterranean region. The New Kingdom of Egypt survived the invasion of the “sea people,” some of whom historians are now certain went on to settle in Canaan (they are remembered in the Hebrew Bible as the Philistines against whom the early Hebrews struggled), but the state was badly weakened in the process. In the following decades, other groups that remain impossible to identify precisely appear to have sacked the Mycenaean palace complexes and various cities across the Near East. While Assyria in northern Mesopotamia survived the collapse, it lost its territories in the south to Elam, a warlike kingdom based in present-day southern Iran.

The identity of the foreign invaders is not clear from the scant surviving record. One distinct possibility is that the “bandits” (synonymous in many cases with “barbarians” in ancient accounts) blamed for destabilizing the region might have been a combination of foreign invaders and peasants displaced by drought and social chaos who joined the invasions out of desperation. It is thus easy to imagine a confluence of environmental disaster, foreign invasion, and peasant rebellion ultimately destroying the Bronze Age states. What is clear is that the invasions took place over the course of decades – from roughly 1180 to 1130 BCE – and that they must have played a major role in the collapse of the Bronze Age political and economic system.



While the precise details are impossible to pin down, the above map depicts likely invasion routes during the Bronze Age Collapse. More important than those details is the result: the fall of almost all of the Bronze Age kingdoms and empires.

For roughly 100 years, from 1200 BCE to 1100 BCE, the networks of trade and diplomacy considered above were either disrupted or destroyed completely. Egypt recovered and new dynasties of pharaohs were sometimes able to recapture some of the glory of the past Egyptian kingdoms in their building projects and the power of their armies, but in the long run Egypt proved vulnerable to foreign invasion from that point on. Mycenaean civilization collapsed utterly, leading to a Greek “dark age” that lasted some three centuries. The Hittite Empire never recovered in Anatolia, while in Mesopotamia the most noteworthy survivor of the collapse – the Assyrian state – went on to become the greatest power the region had yet seen.

The Iron Age

The decline of the Bronze Age led to the beginning of the Iron Age. Bronze was dependent on functioning trade networks: tin was only available in large quantities from mines in what is today Afghanistan, so the collapse of long-distance trade made bronze impossible to manufacture. Iron, however, is a useful metal by itself without the need of alloys (although early forms of steel – iron alloyed with carbon, which is readily available everywhere – were around almost from the start of the Iron Age itself). Without copper and tin available, some innovative smiths figured out that it was possible, through a complicated process of forging, to create iron implements that were hard and durable. Iron was available in various places throughout the Middle East and Mediterranean regions, so it did not require long-distance trade as bronze had. The Iron Age thus began around 1100 BCE, right as the Bronze Age ended.

One cautionary note in discussing this shift: iron was very difficult to work with compared to bronze, and its use spread slowly. For example, while iron use became increasingly common starting in about 1100 BCE, the later Egyptian kingdoms did not use large amounts of iron tools until the seventh century BCE, a full five centuries after the Iron Age

itself began. Likewise, it took a long time for “weaponized” iron to be available, since making iron weapons and armor that were hard enough to endure battle conditions took a long time. Once trade networks recovered, bronze weapons were still the norm in societies that used iron tools in other ways for many centuries.

Outside of Greece, which suffered its long “dark age” following the collapse of the Bronze Age, a number of prosperous societies and states emerged relatively quickly at the start of the Iron Age. They re-established trade routes and initiated a new phase of Middle Eastern politics that eventually led to the largest empires the world had yet seen.

Iron Age Cultures and States

The region of Canaan, which corresponds with modern Palestine, Israel, and Lebanon, had long been a site of prosperity and innovation. Merchants from Canaan traded throughout the Middle East, its craftsmen were renowned for their work, and it was even a group of Canaanites – the Hyksos – who briefly ruled Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period. Along with their neighbors the Hebrews, the most significant of the ancient Canaanites were the Phoenicians, whose cities (politically independent but united in culture and language) were centered in present-day Lebanon.

The Phoenicians were not a particularly warlike people. Instead, they are remembered for being travelers and merchants, particularly by sea. They traveled farther than any other ancient people; sometime around 600 BCE, according to the Greek historian Herodotus, a Phoenician expedition even sailed around Africa over the course of three years (if that actually happened, it was an achievement that would not be accomplished again for almost 2,000 years). The Phoenicians established colonies all over the shores Mediterranean, where they provided anchors in a new international trade network that eventually replaced the one destroyed with the fall of the Bronze Age. Likewise, Phoenician cities served as the crossroads of trade for goods that originated as far away as England (metals were mined in England and shipped all the way to the Near East via overland routes). The most prominent Phoenician city was Carthage in North Africa, which centuries later would become the great rival of the Roman Republic.

Phoenician trade was not, however, the most important legacy of their society. Instead, of their various accomplishments, none was to have a more lasting influence than that of their writing system. As early as 1300 BCE, building on the work of earlier Canaanites, the Phoenicians developed a syllabic alphabet that formed the basis of Greek and Roman writing much later. A syllabic alphabet has characters that represent sounds, rather than characters that represent things or concepts. These alphabets are much smaller and less complex than symbolic ones. It is possible for a non-specialist to learn to read and write using a syllabic alphabet much more quickly than using a symbolic one (like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese characters). Thus, in societies like that of the Phoenicians, there was no need for a scribal class, since even normal merchants could become literate. Ultimately, the Greeks and then the Romans adopted Phoenician writing, and the alphabets used in most European languages in the present is a direct descendant of the Phoenician one as a result. To this day, the English word “phonetic,” meaning the correspondence of symbols and sounds, is directly related to the word “Phoenician.”

The Phoenician mastery of sailing and the use of the syllabic alphabet were both boons to trade. Another was a practice – the use of currency – originating in the remnants of the Hittite lands. Lydia, a kingdom in western Anatolia, controlled significant sources of gold (giving rise to the Greek legend of King Midas, who turned everything he touched into gold). In roughly 650 BCE, the Lydians came up with the idea of using lumps of gold and silver that had a standard weight. Soon, they formalized the system by stamping marks into the lumps to create the first true (albeit crude) coins, called *staters*. Currency revolutionized ancient economics, greatly increasing the ability of merchants to travel far afield

and buy foreign goods, because they no longer had to travel with huge amounts of goods with them to trade. It also made tax collection more efficient, strengthening ancient kingdoms and empires.

Empires of the Iron Age

While the Phoenicians played a major role in jumpstarting long-distance trade after the collapse of the Bronze Age, they did not create a strong united state. Such a state emerged farther east, however: alone of the major states of the Bronze Age, the Assyrian kingdom in northern Mesopotamia survived. Probably because of their extreme focus on militarism, the Assyrians were able to hold on to their core cities while the states around them collapsed. During the Iron Age, the Assyrians became the most powerful empire the world had ever seen. The Assyrians were the first empire in world history to systematically conquer almost all of their neighbors using a powerful standing army and go on to control the conquered territory for hundreds of years. They represented the pinnacle of military power and bureaucratic organization of all of the civilizations considered thus far. (Note: historians of the ancient world distinguish between the Bronze Age and Iron Age Assyrian kingdoms by referring to the latter as the Neo-Assyrians. The Neo-Assyrians were direct descendants of their Bronze Age predecessors, however, so for the sake of simplicity this chapter will refer to both as the Assyrians.)

The Assyrians were shaped by their environment. Their region in northern Mesopotamia, Ashur, has no natural borders, and thus they needed a strong military to survive; they were constantly forced to fight other civilized peoples from the west and south, and barbarians from the north. The Assyrians held that their patron god, a god of war also called Ashur, demanded the subservience of other peoples and their respective gods. Thus, their conquests were justified by their religious beliefs as well as a straightforward desire for dominance. Eventually, they dispatched annual military expeditions and organized conscription, fielding large standing armies of native Assyrian soldiers who marched out every year to conquer more territory.

The period of political breakdown in Mesopotamia following the collapse of the Bronze Age ended in about 880 BCE when the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II began a series of wars to conquer Mesopotamia and Canaan. Over the next century, the (Neo-)Assyrians became the mightiest empire yet seen in the Middle East. They combined terror tactics with various technological and organizational innovations. They would deport whole towns or even small cities when they defied the will of the Assyrian kings, resettling conquered peoples as indentured workers far from their homelands. They tortured and mutilated defeated enemies, even skinning them alive, when faced with any threat of resistance or rebellion. The formerly-independent Phoenician city-states within the Assyrian zone of control surrendered, paid tribute, and deferred to Assyrian officials rather than face their wrath in battle.

The Assyrians were the most effective military force of the ancient world up to that point. They outfitted their large armies with well-made iron weapons (they appear to be the first major kingdom to manufacture iron weapons in large numbers). They invented a messenger service to maintain lines of communication and control, with messengers on horseback and waystations to replace tired horses, so that they could communicate across their empire. All of their conquered territories were obliged to provide annual tributes of wealth in precious metals and trade goods which funded the state and the military.

The Assyrians introduced two innovations in military technology and organization that were of critical importance: a permanent cavalry, the first of any state in the world, and a large standing army of trained infantry. It took until the middle of the eighth century BCE for selective breeding of horses to produce real “war horses” large enough to carry a heavily armed and armored man into and through an entire battle. The Assyrians adopted horse archery from the barbarians they fought from the north, which along with swords and short lances wielded from horseback made chariots

permanently obsolete. The major focus of Assyrian taxation and bureaucracy was to keep the army funded and trained, which allowed them to completely dominate their neighbors for well over a century.

By the time of the reign of Assyrian king Tiglath-Pilezer III (r. 745 – 727 BCE), the Assyrians had pushed their borders to the Mediterranean in the west and to Persia (present-day Iran) in the east. Their conquests culminated in 671 BCE when king Esarhaddon (r. 681 – 668 BCE) invaded Egypt and conquered not only the entire Egyptian kingdom, but northern Nubia as well. This is the first time in history that both of the founding river valleys of ancient civilization, those of the Nile and of Mesopotamia, were under the control of a single political entity.



The expansion of the Assyrian Empire, originating from northern Mesopotamia.

The style of Assyrian rule ensured the hatred of conquered peoples. They demanded constant tribute and taxation and funneled luxury goods back to their main cities. They did not try to set up sustainable economies or assimilate conquered peoples into a shared culture, instead skimming off the top of the entire range of conquered lands. Their style of rule is well known because their kings built huge monuments to themselves in which they boasted about the lands they conquered and the tribute they exacted along the way.

While their subjects experienced Assyrian rule as militarily-enforced tyranny, Assyrian kings were proud of the cultural and intellectual heritage of Mesopotamia and supported learning and scholarship. The one conquered city in their empire that was allowed a significant degree of autonomy was Babylon, out of respect for its role as a center of Mesopotamian culture. Assyrian scribes collected and copied the learning and literature of the entire Middle East. Sometime after 660 BCE, the king Asshurbanipal ordered the collection of all of the texts of all of his kingdom, including the ones from conquered lands, and he went on to create a massive library to house them. Parts of this library survived

and provide one of the most important sources of information that scholars have on the beliefs, languages, and literature of the ancient Middle East.

The Assyrians finally fell in 609 BCE, overthrown by a series of rebellions. Their control of Egypt lasted barely two generations, brought to an end when the puppet pharaoh put in place by the Assyrians rebelled and drove them from Egypt. Shortly thereafter, a Babylonian king, Nabopolassar, led a rebellion that finally succeeded in sacking Nineveh, the Assyrian capital. The Babylonians were allied with clans of horse-riding warriors in Persia called the Medes, and between them the Assyrian state was destroyed completely. Nabopolassar went on to found the “Neo-Babylonian” empire, which became the most important power in Mesopotamia for the next few generations.

The Neo-Babylonians adopted some of the terror tactics of the Assyrians; they, too, deported conquered enemies as servants and slaves. Where they differed, however, was in their focus on trade. They built new roads and canals and encouraged long-distance trade throughout their lands. They were often at war with Egypt, which also tried to take advantage of the fall of the Assyrians to seize new land, but even when the two powers were at war Egyptian merchants were still welcome throughout the Neo-Babylonian empire.

A combination of flourishing trade and high taxes led to huge wealth for the king and court, and among other things led to the construction of noteworthy works of monumental architecture to decorate their capital. The Babylonians inherited the scientific traditions of ancient Mesopotamia, becoming the greatest astronomers and mathematicians yet seen, able to predict eclipses and keep highly detailed calendars. They also created the zodiac used up to the present in astrology, reflecting the age-old practice of both science and “magic” that were united in the minds of Mesopotamians. In the end, however, they were the last of the great ancient Mesopotamian empires that existed independently. Less than 100 years after their successful rebellion against the Assyrians, they were conquered by what became the greatest empire in the ancient world to date: the Persians, described in a following chapter.

THE HEBREWS

Ancient Hebrew History

Of the Bronze and Iron-Age cultures, one played perhaps the most vital role in the history of Western Civilization: the Hebrews. The Hebrews, a people who first created a kingdom in the ancient land of Canaan, were among the most important cultures of the western world, comparable to the ancient Greeks or Romans. Unlike the Greeks and Romans, the ancient Hebrews were not known for being scientists or philosophers or conquerors. It was their religion, Judaism, that proved to be of crucial importance in world history, both for its own sake and for being the religious root of Christianity and Islam. Together, these three religions are referred to as the “Religions of the Book” in Islam, because they share a set of beliefs first written down in the Hebrew holy texts and they all venerate the same God. (Note: it should be emphasized that the approach taken here is that of secular historical scholarship: what is known about the historical origins of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam based on empirical research carried out by historians and archaeologists).

The history of the ancient Hebrews is a difficult subject. The most important source we have about it is the Hebrew Bible itself, which describes in detail the travails of the Hebrews, their enslavement, battles, triumphs, and accomplishments. The problem with using the Hebrew Bible as a historical source is that it is written in a mythic mode – like the literature of every other Iron Age civilization, many events affecting the Hebrews are explained by direct divine intervention rather than a more prosaic historical approach. Also, the Hebrew Bible was written some 400 – 600 years after the events it describes. Thus, what is known about the ancient Hebrews consists of the stories of the Hebrew Bible supplemented by the archaeological record and the information about the Hebrews available from other historical sources.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the first patriarch (male clan leader) of the Hebrews was Abraham, a man who led the Hebrews away from Mesopotamia in about 1900 BCE. The Hebrews left the Mesopotamian city of Ur and became wandering herders; in fact, the word Hebrew originally meant “wanderer” or “nomad.” Abraham had a son, Isaac, and Isaac had a son, Jacob, collectively known as the Patriarchs in the Hebrew Bible. The Mesopotamian origins of the Hebrews are unclear from sources outside of the Hebrew Bible itself; archaeological evidence indicates that the Hebrews may have actually been from the Levant, with trade contact with the Mesopotamians, rather than coming from Mesopotamia.

According to Jewish belief, by far the most important thing Abraham did was agree to the Covenant, the promise made between the God Yahweh (the “name” of God is derived from the Hebrew characters for the phrase “I am who I am,” the enigmatic response of God when asked for His name by the prophet Moses) and the Hebrews. The Covenant stated that in return for their devotion and worship, and the circumcision of all Hebrew males, the Hebrews would receive from Yahweh a “land of milk and honey,” a place of peace and prosperity of their own for all time.

Then, in about 1600 BCE, the Hebrews went to Egypt to escape famine and were welcomed by the Hyksos dynasty (during the Second Intermediate Period of ancient Egypt). The Hyksos were fellow Canaanites, after all, and they appear to have encouraged the Hebrews to stay. According to the Hebrew Bible, with the rise of the New Kingdom

the Hebrews were enslaved, with their leader Moses leading them away sometime around 1300 – 1200 BCE. There is little archaeological or Egyptian textual evidence to support the story of the complete enslavement of the Hebrews, besides references in Egyptian sources to Canaanite laborers. A pharaoh, Merneptah, makes a passing reference to a people he simply called “Israel” as living in Canaan in 1207 BCE, which is the strongest evidence of the Hebrews’ presence in Canaan in the late Bronze Age.

According to the Hebrew Bible, Moses was not only responsible for leading the Hebrews from Egypt, but for modifying the Covenant. In addition to the exclusive worship of Yahweh and the circumcision of all male Hebrews, the Covenant was amended by Yahweh to include specific rules of behavior: the Hebrews had to abide by the 10 Commandments in order for Yahweh to guarantee their prosperity in the promised land. Having agreed to the Commandments, the Hebrews then arrived in the region that was to become their first kingdom, Israel.

As noted above, the tales present in the Hebrew Bible cannot generally be verified with empirical evidence. They also bear the imprint of earlier traditions: many stories in the Hebrew Bible are taken from earlier Mesopotamian legends. The story of Moses is very close to the account of Sargon the Great’s rise from obscurity in Akkadian tradition, and the flood legend (described in the Bible’s first book, Genesis) is taken directly from the Epic of Gilgamesh, although the motivation of the Mesopotamian gods versus that of Yahweh in those two stories is very different: the Mesopotamian gods are cruel and capricious, while the flood of Yahweh is sent as a punishment for the sins of humankind.

Archeological evidence has established that the Hebrews definitely started settling in Canaan by about 1200 BCE. The Egyptian record from 1207 BCE noted above consists of the pharaoh boasting about his conquests in Canaan, including Israel. The story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of slavery in Egypt could also have been based on the events associated with the collapse of the Bronze Age, the great century or so of upheaval in which nomadic raiders joined forces with oppressed peasants and slaves to topple the great empires of the Bronze Age. Some of those people, probably Canaanites who had been subjects of the pharaohs, did seize freedom, and they could well have included the Hebrews.

The Kings and Kingdoms

While the early Hebrews were communalists, meaning they shared most goods in common within their clans (referred to as the twelve “tribes” in the Hebrew Bible), conflicts with the Philistines, another Canaanite people on the coast, led them to appoint a king, Saul, in about 1020 BCE. The Philistines were one of the groups of “Sea People” who had attacked the New Kingdom of Egypt. The Philistines were a small but powerful kingdom. They were armed with iron and they fought the Hebrews to a standstill initially – at one point they captured the Ark of the Covenant, containing the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written. Under the leadership of their kings, however, the Hebrews pushed back the Philistines and eventually defeated them completely.

Saul’s successor was David, one of his former lieutenants, and David’s was his son Solomon, renowned for his wisdom. The Hebrew kings founded a capital at Jerusalem, which had been a Philistine town. The kings created a professional army, a caste of scribes, and a bureaucracy. All of this being noted, the kingdom itself was not particularly large or powerful; Jerusalem at the time was a hill town of about 5,000 people. Israel emerged as one of the many smaller kingdoms surrounded by powerful neighbors, engaging in trade and waging small-scale wars depending on the circumstances.

Solomon was an effective ruler, forming trade relationships with nearby kingdoms and overseeing the growing wealth of Israel. He also lived in a manner consistent with other Iron Age kings, with many wives and a whole harem of concubines as well. Likewise, he taxed both trade passing through the Hebrew kingdom and his own subjects. His

demands for free labor from the Hebrew people amounted to one day in every three spent working on palaces and royal building projects – an enormous amount from a contemporary perspective, but one that was at least comparable to the redistributive economies of nearby kingdoms. Thus, while his subjects came to resent aspects of his rule, neither was it markedly more exploitative than the norm in the region as a whole.

The most important building project under Solomon was the great Temple of Jerusalem, the center of the Yahwist religion. There, a class of priests carried out rituals and worship of Yahweh. Members of the religion believed that God's attention was centered on the Temple. Likewise, the rituals were similar to those practiced among various Middle Eastern religions, focusing on the sacrifice and burning of animals as offerings to God. David and Solomon supported the priesthood, and there was thus a direct link between the growing Yahwist faith and the political structure of Israel.

As noted above, the kingdom itself was fairly rich, thanks to its good spot on trade routes and the existence of gold mines, but Solomon's ongoing taxation and labor demands were such that resentment developed among the Hebrews over time. After his death, fully ten out of the twelve tribes broke off to form their own kingdom, retaining the name Israel, while the smaller remnant of the kingdom took on the name Judah.



Israel and Judah in the ninth century BCE, approximately a century before Israel was invaded and destroyed by the Assyrian Empire.

The northern kingdom of Israel was larger, richer, and more cosmopolitan. Israel's capital was the city of Samaria, and its people became known as Samaritans; they appear to have interacted with neighboring peoples frequently and many of them remained polytheists (people who worship more than one god) despite the growing movement to focus worship exclusively on Yahweh. The southern kingdom of Judah was poorer, smaller, and more conservative; it was in Judah that the Prophetic Movement (see below) came into being. It is from Judah that we get the word Jew: the Jews were the people of Judah.

With its riches, Israel was more attractive to invaders. When the Assyrian Empire expanded beyond Mesopotamia, it first conquered Israel, then eventually destroyed it outright when the Israelites rose up against them (this occurred in 722 BCE). The inhabitants of Israel either fled to Judah or were absorbed into the Assyrian Empire, losing their cultural identity in the process. This tragedy was later remembered as the origin of the “lost tribes” of Israel – Hebrews who lost their identity and their religion because of the Assyrian enslavement. Judah was overrun by the Assyrians, but Jerusalem withstood a siege long enough to convince the Assyrians to accept bribes to leave, and instead became a satellite kingdom dominated by the Assyrians but still ruled by a Hebrew king. (Judah was saved in part due to a plague that struck the Assyrian army, but it still ended up a tributary of the Assyrians, paying annual tributes and answering to an Assyrian official.)

In Judah, there were two prevailing patterns: vassalage and rebellion. Judah was simply too small to avoid paying tribute to various neighboring powers, but its people were proud and defensive of their independence, so every generation or so there were uprisings. The worst case was in 586 BCE, when the Jews rose up against the Neo-Babylonian Empire that succeeded the Assyrians. The Babylonians burned Jerusalem, along with Solomon's Temple, to the ground, and they enslaved tens of thousands of Jews. The Jews were deported to Babylon, just as the Israelites had been deported to Assyrian territory about 150 years earlier – this event is referred to as the “Babylonian Captivity” of the Jews.

Two generations later, when the Neo-Babylonian empire itself fell to the Persians, the Persian emperor Cyrus the Great allowed all of the enslaved people of the Babylonians to return to their homelands, so the Babylonian Captivity came to an end and the Jews returned to Judah, where they rebuilt the Temple. That being noted, what is referred to as the Jewish “diaspora,” meaning the geographical dispersion of the Jews, really began in 538 BCE, because many Jews chose to remain in Babylon and, soon, other cities in the Persian Empire. Since they continued to practice Judaism and carry on Jewish traditions, the notion of a people scattered across different lands but still united by culture and religion came into being.

After being freed by Cyrus, the Jews were still part of the Persian Empire, ruled by a Persian governor (called a “satrap”). For most of the rest of their history, the Jews were able to maintain their distinct cultural identity and their religion, but rarely their political independence. The Jews went from being ruled by the Persians to the Greeks to the Romans (although they did occasionally seize independence for a time), and were then eventually scattered across the Roman Empire. The real hammer-blow of the Diaspora was in the 130s CE, when the Romans destroyed much of Jerusalem and forced almost all of the Jews into exile – the word diaspora itself means “scattering,” and with the destruction of the Jewish kingdom by Rome there would be no Jewish state again until the foundation of the modern nation of Israel in 1948 CE.

The Yahwist Religion and Judaism

The Hebrew Bible claims that the Jews as a people worshipped Yahweh exclusively from the time of the Covenant, albeit with the worship of “false” gods from neighboring lands sometimes undermining their unity (and inviting divine retribution on the part of Yahweh for those transgressions). There is no historical or archeological evidence that suggests a single unified religion in Israel or Judah during the period of the united Hebrew monarchy or post-Solomon split between Israel and Judah, however (the Hebrew Bible itself was written down centuries later). A more likely scenario is that the Hebrews, like every other culture in the ancient world, worshipped a variety of deities, with Yahweh in a place of particular importance and centrality. A comparable case would be that of the Assyrians, who emphasized the worship of Ashur but who acknowledged the existence of other gods (including Yahweh).

As the Hebrews became more powerful, however, their religion changed dramatically. A tradition of prophets, later remembered as the Prophetic Movement, arose among certain people who sought to represent the poorer and more beleaguered members of the community, calling for a return to the more communal and egalitarian society of the past. The Prophetic Movement claimed that the Hebrews should worship Yahweh exclusively, and that Yahweh had a special relationship with the Hebrews that set Him apart as a God and them apart as a people. The Prophetic Movement lasted from the period before the Assyrian invasion of Israel through the Babylonian Captivity of the Jews, from about 750 BCE – 550 BCE.

This new set of beliefs, regarding the special relationship of a single God to the Hebrews, is referred to historically as the Yahwist religion. It was not yet “Judaism,” since it did not yet disavow the belief that other gods might exist, nor did it include all of the rituals and traditions associated with later Judaism. Initially, most of the Hebrews continued to at least acknowledge the existence of other gods – this phenomenon is called *henotheism*, the term for the worship of only one god in the context of believing in the existence of more than one god (i.e. many gods exist, but we only worship one of them). Over time, this changed into true monotheism: the belief that there *is* only one god, and that all other “gods” are illusory.

The Prophetic Movement attacked both polytheism and the Yahwist establishment centered on the Temple of Jerusalem (they blamed the latter for ignoring the plight of the common people and the poor). The prophets were hostile to both the political power structure and to deviation from the exclusive worship of Yahweh. The prophets were also responsible for enunciating the idea that Yahweh was the only god, in part in reaction to the demands of Assyria that all subjects acknowledge the Assyrian god Ashur as the supreme god. In other words, the claim of the Prophetic Movement was not only that Yahweh was superior to Ashur, but that Ashur was not really a god in the first place.

This is, so far as historians know, the first instance in world history in which the idea of a single all-powerful deity emerged among any people, anywhere (although some scholars consider Akhenaten’s attempted religious revolution in Egypt a quasi-monotheism). Up to this point, all religions held that there were many gods or spirits and that they had some kind of direct, concrete connections to specific areas. Likewise, the gods in most religions were largely indifferent to the actions of individuals so long as the proper prayers were recited and rituals performed. Ethical conduct did not have much influence on the gods (“ethical conduct” itself, of course, differing greatly from culture to culture), what mattered was that the gods were adequately appeased.

In contrast, early Judaism developed the belief that Yahweh was deeply invested in the actions of His chosen people both as a group and as individuals, regardless of their social station. There are various stories in which Yahweh judged people, even the kings like David and Solomon, making it clear that all people were known to Yahweh and no one

could escape His judgment. The key difference between this belief and the idea of divine anger in other ancient religions was that Yahweh only punished those who deserved it. He was not capricious and cruel like the Mesopotamian gods, for instance, nor flighty and given to bickering like the Greek gods.

The early vision of Yahweh present in the Yahwist faith was of a powerful but not *all*-powerful being whose authority and power was focused on the Hebrew people and the territory of the Hebrew kingdom only. In other words, the priests of Yahweh did not claim that he ruled over all people, everywhere, only that he was the God of the Hebrews and their land. That started to change when the Assyrians destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE. Many of the Hebrews regarded this disaster as proof of the corruption of the rich and powerful and the righteousness of the Prophetic Movement. Even though the loss of Israel was an obvious blow against the Hebrews as a people, the worship of Yahweh as the exclusive god of the Hebrews gained considerable support in Judah. Likewise, as the exclusive worship of Yahweh grew in importance among the Jews (now sundered from the other Hebrews, who had been enslaved), the concept of Yahweh's omnipotence and omnipresence grew as well.

The most important reforms of Hebrew religion occurred in the seventh century BCE. A Judean king, Josiah, insisted on the imposition of strict monotheism and the compilation of the first books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah, in 621 BCE. In the process, the Yahwist priesthood added the book of Deuteronomy to older sacred writings (the priests claimed to have discovered Deuteronomy, but almost all historians of ancient religion believe that it was simply written at the time). When many Jews left the religion after Josiah's death, the prophet Jeremiah warned them that disaster would ensue, and when the Neo-Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BCE, it seemed to validate his warning. Likewise, during the Babylonian Captivity, the prophet Ezekiel predicted the liberation of the Hebrews if they stuck to their faith, and they were indeed freed thanks to Cyrus (who admired older cultures like the Hebrews, since the Persians were originally semi-nomadic).

The sacred writings compiled during these events were all in the mode of the new monotheism. In these writings, Yahweh had *always* been there as the exclusive god of the Hebrew people and had promised them a land of abundance and peace (i.e. Israel) in return for their exclusive worship of Him. In these histories, the various defeats of the Hebrew people were explained by corruption from within, often the result of Hebrews straying from the Covenant and worshiping other gods.

These reforms were complete when the Neo-Babylonians conquered Judah in 586 BCE and enslaved tens of thousands of the Hebrews. The impact of this event was enormous, because it led to the belief that Yahweh could not be bound to a single place. He was no longer just the god of a single people in a single land, worshiped at a single temple, but instead became a boundless God, omnipotent and omnipresent. The special relationship between Him and the Hebrews remained, as did the promise of a kingdom of peace, but the Hebrews now held that He was available to them wherever they went and no matter what happened to them.

In Babylon itself, the thousands of Hebrews in exile not only arrived at this idea, but developed the strict set of religious customs, of marriage laws and ceremonies, of dietary laws (i.e. keeping a kosher diet), and the duty of all Hebrew men to study the sacred books, all in order to preserve their identity. Once the Torah was compiled as a single sacred text by the prophet Ezra, one of the official duties of the scholarly leaders of the Jewish community, the rabbis, was to carefully re-copy it, character by character, ensuring that it would stay the same no matter where the Jews went. The result was a "mobile tradition" of Judaism in which the Jews could travel anywhere and take their religion with them. This would become important in the future, when they were forcibly taken from Judah by the Romans and scattered across Europe and North Africa. The ability of the Jews to bring their religious tradition with them would allow them to survive as a distinct people despite ongoing persecution in the absence of a stable homeland.

Another important aspect of Judaism was its egalitarian ethical system. The radical element of Jewish religion, as well as the Jewish legal system that arose from it, the Talmud, was the idea that all Jews were equal before God, rather than certain among them having a closer relationship to God. This is the first time a truly egalitarian element enters into ethics; no other people had proposed the idea of the essential equality of all human beings (although some aspects of Egyptian religion came close). Of all the legacies of Judaism, this may be the most important, although it would take until the modern era for political movements to take up the idea of essential equality and translate them into a concrete social, legal, and political system.

Conclusion

What all of the cultures considered in this chapter have in common is that they were more dynamic and, in the case of the empires, more powerful than earlier Mesopotamian (and even Egyptian) states. In a sense, the empires of the Bronze Age and, especially, the Iron Age represented different experiments in how to build and maintain larger economic systems and political units than had been possible earlier. The other major change is that it now becomes possible to discuss and examine the interactions between the various kingdoms and empires, not just what happened with them internally, since the entire region from Greece to Mesopotamia was now in sustained contact through trade, warfare, and diplomacy.

Likewise, some of the ideas and beliefs that originated in the Bronze and Iron Ages – most obviously Judaism – would go on to play a profound role in shaping the subsequent history of not just Western Civilization, but much of world history. Monotheism and the concept of the essential spiritual equality of human beings began as beliefs among a tiny minority of people in the ancient world, but they would go on to become enormously influential in the long run.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Hittite Empire](#) – Crates

[Mask of Agamemnon](#) – Jebulon

[Bronze Age collapse](#) – Alexikoua

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[Israel and Judah](#) – FinnWikiNo

CHAPTER 4: THE ARCHAIC AGE OF GREECE

Overview

Many Western Civilization textbooks begin with the ancient Greeks. As noted in the introduction of this book, however, there are some problems with taking that approach, most importantly the fact that starting with the Greeks overlooks the fact that the Greeks did not invent the essential elements of civilization itself.

That being noted, the Greeks were unquestionably historically important and influential. They can be justly credited with creating forms of political organization and approaches to learning that were and remain hugely influential. Among other things, the Greeks carried out the first experiments in democratic government, invented a form of philosophy and learning concerned with empirical observation and rationality, created forms of drama like comedy and tragedy, and devised the method of researching and writing history itself. It is thus useful and productive to consider the history of ancient Greece even if the conceit that other forms of ancient history are less important is abandoned.

The Greek Dark Age

During the Bronze Age, as described in the last chapter, the Minoans and Mycenaeans were two of the civilizations that were part of the international trade and diplomacy network of the Mediterranean and Middle East. The Minoans were a major seafaring civilization based on the island of Crete. They created huge palace complexes, magnificent artwork, and great wealth. They eventually vanished as a distinct culture, most likely after they were conquered and absorbed by the Mycenaeans, their neighbors to the north.

The Mycenaeans developed as a civilization after the Minoans were already established in Crete. The Mycenaeans lived on the Greek mainland and the islands of the Aegean Sea and were known primarily as sea-going merchants and raiders. They were extremely warlike, attacking each other, their neighbors, and the people they also traded with whenever the opportunity existed to loot and sack. The Mycenaeans were the protagonists of the famous epic poems written by the (possibly mythical) Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*.

The Mycenaeans vanished as a civilization at the end of the Bronze Age. The cause was probably a combination of foreign invasions and local rebellions and wars. One strong possibility is that there was a sustained civil war among the Mycenaean palace-settlements that resulted in a fatal disruption to the economic setting that was essential to their very existence. A bad enough war in Greece itself could have easily undermined harvests, already near a subsistence level, and when they were destroyed by these conflicts, towns, fortresses and palaces could not be rebuilt. Whatever the cause, the decline of the Mycenaeans occurred around 1100 BCE, marking the beginning of what historians refer to as the Dark Age in Greek history.

Of all the regions and cultures affected by the collapse of the Bronze Age, Greece was among those hit hardest. First and foremost, foreign trade declined dramatically. Whereas the Mycenaeans had been seafaring traders, their descendants were largely limited to local production and trade. Agriculture reverted to subsistence levels, and trade with neighboring areas all but vanished. In turn, this reversion to local subsistence economies cut them off from important

sources of nutrition and materials for daily life, as well as foreign ideas and cultural influences. The Greeks went from being a great traveling and trading culture to one largely isolated from its neighbors. The results were devastating: some scholarly estimates are that the population of Greece declined by as much as 90% in the centuries following the Bronze Age collapse.

The Archaic Age and Greek Values

The Greek Dark Age started to end around 800 BCE. The subsequent period of Greek history, from around 800 BCE – 490 BCE, is referred to as the “Archaic” (meaning “old”) Age. The Archaic Age saw the re-emergence of sustained contact with foreign cultures, starting with the development of Greek colonies on the Greek islands and on the western coast of Anatolia; this region is called Ionia, with its Greek inhabitants speaking a dialect of Greek called Ionian. These Greeks reestablished long-distance trade routes, most importantly with the Phoenicians, the great traders and merchants of the Iron Age. Eventually, foreign-made goods and cultural contacts started to flow back to Greece once again.

Of the various influences the Ionian Greeks received from the Phoenicians, none was more important than their alphabet. Working from the Phoenician version, the Ionian Greeks developed their own syllabic alphabet (the earlier Greek writing system, Linear B, vanished during the Greek Dark Age). This system of writing proved flexible, nuanced, and relatively easy to learn. Soon, the Greeks started recording not just tax records and mercantile transactions, but their own literature, poetry, and drama. The earliest surviving Greek literature dates from around 800 – 750 BCE thanks to the use of this new alphabet (which, in turn, served as the basis of the Roman alphabet and from there to the alphabets used in all Latinate European languages, including English).

Homer’s epic poems – *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* – were written down in this period after being recited in oral form by traveling singers for centuries. They purported to recount the deeds of great heroes from the Mycenaean age, in the process providing a rich tapestry of information about ancient Greek values, beliefs, and practices to later cultures. Both poems celebrated *arete* – a Greek virtue which can be translated in English as “excellence” and “success,” but must be understood as a moral characteristic as much as a physical or mental one. *Arete* meant, among other things, fulfilling one’s potential, which was almost always the highest goal espoused in Greek philosophy. Throughout the epics, men and women struggle to overcome both one another and their own limitations, while grappling with the limitations imposed by nature, chance, and the will of the gods.

The values on display in the Homeric poems spoke to the Greeks of the Archaic Age in how they determined what was good and desirable in human behavior in general. The focus of the Greeks was on the two ways that a man (and it was always a man in Greek philosophy – a theme that will be explored in detail in a subsequent chapter) could dominate other men: through strength of arms and through skill at words. The two major areas a man had to master were thus war and rhetoric: the ability to defeat enemies in battle and the ability to persuade potential allies in the political arena.

What was important to the Greeks was the public performance of excellence, not private virtue or good intentions. What mattered was how a man performed publicly, in battle, in athletic competitions, or in the public forums of debate that emerged in the growing city-states of Archaic Greece. The fear of shame was a built-in part of the pursuit of excellence; Greek competitions (in everything from athletics to poetry) had no second-place winners, and the losers were openly mocked in the aftermath of the contests. This idea of public debate and competition was to have an enormous

influence on the development of Greek culture, one that would subsequently spread around the entire Mediterranean region.

Greek values translated directly into Greece's unique political order. The Archaic Age was the era when major Greek political innovations took place. Of these, the most important was the creation of the *polis* (plural: *poleis*): a political unit centered on a city and including the surrounding lands. The English word "political" derives from "polis" – the polis was the center of Greek politics in each city-state, and Greek innovations in the realm of political theory would have an enormous historical legacy. From the Greek poleis of the Archaic and subsequent Classical Age, the notion of legal citizenship and equality, the practice of voting on laws, and a particular concept of political pride now referred to as patriotism all first took shape.

In the Archaic Age, Greek city-states shared similar institutions. Greek citizens could only be members of a single polis, and citizens had some kind of role in political decision-making. Citizens would gather in the *agora*, an open area that was used as a market and a public square, and discuss matters of importance to the polis as a whole. The richest and most powerful citizens became known as "aristocrats" – the "best people." Eventually, aristocracy became hereditary. Other free citizens could vote in many cases on either electing officials or approving laws, the latter of which were usually created by a council of elders (all of whom were aristocrats) – the elders were called *archons*. At this early stage, commoners had little real political power; the importance was the precedent of meeting to discuss politics.

Even in poleis in which citizens did not directly vote on laws, however, there was a strong sense of community, out of which developed the concept of *civic virtue*: the idea that the highest moral calling was to place the good of the community above one's own selfish desires. This concept was almost unparalleled elsewhere in the ancient world. While other ancient peoples certainly identified with their places of origin, they linked themselves to lineages of kings rather than the abstract idea of a community in most cases. Also, all Greek citizens were equal before the law, which was a radical break since most other civilizations had different sets of laws based on class identity (there were considerable ironies in Greek notions of "equality" however – see the later chapter on classical Greece). Civic virtue, very closely related to the modern concept of patriotism, was power and influential idea because it would continue through the Greek Classical Age, be transmitted by Alexander the Great's conquests, and eventually become one of, if not the single most important ethical standards of the Roman Republic and Empire. It would ultimately go on to influence thinkers and politicians up to the present.

One area of Archaic Greek culture bears additional focus: gender. Greek society was explicitly patriarchal, with men holding all official positions of political power. Likewise, both the Greek myths and epic tales are both rife with hostility and suspicion of assertive, intelligent women, celebrating instead women who dutifully served their husbands or fathers (Penelope, wife of the Greek hero Odysseus, is described as waiting faithfully for twenty years for Odysseus to return from the invasion of Troy despite a legion of suitors trying to win her and Odysseus's lands). Women were expected to be sexually monogamous with their husbands while men's sexual liaisons with female slaves as well as other men of their own social rank were perfectly acceptable behaviors.

That being noted, it is clear that women in the Archaic Age did enjoy both social influence and some access to economic power, being able to inherit property and receiving social approval for the skillful management of households. Likewise, women were not generally secluded from men in normal social discourse, with various Greek tales including moments of casual interaction between men and women. Practically speaking, women were invaluable to the Greek economy, providing almost all of the domestic labor and contributing to farming and commerce as well. Their status, however, would grow more fraught over time: as the Archaic Age evolved into the Classical Age (considered in a

following chapter,) restrictions on women's lives and freedoms would increase, especially in key poleis like Athens, culminating in some of the most misogynistic gender standards in the ancient world.

Greek Culture and Trade

The Greek poleis were each distinct, fiercely proud of their own identity and independence, and they frequently fought small-scale wars against one another. Even as they did so, they recognized each other as fellow Greeks and therefore as cultural equals. All Greeks spoke mutually intelligible dialects of the Greek language. All Greeks worshiped the same pantheon of gods. All Greeks shared political traditions of citizenship. Finally, the Greeks took part in a range of cultural practices, from listening to traveling storytellers who recited the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* from memory to holding drawn-out drinking parties called *symposia*.



Depiction of a symposium dating from c. 475 BCE.

The poleis also invented institutions that united the cities culturally, despite their political independence, the most important of which was the Panhellenic games. “Panhellenic” literally means “all Greece,” and the games were meant to unite all of the Greek poleis, including those founded by colonists and located far from Greece itself. The games were a combination of religious festival and competition in which aristocrats from each city competed in various sports, including javelin, discus, footraces, and a brutal form of unarmed combat called *pankration*.

The most significant of these games was the Olympics, named after Olympia, the site in southern Greece where they were held every four years. They started in 776 BCE and ended in 393 CE – in other words, they lasted for over 1,000 years. Thanks to the Olympics, the date 776 BCE is usually used as the definitive break between the Dark and Archaic ages of Greek civilization. The Olympics were extraordinary not just in their longevity, but because Greeks from the entire world of Greek settlements came to them, traveling from as far away as Sicily and the Black Sea. Wars were temporarily suspended and all Greek poleis agreed to let athletes travel with safe passage to take part in the games, in part because the Olympics were dedicated to Zeus, the chief Greek god. As noted above, there were no second prizes. Greek culture was hugely competitive; the defeated were humiliated and the winners totally triumphant. In the games, they sought, in the words of one Greek poet, “either the wreath of victory or death” (granted, that poet was indulging in some hyperbole, as there is no evidence that defeated athletes actually committed suicide).

With the end of the Dark Age, population levels in Greece recovered. This led to emigration as the population outstripped the poor, rocky soil of Greece itself and forced people to move elsewhere. Eventually, Greek colonies stretched across the Mediterranean as far as Spain in the west and the coasts of the Black Sea in the north. Greeks founded

colonies on the North African coast and on the islands of the Mediterranean, most importantly on Sicily. Greeks set up trading posts in the areas they settled, even in Egypt. The colonies continued the mainland practice of growing olives and grapes for oil and wine, but they also took advantage of much more fertile areas away from Greece to cultivate other crops.

Greek colonists sometimes intermarried with local peoples on arrival, an unsurprising practice given that many expeditions of colonists were almost all young men. In other cases, however, colonists found relatively isolated areas appropriate for shipping and set up shop, maintaining close connections with their home polis as an economic outpost. The one factor that was common to all Greek colonies was that they were rarely far from the sea. They were so closely tied to the idea of a shared Greek civilization and the need for the sea for trade routes was so strong that colonists were not generally interested in trying to push inland.



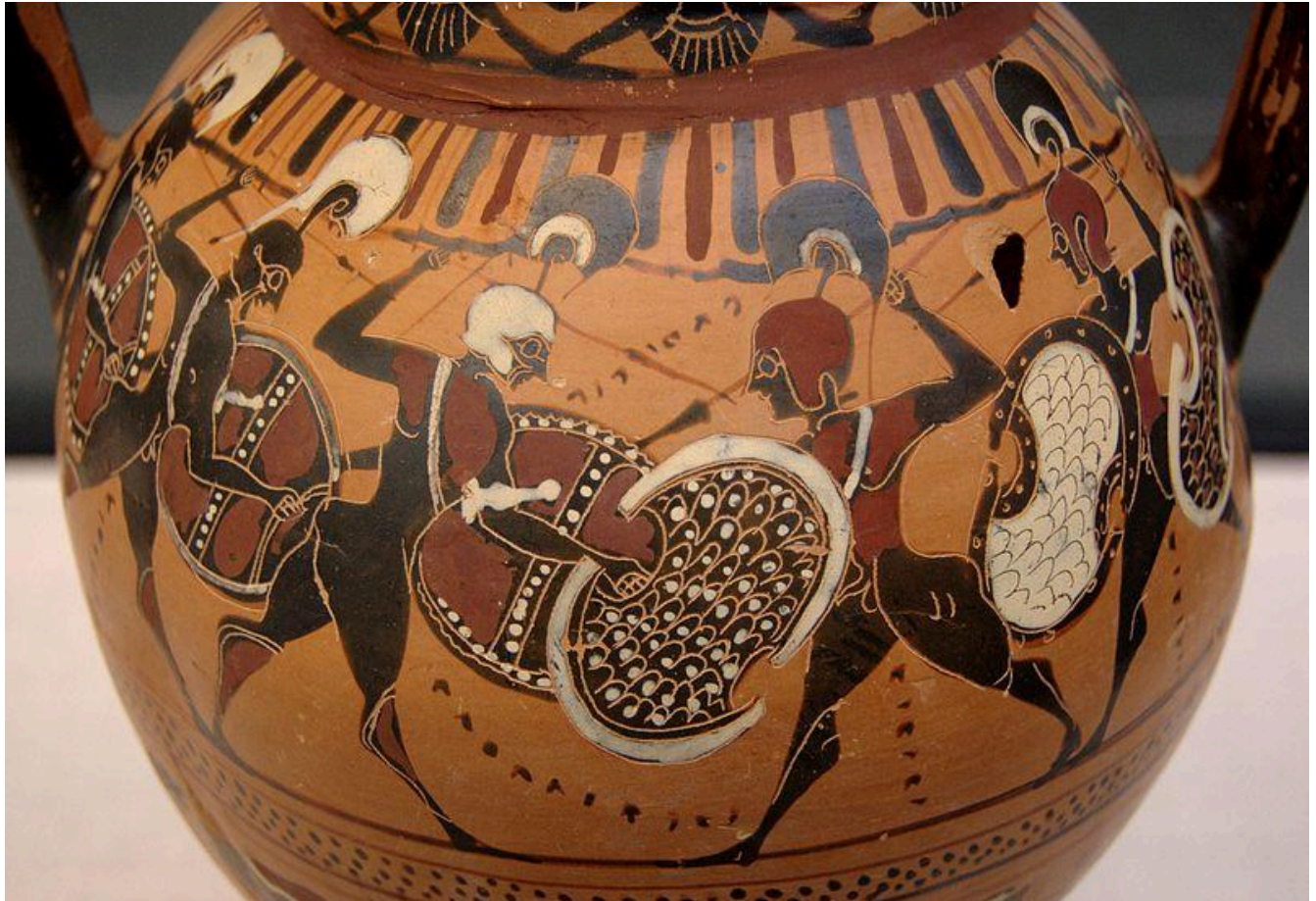
Greek colonization during the Archaic period – note how Greek colonies were always near the sea.

As trade recovered following the end of the Dark Age, the Greeks re-established their commercial shipping network across the Mediterranean, with their colonies soon playing a vital role. Greek merchants eagerly traded with everyone from the Celts of Western Europe to the Egyptians, Lydians, and Babylonians. When Julius Caesar was busy conquering Gaul about 700 years later, he found the Celts there writing in the Greek alphabet, long since learned from the Greek colonies along the coast. Likewise, archaeologists have discovered beautiful examples of Greek metalwork as far from Greece as northern France.

Greek colonies far from Greece were as important as the older poleis in Greece itself, since they created a common Greek civilization across the entire Mediterranean world. Greek civilization was not an empire united by a single ruler or government. Instead, it was united by culture rather than a common leadership structure. That culture would go on to influence all of the cultures to follow in a vast swath of territory throughout the Mediterranean region and the Middle East.

Military Organization and Politics

A key military development unique to Greece was the *phalanx*: a unit of spearmen standing in a dense formation, with each using his shield to protect the man to his left. Each soldier in a phalanx was called a *hoplite*. Each hoplite had to be a free Greek citizen of his polis and had to be able to pay for his own weapons and armor. He also had to be able to train and drill regularly with his fellow hoplites, since maneuvering in the densely-packed phalanx required a great deal of practice and coordination. The hoplites were significant politically because they were not always aristocrats, despite the fact that they had to be free citizens capable of paying for their own arms. Because they defended the poleis and proved extremely effective on the battlefield, the hoplites would go on to demand better political representation, something that would have a major impact on Greek politics as a whole.



Depiction of a battle between phalanxes of hoplites from rival poleis, dating from c. 560 BCE. The clay vessel is an amphora, a container used for wine or olive oil.

The most noteworthy military innovation represented by the hoplites was that their form of organization provided one solution to the age-old problem of how to pay for highly-trained and motivated soldiers: rather than a state paying for a standing army, the hoplites paid for themselves and were motivated by civic virtue. When rival poleis fought, the phalanxes of each side would square off and stab away at each other until one side broke, threw down their shields, and ran away (by far the deadliest part of the confrontation). The victors would then allow the losers time to gather their dead for a proper burial and peace terms would be negotiated.

By the seventh century BCE, the hoplites in many poleis were clamoring for better political representation, since

they were excluded by the traditional aristocrats from meaningful political power. In many cases, the result was the rise of tyrannies: a government led by a man, the tyrant, who had no legal right to power, but had been appointed by the citizens of a polis in order to stave off civil conflict (tyrants were generally aristocrats, but they answered to the needs of the hoplites as well). To the Greeks, the term tyrant did not originally mean an unjust or cruel ruler, since many tyrants succeeded in solving major political crises on behalf of the hoplites while still managing to placate the aristocrats.

The tyrants, lacking official political status, had to play to the interests of the people to stay in power as popular dictators. They sometimes seized lands of aristocrats outright and distributed them to free citizens. Many of them built public works and provided jobs, while others went out of their way to promote trade. The period between 650 – 500 BCE is sometimes called the “Age of Tyrants” in Greek history because many poleis instituted tyrants to stave off civil war between aristocrats and less wealthy citizens during this period. After 500 BCE, a compromise government called oligarchy tended to replace both aristocracies and tyrannies. In an oligarchy, anyone with enough money could hold office, the laws were written down and known to all free citizens, and even poorer citizens could vote (albeit only yes or no) on the laws passed by councils.

Sparta and Athens

Two of the most memorable poleis of the Archaic Age were Sparta and Athens. The two poleis were in many ways a study in contrasts: an obsessively militaristic and inward-looking society of “equals” who controlled the largest slave society in Greece, and a cosmopolitan naval power at the forefront of political innovation.

Sparta

One scholarly work on Greek history, Frank Frost’s *Greek Society*, describes the Spartans as “an experiment in elitist communism.” From approximately 600 BCE – 450 BCE, the Spartans were unique in the ancient world in placing total emphasis on a super-elite, and very small, citizenship of warriors. Starting in about 700 BCE, the Spartans conquered a large swath of territory in their home region of Greece, the southern Greek peninsula called the Peloponnesus. Sparta at the time was an aristocratic monarchy, with two kings ruling over councils of citizens. Under the two kings were a smaller council that issued laws and a large council made up of all Spartan males over 30 who approved or rejected the laws proposed by the council. Over time, citizenship was limited to men who had undergone the arduous military training for which the Spartans are best remembered.

Spartan culture was among the most extreme forms of militarism the world has ever seen. Spartan boys were taken from their parents when they were seven to live in barracks. They were regularly beaten, both as a form of discipline and to make them unafraid of pain. Children with deformities of any kind were left in the elements to die, as were children maimed by the training regimen. Spartan boys were trained constantly in combat, maneuvering, and physical endurance. Spartan girls were allowed to stay with their parents, but were trained in martial skills as children as well, along with the knowledge they would need to run a household. When a man reached the age of twenty, assuming he was judged worthy, he would be elevated to the rank of “Equal” – a full Spartan citizen – and receive a land grant that ensured that he could concentrate on military discipline for the rest of his life without having to worry about making a living.

Even activities like courtship and acquiring nourishment were designed to test Spartans. When it was time for young Spartan to marry, the young man would brawl his way into the family home of his bride-to-be, fighting her

relatives until he could “kidnap” her – this was as close to courtship as the Spartans got. Married couples were not allowed to live together before the age of 30; up till then, the man was expected to sneak out of his bunker to see his wife, then sneak back in again before morning. In addition, Spartans in training were often forced to steal food (from their own slave-run farms); they were punished if caught, but the infraction was being caught, not the theft – the idea was that the future warrior had failed to live up to the required level of skill at stealth.

The reason for all of this militaristic mania was simple: Sparta was a slave society. Approximately 90% of the population of the area under Sparta’s control were *helots*, serfs descended from the population conquered by Sparta in the eighth century. Early Spartan conquests of their region of Greece had resulted in a very large area under their control, populated by people who were not Spartan. Rather than extend any kind of political representation to these subjects, the Spartans instead maintained absolute control over them, up to the right of killing them at will with no legal consequence.

Every year, the Spartans would “declare war” on the helots, rampaging through their river valley, and part of the training of young Spartans was serving on the *Krypteia*, the Spartan secret police that infiltrated Helot villages to watch for signs of rebellion. Adolescent Spartans in training would even be dispatched to simply murder any helots they encountered. All of this was to ensure that the helots would be too terrified and broken-spirited to resist Spartan domination. There were never more than 8,000 Spartan soldiers, along with another 20,000 or so of free noncitizens (inhabitants of towns near Sparta who were not considered helots, but instead free but subservient subjects), overseeing a much larger population of helots. Simply put, Spartan society was a military hierarchy that arose out of the fear a massive slave uprising.

Likewise, despite the famous, and accurate, accounts of key battles in which the Spartans were victorious, or at least symbolically victorious, they were loathe to be drawn into wars, especially ones that involved going more than a few days’ march from Sparta. They were so preoccupied with maintaining control over the helots that they were very hesitant to engage in military campaigns of any kind, and hence rarely engaged in battles against other poleis before the outbreak of war against Athens in the fourth century BCE.

The only area in which Spartan society was actually *less* repressive than the rest of the Greek poleis was in gender roles. According to Greeks from outside of Sparta, free Spartan women were much less restricted than women elsewhere in Greece. They were trained in war, they could speak publicly, and they could own land. They scandalized other Greeks by participating in athletics and appear to have benefited from a greater degree of personal freedom than women anywhere else in Greece – of course, this would have been a social necessity since the men of Sparta lived in barracks until they were 30, leaving the women to run household estates.

Athens

In many ways, Athens was the opposite of Sparta. Whereas the Spartans were militaristic and austere (the word “spartan” in English today means “severe and unadorned”), the Athenians celebrated art, music, and drama. While it still controlled a large slave population, Athens is also remembered as the birthplace of democracy. In turn, Sparta and Athens were, especially in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, rivals for the position of the most powerful polis in Greece.

Athens was rich and populous – the population of Attica, its 1,000-square-mile region of Greece, was about 600,000 by 600 BCE, and Athens was a major force in Mediterranean trade. That wealth led to conflicts over its distribution among the citizens, in turn prompting some unprecedented political experiments. Starting early in the Archaic Age, Athens witnessed a series of struggles and compromises between the aristocrats – wealthy land-owning families who controlled most of the land and most of the political power – and everyone else, particularly the free citizens

and farmers of Athens who were not aristocrats. One key development in Athenian politics arose from the fact that merchants and prosperous farmers could afford arms and armor but were shut out of political decision-making. This was a classic case of hoplites becoming increasingly angry with the political domination of the aristocracy.

The crisis of representation reached a boiling point in about 600 BCE when there was a real possibility of civil war between the common citizens and the aristocrats. The major problem was that the aristocrats owned most of the land that other farmers worked on, many of those farmers were increasingly indebted to the aristocrats, and by Athenian law anyone who could not pay off his or her debts could be legally enslaved. An increasing number of formerly-free Athenian citizens thus found themselves enslaved to pay off their debts to an aristocrat.

To prevent civil war, the Athenians appointed Solon (638 – 558 BCE), an aristocratic but fair-minded politician, to serve as a tyrant and to reform institutions. His most important step in restoring order was to cancel debts and to eliminate debt-slavery itself. He used public money to buy Athenian slaves who had been enslaved abroad and bring them back to Athens. He enacted other legal reforms that reduced the overall power of the aristocracy, and in a savvy move, he had the laws written down on wooden panels and posted around the city so that anyone who could read could examine them (up to that point, the only people who actually knew the laws were the aristocratic judges, which made it all too easy for them to abuse their power).

Solon was not some kind of rabble-rouser or proto-communist, however. He mitigated the worst of the social divides between rich and poor in Athens, but he still reserved the highest offices for members of the richest families. On the other hand, the poorer free citizens were completely exempt from taxes, which made it easier for them to stay out of debt and to contribute to Athenian society (and the military). Perhaps the most innovative and important of Solon's innovations was the concept of an impersonal state, one in which the politicians come and go but which continues on as an institution obeying written laws; this is in contrast to "the state" as just the ruling cabal of elite men, which Athens had been prior to Solon's intervention.

This pattern continued for about a century. Solon's successors were a collection of new tyrants, some of whom seized more land from aristocrats and distributed it to farmers, most of whom sponsored new building projects, but none of whom definitively broke the power of the old families. Social divides and tension continued to be the essential reality of Athenian society.

In 508 BCE, however, a new tyrant named Cleisthenes was appointed by the Athenian assembly who finally took the radical step of allowing all male citizens to have a vote in public matters and to be eligible to serve in public office. This included free but poor citizens, the ones too poor to afford weapons and serve as hoplites. He had lawmakers chosen by lot (i.e. randomly) and created new "tribes" mixing men of different backgrounds together to force them to start to think of themselves as fellow Athenians, not just jealous protectors of their own families' interests. Thus, under Cleisthenes, Athens became the first "real" democracy in history.

That being noted, by modern standards Athens was still highly unequal and unrepresentative. Women were completely excluded from political life, as were free non-citizens (including many prosperous Greeks who had not been born in Athens) and, of course, slaves. The voting age was set at 20. Overall, about 40% of the population were native-born Athenians, of which half were men, and half were under 20, so only 10% of the actual population had political rights. This is still a very large percentage by the standards of the ancient world, but it should be considered as an antidote to the idea that the Greeks believed in "equality" in a modern sense.

Conclusion

Greece managed to develop its unique political institutions and culture as part of a larger Mediterranean “world,” trading with, raiding, and settling alongside many of the other civilizations of the Iron Age. For centuries, Greece itself was too remote, geographically, and too poor, in terms of natural resources, to tempt foreign invaders to try to seize control. Starting in the sixth century BCE, however, some Greek colonies fell under the sway of the greatest empire the world had seen to date, and a series of events culminated in a full-scale war between the Greeks and that empire: Persia.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Symposium](#) – PD-1923

[Greek colonies](#) – Regaliorum

[Phalanxes](#) – Bibi Saint-Pol

CHAPTER 5: PERSIA AND THE GREEK WARS

Persia was one of the most significant ancient civilizations, a vast empire that was at the time the largest the world had ever seen. It incorporated all of the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, and at its height it even included Egypt. In other words, the entire expanse of land stretching from the borders of India to Greece, including nearly all of the cultures described in the chapters above, were all conquered and controlled by the Persians.

Persia itself corresponds with present-day Iran (the language of Iran today, Farsi, is a direct linguistic descendent of ancient Persian). Most of its landmass is an arid plateau crossed by mountain ranges. In the ancient world, it was dominated by warriors on horseback who were generally perceived as “barbarians” by the settled people of Mesopotamia to the west. By the seventh century BCE, a powerful collection of clans, the Medes, dominated Persia, forming a loosely-governed empire. In turn, the Medes ruled over a closely-related set of clans known as the Persians, who would go on to rule territories far beyond the Iranian heartland.

Historians divide Persian history into periods defined by the founding clan of a given royal dynasty. The empire described in this chapter is referred to as the Achaemenid Persian Empire after its first ruling clan. Later periods of ancient Persian history, most importantly the Parthian and Sasanian empires, are described in the chapters on ancient Rome.

Persian Expansion

The Medes were allies of Babylon, and in 612 BCE they took part in the huge rebellion that resulted in the downfall of the Assyrian Empire. For just over fifty years, the Medes continued to dominate the Iranian plateau. Then, in 550 BCE a Persian leader, Cyrus II the Great, led the Persians against the Medes and conquered them (practically speaking, there was little distinction between the two groups since they were so closely related and similar; the Greeks regularly confused the two when writing about them). He assimilated the Medes into his own military force and then embarked on an incredible campaign of conquest that lasted twenty years, forging Persia into a gigantic empire.

Cyrus began his conquests by invading Anatolia in 546 BCE, conquering the kingdom of Lydia in the process. His principal further west were the Greek colonies of Ionia, along the coast of the Aegean Sea. Cyrus swiftly defeated the Greek poleis, but instead of punishing the Greeks for opposing him he allowed them to keep their language, religion, and culture, simply insisting they give him loyal warriors and offer tribute. He found Greek leaders willing to work with the Persians and he appointed them as governors of the colonies. Thus, even though they had been beaten, most of the Greeks in the colonies did not experience Persian rule as particularly oppressive.

Cyrus next turned south and conquered the city-states and kingdoms of Mesopotamia, culminating with his conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. This conquest was surprisingly peaceful; Babylon was torn between the priests of Marduk (the patron deity of the city) and the king, who was trying to favor the worship of a different goddess. After he defeated the forces of the king in one battle, Cyrus was welcomed as a liberator by the Babylonians and he made a point of venerating Marduk to help ensure their ongoing loyalty.

Much of what historians know about Persia is gleaned from the propaganda Persian kings left behind. The

conquest of Babylon produced an outstanding example – the “Cyrus Cylinder,” a pillar covered in a proclamation that Cyrus commissioned after the conquest of Babylon.



Part of the inscription reads: “I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters, the son of Cambyses, great king, king of Anšan, grandson of Cyrus, great king, king of Anšan, descendant of Teispes, great king, king of Anšan, of an eternal line of kingship, whose rule Bêl and Nabu love, whose kingship they desire for their hearts’ pleasure. When I entered Babylon in a peaceful manner, I took up my lordly abode in the royal palace amidst rejoicing and happiness. Marduk, the great lord, established as his fate for me a magnanimous heart of one who loves Babylon, and I daily attended to his worship.”

The Cyrus Cylinder is a crucial source for understanding Persian rulership at its very beginning. Cyrus established his authority on two principles: descent from other great kings and the favor of the gods. He was the living representative of a supreme royal line of descent and an *ensis* in the Mesopotamian sense: the agent of the patron god on earth. Over time the identity of the god in question became Ahura Mazda, the supreme god of the Zoroastrian religion (described below) rather than Marduk, but the principle remained the same. All subsequent Persian kings would cite these two principles, which when combined elevated them in authority above all other rulers.

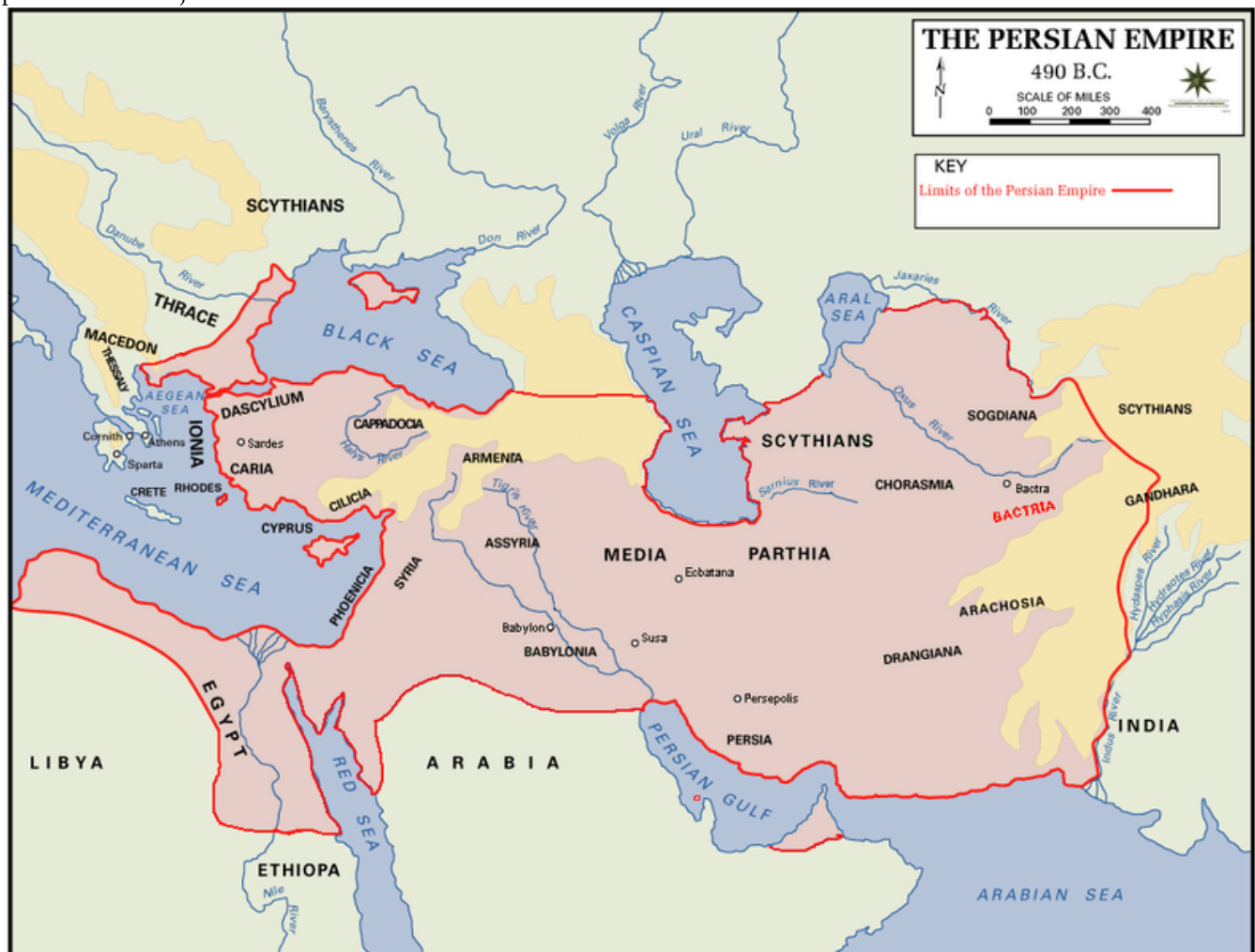
Cyrus continued the practice of finding loyal leaders and treating his conquered enemies fairly, which kept uprisings against him to a minimum. He then pushed into Central Asia, in present-day Afghanistan, conquering all of what constituted the “known world” in that region. To the northeast were the steppes, home of a steppe-dwelling nomadic people called the Scythians, whom the Persians would go on to fight for centuries (Cyrus himself died in battle against the Scythians in 530 BCE – he was 70 years old at the time).

Cyrus was followed by his son Cambyses II. Cambyses led the Persian armies west, conquering both the

rich Phoenician cities of the eastern Mediterranean coast and Egypt. He was installed as pharaoh in Egypt, again demonstrating Persian respect for local traditions. Thus, in less than thirty years, Persia had gone from an obscure kingdom in the middle of the Iranian plateau to the largest land empire in the entire world, bigger even than China (under the Eastern Zhou dynasty) at the time. Cambyses died not long after, in 522 BCE, under somewhat mysterious circumstances – he supposedly fell on his sword while getting off of his horse.

In 522, following Cambyses' death, Darius I became king (r. 521 – 486 BCE). Darius came to power after leading a conspiracy that may have assassinated Cambyses' younger brother Bardiya, who had briefly ruled. In the midst of the political chaos at the top, a series of revolts briefly shook the empire, but Darius swiftly crushed the uprisings and reasserted Persian rule. He captured his moment of triumph in a huge carved image on a rock wall (the "Bisitun Inscription") which depicts his victory over lesser kings and traces his royal lineage back to a shared ancestor with Cyrus the Great.

By the time Darius came to power, the Persian Empire was already too large to rule effectively; it was bigger than any empire in the world to date but there was no infrastructure or government sufficient to rule it consistently. Darius worked to change that. He expanded the empire further and, more importantly, consolidated royal power. He improved infrastructure, established a postal service, and standardized weights, measures, and coinage. He set up a uniform bureaucracy and system of rule over the entire empire to standardize taxation and make it clear what was expected of the subject areas.



The Persian Empire at its territorial height under Darius I.

Darius inherited the conquests of his predecessors, and he personally oversaw the conquest of the northern part of the Indus river valley in northwestern India, thus marking the first time in world history when one state ruled over three of the major river systems of ancient history (i.e. the Nile, Mesopotamia, and the Indus). In 513 BCE he led a gigantic invasion of Central Asia to try to end the raids of the Scythians once and for all; he was forced to retreat without winning a decisive victory, but his army was still intact and he had added Thrace (present-day Bulgaria) to the empire.

Darius was also interested in seizing more territory to the west, conquering the remaining Greek colonies on the coast of Anatolia. In 499 BCE several Ionian Greek poleis rose against the Persians and successfully secured Athenian aid. Several years of fighting followed, with the Persians eventually crushing the rebellion in 494 BCE (the Persians deported many of the Greek rebels to India as punishment). Athens' decision to support the rebellion angered the Persians, however, and Darius began to plan a full-fledged invasion of Greece (considered below).

The Persian Government

An empire this big posed some serious logistical challenges. The Persians may have had relatively loyal subjects, after all, but if it took months for messages to reach them, even loyal subjects could make decisions that the kings would disagree with. To help address this issue, Darius undertook a series of major reforms. The Persians continued the Assyrian practice of building highways and setting up supply posts for their messengers. The most important of these highways was called the Royal Road, linking up the empire all the way from western Anatolia to the Persian capital of Susa, just east of the Tigris. A messenger on the Royal Road could cover 1,600 miles in a week on horseback, trading out horses at posts along the way. The Persians standardized laws and issued regular coinage in both silver and gold. The state used several languages to communicate with its subjects, and the government sponsored a major effort to standardize a new, simplified cuneiform alphabet.

As described above, the key to Persian rule was the novel innovation of treating conquered people with a degree of leniency (in stark contrast to the earlier methods of rule employed by the Assyrians and Neo-Babylonians). So long as they were loyal, paid taxes, and sent troops when called, the Persian kings had no problem with letting their subjects practice their own religions, use their own languages, and carry on their own trading practices and customs. For example, it was Cyrus who allowed the exiled Jews to return to Judah from Babylon in the name of a kind of royal generosity. It seems that the Persian kings felt it very important to maintain an image of beneficence, of linking their power to sympathy for their subjects, rather than trying to terrorize their subjects into submission.

The Persian kings introduced a system of governance that allowed them to gather intelligence and maintain control over such a vast area relatively successfully. The empire was divided into twenty *satrapies* (provinces), ruled by officials called *satraps*. In each satrapy, the satrap was the political governor, advised and supplemented by a military general who reported directly to the king; in this way, the two most powerful leaders in each satrapy could keep an eye on each other. In addition, roaming officials called the “eyes and ears of the king” traveled around the empire checking that the king’s edicts were being enforced and that conquered people were not being abused, then reporting back to the Persian capitals of Susa and Persepolis (both cities served as royal capitals). Despite that system of political “checks and balances,” the satraps appointed the new king from the royal family when the old one died; sometimes they preferred to appoint weak-willed members of the royal family so that the satraps might enjoy more personal freedom. Likewise, despite the innovations that Darius introduced in organization, the satraps normally operated with a large degree of autonomy.

The kings themselves adopted the title of “King of Kings.” They were happy to acknowledge the authority of the rulers of the lands they had conquered, but required those rulers to in turn acknowledge the Persian king’s overarching supremacy. Persian images of the kings depicted them receiving tribute from other, lesser kings who had come to Susa or Persepolis in a show of loyalty and support. In this way, the political authority of the empire was tied together by both the formal bureaucratic structure of the satrapies as well as the bonds of loyalty between the King of Kings and his subject rulers.

One final component of the Persian system was relatively modest taxation. In order to keep taxes moderate, the Persian kings only called up armies (of both Persians and conquered peoples) when there was a war; otherwise the only permanent army was the 10,000-strong elite bodyguard of the king that the Greeks called the “Immortals.” When the Persians did go to war, their subjects contributed troops according to their strengths. The Phoenicians formed the navy, the Medes the cavalry, the Mesopotamians the infantry, and so on. This system worked well on long campaigns, but its weakness was that it took up to two years to mobilize the whole empire for war, a serious issue in the conflicts between Persia and Greece in the long run.

The Achaemenid dynasty of Persia would rule for approximately two centuries, from Cyrus’s victories in 550 BCE to its conquest by Alexander the Great, completed in 330 BCE. It is worth noting that despite the relatively “enlightened” character of Persian rule, rebellions did occur (often starting in Egypt), most frequently during periods of transition or civil war between rival claimants to the throne. In a sense, the empire both benefited from and was made vulnerable by the autonomy of its subjects: each region maintained its own identity and traditions, keeping everyday resentment to a minimum, but in moments of crisis that autonomy might also lead to the demand for actual independence.

Zoroastrianism

Despite the overall policy of religious tolerance, there was still a dominant Persian religion: Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism, named after its prophet Zoroaster, taught that the world was being fought over by two great powers: a god of goodness, honesty, and benevolence known as Ahura Mazda (meaning “Lord Wisdom”) and an evil spirit, Ahriman. Ahura Mazda was aided by lesser gods like Mithras, god of the sun and rebirth, and Anahita, goddess of water and the cosmos. Every time a person did something righteous, honest, or brave, Ahura Mazda won a victory over Ahriman, while every time someone did something cruel, dishonest, or dishonorable Ahriman pushed back against Ahura Mazda. Thus, humans had a major role to play in bringing about the final victory of Ahura Mazda through their actions.

Zoroaster himself lived far earlier (sometime between 1300 BCE and 1000 BCE), long before the rise of the empire, and was responsible for codifying the beliefs of the religion named after him. Zoroaster claimed that Ahura Mazda was the primary god and would ultimately triumph in the battle against evil, but explained the existence of evil in the world as a result of the struggle against Ahriman. Thus, Ahura Mazda was not “all-powerful” in quite the same way as the Jewish (and later Christian and Muslim) God was believed to be. Human actions mattered in this scheme because everyone played a role, however minor, in helping to bring about order and righteousness or impeding progress by indulging in wickedness. Zoroastrianism also told a specific story about the afterlife: when the power of good finally triumphs definitively over evil, those who lived righteously would live forever in the glorious presence of Ahura Mazda, while those who were evil would suffer forever in a black pit.

There are obvious parallels here between Zoroastrianism and Jewish and Christian beliefs. Indeed, there is a

direct link between the Zoroastrian Ahriman and the Jewish and Christian figure of Satan, who was simply a dark spirit in the early books of the Torah but later became a distinct presence, the “nemesis” of God Himself and a threat to the order of the world, if not to God. Likewise, the Christian idea of the final judgment is clearly indebted to the Zoroastrian one: a great day of reckoning.

In turn, Zoroastrianism provided a spiritual justification for the expansion of the Persian Empire. Because the great kings believed that they were the earthly representatives of Ahura Mazda, they claimed that the expansion of the empire would bring the final triumph of good over evil sooner. There was a parallel here to the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, who had also (during their expansionist phase during the New Kingdom) claimed to be bringing order to a chaotic world at the end of a sword. The kings sponsored Zoroastrian temples and expanded the faith at least in part because the faith supported them: the *magi*, or priests, preached in favor of the continued power and expansion of the empire.

One noteworthy aspect of Zoroastrianism is that, in contrast to other ancient religions (including Judaism, and later, Christianity), Zoroastrianism appears to have banned slavery on spiritual grounds. This is important to bear in mind in the context of discussing the Persian War, described below. The Greeks thought of the war as the defense of their glorious traditions, including the political participation of citizens in the state, but it was the Greeks who controlled a society that was heavily dependent on slavery, whereas slavery was at least less prevalent in Persia than in Greece (despite the religious ban, slavery was clearly still present in the Persian Empire to some degree).

Almost all of the theological details about Zoroastrianism are known from much later periods of Persian history, although historians have established that the Persian rulers themselves were almost certainly Zoroastrians by the rule of Darius I. The importance of Zoroastrianism is in part the fact that it reveals much about what the Persians *valued*, not just what they believed about the universe. Truth was the cardinal virtue of Zoroastrianism, with lying being synonymous with evil. Each person had a certain social role to play in the Zoroastrian worldview, with the kings presiding over an ordered, loyal, prosperous society. In theory, war was fought to extend righteousness, not just seize territory and loot. Clearly, there was a sophisticated ethical code and set of social expectations present even in early Zoroastrianism, reflected in a comment made by the Greek historian Herodotus. According to him, the Persians taught their children three things: to ride a horse, to shoot a bow, and to tell the truth.

The Persian War

When the Greek cities of Ionia rose up against Persian rule, Darius vowed to make an example not just of them, but of the Greek poleis that had aided them, including Athens. This led to the Persian War, one of the most famous conflicts in ancient history. It is remembered in part because it pitted an underdog, Greece, against a massive empire, Persia. It is remembered because the underdog won, at least initially. It is also remembered, unfortunately, for how the conflict was appropriated by proto-racist beliefs in the superiority of “The West.” Because the Greeks saw the conflict in terms of the triumph of true, Greek, civilization over barbaric tyranny, and the surviving historical sources are told exclusively from the Greek perspective, this bias has managed to last down until the present – consider the recent movie adaptations of the most famous battles of the Persian War, *300* and *300: Rise of an Empire*, in which the Persians are depicted as being literally monstrous, ruled over by a comically evil, eight-foot-tall king. The fact that both Sparta and Athens were slave-based societies is *not* part of those movies’ narratives.

The war began in 490 BCE, when the Persians, with about 25,000 men, landed at Marathon, a town 26 miles

from Athens. The Athenians sent a renowned runner, Pheidippides, to Sparta (about 140 miles from Athens) to ask for help. The Spartans agreed, but said that they could only send reinforcements when their religious ceremonies were completed in a few days. Pheidippides ran back to Athens with the bad news, but by then the Athenians were already engaged with the Persians.

There were about 25,000 Persian troops – this was an “expeditionary force,” not a large army, against which the Athenians fielded 10,000 hoplites. The Athenians marched out to confront the Persians. The two armies camped out and watched each other for a few days, then the Persians dispatched about 10,000 of their troops in naval transports to attack Athens directly; this prompted a gamble on the part of the leading Athenian general (named Miltiades) to attack the remaining Persians, rather than running back to Athens to defend it. The ensuing battle was a decisive show of force for the Greeks: the citizen-soldier hoplites proved far more effective than the conscript infantry of the Persian forces. The core of the Persian army, its Median and Persian cavalry, fought effectively against the Athenians, but once the Athenian wings closed in and forced back the infantry, the Persians were routed.

The Greeks were especially good at inflicting casualties without taking very many – the Persians supposedly lost 33 men to every Athenian lost in the battle (6,400 Persian dead to 192 Athenians). There is also a questionable statistic from Greek sources that it was more than that – as many as 60 Persians per Athenian. Whatever the real number, it was a crushing victory for the Athenians. A later (almost certainly fabricated) account of the aftermath of the battle claimed that Pheidippides was then sent back to Athens, still running, to report the victory. He dropped dead of exhaustion, but in the process he ran the first “marathon.”

It is entirely possible that, despite this victory, the Greeks would have still been overwhelmed by the Persians if not for setbacks in Persia and its empire. A major revolt broke out in Egypt against Persian rule, drawing attention away from Greece until the revolt was put down. Likewise, it took years to fully “activate” the Persian military machine; preparation for a full-scale invasion took a full decade to reach completion. Darius died in 486 BCE, in the middle of the preparations, which disrupted them further while his son Xerxes consolidated his power.

In the meantime, the Greeks were well aware that the Persians would eventually return. A new Athenian general, Themistocles, convinced his countrymen to spend the proceeds of a silver mine they had discovered on a navy. Athens went into a naval-building frenzy, ending up with hundreds of warships called triremes, rowed by those free Athenians too poor to afford armor and weapons and serve as hoplites, but who now had an opportunity to directly aid in battle as sailors. This was perhaps the first time in world history that a fairly minor power transformed itself into a major power simply by having the foresight to build an effective navy.

The Persians had finally regrouped by 480 BCE, ten years after their first attempt to invade. Xerxes I, the new king, dispatched a huge army (as many as 200,000 soldiers and 1,200 ships) against Greece, supported by a navy over twice as large as that of the Athenians. The Greek poleis were, for the most part, terrified into submission, with only about 6% of the Greek cities joining into the defensive coalition created by Athens and Sparta (that being said, within that 6% were some of the most powerful poleis in Greece). The Spartans took leadership of the land army that would block the Persians in the north while the Athenians attacked the Persian navy in the south.



Route of the Persian invasion under Xerxes.

The Spartan-led force was very small compared to the Persian army, but for several days they held the Persians back at the Battle of Thermopylae, a narrow pass in which the Persians were unable to deploy the full might of their (much larger) army against the Greeks. The Spartan king, Leonidas, and his troops held the Persian forces in place until the Spartans were betrayed by a Greek hired by the Persians into revealing a path that allowed the Persians to surround the Greeks and, finally, overwhelm them. Despite the ultimate defeat of the Spartan force, this delay gave the Athenians enough time to get their navy into position, and they crushed the Persian navy in a single day.

Despite the Persian naval loss, Xerxes' army was easily able to march across Greece and ransack various poleis and farmlands; it even sacked Athens itself, which had been evacuated earlier. Xerxes then personally withdrew along with a significant portion of his army, while claiming victory over the Greeks. Here, simple logistics were the issue: the Greek naval victory made supply of the whole Persian army impractical.

The next year, in 479 BCE, a decisive battle was fought in central Greece by a Greek coalition led by the Spartans, followed by a Greek naval battle led by the Athenians. The latter then led an invasion of Ionia that defeated the Persian

army. Each time the Greeks were victorious, and the Persians finally decided to abandon the attempt to conquer Greece as being too costly. The remaining Greek colonies in Anatolia rose up against the Persians, and sporadic fighting continued for almost 20 years.

While there is obviously a pro-Greek bias to the Greek sources that describe the Persian War, they do identify an essential reason for Greek victories: thanks to the viability of the phalanx, each Greek soldier (from any polis, not just Sparta) was a real, viable soldier. The immense majority of the Persian forces were relatively ineffective peasant conscripts, unwillingly recruited from their homes and forced to fight for a king for whom they had little personal loyalty. The core of the Persian army were excellent cavalry from the Iranian plateau and Bactria (present-day Afghanistan), but those were always a small minority of the total force.

479 BCE was the end of the Persian war and the beginning of the “classical age” of Greece, the period during which the Greeks exhibited the most remarkable flowering of their ideas and accomplishments, as well as perhaps their most selfish and misguided political blunders in the form of a costly and ultimately pointless war between Sparta and Athens: the Peloponnesian War.

The Peloponnesian War

When the Spartans and Athenians led the Greek poleis to victory against the Persians in the Persian War, it was a shock to the entire region of the Mediterranean and Middle East. Persia was the regional “superpower” at the time, while the Greeks were just a group of disunited city-states on a rocky peninsula to the northwest. After their success, the Greeks were filled with confidence about the superiority of their own form of civilization and their taste for inquiry and innovation. Greeks in this period, the Classical Age, produced many of their most memorable cultural and intellectual achievements.

The great contrast in the Classical Age was between the power and splendor of the Greek poleis, especially Athens and Sparta, and the wars and conflicts that broke out as they tried to expand their power and control. After the defeat of the Persians, the Athenians created the Delian League, in theory a defensive coalition that existed to defend against Persia and to liberate the Ionian colonies still under Persian control, but in reality a political tool eventually used by Athens to create its own empire.

Each year, the members of the Delian League contributed money to build and support a large navy, meant to protect all of Greece from any further Persian interference. Athens, however, quickly became the dominant player in the Delian League. Athens was able to control the League due to its powerful navy; no other polis had a navy anywhere near as large or effective, so the other members of the League had to contribute funds and supplies while the Athenians fielded the ships. Thus, it was all too easy for Athens to simply use the League to drain the other poleis of wealth while building up its own power. The last remnants of Persian troops were driven from the Greek islands by 469 BCE, about ten years after the great Greek victories of the Persian War, but Athens refused to allow any of the League members to resign from the League after the victory.

Soon, Athens moved from simply extracting money to actually imposing political control in other poleis. Athens stationed troops in garrisons in other cities and forced the cities to adopt new laws, regulations, and taxes, all designed to keep the flow of money going to Athens. Some of the members of the League rose up in armed revolts, but the Athenians were able to crush the revolts with little difficulty. The final event that eliminated any pretense that the League was anything but an Athenian empire was the failure of a naval expedition sent in 460 BCE by Athens to help

an Egyptian revolt against the Persians. The Greek expedition was crushed, and the Athenians responded by moving the treasury of the League, formerly kept on the Greek island of Delos (hence “Delian League”), to Athens itself, arguing that the treasury was too vulnerable if it remained on Delos. At this point, no other member of the League could do anything about it – the League existed as an Athenian-controlled empire, pumping money into Athenian coffers and allowing Athens to build some of its most famous and beautiful buildings. Thus, the great irony is that the most glorious age of Athenian democracy and philosophy was funded by the extraction of wealth from its fellow Greek cities. In the end, the Persians simply made peace with Athens in 448 BCE, giving up the claim to the Greek colonies entirely and in turn eliminating the very reason the League had come into being.

Meanwhile, Sparta was the head of a different association, the Peloponnesian League, which was originally founded before the Persian War as a mutual protection league of the Greek cities of Corinth, Sparta, and Thebes. Like Athens, Sparta dominated its allies, although it did not take advantage of them in quite the same ways that Athens did. Sparta was resentful and, in a way, fearful of Athenian power. Open war finally broke out between the two cities in 431 BCE after two of their respective allied poleis started a conflict and Athens tried to influence the political decisions of Spartan allies. The war lasted from 431 – 404 BCE.

The Spartans were unquestionably superior in land warfare, while the Athenians had a seemingly unstoppable navy. The Spartans and their allies repeatedly invaded Athenian territory, but the Athenians were smart enough to have built strong fortifications that held the Spartans off. The Athenians, in turn, attacked Spartan settlements and positions overseas and used their navy to bring in supplies. While Sparta could not take Athens itself, Athens was essentially under siege for decades; life went on, but it was usually impossible for the Athenians to travel over land in Greece outside of their home region of Attica.



Athens and its allies, including the poleis it dominated in the Delian League, are depicted in orange, Sparta and its allies in green.

Truces came and went, but the war continued for almost thirty years. In 415 BCE Athens suffered a disaster when a young general convinced the Athenians to send thousands of troops against the city of Syracuse (a Spartan ally) in southern Sicily, hundreds of miles from Greece itself, in hopes of looting it. The invasion turned into a nightmare for the Athenians, with every ship captured or sunk and almost every soldier killed or captured and sold into slavery; this dramatically weakened the Athenian military.

At that point, the Athenians were on the defensive. The Spartans established a permanent garrison within sight of Athens itself. Close to 20,000 slaves escaped from the Athenian silver mines that had originally paid for the navy before the Persian War and were welcomed by the Spartans as recruits (thus bolstering Spartan forces and cutting off Athens' main source of revenue). Sparta finally struck a decisive blow in 405 BCE by surprising the Athenian fleet in Anatolia and destroying it. Athens had to sue for peace. Sparta destroyed the Athenian defenses it had used during the war, but did not destroy the city itself, and within a year the Athenians had created a new government.

The Aftermath

Greece itself was transformed by the Peloponnesian War. Both sides had sought out allies outside of Greece, with the Spartans ultimately allying with the Persians – formerly their hated enemies – in the final stages of the war. The Greeks as a whole were less isolated and more cosmopolitan by the time the war ended, meaning that at least some of their prejudices about Greek superiority were muted. Likewise, the war had inadvertently undermined the hoplite-based social and political order of the prior centuries.

Nowhere was this more true than in Sparta. Sparta had been greatly altered by the war, out of necessity becoming both a naval power and a diplomatic “player” and losing much of its former identity; some Spartans had gotten rich and were buying their sons out of the formerly-obligatory life in the barracks, while others were too poor to train. Likewise, the war had weakened Sparta’s cultural xenophobia and obsession with austerity, since controlling diplomatic alliances was as important as sheer military strength. Diplomacy required skill, culture, and education, not just force of arms. Subsequently, the Greeks as a whole were shocked in 371 BCE when the polis of Thebes defeated the Spartans three times in open battle, symbolically marching to within sight of Sparta itself and destroying the myth of Spartan invincibility.

Across Greece, the Poleis all adopted the practice of state-financed standing armies for the first time, rather than volunteer citizen-soldiers. Likewise, the poleis came to rely on mercenaries, many of whom (ironically) went on to serve the Persians after the war wound down. Thus, between 405 BCE – 338 BCE, the old order of the hoplites and republics atrophied, replaced by oligarchic councils or tyrants in the poleis and stronger, tax-supported states. The period of the war itself was thus both the high point and the beginning of the end of “classical” Greece. Meanwhile, Persia re-captured and exerted control over the Anatolian Greek cities by 387 BCE as Greece itself was divided and weakened. Thus, even though the Persians had “lost” the Persian War, they were as strong as ever as an empire.

Despite the importance of the Peloponnesian War in transforming ancient Greece, however, it should be emphasized that not all of the poleis were involved in the war, and there were years of truce and skirmishing during which even the major antagonists were not actively campaigning. The reason that this part of Greek history is referred to as the Classical Age is that its lasting achievements had to do with culture and learning, not warfare. The Peloponnesian War ultimately resulted in checking Athens’ imperial ambitions and causing the Greeks to broaden their outlook toward non-Greeks; its effects were as much cultural as political. Those effects are the topic of the next chapter.

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CHAPTER 6: THE CLASSICAL AGE OF GREECE

Introduction

The most frequently studied period of Greek history is the “Classical Age,” the time between the triumph of the Greek coalition against Persia in 479 BCE and the conquest of Greece by the Macedonian king Philip II (the father of Alexander the Great) in 338 BCE. This was the era in which the Greek poleis were at their most powerful economically and militarily and their most innovative and productive artistically and intellectually. While opinions will vary, perhaps the single most memorable achievement of the Classical Age was in philosophy, first and foremost because of the thought of the most significant Greek philosophers of all time: Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The Classical Age (like the European Renaissance about two thousand years later) is best remembered for its artistic and intellectual achievements rather than the political events of the time.

Athens and the Ironies of Democracy

Just as the Classical Age is nearly synonymous with “ancient Greece” itself, “ancient Greece” in the Classical Age is often conflated with what happened in Athens specifically. Athens was the richest and most influential of all of the Greek poleis during this period, although its power waned once it plunged into the Peloponnesian War against Sparta starting in 431 BCE. The most famous Greek philosophers – Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle – were either native Athenians (Socrates and Plato) or studied and taught in Athens (Aristotle). Likewise, the Athenian democracy that had crystallized under Cleisthenes, with about 10% of the overall population having a vote in public affairs, was at its height during this period.

The irony was not just that Athens reached its peak during the period of the Delian League and the wealth it extracted from other poleis, it was that Athenian democracy itself was at its strongest: even as it was forging an empire on top of the other city-states, Athens was becoming the first great experiment in democratic government in world history. The Athenian leader in charge during the transition to this phase was Pericles (495 – 429 BCE), an aristocrat who dominated Athenian politics but did not actually seize power as had the earlier tyrants.

When Pericles rose to be a dominant voice in Athenian politics, the system remained in place that had been set up by Cleisthenes. All adult male citizens had a vote in the public assembly, while a smaller council handled day-to-day business. Athenian citizens continued to pride themselves on their rhetorical skill, since everything hinged on the ability of public speakers to convince their fellows through strength of argumentative skill. The assembly also voted every year to appoint ten generals, who were in charge of both the military and foreign relations.

As the Delian League grew, which is to say as Athens took over control of its “allied” poleis, it increased the size of its bureaucracy accordingly. Under Pericles, there were about 1,500 officials who managed the taxation of the league’s cities, ran courts and administrative bodies, and managed the League’s activities. Pericles instituted the policy of paying public servants, who had worked for free in the past, a move that dramatically decreased the potential for corruption through bribes and opened the possibility of poorer citizens to serve in public office (i.e. before, a citizen had to be

wealthy enough to volunteer in the city government – this meant that almost all farmers and small merchants were cut off from direct political power). He also issued a new law decreeing that only the children of Athenian parents could be Athenian citizens, a move that elevated the importance of Athenian women but also further entrenched the conceit of the Athenians in relation to the other Greek cities; the Athenians wanted citizenship to be their own, carefully protected, commodity. All of this suggests that Athens enjoyed a tremendous period of growth and prosperity, along with what was among the fairest and most impartial government in the ancient world at the time, but that it did so on the backs of its Greek “allies.”

There were further ironies present in the seeming egalitarianism of Greek society during the Classical Age. The Greeks were the first to carry out experiments in rationalistic philosophy and in democratic government. At the same time, Greek society itself was profoundly divided and unequal. First and foremost, women were held in a subservient position. Women, by definition, could not be citizens, even though in certain cases like the Athens of Pericles, they could assume an honored social role as mothers of citizens. Women could not hold public office, nor could they legally own property or defend themselves independently in court. They were, in short, legal minors (like children are in American society today) under the legal control and guardianship of their fathers or husbands.

For elite Greek women, social restrictions were stark: they were normally confined to the inner sanctums of homes, interacting only with family members or close female friends from families of the same social rank, and when they did go out in public they had to do so in the company of chaperones. There was never a time in which it was socially acceptable for an elite woman to be alone in public. Just about the only social position in which elite women had real, direct power was in the priesthoods of some of the Greek gods, where women could serve as priestesses. These were a very small minority, however.

Non-elite women had more freedom in the sense that they had to work, so they often sold goods in the marketplace or helped to run shops. Since the large majority of the Greek population outside of the cities themselves were farmers, women naturally worked alongside men on farms. Regardless, they did not have legal control over their own livelihoods, even if they did much of the actual work, with their husbands (or fathers or brothers) retaining complete legal ownership.

In almost all cases, Greek women were married off while extremely young, usually soon after puberty, and almost always to men significantly older than they were. Legal power over a woman passed from the father to the husband, and in cases of divorce it passed back to the father. Even in the case of widows, Greek tradition held that the husband’s will should dictate who his widow marry – most often another male member of his family, to keep the family property intact. One important exception to the absence of legal rights for women was that Greek women could initiate divorce, although the divorce would be recognized only after a legal process proved that the husband’s behavior was truly reprehensible to Greek sensibilities, and it was a rare occurrence either way: there is only one known case from classical Athens of a woman attempting to initiate divorce.

In the domestic sphere, there were physical divides between the front, public part of the house where men entertained their friends, and the back part of the house where women cared for the children and carried on domestic tasks like sewing. There was little tradition of mixed-sex socializing, outside of the all-male drinking parties called *symposia* that featured female “entertainers” – slaves and servants who carried on conversation, danced and sang, and had sex with the guests. In these cases, the female “company” was present solely for entertainment and sexual slavery.



Depiction of a symposium from c. 420 BCE, featuring a female entertainer – most likely a slave and obliged to provide sex as well as musical entertainment to the male guests.

In turn, prostitution was very common, with the bulk of prostitutes being slaves. Elite prostitutes were known as *hetairai*, who served as female companions for elite men and were supposed to be able to contribute to witty, learned discussion. One such *hetairai*, Aspasia, was the companion of Pericles and was a full member of the elite circle of philosophers, scientists, and politicians at the top of Athenian society. The difficulty in considering these special cases, however, is that they can gloss over the fact that the vast majority of women were in a disempowered social space, regarded as a social necessity that existed to bear children. An Athenian politician, Demosthenes, once said “we have *hetairai* for the sake of pleasure, regular prostitutes to care for our physical needs, and wives to bear legitimate children and be loyal custodians of our households.”

It is difficult to know the degree to which female seclusion was truly practiced, since all of the commentary that refers to it was written by elite men, almost all of whom supported the idea of female subservience and the separation of the sexes in public. What we know for sure is that almost no written works survive by women authors – the outstanding exception being Sappho, a poet of the Archaic period whose works suggests that lesbianism may have been relatively common (her home, the Greek island of Lesbos, is the root of the English word lesbian itself). Likewise, Greek legal codes certainly enforced a stark gender divide, and Greek homes were definitely divided into male-dominated public spaces and the private sphere of the family. There is at least some evidence, however, that gender divisions might not have been quite as stark as the male commentators would have it – as noted below, at least one Greek playwright celebrated the wit and fortitude of women in his work. Finally, we should note that major differences in gender roles were definitely present in

different regions and between different poleis; regimented Sparta was far more progressive in its empowerment of women than was democratic Athens.

One product of the divide between men and women was the prevalence of bisexuality among elite Greek men (and, as suggested by Sappho's work, also apparently among women). There was no concept of "heterosexual" versus "homosexual" in Greek culture; sexual attraction was assumed to exist, in potential, between men as easily as between men and women, although bisexuality appears to have been most common among men in the upper social ranks. One common practice was for an adult man of the elite classes to "adopt" a male adolescent of his social class and both mentor him in politics, social conduct, and war, and carry on what we would now regard as a statutory sexual relationship with him – this practice was especially common in the barracks society of Sparta.

Building on the prevalence of male relationships was the Greek tradition of male homosexual warriorhood, homosexual bonds between soldiers that helped them be more effective fighters. To cite a literary example, in Homer's *Iliad*, the one event that rouses the mighty warrior Achilles to battle when he is busy sulking is the death of his (male) lover. In addition to the Spartan case noted above, another renowned historical example of homosexual warriorhood was the Sacred Band of the polis of Thebes, 150 male couples who led the army of Thebes and held the reputation of being completely fearless. Homosexual love in this case was linked directly to the Greek virtues of honor and skill in battle, as the Sacred Band were believed to fight all the harder in order to both honor and defend their lovers. This certainly seemed to be true at times, as when the Theban army, led by the Sacred Band, was the city that first defeated Sparta in open battle (this occurred after the Peloponnesian War, when Sparta found itself warring with its former allies like Thebes).

In addition to the dramatic gender disparities in Greek society, there was the case of slavery. Slaves in Greece were in a legal position just about as dire as any in history. Their masters could legally kill them, rape them, or maim them if they saw fit. Normally, slaves were not murdered outright, but this was because murder was seen as offensive to the gods, not because there were any legal consequences. As Greece became more wealthy and powerful, the demand for slaves increased dramatically as each polis found itself in need of more labor power, so a major goal for warfare became the capturing of slaves. By 450 BCE, one-third of the population of Athens and its territories consisted of slaves.

Slaves in Greece came from many sources. While the practice was outlawed in Athens by Solon, most poleis still allowed the enslavement of their own people who were unable to pay debts. More common was the practice of taking slaves in war, and one of the effects of the Greek victories in the Persian War was that thousands of Persian captives were taken as slaves. There was also a thriving slave trade between all of the major civilizations of the ancient world; African slaves were captured and sold in Egypt, Greek slaves to Persia (despite its nominal ban on slavery, it is clear that at least some slavery existed in Persia), nomadic people from the steppes in Black Sea ports, and so on. With demand so high, any neighboring settlement was a potential source of slaves, and slavery was an integral part of the Mediterranean economy as a result.

Slavery was so prevalent that what the slaves actually did varied considerably. Some very lucky slaves who were educated ran businesses or served as bureaucrats, teachers, or accountants. In a small number of cases, such elite slaves were able to keep some of the money they made, save it, and buy their freedom. Much more common, however, were laborers or craftsmen of all kinds, who made things and then sold them on behalf of their masters. Slaves even served as clerks in the public bureaucracies, as well as police and guard forces in the cities. One exceptional case was a force of archers used as city guards in Athens who were slaves from Scythia (present-day Ukraine).

The worst positions for slaves were the jobs involving manual labor, especially in mines. As noted in the last chapter, one of the events that lost the Peloponnesian War for Athens was the fact that 20,000 of its publicly-owned slaves were liberated by the Spartans from the horrendous conditions in the Athenian silver mines. Likewise, there was

no worse fate than being a slave in a salt mine (one of the areas containing a natural underground salt deposit). Salt is corrosive to human tissue in large amounts, and exposure meant that a slave would die horribly over time. The historical evidence suggests that slaves in mines were routinely worked to death, not unlike the plantation slaves of Brazil and the Caribbean thousands of years later.

Culture

If Greek society was thus nothing like present-day concepts of fairness or equality, what about it led to this era being regarded as “classical”? The answer is that it was during the Classical Age that the Greeks arrived at some of their great intellectual and cultural achievements. The Athenian democratic experiment is, of course, of great historical importance, but it was relatively short-lived, with democratic government not returning to the western world until the end of the eighteenth century CE. In contrast, the Greek approach to philosophy, drama, history, scientific thought, and art remained living legacies even after the Classical Age itself was at an end.

The fundamental concept of Greek thought, as reflected in drama, literature, and philosophy, was *humanism*. This was an overarching theme and phenomenon common to all of the most important Greek cultural achievements in literature, religion, drama, history-writing, and art. Humanism is the idea that, first and foremost, humankind is inherently beautiful, capable, and creative. To the Greek humanists, human beings were not put on the earth to suffer by cruel gods, but instead carried within the spark of godlike creativity. Likewise, a major theme of humanism was a pragmatic indifference to the gods and fate – one Greek philosopher, Xenophanes, dismissed the very idea of human-like gods who intervened in daily life. The basic humanistic attitude is that if there are any gods, they do not seem particularly interested in what humans do or say, so it is better to simply focus on the tangible world of human life. The Greeks thus offered sacrifices to keep the gods appeased, and sought out oracles for hints of what the future held, but did not normally pursue a deeply spiritual connection with their deities.

That being noted, one of the major cultural innovations of the Greeks, the creation of drama, emerged from the worship of the gods. Specifically, the celebrations of the god Dionysus, god of wine and revelry, brought about the first recognizable “plays” and “actors.” Not surprisingly, religious festivals devoted to Dionysus involved a lot of celebrating, and part of that celebration was choruses of singing and chanting. Greek writers started scripting these performances, eventually creating what we now recognize as plays. A prominent feature of Greek drama left over from the Dionysian rituals remained the *chorus*, a group of performers who chanted or sang together and served as the narrator to the stories depicted by the main characters.



Contemporary view of the remnants of the Greek theater of Lychnidos in present-day Macedonia. The upper tiers are still marked with the names of the wealthy individuals who purchased their own reserved seats.

Greek drama depicted life in human terms, even when using mythological or ancient settings. Playwrights would set their plays in the past or among the gods, but the experiences of the characters in the plays were recognizable critiques of the playwrights' contemporary society. Among the most powerful were the *tragedies*: stories in which the frailty of humanity, most importantly the problem of pride, served to undermine the happiness of otherwise powerful individuals. Typically, in a Greek tragedy, the main character is a powerful male leader, a king or a military captain, who enjoys great success in his endeavors until a fatal flaw of his own personality and psyche causes him to do something foolish and self-destructive. Very often this took the form of *hubris*, overweening pride and lack of self-control, which the Greeks believed was offensive to the gods and could bring about divine retribution. Other tragedies emphasized the power of fate, when cruel circumstances conspired to lead even great heroes to failure.

In addition to tragedy, the Greeks invented *comedy*. The essential difference is that tragedy revolves around *pathos*, or suffering, from which the English word “pathetic” derives. Pathos is meant to inspire sympathy and understanding in the viewer. Watching a Greek tragedy should, the playwrights hoped, lead the audience to relate to and sympathize with the tragic hero. Comedy, however, is meant to inspire mockery and gleeful contempt of the failings of others, rather than sympathy. The most prominent comic playwright (whose works survive) was Aristophanes, a brilliant writer whose plays are full of lying, hypocritical Athenian politicians and merchants who reveal themselves as the frauds they are to the delight of audiences.

One famous play by Aristophanes, *Lysistrata*, was set in the Peloponnesian War. The women of Athens are fed up with the pointless conflict and use the one thing they have some power over, their bodies, to force the men to stop the fighting by withholding sex. A Spartan contingent appears begging to open peace negotiations because, it turns out, the Spartan women have done the same thing. Here, Aristophanes not only indulged in the ribald humor that was popular with the Greeks (even by present-day standards, *Lysistrata* is full of “dirty” jokes) but showed a remarkable awareness of, and sympathy for, the social position of Greek women. In fact, in plays like *Lysistrata* we see evidence that Greek women were *not* in fact always secluded and rendered mute by male-dominated society, even though (male) Greek commentators generally argued that they should be.

Greek drama, both tragedy and comedy, is of enormous historical importance because even when it used the gods as characters or fate as an explanation for problems, it put human beings front and center in being responsible for their own errors. It depicted human choice as being the centerpiece of life against a backdrop of often uncontrollable circumstances. Tragedy gave the Greeks the option of lamenting that condition, while comedy offered the chance of laughing at it. In the surviving plays of the ancient Greeks, there were very few happy endings, but plenty of opportunities to relate to the fate of, or make fun of, the protagonists. In turn, almost every present-day movie and television show is deeply indebted to Greek drama. Greek drama was the first time human beings acted out stories that were meant to entertain, and sometimes to inform, their audiences.

Science

The idea that there is a difference between “science” and “philosophy” is a very recent one, in many ways dating to the eighteenth century CE (i.e. only about 300 years ago). The word “philosophy” literally means “love of knowledge,” and in the ancient world the people we might identify as Greek “scientists” were simply regarded as philosophers by their fellow Greeks, ones who happened to be especially interested in how the world worked and what things were made of. Unlike earlier thinkers, the Greek scientists sought to understand the operation of the universe on its own terms, without simply writing off the details to the will of the gods.

The importance of Greek scientific work is not primarily in the conclusions that Greek scientists reached, which ended up being factually wrong most of the time. Instead, its importance is in its spirit of rational inquiry, in the idea that the human mind can discover new things about the world through examination and consideration. The world, thought the Greek scientists, was not some sacred or impenetrable thing that could never be understood; they sought to explain it without recourse to supernatural forces. To that end, Greek scientists claimed that things like wind, fire, lightning, and other natural forces, were not necessarily spirits or gods (or at least tools of spirits and gods), but might just be natural forces that did not have personalities of their own.

The first known Greek scientist was Thales of Miletus (i.e. Thales, and the students of his who went on to be important scientific thinkers as well, were from the polis of Miletus in Ionia), who during the Archaic Age set out to understand natural forces without recourse to references to the gods. Thales explained earthquakes not as punishments inflicted by the gods arbitrarily on humanity, but as a result of the earth floating in a gigantic ocean that occasionally sloshed it around. He traveled to Egypt and was able to measure the height of the pyramids (already thousands of years old) by the length of their shadows. He became so skilled at astronomy that he (reputedly) successfully predicted a solar eclipse in 585 BCE.

Thales had a student, Anaximander, who posited that rather than floating on water as his teacher had suggested, the earth was held suspended in space by a perfectly symmetrical balance of forces. He created the first known map of

the world that attempted to accurately depict distances and relationships between places. Following Anaximander, a third scientist, Anaximenes, created the theory of the four elements that, he argued, comprise all things – earth, air, fire, and water. Many centuries later, Galen of Pergamon, a Greek physician living under Roman rule, would explain human health in terms of the balance of those four forces (the four “humors” of the body), ultimately crafting a medical theory that would persist until the modern era.

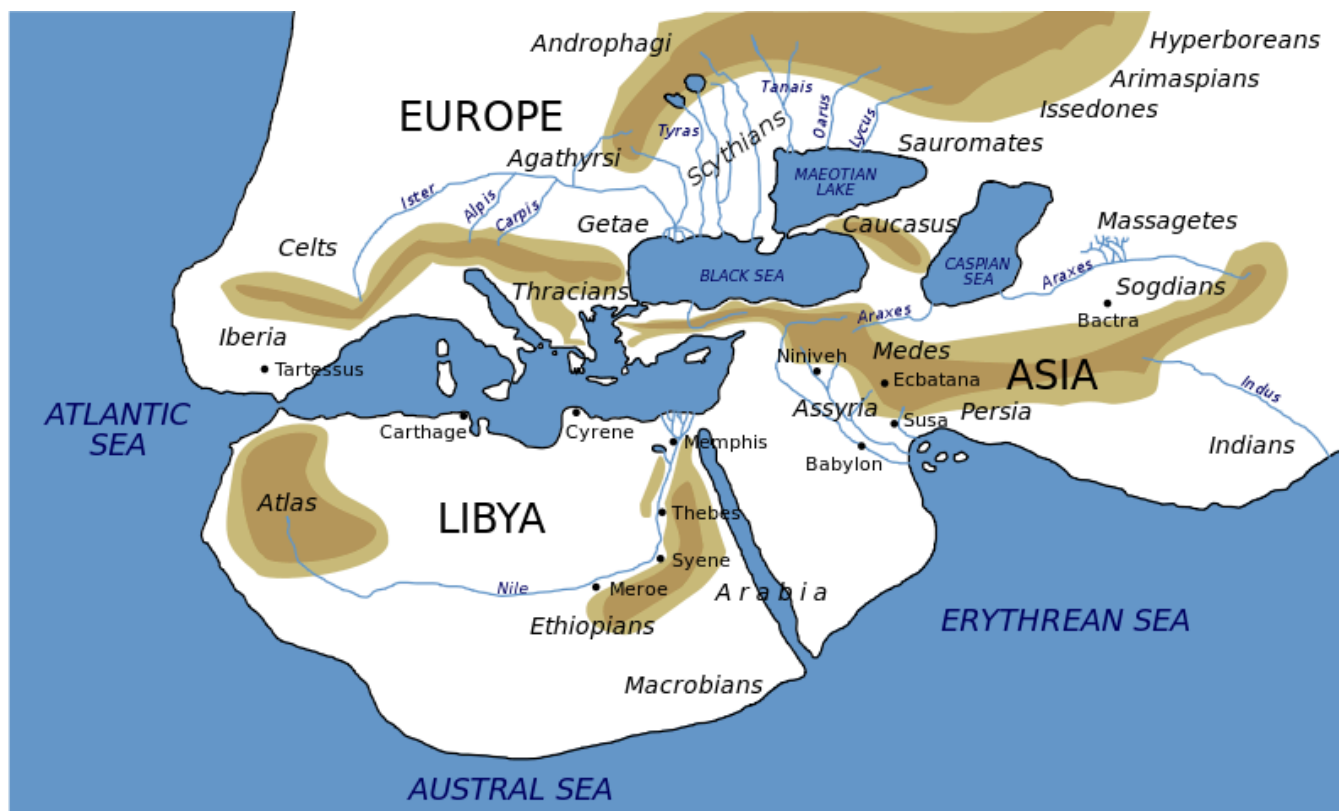
In all three cases, the significance of the Greek scientists is that they tried to create theories to explain natural phenomena based on what they observed in nature itself. They were employing a form of what is referred to as inductive reason, of starting with observation and moving toward explanation. Even though it was (at it turns out) inaccurate, the idea of the four elements as the essential building-blocks of nature and health remained the leading explanation for many centuries. Other Greek scientists came along to refine these ideas, most importantly when two of them (Leucippus and Democritus) came up with the idea that tiny particles they called atoms formed the elements that, in turn, formed everything else. It would take until the development of modern chemistry for that theory to be proved correct through empirical research, however.

History

It was the Greeks that came up with history in the same sense that the term is used today, namely of a story (a narrative) based on historical events that tries to explain what happened and why it happened the way it did. In other words, history as it was first written by the Greeks is not just about listing facts, it is about explaining the human motivations at work in historical events and phenomena. Likewise, the Greeks were the first to systematically employ the essential historical method of using primary sources written or experienced at the time as the basis of historical research.

The founding figure of Greek history-writing was Herodotus (484 – 420 BCE), who wrote a history of the Persian War that was acclaimed by his fellow Greeks. Herodotus sought to explain human actions in terms of how people tend to react to the political and social pressures they experienced. He applied his theory to various events in the ancient past, like the Trojan War, as well as those of Greece’s recent past. Most importantly, Herodotus traveled and read sources to serve as the basis of his conclusions. He did not simply sit in his home city and theorize about things; he gathered a huge amount of information about foreign lands and cultures and he examined contemporary accounts of events. This use of primary sources is still the defining characteristic of history as an academic discipline: professional historians must seek out writings and artifacts from their areas of study and use them as the basis for their own interpretations.

Herodotus also raised issues of ongoing relevance about the encounter of different cultures; despite the greatness of his own civilization, he was genuinely vexed by the issue of whether one set of beliefs and practices (i.e. culture) could be “better” than another. He knew enough about other cultures, especially Persia, to recognize that other societies could be as complex, and military more powerful, than was Greece. Nevertheless, his history of the Persian War continued the age-old Greek practice of referring to the Persians as “barbarians.”



The world as described by Herodotus (the map is a contemporary image based on Herodotus's work). Note the central position of Greece, just south of the region marked "Thracians."

The other great Greek historian of the classical period was the Athenian writer Thucydides (460 – 404 BCE), sometimes considered the real “father” of history-writing. Thucydides wrote a history of the Peloponnesian War that remains the single most significant account of the war to this day. The work meticulously follows the events of the war while investigating the human motivations and subsequent decisions that caused events. The war had been a terrible tragedy, he wrote, because Athens became so power-hungry that it sacrificed its own greatness in the quest for more power and wealth. Thus, he deliberately crafted an argument (a thesis) and defended it with historical evidence, precisely the same thing historians and history students alike are expected to do in their written work. Thanks in part to the work of Herodotus and Thucydides, history became such an important discipline to the Greeks that they believed that Clio, one of the divine muses, the sources of inspiration for thought and artistic creation, was the patron of history specifically.

Philosophy

Perhaps the single greatest achievement of Greek thought was in philosophy. It was in philosophy that the Greeks most radically broke with supernatural explanations for life and thought and instead sought to establish moral and ethical codes, investigate political theory, and understand human motivations all in terms of the human mind and human capacities. As noted above, the word “philosophy” literally means “love of knowledge,” and Greek philosophers did much more than just contemplate the meaning of life; they were often mathematicians, physicists, and literary critics *as well as* “philosophers” in the sense that that the word is used in the present.

Among the important questions that most Greek philosophers dealt were those concerning politics and ethics. The key question that arose among the early Greek philosophers was whether standards of ethics and political

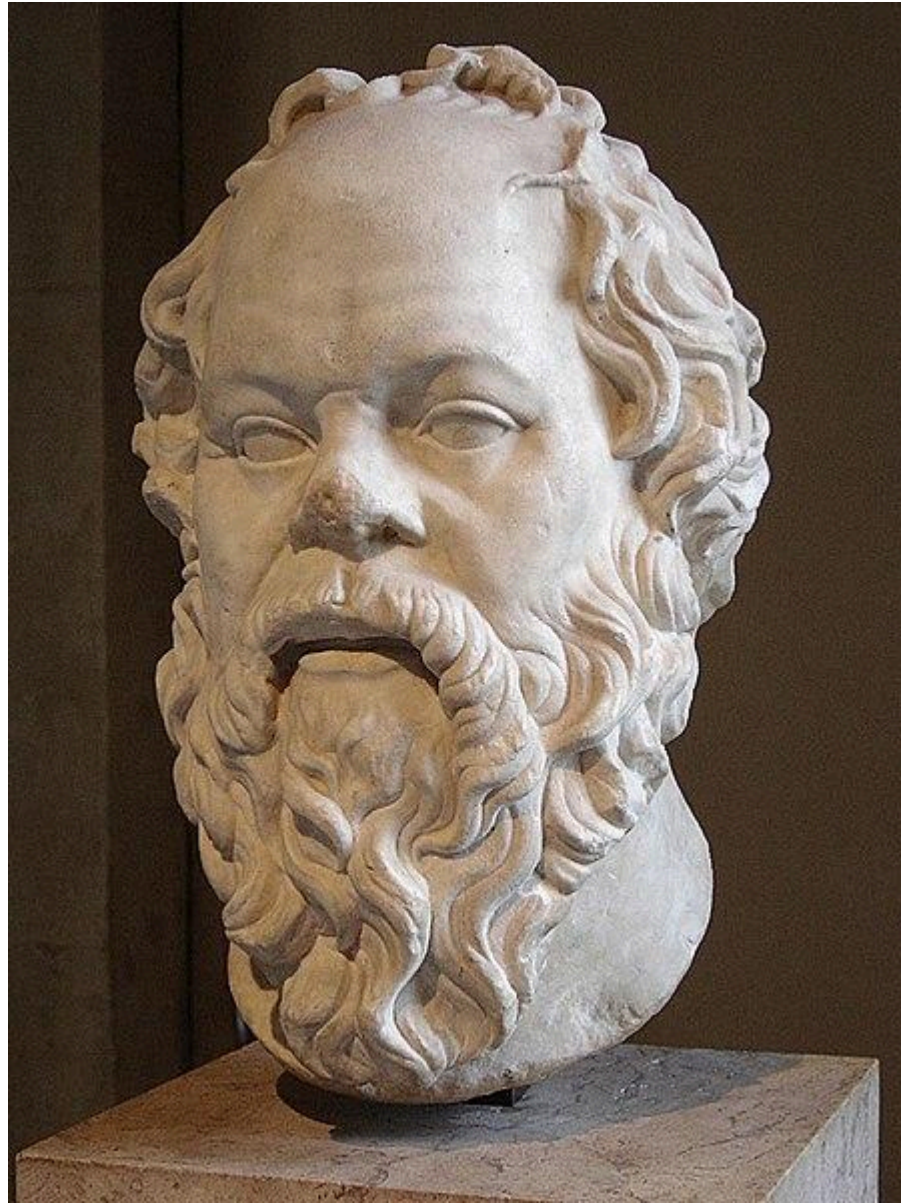
institutions as they existed in Greece – including everything from the polis, democracy, tyranny, Greek standards of behavior, and so on – were somehow dictated by nature or were instead merely social customs that had arisen over time. The Classical Age saw the full flowering of Greek engagement with those questions.

Some of the early philosophers of the Greek classical age were the Sophists: traveling teachers who tutored students on all aspects of thought. While they did not represent a truly unified body of thought, the one common sophistic doctrine was that all human beliefs and customs were just habits of a society, that there were no absolute truths, and that it was thus vitally important for an educated man to be able to argue both sides of an issue with equal skill and rhetorical ability. Their focus was on training elite Greeks to be *successful* – the Greek term for “virtue” was synonymous with “success.” Thus, the sophists were in the business of educating Greeks to be more successful, especially in the law courts and the public assemblies. They did not have a shared philosophical doctrine besides this idea that truth was relative and that the focus in life ought to be on individual achievement.

The men who became the most famous Greek philosophers of all time strongly disagreed with this view. These were a three-person line of teachers and students. Socrates (469 – 399 BCE) taught Plato (428 – 347 BCE), who taught Aristotle (384 – 322 BCE), who went on to be the personal tutor of Alexander the Great for a time. It is one of the most remarkable intellectual lineages in history – three of the greatest thinkers of Greek civilization and one of the greatest military and political leaders, all linked together as teachers and students.

Socrates never wrote anything down; like most of his contemporaries, he believed that writing destroyed the memory and undermined meaning, preferring spoken discourses and memorization. Instead, his beliefs and arguments were recorded by his student Plato, who committed them to prose despite sharing Socrates’ disdain for the written word. Socrates challenged the sophists and insisted that there *are* essential truths about morality and ethical conduct, but that to arrive at those truths one must be willing to relentlessly question oneself. He took issue with the fact that the sophists were largely unconcerned with ethical behavior, focusing entirely on worldly success; according to Socrates, there were higher truths and meanings to human conduct than mere wealth and political power.

Socrates used what later became known as the “Socratic Method” to seek out these fixed, unchanging rules of truth and ethics. In the Socratic Method, the teacher asks a series of questions of the student, forcing the student to examine her own biases and gaps in logic, until finally arriving at a more satisfying and reasonable belief than she started with. In Socrates’s case, his questions were meant to lead his interlocutors to arrive at real, stable truths about justice, truth, and virtuous politics. Unlike with the sophists’ mastery of rhetoric, the point of the question-and-answer sessions was not to prove that nothing was true, but instead to force one to arrive at truths through the most rigorous application of human reason.



A Roman copy of an original Greek bust of Socrates – as with many Greek sculptures, only the Roman copy survives.

Most Greek statues were made of bronze, and over the centuries almost all were melted down for the metal.

Plato agreed with his teacher that there are essential truths, but he went further: because the senses can be deceived and because our insight is imperfect, only through the most serious contemplation and discussion can we arrive at truth. Truth could only be apprehended with the mind, not with the eye or ear, and it required rigorous discussion and contemplation. To Plato, ideas (which he called “Forms”) were more “real” than actual objects. The idea of a table, for instance, is fixed, permanent, and invulnerable, while “real” tables are fragile, flawed, and impermanent. Plato claimed that politics and ethics were like this as well, with the Form of Justice superseding “real” laws and courts, but existing in the intellectual realm as something philosophers ought to contemplate.

In Plato’s work *The Republic* he wrote of an imaginary polis in which political leaders were raised from childhood to become “philosopher-kings,” combining practical knowledge with a deep understanding of intellectual concepts. Plato believed that the education of a future leader was of paramount importance, perhaps even more important than that leader’s skill in leading armies. Of all his ideas, this concept of a philosopher-king was one of the

most influential; various kings, emperors, and generals influenced by Greek philosophy would try to model their rule on Plato's concepts right up to the modern era.

Plato founded a school, the Academy, in Athens, which remained in existence until the early Middle Ages as one of the greatest centers of thought in the world. Philosophers would travel from across the Greek world to learn and debate at the Academy, and it was a mark of tremendous intellectual prestige to study there. It prospered through the entire period of Classical Greece, the Hellenistic Age that followed, and the Roman Empire, only to be disbanded by the Byzantine (eastern Roman) emperor Justinian in the sixth century CE. It was, in short, both one of the most significant and one of the longest-lasting schools in history.

Plato's most gifted student was Aristotle, who founded his own institution of learning, the Lyceum, after he was passed over to lead the Academy following Plato's death. Aristotle broke sharply with his teacher over the essential doctrine of his teaching. Aristotle argued that the senses, while imperfect, are still reliable enough to provide genuine insights into the workings of the world, and furthermore that the duty of the philosopher was to try to understand the world in as great detail as possible. One of his major areas of focus was an analysis of the real-life politics of the polis; his conclusion was that humans are "political animals" and that it was possible to improve politics through human understanding and invention, not just contemplation.

Aristotle was the ancient world's greatest intellectual overachiever. He single-handedly founded the disciplines of biology, literary criticism, political science, and logical philosophy. He wrote about everything from physics to astronomy and from mathematics to drama. His work was so influential that philosophers continued to believe in the essential validity of his findings well into the period of the Renaissance (thousands of years later) even though many of his scientific conclusions turned out to be factually inaccurate. Despite those inaccuracies, he unquestionably deserves to be remembered as one of the greatest thinkers of all time.

Art

The great legacy of Greek art is in its celebration of perfection and balance: the human body in its perfect state, perfect symmetry in buildings, and balance in geometric forms. One well known instance of this was in architecture, with the use of a mathematical concept known as the "golden ratio" (also known as the "golden mean") which, when applied to building, creates forms that the Greeks, and many others afterwards, believed was inherently pleasing to the eye. The most prominent surviving piece of Greek architecture, the Parthenon of Athens dedicated to the polis's patron goddess Athena, was built to embody the golden ratio in terms of its height and width. Likewise, in its use of symmetrical columns and beautiful carvings, it is widely believed to strike a perfect balance between elegance and grandeur.



Contemporary view of the Parthenon.

In turn, Greek sculpture is renowned for its unflinching commitment to perfection in the human form. The classical period saw a transition away from symbolic statuary, most of which was used in grave decorations in the Archaic period, toward lifelike depictions of real human beings. In turn, classical statues often celebrated the human potential for beauty, most prominently in nude sculptures of male warriors and athletes at the height of physical strength and development. Greek sculptors would often use several live models for their inspiration, combining the most attractive features of each subject to create the “perfected” version present in the finished sculpture – this was artistic humanism in its purest form.



One of the few original Greek bronze statues to survive, depicting either Zeus or Poseidon (Zeus would have held a lightning bolt, Poseidon a trident).

Most Greek art was destroyed over time, not least because the dominant medium for sculpture was bronze, which had allowed sculptors great flexibility in crafting their work. As Greece fell under the domination of other civilizations and empires in the centuries that followed, almost all of those bronzes were melted down for their metal. Fortunately, the Romans so appreciated Greek art that they frequently made marble copies of Greek originals. We thus have a fair number of examples of what Greek sculpture looked like, albeit in the form of the Roman facsimiles. Likewise, the Romans copied the Greek architectural style and, along with the Greek buildings like the Parthenon that did survive, we are still able to appreciate the Greek architectural aesthetic.

Exploration

Greek knowledge of the outside world was heavily based on hearsay; Greeks loved fantastical stories about lands

beyond their immediate knowledge, and so even great historians like Herodotus reported that India was populated by magical beasts and by men with multiple heads. In turn, the immediate knowledge Greeks actually had of the world extended to the coasts of the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, Egypt, and Persia, since those were the areas they had colonized or were in contact with through trade. Through the Classical Age, a strong naval garrison was maintained by the Carthaginians, Phoenician naval rivals of the Greeks, at the straits of Gibraltar (the narrow gap between North Africa and southern Spain between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean), which prevented Greek sailors from reaching the Atlantic and thereby limiting their direct knowledge of the world beyond.

One exception to these limited horizons was a Greek explorer named Pytheas. A sailor from the small Greek polis Massalia that was well-known for producing ship captains and navigators, Pytheas undertook one of the most improbable voyages in ancient history, alongside the famous (albeit anonymous) Phoenician voyage around Africa earlier. Greek sailors already knew the world was round and had devised a system for determining latitude that was surprisingly accurate; Pytheas' own calculation of the latitude of Massalia was only off by eight miles. Driven by a sense of how large the world must be, he set off to sail past the Carthaginian sentries and reach the ocean beyond.

Sometime around 330 BCE, roughly the same time Alexander the Great was heading off to conquer the Persian Empire, Pytheas evaded the Carthaginian blockade and sailed into Atlantic waters. He went on to sail up the coast of France, trading with and noting the cultures of the people he encountered. He then sailed across the English Channel, ultimately circumnavigating England and Scotland, then sailing east to (probably) Denmark, and ultimately returning home to Massalia. He subsequently wrote a book about his account titled *On the Ocean* that was met with scorn from most of its Greek audience since it did not have any fantastical creatures and mixed in genuine empirical observation (about distances and conditions along the way) with its narrative. Armchair critics claimed that it was impossible that he had gone as far as north as he said, because north of Greece it was quite cold enough and there was no way humans could live any farther north than that. Practically speaking, despite Pytheas's voyage, the Greek world would remain defined by the shores of the Mediterranean.

Conclusion

“Classical Greece” is important historically because of what people *thought* as much as what they *did*. What the Greeks of the Classical Age deserve credit for is an intellectual culture that resulted in remarkable innovations: humanistic art, literature, and a new focus on the rational mind's ability to learn about nature and to improve politics and social organization. What the Greeks had never done, however, was spread that culture and those beliefs to non-Greeks, both because of the Greek belief in their own superiority and their relative weakness in the face of great empires like Persia. That would change with the rise of a dynasty from the most northern part of Greece itself: Macedonia, and its king: Alexander.

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CHAPTER 7: THE HELLENISTIC AGE

Introduction

The ancient Greek word for Greece is *Hellas*. The period after the Classical Age is referred to as the Hellenistic Age because it saw Greek civilization spread across the entire Middle East, thanks to the tactical genius and driving ambition of one man, Alexander the Great. Hellenistic history at its simplest is easy to summarize: a Macedonian king named Alexander conquered all of the lands of the Persian Empire during twelve years of almost non-stop campaigning. Shortly afterward, he died without naming an heir. His top generals fell to bickering and ultimately carved up Alexander's empire between themselves, founding several new dynasties in the process. Those dynasties would war and trade with each other for about three hundred years before being conquered by the Romans (the rise of Rome happened against the backdrop of the Hellenistic kingdoms). Thanks to the legacy of Alexander's conquests, Greek culture went from relative insignificance to become a major influence on the entire region.

Macedon and Philip II

The story starts in Macedon, a kingdom to the north of Greece. The Macedonians were warriors and traders. They lived in villages instead of poleis and, while they were recognized as Greeks because of their language and culture, they were also thought of as being a bit like country bumpkins by the more "civilized" Greeks of the south. Macedon was a kingdom ruled by a single monarch, but that monarch had to constantly deal with both his conniving relatives and his disloyal nobles, all of whom frequently conspired to get more power for themselves. Macedon was also bordered by nomadic peoples to the north, particularly the Thracians (from present-day Bulgaria), who repeatedly invaded and had to be repelled. The Macedonian army was comprised of free citizens who demanded payment after every campaign, payment that could only be secured by looting from defeated enemies. In short, Macedon bred some of the toughest and most wily fighters and political operators in Greece out of sheer necessity.

By the fifth century BCE, some of the larger villages of Macedon grew big enough to be considered cities, and elite Macedonians made efforts to civilize their country in the style of the southern Greeks. They competed in the Olympics and patronized the arts and literature. They tended to stay out of the political affairs of the other Greeks, however; they did not invade the Greek peninsula itself in their constant wars, nor did they take sides in conflicts like the Peloponnesian War. This did nothing to improve the situation in Macedon itself, of course, which remained split between the royal family and the nobility. In 399 BCE, Macedon slid into an ongoing civil war, with the nobles openly rejecting the authority of the king and the country sliding into anarchy. The war lasted for forty years.

In 359 BCE, the Macedonian king, Philip II, re-unified the country. Philip was the classic Macedonian leader: shrewd, clever, skilled in battle, and quick to reward loyalty or punish sedition. He started a campaign across Macedonia and the surrounding areas to the north, defeating and usually killing his noble rivals as well as hostile tribes. When men joined with him, he rewarded them with looted wealth, and his army grew.

Philip was a tactical innovator as well. He found a way to secure the loyalty of his nobles by organizing them

into elite cavalry units who swore loyalty to him, and he proudly led his troops personally into battle. He also reorganized the infantry into a new kind of phalanx that used longer spears than did traditional hoplites; these new spearmen would hold the enemy in place and then the cavalry would charge them, a tactic that proved effective against both “barbarian” tribes and traditional Greek phalanxes. Philip was the first Macedonian king to insist on the drilling and training of his infantry, and the combination of his updated phalanx and the cavalry proved unstoppable. Philip attacked neighboring Greek settlements and seized gold mines in the north of Greece, which paid his soldiers and paid to equip them as well. He hired mercenaries to supplement his Macedonian troops, ending up with the largest army Macedon had ever seen.



The expansion of Macedon under Philip II, from the small region marked in the red border to the larger blue region, along with the dependent regions surrounding it.

The Greek poleis were understandably worried about these developments. Under the leadership of Athens, they organized into a defensive league to resist Macedonian aggression. For about ten years, the Macedonians bribed potential Greek allies, threatened those that opposed them, and launched attacks in northern Greece while the larger poleis to the south prepared for war. In 338 BCE, following a full-scale Macedonian invasion, the Macedonian army crushed the coalition armies. The key point of the battle was when Philip’s eighteen-year-old son Alexander led the noble cavalry unit in a charge that smashed the Greek forces.

In the aftermath of the invasion, Philip set up a new league of Greek cities under his control and stationed troops

throughout Greece. As of 338 BCE, Greece was no longer the collection of independent city-states it had been for over a thousand years; it was now united under an invader from the north. The Greeks deeply resented this occupation. They only grudgingly accepted the Macedonians as fellow Greeks and had celebrated the independence of the Greek poleis as one of the defining characteristics of Greek civilization for centuries. Philip thus had his job cut out for him in managing his new conquest.

The more immediate problem facing Philip in the aftermath of the Greek conquest was that his men demanded more loot – the only way he could pay them was to find new places to invade and sack. Thus, Philip ruled Greece but he could not afford to sit idle with troops aching for more victories. Cleverly, having just defeated the Greek poleis, Philip began behaving like a Greek statesman and assuming a kind of symbolic leadership role for Greek culture itself, not just Greek politics. He began agitating for a Greek invasion of Persia under his leadership to “avenge” the Persian invasion of the prior century. All things considered, this was a far-fetched scheme; Persia was by far the “superpower” of its day, and since the end of the Persian War over a century earlier numerous Greeks had served Persian kings as mercenaries and merchants. Nevertheless, the idea of an invasion created an excuse for Macedonian and Greek imperialism and aggression under cultural pretext of revenge.

Unfortunately for Philip, he was murdered by one of his bodyguards in 336 BCE, just two years after conquering Greece. Family politics might have been to blame here, as his estranged wife Olympias (mother of Alexander) may have ordered his murder, as well as the murder of his other wife and children. It is worth noting, however, that the theory of Olympias’ involvement in Philip’s murder was once accepted as fact but has faced sustained criticism for many years. Regardless of who was ultimately responsible for the assassination, Alexander ascended to the throne at the age of twenty following his father’s demise, and he remained devoted to his mother for as long as she lived.

Alexander the Great

Alexander was one of the historical figures who truly deserves the honorific “the Great.” He was a military genius and a courageous warrior, personally leading his armies in battle and fighting on despite being wounded on several occasions. He was a charismatic and inspirational leader who won the loyalty not only of his Macedonian countrymen, but the Greeks and, most remarkably, the people of the Persian Empire whom he conquered. He was also driven by incredible ambition; tutored by none other than Aristotle in his youth, he modeled himself on the legendary Greek hero Achilles, hoping to not only match but to surpass Achilles’ prowess in battle. He became a legend in his own life, worshiped as a god by many of his subjects, and even his Greek subjects came to venerate him as one of the greatest leaders of all time.

Alexander’s conquests began almost immediately after seizing the throne. He first ruthlessly killed off his rivals and enemies in Macedon and Greece, executing nobles he suspected of treason, and then leading an army back through Macedon, crushing the Thracian tribes of the north who threatened to defect. Some of the Greek poleis rose up, hoping to end Macedonian control almost as soon as it had begun, but Alexander returned to reconquer the rebellious Greek cities. In the case of the city of Thebes, for instance, Alexander let the Thebans know that, by rebelling, they had signed their own death warrant and he refused to accept their surrender, sacking the city and slaughtering thousands of its inhabitants as a warning to the rest of Greece.

By 334 BCE, two years after he became king, Alexander was thoroughly in control of Greece. He immediately embarked on his father’s mission to attack Persia, leading a relatively small army (of about 45,000 men) into Persian

territory – note how much smaller this army was than the Persian one had been a century earlier, when Xerxes I had invaded with over 200,000 soldiers. He immediately engaged Persian forces and started winning battles, securing Anatolia and the rich Greek port cities in 333 BCE and Syria in 332 BCE. In almost every major battle, Alexander personally led the cavalry, a quality that inspired loyalty and confidence in his men.



A Roman mosaic depicting Alexander the Great in battle, possibly based on a Greek original.

His success against the Persians can be explained in part by the fact that the Persian technique of calling up their armies was too slow. Even though Alexander had arrived in Anatolia with only 45,000 men, against a potential Persian army of close to 300,000, far fewer troops were actually available to the Persians at any one time during the first years of Alexander's campaign. Instead, the first two years of the invasion consisted of Macedonian and Greek forces engaging with smaller Persian armies, some of which even included Greek mercenaries. Alexander's forces succeeded in conquering Persian territory piecemeal, taking key fortresses and cities, seizing supplies, and fighting off Persian counter-attacks; even with its overall military superiority, the Persian Empire could not focus its full might against the Greeks until much of the western empire had already been lost. In addition, Alexander was happy to offer alliances and concessions to Persian subjects who surrendered, sometimes even honoring with lands and positions those who had fought against him and lost honorably. In sum, conquest by Alexander was not experienced as a disaster for most Persian subjects, merely a shift in rulership.

In 332 BCE, the Persian king, Darius III, tried to make peace with Alexander and (supposedly – there is reason to believe that this episode was invented by Greek propagandists afterwards) offered him his daughter in marriage, along with the entire western half of the Persian Empire. Alexander refused and marched into Egypt, where he was welcomed as a divine figure and liberator from Persia. Alexander made a point of visiting the key Egyptian temples and paying his respects to the Egyptian gods (he identified the chief Egyptian deity Amun-Ra with Zeus, father of the Greek

gods), which certainly eased his acceptance by the Egyptians. In the meantime, Darius III succeeded in raising the entire strength of the Persian army, knowing that a final showdown was inevitable.

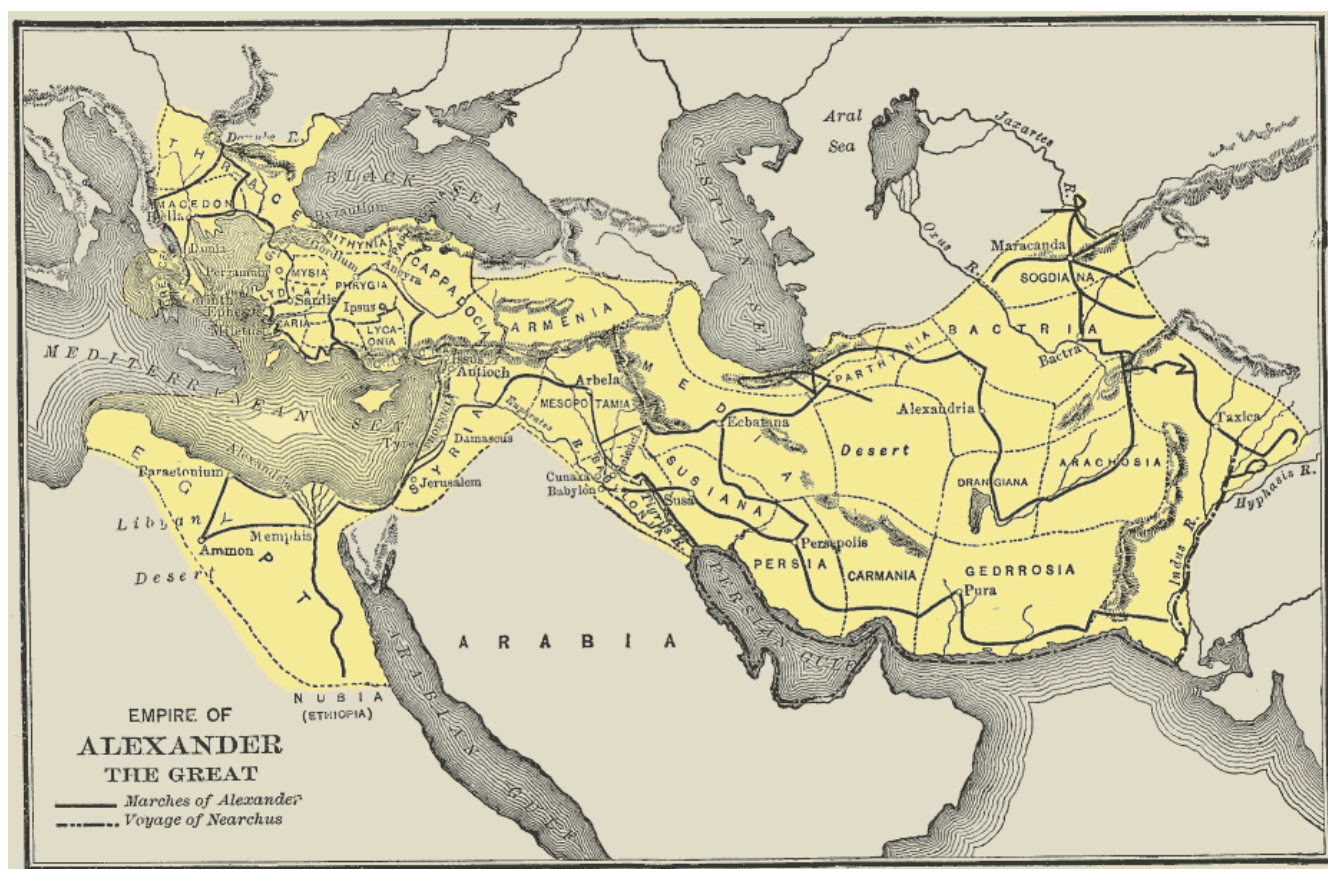
From Egypt, the Greek armies headed east, defeating the Persians at two more major battles, culminating in 330 BCE when they seized Persepolis, the Persian capital city. There, the Greek armies looted the entire palace complex before burning it to the ground; historians have concluded that Alexander ordered the burning to force the remaining Persians who were resistant to his conquest to acknowledge its finality. The wealth of Persepolis and the surrounding Persian cities paid for the entire Greek army for years to come and inspired a renaissance of building back in Greece and Macedon, paid for with Persian gold. Darius III fled to the east but was murdered by Persian nobles, who hoped to hold on to their own independence (this did not work – Alexander painstakingly hunted down the assassins over the next few years).

Alexander After the Conquest of Persia

Alexander paused his campaign to pay off his men and allow some of his troops to return to Greece. He then arranged for thousands of his Greek and Macedonian officers to marry Persian noblewomen in an effort to formally and permanently fuse together the Greek and Persian civilizations. His goal was not to devastate the empire, but to become the next “Great King” to whom all other leaders had to defer. He maintained the Persian bureaucracy (such as the organization of the Satrapies) and enlisted thousands of Persian soldiers who joined his campaign as his armies moved even farther east. He also made a show of treating Darius’s family with respect and honor, demonstrating that he wanted to win the Persians over rather than humiliate them. Alexander declared that the ancient city of Babylon would be his new capital. Even though he now ruled over the largest empire in the world, however, he was unsatisfied, and he set off to conquer lands his new Persian subjects told him about beyond the borders of the empire.

Alexander headed east again with his armies, defeating the tribesmen of present-day Afghanistan and then fighting a huge battle against the forces of the Indian king Porus in the northern Indus River Valley in 327 BCE (Alexander was so impressed by Porus that after the battle he appointed him satrap of what had been Porus’s kingdom). He pressed on into India for several months, following the Indus south, but finally his loyal but exhausted troops refused to go on. Alexander had heard of Indian kingdoms even farther east (i.e. toward the Ganges River Valley, completely unknown to the Greeks before this point) and, being Alexander, he wanted to conquer them too. His men, however, were both weary and rich beyond their wildest dreams. Few of them could see the point of further conquests and wanted instead to return home and enjoy their hard-won loot. Some of his followers were now over 65 years old, having fought for both Philip II and then Alexander, and they concluded that it was high time to go home.

Alexander consulted an oracle that confirmed that disaster would strike if he crossed the next river, so after sulking in his tent for a week, he finally relented. To avoid the appearance of a retreat, however, he insisted that his armies fight their way down the Indus river valley and then across the southern part of the former Persian Empire on their way back to Mesopotamia. Unfortunately, Alexander made a major tactical error when he reached the Indian Ocean, splitting his forces into a fleet and a land force that would travel west separately. The fleet survived unscathed, but the army had to cross the brutally difficult Makran desert (in the southern part of present-day Pakistan and Iran), which cost Alexander’s forces more lives than had the entire Indian campaign.



Alexander's conquests – the dark black lines trace his route from Macedon in the far northwest through Egypt, across the Persian heartland, then to Afghanistan and India, and finally along the shores of the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf back to Babylon.

The return journey was arduous, and it took years to get back to the heartland of Persia. In 323 BCE, his armies finally arrived in Babylon. Alexander was exhausted and plagued by injuries from the many battles he had fought, but Macedonian and Greek tradition required him to drink to excess with his generals. Some combination of his injuries, alcohol, and exhaustion finally caught up with him. Supposedly, while he lay on his deathbed, his generals asked who would follow him as Great King and he replied “the strongest,” then died. The results were predictable: decades of fighting as each general tried to take over the huge empire Alexander had forged.

The true legacy of Hellenistic civilization was not Alexander's wars, as remarkable as they were, but their aftermath. During his campaigns, Alexander founded numerous new cities that were to be colonies for his victorious Greek soldiers, all of which were named Alexandria except for ones that he named after his horse, Bucephalus, and his dog, Peritas. For almost 100 years, Greeks and Macedonians streamed to these colonies, which resulted in a tremendous growth of Greek culture across the entire ancient world. They also came to settle in conquered Persian cities. Everywhere, Greeks became a new elite class, establishing Greek laws and Greek buildings and amenities. At the same time, the Greeks were always a small minority in the lands of the east, a fact that Alexander had certainly recognized. To deal with the situation, not only did he encourage inter-marriage, but he simply took over the Persian system of governance, with its royal road, its regional governors, and its huge and elaborate bureaucracy.

The Hellenistic Monarchies

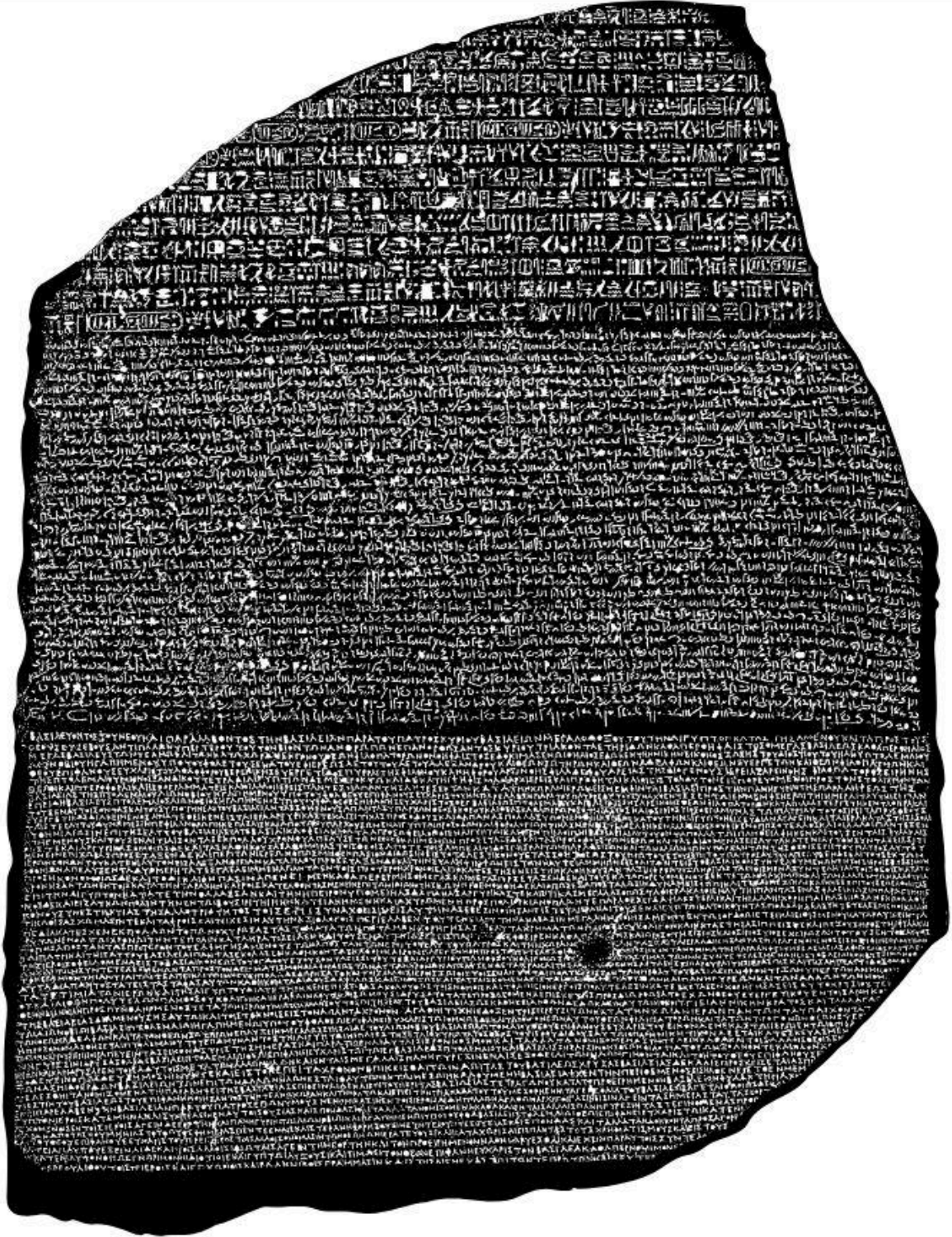
The Macedonians could be united by powerful leaders, but their nobility tended to be selfish and jealous of power. Since he named no heir, Alexander almost guaranteed that his empire would collapse as his generals turned on each other. Indeed, within a year of his death the empire plunged into civil war, and it took until 280 BCE for the fighting to cease and three major kingdoms to be established, founded by the generals Antigonos, Ptolemy, and Seleucus.



The major Hellenistic kingdoms (here Anglicized as “Seleukos” rather than “Seleucid” and “Ptolemaios” instead of “Ptolemaic.”) The Mauryan Empire was a loose confederacy of Indian princes that swiftly achieved independence from Greek influence following Alexander’s death.

The Antigonids ruled over Macedon and Greece. Despite controlling the Macedonian heartland and Greece itself, the Antigonids were the weakest of the Hellenistic monarchies. Both areas were depopulated by the wars; many thousands of soldiers and their families emigrated to the new military colonies established by Alexander, weakening Greece and, of course, its tax base. Over time, the Antigonids had to fight to hold on to power in Greece alone and they ultimately saw many of the Greek poleis achieve independence from their rule.

The Ptolemies ruled over Egypt. The Ptolemies were very powerful and, perhaps more importantly, they had the benefit of ruling over a coherent, unified state that had ancient traditions of kingship. Once they cemented their control, the Ptolemies were able to simply act as pharaohs, despite remaining ethnically and linguistically Macedonian Greek. In their state, the top levels of rule and administration were Greek, but the bulk of the royal bureaucracy was Egyptian. There were long-term patterns of settlement and integration, but right up to the end the dynasty itself was fiercely proud of its Greek heritage, with Greek soldier colonies providing the backbone of the Ptolemaic military. Ptolemy had been a close friend and trusted general of Alexander, and he took Alexander’s body to Egypt and buried it in a magnificent tomb in Alexandria, thereby asserting a direct connection between his regime and Alexander himself. In the end, the Ptolemies were the longest-lasting of the Hellenistic dynasties.



One of the most important artifacts of the Ptolemaic era: the Rosetta Stone, the object that enabled the translation of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Written during Ptolemaic rule, the stone consists of a single royal proclamation in two hieroglyphic alphabets as well as ancient Greek.

The Seleucids ruled over Mesopotamia and Persia. Despite the vast wealth of the Seleucid kingdom, it was the most difficult one to govern effectively. There was a relative scarcity of Greeks vis-à-vis the native populations, and it was thus also the most diverse. It proved impossible in the long term for the Seleucid kings to hold on to the entire

expanse of territories originally conquered by Alexander. Seleucus himself gave his Indian territory back to an Indian king, Chandragupta, in 310 BCE in return for some elephants. In 247 BCE a former Seleucid general based in the region of Parthia destroyed Seleucid control in the old Persian heartland, in the process founding a new Persian empire (remembered as the Parthian Empire for the region its rulers originally governed). Nevertheless, the Seleucid kingdom held on until its remnants were defeated in 63 BCE by Pompey the Great of Rome, one-time ally and subsequent enemy of Julius Caesar.

Each of the successor kingdoms was ruled by Greeks and Macedonians but the bureaucracies were staffed in large part by “natives” of the area. A complex relationship emerged between the cultures and languages of the kingdoms. Greek remained the language of state and the language of the elites, the Persian trade language of Aramaic was still used across most of the lands, and then a host of local tongues existed as the vernacular. The kings often did not speak a word of the local languages; as an example, Cleopatra VII (the famous Cleopatra and last ruler of Egypt before its conquest by Rome) was the first Ptolemaic monarch to speak Egyptian.

All of the Hellenistic monarchs tried to rule in the style of Alexander, rewarding their inner circles with riches, founding new cities, and expanding trade routes to foreign lands. They also warred with one another, however, with the Ptolemies and the Seleucids emerging as particularly bitter rivals, frequently fighting over the territories that divided their empires. The kingdoms fielded large armies, many of which consisted of the descendants of Greek settlers who agreed to serve in the armies in return for permanent land-holdings in special military towns.

The Ptolemaic kingdom is particularly noteworthy: starting with Ptolemy himself, the existing Egyptian bureaucracy was expanded and its middle and upper ranks staffed entirely by Greeks (and Macedonians), who developed obsessively detailed records on every sheaf of wheat owed to the royal treasury. So much papyrus was used in keeping records that old copies had to be dumped unceremoniously in holes in the desert to make room for new ones – quite a lot of information about the Ptolemaic economy survived in these dumps to be discovered by archaeologists a few thousand years later. Likewise, the abundance of the Nile was carefully managed to produce the greatest yields in history, so large that even after numerous taxes were taken, Egyptian wheat was still the cheapest available everywhere from Spain to Mesopotamia (the same held true with papyrus, a royal monopoly used everywhere in the Hellenistic world). Under the Ptolemies, Egypt was in many ways at its most prosperous in history, outstripping even the incredible bounty of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms centuries earlier.

The political legacy of the Seleucid kingdom was of nearly constant rebellion and infighting. While the dynasty tried to model itself both on Greek traditions of rule and on the earlier Persian dynasty of the Achaemenids (Darius III was the last of that dynasty to rule), it never established legitimacy in the eyes of many of its subjects. Instead, the Seleucid rulers were military leaders first and foremost, often obliged to criss-cross their large empire suppressing rebellions, fighting off invasions of Central Asian nomads, and squabbling with their neighbors in Egypt.

That noted, where Seleucid rule left a lasting mark on the region it was in consolidating long-distance trade. The Silk Road that linked China, India, the Middle East, and Europe truly began during the Hellenistic period and the Seleucids did everything in their power to support trade in their territories. They supervised the construction of roads and canals useful to merchants and derived much of their revenue from silk textiles. Even though raw silk (from silkworms) was only available from China, subjects of the Seleucids in Mesopotamia did master the production of textiles from the raw material, creating an enormously valuable commodity to markets farther west. Thus, even though Seleucid political control was somewhat haphazard overall, it did at least play a role in encouraging the east/west trade that would only grow in the following centuries.

Culture and Gender

One of the remarkable aspects of the Hellenistic age was the extent to which the people of Greece and the Middle East started exploring beyond the confines of the ancient world as they had known it. The Ptolemies supported trading posts along the Red Sea and as far south as present-day Eritrea and Ethiopia, trading for ivory and gold from the African interior. Explorers tried, but did not quite succeed, to circumnavigate Africa itself. In addition to accounts by explorers, the Greeks of the Hellenistic lands enjoyed histories and accounts of foreign lands written by the natives of those lands. Major histories of Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt were written during the Hellenistic period and translated into Greek. Ambassadors from the Hellenistic kingdoms in foreign lands sometimes wrote accounts of the customs of those lands (such as India). In short, it was a period when knowledge of the world greatly expanded.

The core of the Hellenistic kingdoms were the new cities founded by Alexander or, later, by the Hellenistic monarchs. The largest was Alexandria in Egypt, but there were equivalently grandiose cities in the other kingdoms. Both the new cities founded by Alexander and his successors and the old Greek settlements along the eastern coasts of the Mediterranean grew and prospered. The new cities were built on grid-pattern streets with various Greek amenities like public forums, theaters, and temples. Likewise, citizenship, which had been the basic unit of political currency in the ancient poleis, became instead a mark of elite membership that could be won in multiple cities at the same time.

Of note is the fact that the Seleucid cities represented the first major experiment in what we now call the welfare state. Because of the obligations the first monarchs felt toward their specifically Greek subjects, things like education and garbage collection were funded by the state. Eventually, public services extended to include poor relief, which consisted of free food distributed within the cities to the poorest classes of permanent residents. This practice had nothing to do with charity; it was simply a means for keeping the peace in the growing cities.

There were major ongoing problems for the Hellenistic ruling class, however, the most important of which was the continued stratification between Greeks and their non-Greek subjects. Greeks in the Hellenistic kingdoms felt that they were the heirs to Alexander's conquests and that they were thus justified in occupying most, if not all, of the positions of political power. Especially in places like Egypt and Mesopotamia that had enormous non-Greek populations, resentment could easily turn into outright rebellion. Various works emerged among the subjects of the Hellenistic kingdoms predicting the downfall of their Greek rulers; Mesopotamian priests, Zoroastrians in Persia, and Egyptian religious leaders all wrote works of prophecy claiming that the Greeks were in league with evil forces and would eventually be deposed. The Jews also struggled with their Greek overlords, a problem exacerbated by the fact that they were ruled first by the Ptolemies and then by the Seleucids. While the Ptolemaic kingdom remained relatively stable until its takeover by the Romans in 30 BCE, both the Antigonid and Seleucid kingdoms lost ground over the years, ultimately ruling over a fraction of their former territories by the time the Romans began encroaching in the second century BCE.

Unrelated to the struggle between Greeks and non-Greeks, the Hellenistic period saw a significant shift in gender relations. Simply put, the Greek obsession with maintaining not just a strict sexual hierarchy but an attempt to separate men and women socially that reached its zenith in Classical Athens loosened enormously in the Hellenistic age. Women were praised for fulfilling social and familial duties, for carrying out religious ceremonies, and even for their political savvy in the case of noteworthy queens (like Alexander's mother Olympias or, much later, the famous Cleopatra VII).

Strikingly, Hellenistic women exercised considerable economic power and enjoyed much greater legal recognition than had women in earlier periods of Greek history. While they were sometimes obliged to do so with

the backing of a male guardian, women controlled property, could borrow and lend money, and could manage the inheritances of their children. Some few women even served in political office – for example, a woman served as a magistrate in the polis of Histria, on the shores of the Black Sea, in the first century BCE.

The general pattern appears to be that women in Greece itself faced greater legal restrictions than those living in Greek colonies elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, which is unsurprising since the older Greek poleis had centuries of both law and tradition in place enforcing sexual divisions. The Macedonian society represented by Alexander and his companions had always been less restrictive, with women exercising much more autonomy than in the Greek poleis to the south, and that cultural value was clearly imprinted along with Macedonian rule itself across the Hellenistic world. Back in Greece, meanwhile, Sparta stood apart as the one polis that exceeded even Macedonian gender standards: Spartan women were fully autonomous economically, owning two-fifths of the land overall, and asserting considerable political influence.

As usual when discussing gender in the pre-modern period, however, it is necessary to provide some caveats about greater periods of freedom and autonomy for women. With very few exceptions (once again, Cleopatra VII is the outstanding example), men continued to control politics. The laws of the Hellenistic kingdoms did protect and recognize women in various ways, but men were always given the greater legal role and identity. Analysis of birth rates suggests that infanticide was common, with girl babies often left to die both out of a general preference for boys and because the dowry the girl would have to be provided for at marriage was a burdensome expense for the family. Most male intellectuals continued to insist on the desirability of female submission, and with a few great exceptions, the bulk of the literature and philosophy from the period was written by men.

Philosophy and Science

Hellenistic philosophy largely shifted away from the concerns of Greek philosophers of the Classical Age. Because philosophers were discouraged from studying politics, as had Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, they turned instead to investigations of personal ethics, of how to live one's life to be happy, even if a larger kind of social justice remained elusive. All of the major schools of Hellenistic philosophy shared the same pursuit, albeit in different ways: to live in pleasure and tranquility. Three are of particular note: the Epicureans, Stoics, and Cynics.

The Epicureans, named after their founder Epicurus, believed that humans ought to turn their backs on the pointless drama of politics and social competition and retire to a kind of inner contemplation. Epicurus taught that even if gods existed, they clearly had no interest in human affairs and thus did not need to be feared. Death was final and total, representing release and peace, not an afterlife of torment or work, so there was no need to worry about it, either. In short, the Epicureans believed in a virtuous renunciation of earthly cares and an indulgence in pleasure. Pleasure was not about overindulgence, however (which led to suffering – think of indigestion and hangovers), but a refined enjoyment of food, drink, music, and sex, although one interesting aspect of this philosophy was the idea that sexual pleasure was fine, but emotional love was to be avoided since it was too likely to result in suffering. To this day, the word “epicurean” as it is used in English means someone who enjoys the finer things in life, especially in terms of good cooking!

The Cynics believed that social conventions were unfortunate byproducts of history that distracted people from the true source of virtue and happiness: nature. In turn, the only route to happiness was a more aggressive rejection of social life than that espoused by the Epicureans (who, again, were quite sedate). They advocated a combination of asceticism and naturalism, indulging in one's physical needs without regard to social convention. Practically speaking,

this involved deliberately flouting social mores, sometimes in confrontational or even disgusting ways: Diogenes, founder of the Cynics, notoriously masturbated and defecated in public. Most Cynics were slightly more restrained, but most took great pleasure in mocking people in positions of political authority, and they also belittled the members of other philosophical schools for their overly rigid systems of thought. One story had it that Alexander sought out Diogenes and found him lying in the street in a suburb of the polis of Corinth, asking him what he, the king, might do for him, the philosopher. The Cynic replied “stop standing in my sunbeam.”

Originally an offshoot of the Cynics, the Stoics became philosophers of fate and rationality. Unlike the Epicureans, Stoics believed that humans had an obligation to engage in politics, which formed part of a great divine plan, something linked to both fate and nature. As participants in the natural order, humans ought to learn to accept the trials and tribulations of life rationally, without succumbing to emotion (hence the contemporary meaning of the word “stoic”: someone who is indifferent in the face of pain or discomfort). The Stoics accepted the necessity of being part of a society and of fulfilling social obligations, but they warned against excesses of pride and greed. Instead, a Stoic was to do his duty in his social roles without the distraction of luxury or indulgence. They were one possible version of a philosophy that believes in the existence of fate, of accepting one’s place in a larger scheme instead of resisting it, and they also celebrated the idea that the rational mind was always more powerful than emotional reactions.

What these three schools of philosophy had in common, despite their obvious differences, is that they all represented different approaches to accepting the (political) status quo. The Epicureans avoided politics, the Stoics supported existing political structures, and the Cynics mocked everything without offering positive suggestions for change. This was a far cry from the earnest inquiry of a Socrates, a Plato, or an Aristotle in trying to establish a virtuous form of politics. While Greek culture enjoyed a period of unprecedented influence during the Hellenistic period, its experiments in rational (let alone democratic) political analysis were not a major component of that influence.

While political theory did not enjoy a period of growth during the period, there were significant accomplishments in science and mathematics. The most important Hellenistic mathematicians were Euclid and Archimedes. Euclid was the inventor of the mathematical discipline of geometry. He was the first to use obvious starting points called axioms – for instance, the idea that two parallel lines will never intersect – to be able to deduce more complex principles called theorems. Euclid is one of those relatively few ancient thinkers who really “got it right” in the sense that none of his major claims were later proved to be inaccurate. His work on geometry, the *Elements*, was still used as the standard textbook in many courses on mathematics well into the twentieth century CE, thousands of years after it was composed. Archimedes was also a geometrician, best remembered for his applications of geometry to engineering. He discovered the principle of using the displacement of water to calculate the specific gravity of objects, and he devised a number of complex war machines used against Roman forces when his home city of Syracuse, in Sicily, was under attack (including, according to some accounts, a giant mirror used to focus the sun’s rays on Roman ships and set them on fire).

Hellenistic thinkers also made important discoveries in astronomy, most notably the fact that certain astronomers determined that the sun was the center of the solar system. Hellenistic astronomers also refined the calculations associated with the size of the Earth; one astronomer named Eratosthenes calculated the circumference of the Earth that was only off by 200 miles. Another astronomer named Hipparchus created the first star charts that included precise positions for stars over the course of the year, and to help keep track of their positions he created the first system of longitudes and latitudes.

Perhaps the most memorable achievement in scholarship during the period was the institutional form it took at the Library of Alexandria and its associated Museon, often considered to be the first research university in the western world. Funded directly by the Ptolemaic government, the Library collected and translated every scrap of available

scholarship from the Hellenistic world and played host to scholars who based their own work on its archives. It housed lecture halls as well, representing the preeminent site of learning in the Hellenistic world as a whole. It was eventually destroyed, although to this day there are competing versions of who was to blame for its destruction (ranging from the forces of Julius Caesar during his involvement in an Egyptian civil war to either Christian or Muslim fanatics centuries later).

Thus, there were certainly important intellectual breakthroughs that occurred during the Hellenistic period. There were not, however, corresponding achievements in technology or engineering. That is not surprising in that the pace of technological change in the ancient world was *always* glacially slow by modern standards. Instead, what mattered at the time was the spread of ideas and knowledge, much of which had no immediate and practical consequences in the form of applied technology – this was as true of ancient Rome as it was of the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Conclusion

While Alexander the Great is a well-known figure from ancient history, the Hellenistic period as a whole is not. The reason for that relative neglect (in popular culture and in many history surveys, at least those at the pre-college level) is that the Hellenistic age is overshadowed by what was happening simultaneously to the west: the rise of Rome. In precisely the same period in which Alexander and his successors first conquered then ruled the territories of the former Persian Empire, Rome was in the process of evolving from a town in central Italy to the center of what would eventually be one of the greatest and longest-lasting empires in world history. That is the subject of the next few chapters.

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CHAPTER 8: THE ROMAN REPUBLIC

Introduction

In many ways, Rome defines Western Civilization. Even more so than Greece, the Roman Republic and the Roman Empire that followed created the idea of a single, united civilization sharing certain attributes and providing a lasting intellectual and political legacy. Its boundaries, from what is today England to Turkey and from Germany to Spain, mark out the heartland of what its inhabitants would later consider itself to be “The West” in so many words. The Greek intellectual legacy was eagerly taken up by the Romans and combined with unprecedented organization and engineering on a scale the Greeks had never imagined, even under Alexander the Great.

Roman Origins

Rome was originally a town built amidst seven hills surrounded by swamps in central Italy. The Romans were just one group of “Latins,” central Italians who spoke closely-related dialects of the Latin language. Rome itself had a few key geographical advantages. Its hills were easily defensible, making it difficult for invaders to carry out a successful attack. It was at the intersection of trade routes, thanks in part to its proximity to a natural ford (a shallow part of a river that can be crossed on foot) in the Tiber River, leading to a prosperous commercial and mercantile sector that provided the wealth for early expansion. It also lay on the route between the Greek colonies of southern Italy and various Italian cultures in the central and northern part of the peninsula.

The legend that the Romans themselves invented about their own origins had to do with two brothers: Romulus and Remus. In the legend of Romulus and Remus, two boys were born to a Latin king, but then kidnapped and thrown into the Tiber River by the king’s jealous brother. They were discovered by a female wolf and suckled by her, eventually growing up and exacting their revenge on their treacherous uncle. They then fought each other, with Romulus killing Remus and founding the city of Rome. According to the story, the city of Rome was founded on April 21, 753 BCE. This legend is just that: a legend. Its importance is that it speaks to how the Romans wanted to see themselves, as the descendants of a great man who seized his birthright through force and power, accepting no equals. In a sense, the Romans were proud to believe that their ancient heritage involved being literally raised by wolves.



Replica of an Etruscan-era statue of Romulus and Remus suckling from the wolf.

The Romans were a warrior people from very early on, feuding and fighting with their neighbors and with raiders from the north. They were allied with and, for a time, ruled by a neighboring people called the Etruscans who lived to the northwest of Rome. The Etruscans were active trading partners with the Greek poleis of the south, and Rome became a key link along the Etruscan – Greek trade route. The Etruscans ruled a loose empire of allied city-states that carried on a brisk trade with the Greeks, trading Italian iron for various luxury goods. This mixing of cultures, Etruscan, Greek, and Latin, included shared mythologies and stories. The Greek gods and myths were shared by the Romans, with only the names of the gods being changed (e.g. Zeus became Jupiter, Aphrodite became Venus, Hades became Pluto, etc.). In this way, the Romans became part of the larger Mediterranean world of which the Greeks were such a significant part.

According to Roman legends, the Etruscans ruled the Romans from some time in the eighth century BCE until 509 BCE. During that time, the Etruscans organized them to fight along Greek lines as a phalanx. From the phalanx, the Romans would eventually create new forms of military organization and tactics that would overwhelm the Greeks themselves (albeit hundreds of years later). There is no actual evidence that the Etruscans ruled Rome, but as with the legend of Romulus and Remus, the story of early Etruscan rule inspired the Romans to think of themselves in certain ways – most obviously in utterly rejecting foreign rule of any kind, and even of foreign cultural influence. Romans were always fiercely proud (to the point of belligerence) of their heritage and identity.

By 600 BCE the Romans had drained the swamp in the middle of their territory and built the first of their large public buildings. As noted, they were a monarchy at the time, ruled by (possibly) Etruscan kings, but with powerful Romans serving as advisers in an elected senate. Native-born men rich enough to afford weapons were allowed to vote,

while native-born men who were poor were considered full Romans but had no vote. In 509 BCE (according to their own legends), the Romans overthrew the last Etruscan king and established a full Republican form of government, with elected senators making all of the important political decisions. Roman antipathy to kings was so great that no Roman leader would ever call himself *Rex* – king – even after the Republic was eventually overthrown centuries later.

Note: The Celts

While the Hellenistic world was flourishing in Greece and the Middle East, and Rome was beginning its long climb from obscurity to power, most of Western Europe was dominated by the Celts. The Celts provide background context to the rise of Rome, since Roman expansion would eventually spell the end of Celtic independence in most of Europe.

Much less is known about the Celts than about the contemporaneous cultures of the Mediterranean because the Celts did not leave a written record. The Celts were not a unified empire of any kind; they were a tribal people who shared a common culture and a set of beliefs, along with certain technologies having to do with metal-working and agriculture.

The Celts were a warrior society which seemed to have practiced a variation of what would later be known as feudal law, in which every offense demanded retribution in the form of either violence or “man gold”: the payment needed to atone for a crime and thereby prevent the escalation of violence. The Celts were in contact with the people of the Mediterranean world from as early as 800 BCE, mostly through trade. They lived in fortified towns and were as quick to raid as to trade with their neighbors.

By about 450 BCE the Celts expanded dramatically across Europe. They seem to have become more warlike and expansionist and they adopted a number of technologies already in use further south, including chariot warfare and currency. By 400 BCE groups of Celts began to raid further into “civilized” lands, sacking Rome itself in 387 BCE and pushing into the Hellenistic lands of Macedonia, Greece, and Anatolia. Subsequently, Celtic raiders tended to settle by about 200 BCE, often forming distinct smaller kingdoms within larger lands, such as the region called Galatia in Anatolia, and serving as mercenary warriors for the Hellenistic kingdoms.

Eventually, when the Romans began to expand beyond Italy itself, it was the Celts who were first conquered and then assimilated into the Republic. The Romans regarded Celts as barbarians, but they were thought to be barbarians who were at least capable of assimilating and adopting “true” civilization from the Romans. Centuries later, the descendants of conquered Celts considered themselves fully Roman: speaking Latin as their native language, wearing togas, drinking wine, and serving in the Roman armies.

The Republic

The Roman Republic had a fairly complex system of government and representation, but it was one that would last about 500 years and preside over the vast expansion of Roman power. An assembly, called the Centuriate Assembly, was elected by the citizens and created laws. Each year, the assembly elected two executives called consuls to oversee the laws and ensure their enforcement. The consuls had almost unlimited power, known as *imperium*, including the right to inflict the death penalty on law-breakers, and they were preceded everywhere by twelve bodyguards called *lictors*. Consular authority was, however, limited by the fact that the terms were only a year long and each consul was expected to hold the other in check if necessary. Under the consuls there was the Senate, essentially a large body of aristocratic

administrators, appointed for life, who controlled state finances. The whole system was tied closely to the priesthoods of the Roman gods, who performed divinations and blessings on behalf of the city. While the Romans were deeply suspicious of individuals who seemed to be trying to take power themselves, several influential families worked behind the scenes to ensure that they could control voting blocks in the Centuriate Assembly and the Senate.

When Rome faced a major crisis, the Centuriate Assembly could vote to appoint a *dictator*, a single man vested with the full power of imperium. Symbolically, all twenty-four of the lictors would accompany the dictator, who was supposed to use his almost-unlimited power to save Rome from whatever threatened it, then step down and return things to normal. While the office of dictator could have easily led to an attempted takeover, for hundreds of years very few dictators abused their powers and instead respected the temporary nature of Roman dictatorship itself.

The rich were referred to as *patricians*, families with ancient roots in Rome who occupied most of the positions of the senate and the judiciary in the city. There were about one hundred patrician families, descending from the men Romulus had, allegedly, appointed to the first senate. They were allied with other rich and powerful people, owners of large tracts of land, in trying to hold in check the *plebeians*, Roman citizens not from patrician backgrounds.

While the Senate began as an advisory body, it later wrested real law-making power from the consuls (who were, after all, almost always drawn from its members). By 133 BCE, the Senate proposed legislation and could veto the legislation of the consuls. An even more important power was its ability to designate funds for war and public building, giving it enormous power over what the Roman government actually did, since the senate could simply cut off funding to projects it disagreed with.

The Centuriate Assembly was divided into five different classes based on wealth (a system that ensured that the wealthy could always outvote the poorer). The wealthiest class consisted of the *equestrians*, so named because they could afford horses and thus form the Roman cavalry; the equestrian class would go on to be a leading power bloc in Roman history well into the Imperial period. The Centuriate Assembly voted on the consuls each year, declared war and peace, and acted as a court of appeal in legal cases involving the death penalty. It could also propose legislation, but the Senate had to approve it for it to become law.

Class Struggle

Rome struggled with a situation analogous to that of Athens, in which the rich not only had a virtual monopoly on political power, but in many cases had the legal right to either enslave or at least extract labor from debtors. In Rome's case, an ongoing class struggle called the Conflict of Orders took place from about 500 BCE to 360 BCE (140 years!), in which the plebeians struggled to get more political representation. In 494 BCE, the plebeians threatened to simply leave Rome, rendering it almost defenseless, and the Senate responded by allowing the creation of two officials called *Tribunes*, men drawn from the plebeians who had the legal power to veto certain decisions made by the Senate and consuls. Later, the government created a *Plebeian Council* to represent the needs of the plebeians, approved the right to marry between patricians and plebeians, banned debt slavery, and finally, came to the agreement that of the two consuls elected each year, one had to be a plebeian. By 287 BCE, the Plebeian Assembly could pass legislation with the weight of law as well.

Roman soldiers were citizen-soldiers, farmers who volunteered to fight for Rome in hopes of being rewarded with wealth taken from defeated enemies. An important political breakthrough happened in about 350 BCE when the Romans enacted a law that limited the amount of land that could be given to a single citizen after a victory, ensuring a more equitable distribution of land to plebeian soldiers. This was a huge incentive to serve in the Roman army, since any soldier now had the potential to become very rich if he participated in a successful campaign against Rome's enemies.

That being said, class struggle was always a factor in Roman politics. Even after the plebeians gained legal concessions, the rich always held the upper hand because wealthy plebeians would regularly join with patricians to out-vote poorer plebeians. Likewise, in the Centuriate Assembly, the richer classes had the legal right to out-vote the poorer classes – the equestrians and patricians often worked together against the demands of the poorer classes. Practically speaking, by the early third century BCE the plebeians had won meaningful legal rights, namely the right to representation and lawmaking, but those victories were often overshadowed by the fact that wealthy plebeians increasingly joined with the existing patricians to create something new: the Roman aristocracy. Most state offices did not pay salaries, so only those with substantial incomes from land (or from loot won in campaigns) could afford to serve as full-time representatives, officials, or judges – that, too, fed into the political power of the aristocracy over common citizens.

In the midst of this ongoing struggle, the Romans came up with the basis of Roman law, the system of law that, through various iterations, would become the basis for most systems of law still in use in Europe today (Britain being a notable exception). Private law governed disputes between individuals (e.g. property suits, disputes between business partners), while public law governed disputes between individuals and the government (e.g. violent crimes that were seen as a threat to the social order as a whole). In addition, the Romans established the Law of Nations to govern the territories it started to conquer in Italy; it was an early form of international law based on what were believed to be universal standards of justice.

The plebeians had been concerned that legal decisions would always favor the patricians, who had a monopoly on legal proceedings, so they insisted that the laws be written down and made publicly available. Thus, in 451 BCE, members of the Roman government wrote the Twelve Tables, lists of the laws available for everyone to see, which were then posted in the Roman Forum in the center of Rome. Just as it was done in Athens a hundred years earlier, having the laws publicly available reduced the chances of corruption. In fact, according to a Roman legend, the ten men who were charged with recording the laws were sent to Athens to study the laws of Solon of Athens; this was a deliberate use or “copy” of his idea.

Roman Expansion

Roman expansion began with its leadership of a confederation of allied cities, the Latin League. Rome led this coalition against nearby hill tribes that had periodically raided the area, then against the Etruscans that had once ruled Rome itself. Just as the Romans started to consider further territorial expansion, a fierce raiding band of Celts swooped in and sacked Rome in 389 BCE, a setback that took several decades to recover from. In the aftermath, the Romans swore to never let the city fall victim to an attack again.

A key moment in the early period of Roman expansion was in 338 BCE when Rome defeated its erstwhile allies in the Latin League. Rome did not punish the cities after it defeated them, however. Instead, it offered them citizenship in its republic (albeit without voting rights) in return for pledges of loyalty and troops during wartime, a very important precedent because it meant that with every victory, Rome could potentially expand its military might. Soon, the elites of the Latin cities realized the benefits of playing along with the Romans. They were dealt into the wealth distributed after military victories and could play an active role in politics so long as they remained loyal, whereas resisters were eventually ground down and defeated with only their pride to show for it. While Rome would rarely extend actual citizenship to whole communities in the future, the assimilation of the Latins into the Roman state did set an important precedent:

conquered peoples could be won over to Roman rule and contribute to Roman power, a key factor in Rome's ongoing expansion from that point forward.



Expansion of the Republic, from the region marked in dark red around Rome itself in Central Italy north and south along the Italian Peninsula, culminating in the conquests of Northern Italy, Sicily, and Sardinia (whose conquests are described in the section below).

Rome rapidly expanded to encompass all of Italy except the southernmost regions. Those regions, populated largely by Greeks who had founded colonies there centuries before, invited a Greek warrior-king named Pyrrhus to aid them against the Romans around 280 BCE (Pyrrhus was a Hellenistic king who had already wrested control of a good-sized swath of Greece from the Antigonid dynasty back in Greece). Pyrrhus won two major battles against the Romans, but in the process he lost two-thirds of his troops. After his victories, he made a comment that “one more such victory will undo me” – this led to the phrase “pyrrhic victory,” which means a temporary victory that ultimately spells defeat, or winning the battle but losing the war. He took his remaining troops and returned to Greece. After he fled, the south was unable to mount much of a resistance, and all of Italy was under Roman control by 263 BCE.

Roman Militarism

It is important to emphasize the extreme militarism and terrible brutality of Rome during the republican period, very much including this early phase in which it began to acquire its empire. Wars were annual: with very few exceptions over the centuries the Roman legions would march forth to conquer new territory every single year. The Romans swiftly acquired a reputation for absolute ruthlessness and even wanton cruelty, raping and/or slaughtering the civilian inhabitants of conquered cities, enslaving thousands, and in some cases utterly wiping out whole populations (the neighboring city of Veii was obliterated in roughly 393 BCE, for example, right at the start of the conquest period). The Greek historian Polybius calmly noted at the time in his sweeping history of the republic that insofar as there was a deliberate intention behind all of this cruelty, it was easy to identify: causing terror.

Roman soldiers were inspired by straightforward greed as well as the tremendous cultural importance placed on winning military glory. *Nothing* was as important to a male Roman citizen than his reputation as a soldier. Likewise, Roman aristocrats all acquired their political power through military glory until late in the republic, and even then military glory was all but required for a man to achieve any kind of political importance. The greatest honor a Roman could win was a *triumph*, a military parade displaying the spoils of war to the cheers of the people of Rome; many people held important positions in Rome, but only the greatest generals were ever rewarded with a triumph.

The overall picture of Roman culture is of a society that was in its own way as fanatical and obsessed with war as was Sparta during the height of its barracks society. Unlike Sparta, however, Rome was able to mobilize gigantic armies, partly because slaves came to perform most of the work on farms and workshops over time, freeing up free Roman men to participate in the annual invasions of neighboring territories. One prominent contemporary historian of Rome, W.V. Harris, wisely warns against the temptation of “power worship” when studying Roman history. Rome did indeed accomplish remarkable things, but it did so through appalling cruelty and astonishing levels of violence.

The Punic Wars

Rome’s great rival in this early period of expansion was the North-African city of Carthage, founded centuries earlier by Phoenician colonists. Carthage was one of the richest and most powerful trading empires of the Hellenistic Age, a peer of the Alexandrian empires to the east, trading with them and occasionally skirmishing with the Ptolemaic armies of Egypt and with the Greek cities of Sicily. Rome and Carthage had long been trading partners, and for centuries there was no real reason for them to be enemies since they were separated by the Mediterranean. That being said, as Rome’s power increased to encompass all of Italy, the Carthaginians became increasingly concerned that Rome might pose a threat to its own dominance.

Conflict finally broke out in 264 BCE in Sicily. The island of Sicily was one of the oldest and most important areas for Greek colonization. There, a war broke out between the two most powerful poleis, Syracuse and Messina. The Carthaginians sent a fleet to intervene on behalf of Messinians, but the Messinians then called for help from Rome as well (a betrayal of sorts from the perspective of Carthage). Soon, the conflict escalated as Carthage took the side of Syracuse and Rome saw an opportunity to expand Roman power in Sicily. The Centuriate Assembly voted to escalate the Roman military commitment since its members wanted the potential riches to be won in war. This initiated the First Punic War, which lasted from 264 to 241 BCE. (Note: “Punic” refers to the Roman term for Phoenician, and hence Carthage and its civilization.)

The Romans suffered several defeats, but they were rich and powerful enough at this point to persist in the war

effort. Rome benefited greatly from the fact that the Carthaginians did not realize that the war could grow to be about more than just Sicily; even after winning victories there, the Carthaginians never tried to invade Italy itself (which they could have done, at least early on). The Romans eventually learned how to carry out effective naval warfare and stranded the Carthaginian army in Sicily. The Carthaginians sued for peace in 241 BCE and agreed to give up their claims to Sicily and to pay a war indemnity. The Romans, however, betrayed them and seized the islands of Corsica and Sardinia as well, territories that were still under the nominal control of Carthage.

From the aftermath of the First Punic War and the seizure of Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica emerged the Roman provincial system: the islands were turned into “provinces” of the Republic, each of which was obligated to pay tribute (the “tithe,” meaning tenth, of all grain) and follow the orders of Roman governors appointed by the senate. That system would continue for the rest of the republican and imperial periods of Roman history, with the governors wielding enormous power and influence in their respective provinces.

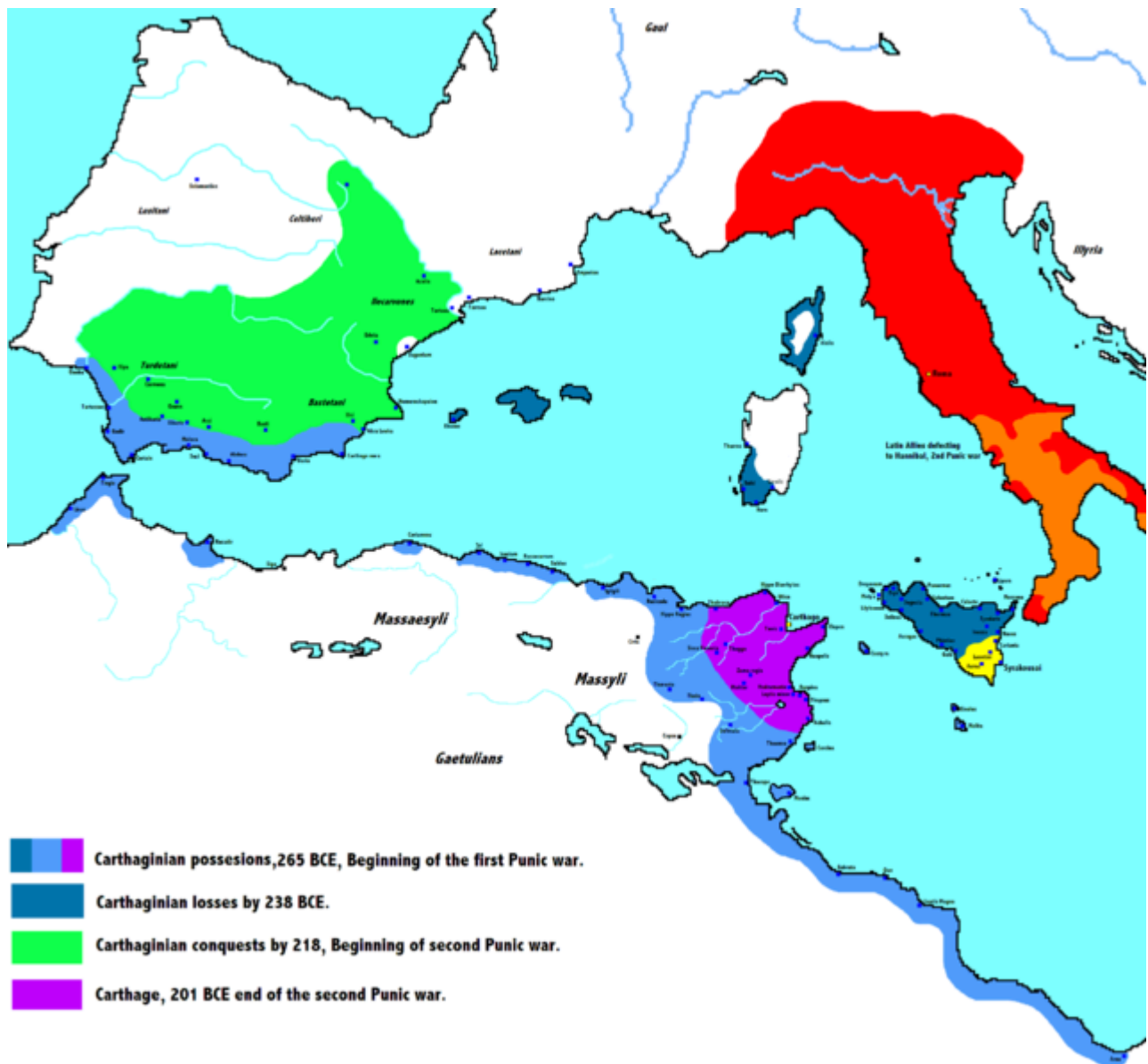
Unsurprisingly, the Carthaginians wanted revenge, not just for their loss in the war but for Rome’s seizure of Corsica and Sardinia. For twenty years, the Carthaginians built up their forces and their resources, most notably by invading and conquering a large section of Spain, containing rich mines of gold and copper and thousands of Spanish Celts who came to serve as mercenaries in the Carthaginian armies. In 218 BCE, the great Carthaginian general Hannibal (son of the most successful general who had fought the Romans in the First Punic War) launched a surprise attack in Spain against Roman allies and then against Roman forces themselves. This led to the Second Punic War (218 BCE – 202 BCE).

Hannibal crossed the Alps into Italy from Spain with 60,000 men and a few dozen war elephants (most of the elephants perished, but the survivors proved very effective, and terrifying, against the Roman forces). For the next two years, he crushed every Roman army sent against him, killing tens of thousands of Roman soldiers and marching perilously close to Rome. Hannibal never lost a single battle in Italy, yet neither did he force the Romans to sue for peace.

Hannibal defeated the Romans repeatedly with clever tactics: he lured them across icy rivers and ambushed them, he concealed a whole army in the fog one morning and then sprang on a Roman legion, and he led the Romans into narrow passes and slaughtered them. In one battle in 216 BCE, Hannibal’s smaller army defeated a larger Roman force by letting it push in the Carthaginian center, then surrounding it with cavalry. He was hampered, though, by the fact that he did not have a siege train to attack Rome itself (which was heavily fortified), and he failed to win over the southern Italian cities which had been conquered by the Romans a century earlier. The Romans kept losing to Hannibal, but they were largely successful in keeping Hannibal from receiving reinforcements from Spain and Africa, slowly but steadily weakening his forces.

Eventually, the Romans altered their tactics and launched a guerrilla war against Hannibal within Italy, harrying his forces. This was totally contrary to their usual tactics, and the dictator Fabius Maximus who insisted on it in 217 BCE was mockingly nicknamed “the Delayer” by his detractors in the Roman government despite his evident success. The Romans vacillated on this strategy, suffering the terrible defeat mentioned above in 216 BCE, but as Hannibal’s victories grew and some cities in Italy and Sicily started defecting to the Carthaginian side, they returned to it.

A brilliant Roman general named Scipio defeated the Carthaginian forces back in Spain in 207 BCE, cutting Hannibal off from both reinforcements and supplies, which weakened his army significantly. Scipio then attacked Africa itself, forcing Carthage to recall Hannibal to protect the city. Hannibal finally lost in 202 BCE after coming as close as anyone had to defeating the Romans. The victorious Scipio, now easily the most powerful man in Rome, became the first great general to add to his own name the name of the place he conquered: he became Scipio “Africanus” – conqueror of Africa.



The Punic Wars over time – note how much Carthage’s empire was reduced by the end of the Second Punic War, encompassing only the region marked in purple around Carthage itself.

An uneasy peace lasted for several decades between Rome and Carthage, despite enduring anti-Carthaginian hatred in Rome; one prominent senator named Cato the Elder reputedly ended every speech in the Senate with the statement “...and Carthage must be destroyed.” Rome finally forced the issue in the mid-second century BCE by meddling in Carthaginian affairs. The third and last Punic War that ensued was utterly one-sided: it began in 149 BCE, and by 146 BCE Carthage was defeated. Not only were thousands of the Carthaginian people killed or enslaved, but the city itself was brutally sacked (the comment by Polybius regarding the terror inspired by Rome, noted above, was specifically in reference to the horrific sack of Carthage). The Romans created a myth to commemorate their victory, claiming that they had “plowed the earth with salt” at Carthage so that nothing would ever grow there again – that was not literally true, but it did serve as a useful legend as the Romans expanded their territories even further.

Greece

Rome expanded eastward during the same period, eventually conquering all of Greece, the heartland of the culture the Romans so admired and emulated. While Hannibal was busy rampaging around Italy, the Macedonian King Philip V allied with Carthage against Rome, a reasonable decision at the time because it seemed likely that Rome was going to lose the war. In 201 BCE, after the defeat of the Carthaginians, Rome sent an army against Philip to defend the independence of Greece and to exact revenge. There, Philip and the king of the Seleucid empire (named Antiochus III) had agreed to divide up the eastern Mediterranean, assuming they could defeat and control all of the Greek poleis. An expansionist faction in the Roman senate successfully convinced the Centuriate Assembly to declare war. The Roman legions defeated the Macedonian forces without much trouble in 196 BCE and then, perhaps surprisingly, they left, having accomplished their stated goal of defending Greek independence. Rome continued to fight the Seleucids for several more years, however, finally reducing the Seleucid king Antiochus III to a puppet of Rome.

Despite having no initial interest in establishing direct control in Greece, the Romans found that rival Greek poleis clamored for Roman help in their conflicts, and Roman influence in the region grew. Even given Rome's long standing admiration for Greek culture, the political and military developments of this period, from 196 – 168 BCE, helped confirm the Roman belief that the Greeks were artistic and philosophical geniuses but, at least in their present iteration, were also conniving, treacherous, and lousy at political organization. There was also a growing conservative faction in Rome led by Cato the Elder that emphatically emphasized Roman moral virtue over Greek weakness.

Philip V's son Perseus took the throne of Macedon in 179 BCE and, while not directly threatening Roman power, managed to spark suspicion among the Roman elite simply by reasserting Macedonian sovereignty in the region. In 172 BCE Rome sent an army and Macedon was defeated in 168 BCE. Rome split Macedon into puppet republics, plundered Macedon's allies, and lorded over the remaining Greek poleis. Revolts in 150 and 146 against Roman power served as the final pretext for the Roman subjugation of Greece. This time, the Romans enacted harsh penalties for disloyalty among the Greek cities, utterly destroying the rich city of Corinth and butchering or enslaving tens of thousands of Greeks for siding against Rome. The plunder from Corinth specifically also sparked great interest in Greek art among elite Romans, boosting the development of Greco-Roman artistic traditions back in Italy.

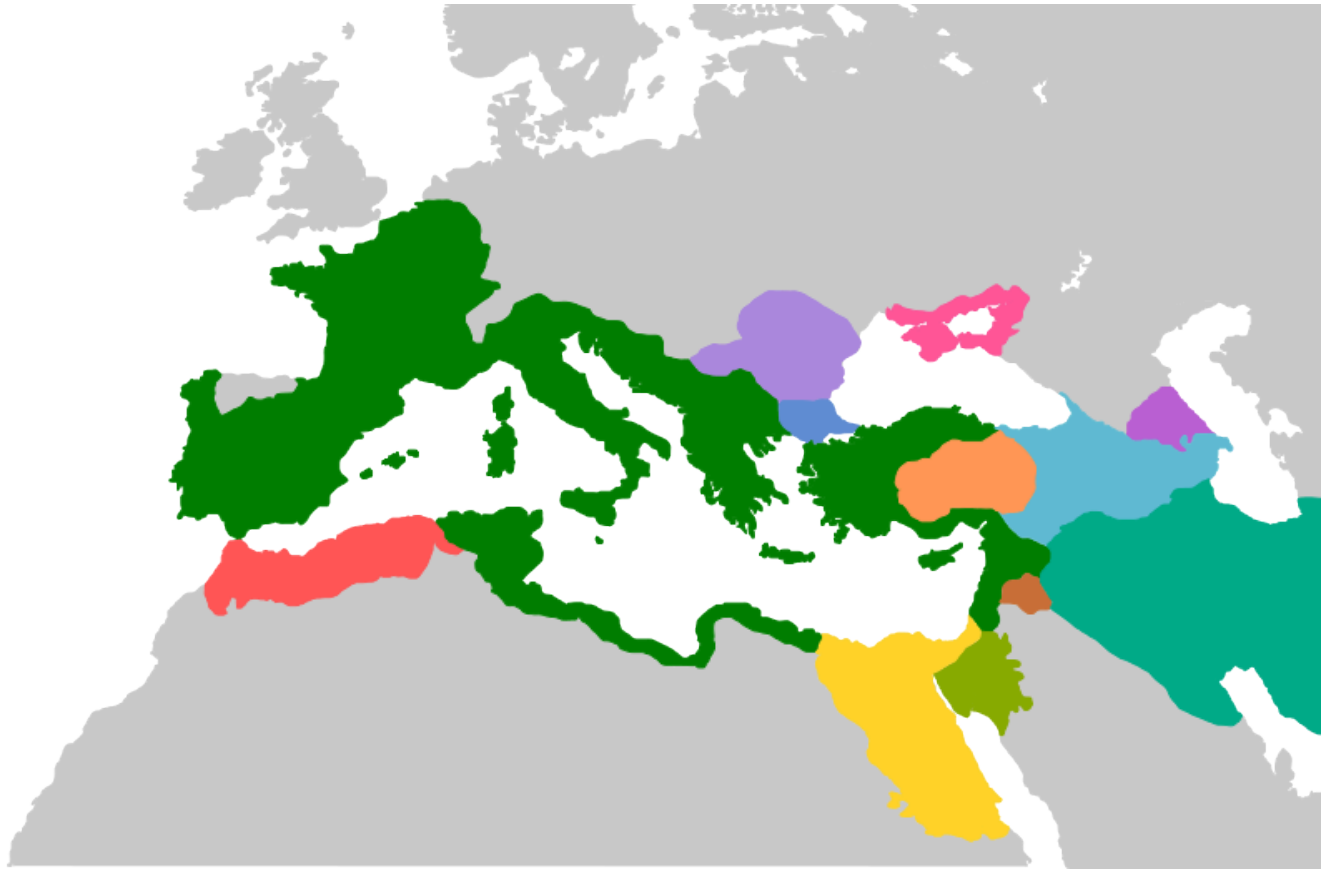
Thus, after centuries of warfare, by 140 BCE the Romans controlled almost the entire Mediterranean world, from Spain to Anatolia. They had not yet conquered the remaining Hellenistic kingdoms, namely those of the Seleucids in the Near East and the Ptolemies in Egypt, but they controlled a vast territory nonetheless. Even the Ptolemies, the most genuinely independent power in the region, acknowledged that Rome held all the real power in international affairs.

The last great Hellenistic attempt to push back Roman control was in the early first century BCE, with the rise of a Greek king, Mithridates VI, from Pontus, a small kingdom on the southern shore of the Black Sea. Mithridates led a large anti-Roman coalition of Hellenistic peoples first in Anatolia and then in Greece itself starting in 88 BCE. Mithridates was seen by his followers as a great liberator from Roman corruption (one Roman governor had molten gold poured down his throat to symbolize the just punishment of Roman greed). He went on to fight a total of three wars against Rome, but despite his tenacity he was finally defeated and killed in 63 BCE, the same year that Rome extinguished the last pitiful vestiges of the Seleucid kingdom.



A Roman bust of Mithridates VI sculpted in the first century CE (i.e. over a century after Mithridates was defeated) by a Roman sculptor. Here, he is depicted in the lion headdress of Hercules – the implication is that the Romans respected his ferocity in historical hindsight, even though he had been a staunch enemy of Rome.

Under the leadership of a general and politician, Pompey (“the Great”), both Mithridates and the remaining independent formerly Seleucid territories were defeated and incorporated either as provinces or puppet states under the control of the Republic. With that, almost the entire Mediterranean region was under Rome’s sway – Egypt alone remained independent.



The Republic as of 40 BCE. The Republic itself is marked in dark green, with the other regions consisting of other independent states. Many of those would subsequently fall under the sway of Rome or be conquered outright (such as Egypt).

Greco-Roman Culture

The Romans had been in contact with Greek culture for centuries, ever since the Etruscans struck up their trading relationship with the Greek poleis of southern Italy. Initially, the Etruscans formed a conduit for trade and cultural exchange, but soon the Romans were trading directly with the Greeks as well as the various Greek colonies all over the Mediterranean. By the time the Romans finally conquered Greece itself, they had already spent hundreds of years absorbing Greek ideas and culture, modeling their architecture on the great buildings of the Greek Classical Age and studying Greek ideas.

Despite their admiration for Greek culture, there was a paradox in that Roman elites had their own self-proclaimed “Roman” virtues, virtues that they attributed to the Roman past, which were quite distinct from Greek ideas. Roman virtues revolved around the idea that a Roman was strong, honest, straightforward, and powerful, while the Greeks were (supposedly) shifty, untrustworthy, and incapable of effective political organization. The simple fact that the Greeks had been unable to forge an empire except during the brief period of Alexander’s conquests seemed to the Romans as proof that they did not possess an equivalent degree of virtue.

The Romans summed up their own virtues with the term *Romanitas*, which meant to be civilized, to be strong, to be honest, to be a great public speaker, to be a great fighter, and to work within the political structure in alliance with other civilized Romans. There was also a powerful theme of self-sacrifice associated with *Romanitas* – the ideal Roman

would sacrifice himself for the greater good of Rome without hesitation. In some ways, Romanitas was the Romans' spin on the old Greek combination of arete and civic virtue.

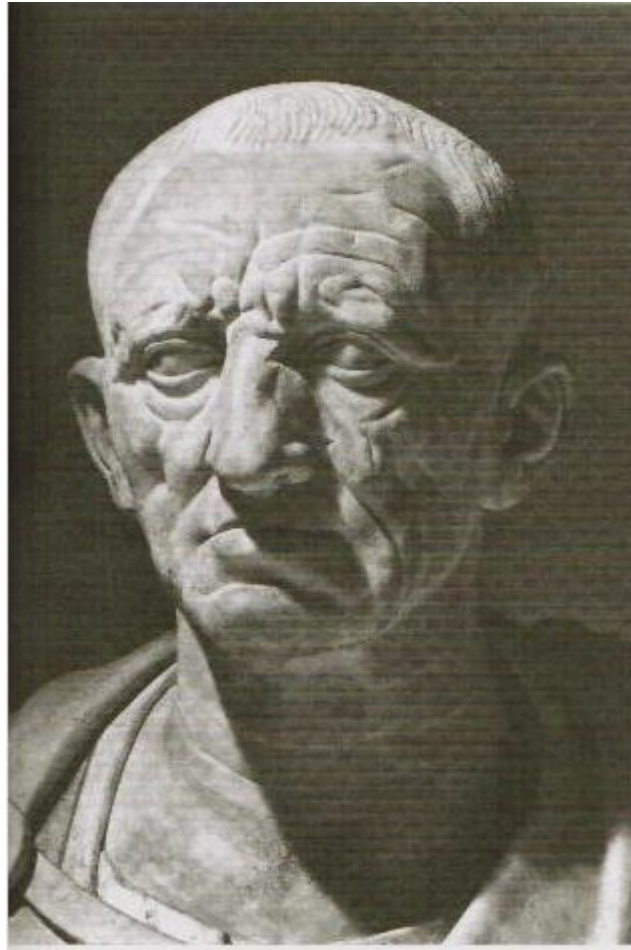
One example of Romanitas in action was the role of dictator. A Roman dictator, even more so than a consul, was expected to embody Romanitas, leading Rome through a period of crisis but then *willingly giving up power*. Since the Romans were convinced that anything resembling monarchy was politically repulsive, a dictator was expected to serve for the greater good of Rome and then step aside when peace was restored. Indeed, until the first century CE, dictators duly stepped down once their respective crises were addressed.

Romanitas was profoundly compatible with Greek Stoicism (which came of age in the Hellenistic monarchies just as Rome itself was expanding). Stoicism celebrated self-sacrifice, strength, political service, and the rejection of frivolous luxuries; these were all ideas that seemed laudable to Romans. By the first century BCE, Stoicism was the Greek philosophy of choice among many aristocratic Romans (a later Roman emperor, Marcus Aurelius, was even a Stoic philosopher in his own right).

The implications of Romanitas for political and military loyalty and morale are obvious. One less obvious expression of Romanitas, however, was in public building and celebrations. One way for elite (rich) Romans to express their Romanitas was to fund the construction of temples, forums, arenas, or practical public works like roads and aqueducts. Likewise, elite Romans would often pay for huge games and contests with free food and drink, sometimes for entire cities. This practice was not just in the name of showing off; it was an expression of one's loyalty to the Roman people and their shared Roman culture. The creation of numerous Roman buildings (some of which survive) is the result of this form of Romanitas.

Despite their tremendous pride in Roman culture, the Romans still found much to admire about Greek intellectual achievements. By about 230 BCE, Romans started taking an active interest in Greek literature. Some Greek slaves were true intellectuals who found an important place in Roman society. One status symbol in Rome was to have a Greek slave who could tutor one's children in the Greek language and Greek learning. In 220 BCE a Roman senator, Quintus Fabius Pictor, wrote a history of Rome in Greek, the first major work of Greek literature written by a Roman (like so many ancient sources, it has not survived). Soon, Romans were imitating the Greeks, writing in both Greek and Latin and creating poetry, drama, and literature.

That being noted, the interest in Greek culture was muted until the Roman wars in Greece that began with the defeat of Philip V of Macedon. Rome's Greek wars created a kind of "feeding frenzy" of Greek art and Greek slaves. Huge amounts of Greek statuary and art were shipped back to Rome as part of the spoils of war, having an immediate impact on Roman taste. The appeal of Greek art was undeniable. Greek artists, even those who escaped slavery, soon started moving to Rome en masse because there was so much money to be made there if an artist could secure a wealthy patron. Greek artists, and the Romans who learned from them, adapted the Hellenistic Greek style. In many cases, classical statues were recreated exactly by sculptors, somewhat like modern-day prints of famous paintings. In others, a new style of realistic portraiture in sculpture that originated in the Hellenistic kingdoms proved irresistible to the Romans; whereas the Greeks of the Classical Age usually idealized the subjects of art, the Romans came to prefer more realistic and "honest" portrayals. We know precisely what many Romans looked like because of the realistic busts made of their faces: wrinkles, warts and all.



The “Patrician Torlonia,” a bust of an unknown Roman politician from sometime in the first century BCE.

Along with philosophy and architecture, the most important Greek import to arrive on Roman shores was rhetoric: the mastery of words and language in order to persuade people and win arguments. The Greeks held that the two ways a man could best his rivals and assert his virtue were battle and public discussion and argumentation. This tradition was felt very keenly by the Romans, because those were precisely the two major ways the Roman Republic operated – the superiority of its armies was well-known, while individual leaders had to be able to convince their peers and rivals of the correctness of their positions. The Romans thus very consciously tried to copy the Greeks, especially the Athenians, for their skill at oratory.

Not surprisingly, the Romans both admired and resented the Greeks for the Greek mastery of words. The Romans came to pride themselves on a more direct, less subtle form of oratory than that (supposedly) practiced in Greece. Part of Roman oratorical skill was the use of passionate appeals to emotional responses in the audience, ones that were supposed to both harness and control the emotions of the speaker himself. The Romans also formalized instruction in rhetoric, a practice of studying the speeches of great speakers and politicians of the past and of debating instructors and fellow students in mock scenarios.

Roman Society

Much of Roman social life revolved around the system of *clientage*. Clientage consisted of networks of “patrons”

– people with power and influence – and their “clients” – those who looked to the patrons for support. A patron would do things like arrange for his or her (i.e. there were women patrons, not just men) clients to receive lucrative government contracts, to be appointed as officers in a Roman legion, to be able to buy a key piece of farmland, and so on. In return, the patron would expect political support from their clients by voting as directed in the Centuriate or Plebeian Assembly, by influencing other votes, and by blocking political rivals. Likewise, clients who shared a patron were expected to help one another. These were open, publicly-known alliances rather than hidden deals made behind closed doors; groups of clients would accompany their patron into meetings of the senate or assemblies as a show of strength.

The government of the late Republic was still in the form of the Plebeian Assembly, the Centuriate Assembly, the Senate, ten tribunes, two consuls, and a court system under formal rules of law. By the late Republic, however, a network of patrons and clients had emerged that largely controlled the government. Elite families of nobles, through their client networks, made all of the important decisions. Beneath this group were the equestrians: families who did not have the ancient lineages of the patricians and who normally did not serve in public office. The equestrians, however, were rich, and they benefited from the fact that senators were formally banned from engaging in commerce as of the late third century BCE. They constituted the business class of Republican Rome who supported the elites while receiving various trade and mercantile concessions.

Meanwhile, the average plebeian had long ago lost his or her representation. The Plebeian Assembly was controlled by wealthy plebeians who were the clients of nobles. In other words, they served the interests of the rich and had little interest in the plight of the class they were supposed to represent. This created an ongoing problem for Rome, one that was exploited many times by populist leaders: Rome relied on a free class of citizens to serve in the army, but those same citizens often had to struggle to make ends meet as farmers. As the rich grew richer, they bought up land and sometimes even forced poorer citizens off of their farms. Thus, there was an existential threat to Rome’s armies, and with it, to Rome itself.

A comparable pattern existed in the territories – soon provinces – conquered in war. Rome was happy to grant citizenship to local elites who supported Roman rule, and sometimes entire communities could be granted citizenship on the basis of their loyalty (or simply their perceived usefulness) to Rome. Citizenship was a useful commodity, protecting its holders from harsher legal punishments and affording them significant political rights. Most Roman subjects, however, were just that: subjects, not citizens. In the provinces they were subject to the goodwill of the Roman governor, who might well look for opportunities to extract provincial wealth for his own benefit.

At the bottom of the Roman social system were the slaves. Slaves were one of the most lucrative forms of loot available to Roman soldiers, and so many lands had been conquered by Rome that the population of the Republic was swollen with slaves. Fully one-third of the population of Italy were slaves by the first century CE. Even freed slaves, called *freedmen*, had limited legal rights and had formal obligations to serve their former masters as clients. Roman slaves spanned the same range of jobs noted with other slaveholding societies like the Greeks: elite slaves lived much more comfortably than did most free Romans, but most were laborers or domestic servants. All could be abused by their owners without legal consequence.

Slavery was a huge economic engine in Roman society. Much of the “loot” seized in Roman campaigns was made up of human beings, and Roman soldiers were eager to capitalize on captives they took by selling them on returning to Italy. In historical hindsight, however, slavery undermined both Roman productivity and the pace of innovation in Roman society. It simply was not necessary to seek out new and better ways of doing things in the form of technological progress or social innovations because slave labor was always available. While Roman engineering was impressive, Rome developed no new technology to speak of in its thousand-year history. Likewise, the long-term effect

of the growth of slavery in Rome was to undermine the social status of free Roman citizens, with farmers in particular struggling to survive as rich Romans purchased land and built huge slave plantations.

There were many slave uprisings, the most significant of which was led by Spartacus, a gladiator (warrior who fought for public amusement) originally from Thrace. Spartacus led the revolt of his gladiatorial school in the Italian city of Capua in 73 BCE. He set up a war camp on the slopes of the volcano Mt. Vesuvius, to which thousands of slaves fled, culminating in an “army” of about 70,000. He tried to convince them to flee over the Alps to seek refuge in their (mostly Celtic) homelands, but was eventually convinced to turn around to plunder Italy. The richest man in Italy, the senator Crassus, took command of the Roman army assembled to defeat Spartacus, crushing the slave army and killing Spartacus in 71 BCE (and lining the road to Rome with 6,000 crucified slaves).

In one area, however, Rome represented greater freedom and autonomy than did some of its neighboring societies (like Greece): gender roles. While Roman culture was explicitly patriarchal, with families organized under the authority of the eldest male of the household (the *pater familias*), there is a great deal of textual evidence that suggests that women enjoyed considerable independence nevertheless. Women retained the ownership of their dowries at marriage, could initiate divorce, and controlled their own inheritances. Widows, who were common thanks to the young marriage age of women and the death of soldier husbands, were legally autonomous and continued to run households after the death of the husband. Within families, women’s voices carried considerable weight, and in the realm of politics, while men held all official positions, women exercised considerable influence from behind the scenes.

It is easy to overstate women’s empowerment in Roman society; Roman culture celebrated the devoted mother and wife as the female ideal, and Roman traditionalists decried the loosening of strict gender roles that seems to have taken place over time during the Republic. Women were expected to be frugal managers of households and, in theory, they were to avoid ostentatious displays. Likewise, Roman law explicitly designated men as the official decision-makers within the family unit. That being noted, however, one of the reasons that we know that women did enjoy a higher degree of autonomy than in many other societies is the number of surviving texts that both described and, in many cases, celebrated the role of women. Those texts were written by both men and women, and most Romans (men very much included) felt that it was both appropriate and desirable for both boys and girls to be properly educated.

The End of the Republic

The Roman Republic lasted for roughly five centuries. It was under the Republic that Rome evolved from a single town to the heart of an enormous empire. Despite the evident success of the republican system, however, there were inexorable problems that plagued the Republic throughout its history, most evidently the problem of wealth and power. Roman citizens were, by law, supposed to have a stake in the Republic. They took pride in who they were and it was the common patriotic desire to fight and expand the Republic among the citizen-soldiers of the Republic that created, at least in part, such an effective army. At the same time, the vast amount of wealth captured in the military campaigns was frequently siphoned off by elites, who found ways to seize large portions of land and loot with each campaign. By around 100 BCE even the existence of the Plebeian Assembly did almost nothing to mitigate the effect of the debt and poverty that afflicted so many Romans thanks to the power of the clientage networks overseen by powerful noble patrons.

The key factor behind the political stability of the Republic up until the aftermath of the Punic Wars was that there had *never* been open fighting between elite Romans in the name of political power. In a sense, Roman expansion

(and especially the brutal wars against Carthage) had united the Romans; despite their constant political battles within the assemblies and the senate, it had never come to actual bloodshed. Likewise, a very strong component of *Romanitas* was the idea that political arguments were to be settled with debate and votes, not clubs and knives. Both that unity and that emphasis on peaceful conflict resolution within the Roman state itself began to crumble after the sack of Carthage.

The first step toward violent revolution in the Republic was the work of the Gracchus brothers – remembered historically as the Gracchi (i.e. “Gracchi” is the plural of “Gracchus”). The older of the two was Tiberius Gracchus, a rich but reform-minded politician. Gracchus, among others, was worried that the free, farm-owning common Roman would go extinct if the current trend of rich landowners seizing farms and replacing farmers with slaves continued. Without those commoners, Rome’s armies would be drastically weakened. Thus, he managed to pass a bill through the Centuriate Assembly that would limit the amount of land a single man could own, distributing the excess to the poor. The Senate was horrified and fought bitterly to reverse the bill. Tiberius ran for a second term as tribune, something no one had ever done up to that point, and a group of senators clubbed him to death in 133 BCE.

Tiberius’s brother Gaius Gracchus took up the cause, also becoming tribune. He attacked corruption in the provinces, allying himself with the equestrian class and allowing equestrians to serve on juries that tried corruption cases. He also tried to speed up land redistribution. His most radical move was to try to extend full citizenship to all of Rome’s Italian subjects, which would have effectively transformed the Roman Republic into the Italian Republic. Here, he lost even the support of his former allies in Rome, and he killed himself in 121 BCE rather than be murdered by another gang of killers sent by senators.

The reforms of the Gracchi were temporarily successful: even though they were both killed, the Gracchi’s central effort to redistribute land accomplished its goal. A land commission created by Tiberius remained intact until 118 BCE, by which time it had redistributed huge tracts of land held illegally by the rich. Despite their vociferous opposition, the rich did not suffer much, since the lands in question were “public lands” largely left in the aftermath of the Second Punic War, and normal farmers did enjoy benefits. Likewise, despite Gaius’s death, the Republic eventually granted citizenship to all Italians in 84 BCE, after being forced to put down a revolt in Italy. In hindsight, the historical importance of the Gracchi was less in their reforms and more in the manner of their deaths – for the first time, major Roman politicians had simply been murdered (or killed themselves rather than be murdered) for their politics. It became increasingly obvious that true power was shifting away from rhetoric and toward military might.

A contemporary of the Gracchi, a general named Gaius Marius, took further steps that eroded the traditional Republican system. Marius combined political savvy with effective military leadership. Marius was both a consul (elected an unprecedented seven times) and a general, and he used his power to eliminate the property requirement for membership in the army. This allowed the poor to join the army in return for nothing more than an oath of loyalty, one they swore to their general rather than to the Republic. Marius was popular with Roman commoners because he won consistent victories against enemies in both Africa and Germany, and because he distributed land and farms to his poor soldiers. This made him a people’s hero, and it terrified the nobility in Rome because he was able to bypass the usual Roman political machine and simply pay for his wars himself. His decision to eliminate the property requirement meant that his troops were totally dependent on him for loot and land distribution after campaigns, undermining their allegiance to the Republic.

A general named Sulla followed in Marius’s footsteps by recruiting soldiers directly and using his military power to bypass the government. In the aftermath of the Italian revolt of 88 – 84 BCE, the Assembly took Sulla’s command of Roman legions fighting the Parthians away and gave it to Marius in return for Marius’s support in enfranchising the people of the Italian cities. Sulla promptly marched on Rome with his army, forcing Marius to flee. Soon, however,

Sulla left Rome to command legions against the army of the anti-Roman king Mithridates in the east. Marius promptly attacked with an army of his own, seizing Rome and murdering various supporters of Sulla. Marius himself soon died (of old age), but his followers remained united in an anti-Sulla coalition under a friend of Marius, Cinna.

After defeating Mithridates, Sulla returned and a full-scale civil war shook Rome in 83 – 82 BCE. It was horrendously bloody, with some 300,000 men joining the fighting and many thousands killed. After Sulla's ultimate victory he had thousands of Marius's supporters executed. In 81 BCE, Sulla was named dictator; he greatly strengthened the power of the Senate at the expense of the Plebeian Assembly, had his enemies in Rome murdered and their property seized, then retired to a life of debauchery in his private estate (and soon died from a disease he contracted). The problem for the Republic was that, even though Sulla ultimately proved that he was loyal to republican institutions, other generals might not be in the future. Sulla could have simply held onto power indefinitely thanks to the personal loyalty of his troops.

Julius Caesar

Thus, there is an unresolved question about the end of the Roman Republic: when a new politician and general named Julius Caesar became increasingly powerful and ultimately began to replace the Republic with an empire, was he merely making good on the threat posed by Marius and Sulla, or was there truly something unprecedented about his actions? Julius Caesar's rise to power is a complex story that reveals just how murky Roman politics were by the time he became an important political player in about 70 BCE. Caesar himself was both a brilliant general and a shrewd politician; he was skilled at keeping up the appearance of loyalty to Rome's ancient institutions while exploiting opportunities to advance and enrich himself and his family. He was loyal, in fact, to almost no one, even old friends who had supported him, and he also cynically used the support of the poor for his own gain.

Two powerful politicians, Pompey and Crassus (both of whom had risen to prominence as supporters of Sulla), joined together to crush the slave revolt of Spartacus in 70 BCE and were elected consuls because of their success. Pompey was one of the greatest Roman generals, and he soon left to eliminate piracy from the Mediterranean, to conquer the Jewish kingdom of Judea, and to crush an ongoing revolt in Anatolia. He returned in 67 BCE and asked the Senate to approve land grants to his loyal soldiers for their service, a request that the Senate refused because it feared his power and influence with so many soldiers who were loyal to him instead of the Republic. Pompey reacted by forming an alliance with Crassus and with Julius Caesar, who was a member of an ancient patrician family. This group of three is known in history as the First Triumvirate.



Busts of the members of the First Triumvirate: Caesar, Crassus, and Pompey.

Each member of the Triumvirate wanted something specific: Caesar hungered for glory and wealth and hoped to be appointed to lead Roman armies against the Celts in Western Europe, Crassus wanted to lead armies against Parthia (i.e. the “new” Persian Empire that had long since overthrown Seleucid rule in Persia itself), and Pompey wanted the Senate to authorize land and wealth for his troops. The three of them had so many clients and wielded so much political power that they were able to ratify all of Pompey’s demands, and both Caesar and Crassus received the military commissions they hoped for. Caesar was appointed general of the territory of Gaul (present-day France and Belgium) and he set off to fight an infamous Celtic king named Vercingetorix.

From 58 to 50 BCE, Caesar waged a brutal war against the Celts of Gaul. He was both a merciless combatant, who slaughtered whole villages and enslaved hundreds of thousands of Celts (killing or enslaving over a million people in the end), and a gifted writer who wrote his own accounts of his wars in excellent Latin prose. His forces even invaded England, establishing a Roman territory there that lasted centuries. All of the lands he invaded were so thoroughly conquered that the descendants of the Celts ended up speaking languages based on Latin, like French, rather than their native Celtic dialects.

Caesar’s victories made him famous and immensely powerful, and they ensured the loyalty of his battle-hardened troops. In Rome, senators feared his power and called on Caesar’s former ally Pompey to bring him to heel (Crassus had already died in his ill-considered campaign against the Parthians; his head was used as a prop in a Greek play staged by the Parthian king). Pompey, fearing his former ally’s power, agreed and brought his armies to Rome. The Senate then recalled Caesar after refusing to renew his governorship of Gaul and his military command, or allowing him to run for consul in absentia.

The Senate hoped to use the fact that Caesar had violated the letter of republican law while on campaign to strip him of his authority. Caesar had committed illegal acts, including waging war without authorization from the Senate, but he was protected from prosecution so long as he held an authorized military command. By refusing to renew his command or allow him to run for office as consul, he would be open to charges. His enemies in the Senate feared his tremendous influence with the people of Rome, so the conflict was as much about factional infighting among the senators as fear of Caesar imposing some kind of tyranny.

Caesar knew what awaited him in Rome – charges of sedition against the Republic – so he simply took his army

with him and marched off to Rome. In 49 BCE, he dared to cross the Rubicon River in northern Italy, the legal boundary over which no Roman general was allowed to bring his troops; he reputedly announced that “the die is cast” and that he and his men were now committed to either seizing power or facing total defeat. The brilliance of Caesar’s move was that he could pose as the champion of his loyal troops as well as that of the common people of Rome, whom he promised to aid against the corrupt and arrogant senators; he never claimed to be acting for himself, but instead to protect his and his men’s legal rights and to resist the corruption of the Senate.

Pompey had been the most powerful man in Rome, both a brilliant general and a gifted politician, but he did not anticipate Caesar’s boldness. Caesar surprised him by marching straight for Rome. Pompey only had two legions, both of whom had served under Caesar in the past and, and he was thus forced to recruit new troops. As Caesar approached, Pompey fled to Greece, but Caesar followed him and defeated his forces in battle in 48 BCE. Pompey himself escaped to Egypt, where he was promptly murdered by agents of the Ptolemaic court who had read the proverbial writing on the wall and knew that Caesar was the new power to contend with in Rome. Subsequently, Caesar came to Egypt and stayed long enough to forge a political alliance, and carry on an affair, with the queen of Egypt: Cleopatra VII, last of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Caesar helped Cleopatra defeat her brother (to whom she was married, in the Egyptian tradition) in a civil war and to seize complete control over the Egyptian state. She also bore him his only son, Caesarion.

Caesar returned to Rome two years later after hunting down Pompey’s remaining loyalists. There, he had himself declared dictator for life and set about creating a new version of the Roman government that answered directly to him. He filled the Senate with his supporters and established military colonies in the lands he had conquered as rewards for his loyal troops (which doubled as guarantors of Roman power in those lands, since veterans and their families would now live there permanently). He established a new calendar, which included the month of “July” named after him, and he regularized Roman currency. Then he promptly set about making plans to launch a massive invasion of Persia.

Instead of leading another glorious military campaign, however, in March of 44 BCE Caesar was assassinated by a group of senators who resented his power and genuinely desired to save the Republic. The result was not the restoration of the Republic, however, just a new chapter in the Caesarian dictatorship. Its architect was Caesar’s heir, his grand-nephew Octavian, to whom Caesar left (much to almost everyone’s shock) almost all of his vast wealth.

Mark Antony and Octavian

Following his death, Caesar’s right-hand man, a skilled general named Mark Antony, joined with Octavian and another general named Lepidus to form the “Second Triumvirate.” In 43 BCE they seized control in Rome and then launched a successful campaign against the old republican loyalists, killing off the men who had killed Caesar and murdering the strongest senators and equestrians who had tried to restore the old institutions. Mark Antony and Octavian soon pushed Lepidus to the side and divided up control of Roman territory – Octavian taking Europe and Mark Antony taking the eastern territories and Egypt. This was an arrangement that was not destined to last; the two men had only been allies for the sake of convenience, and both began scheming as to how they could seize total control of Rome’s vast empire.

Mark Antony moved to the Egyptian city of Alexandria, where he set up his court. He followed in Caesar’s footsteps by forging both a political alliance and a romantic relationship with Cleopatra, and the two of them were able to rule the eastern provinces of the Republic in defiance of Octavian. In 34 BCE, Mark Antony and Cleopatra declared that Cleopatra’s son by Julius Caesar, Caesarion, was the heir to Caesar (not Octavian), and that their own twins were to be rulers of Roman provinces. Rumors in the west claimed that Antony was under Cleopatra’s thumb (which is

unlikely: the two of them were both savvy politicians and seem to have shared a genuine affection for one another) and was breaking with traditional Roman values, and Octavian seized on this behavior to claim that he was the true protector of Roman morality. Soon, Octavian produced a will that Mark Antony had supposedly written ceding control of Rome to Cleopatra and their children on his death; whether or not the will was authentic, it fit in perfectly with the publicity campaign on Octavian's part to build support against his former ally in Rome.



A dedication featuring Cleopatra VII making an offering to the Egyptian goddess Isis. Note the remarkable mix of Egyptian and Greek styles: the image is in keeping with traditional Egyptian carvings, and Isis is an ancient Egyptian goddess, but the dedication itself is written in Greek.

When he finally declared war in 32 BCE, Octavian claimed he was only interested in defeating Cleopatra, which led to broader Roman support because it was not immediately stated that it was yet another Roman civil war. Antony and Cleopatra's forces were already fairly scattered and weak due to a disastrous campaign against the Persians a few years earlier. In 31 BCE, Octavian defeated Mark Antony's forces, which were poorly equipped, sick, and hungry. Antony and Cleopatra's soldiers were starved out by a successful blockade engineered by Octavian and his friend and chief

commander Agrippa, and the unhappy couple killed themselves the next year in exile. Octavian was 33. As his grand-uncle had before him, Octavian began the process of manipulating the institutions of the Republic to transform it into something else entirely: an empire.

Conclusion

One of the peculiar things about the Roman Republic is that its rise to power was in no way inevitable. No Roman leader had a “master plan” to dominate the Mediterranean world, and the Romans of 500 BCE would have been shocked to find Rome ruling over a gigantic territory a few centuries later. Likewise, the demise of the Republic was not inevitable. The class struggles and political rivalries that ultimately led to the rise of Caesar and then to the true transformation brought about by Octavian could have gone very differently. Perhaps the most important thing that Octavian could, and did, do was to recognize that the old system was no longer working the way it should, and he thus set about deliberately creating a new system in its place. For better or for worse, by the time of his death in 14 CE, Octavian had permanently dismantled the Republic and replaced it with the Roman Empire.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

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CHAPTER 9: THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Introduction

When Octavian succeeded in defeating Marc Antony, he removed the last obstacle to his own control of Rome's vast territories. While paying lip service to the idea that the Republic still survived, he in fact replaced the republican system with one in which a single sovereign ruled over the Roman state. In doing so he founded the Roman Empire, a political entity that would survive for almost five centuries in the west and over a thousand years in the east.

This system was called the *Principate*, rule by the “First.” Likewise, although “Caesar” had originally simply been the family name of Julius Caesar's line, “Caesar” came to be synonymous with the emperor himself by the end of the first century CE. The Roman terms for rule would last into the twentieth century CE: the imperial titles of the rulers of both Russia and Germany – “Tsar” and “Kaiser” – meant “Caesar.” In turn, the English word “emperor” derives from *imperator*, the title of a victorious Roman general in the field, which was adopted as yet another honorific by the Roman emperors. The English word “prince” is another Romanism, from *Princeps Civitatis*, “First Citizen,” the term that Augustus invented for himself. For the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the anglicized term “emperor” to refer to all of the leaders of the Roman imperial system.

Augustus

The height of Roman power coincided with the first two hundred years of the Roman Empire, a period that was remembered as the *Pax Romana*: the Roman Peace. It was possible during the period of the Roman Empire's height, from about 1 CE to 200 CE, to travel from the Atlantic coast of Spain or Morocco all the way to Mesopotamia using good roads, speaking a common language, and enjoying official protection from banditry. The Roman Empire was as rich, powerful, and glorious as any in history up to that point, but it also represented oppression and imperialism to slaves, poor commoners, and conquered peoples.

Octavian was unquestionably the architect of the Roman Empire. Unlike his great-uncle, Julius Caesar, Octavian eliminated all political rivals and set up a permanent hereditary emperorship. All the while, he claimed to be restoring not just peace and prosperity, but the Republic itself. Since the term *Rex* (king) would have been odious to his fellow Romans, Augustus instead referred to himself as *Princeps Civitatus*, meaning “first citizen.” He used the Senate to maintain a facade of republican rule, instructing senators on the actions they were to take; a good example is that the Senate “asked” him to remain consul for life, which he graciously accepted. By 23 BCE, he assumed the position of tribune for life, the position that allowed unlimited power in making or vetoing legislation. All soldiers swore personal oaths of loyalty to him, and having conquered Egypt from his former ally Mark Antony, Augustus was worshiped there as the latest pharaoh. The Senate awarded Octavian the honorific *Augustus*: “illustrious” or “semi-divine.” It is by that name, Augustus Caesar, that he is best remembered.

Despite his obvious personal power, Augustus found it useful to maintain the facade of the Republic, along with republican values like thrift, honesty, bravery, and honor. He instituted strong moralistic laws that penalized (elite)

young men who tried to avoid marriage and he celebrated the piety and loyalty of conservative married women. Even as he converted the government from a republic to a bureaucratic tool of his own will, he insisted on traditional republican beliefs and republican culture. This no doubt reflected his own conservative tastes, but it also eased the transition from republic to autocracy for the traditional Roman elites.

As Augustus's powers grew, he received an altogether novel legal status, *imperium majus*, that was something like access to the extraordinary powers of a dictator under the Republic. Combined with his ongoing tribuneship and direct rule over the provinces in which most of the Roman army was garrisoned at the time, Augustus's practical control of the Roman state was unchecked. As a whole, the legal categories used to explain and excuse the reality of Augustus's vast powers worked well during his administration, but sometimes proved a major problem with later emperors because few were as competent as he had been. Subsequent emperors sometimes behaved as if the laws were truly irrelevant to their own conduct, and the formal relationship between emperor and law was never explicitly defined. Emperors who respected Roman laws and traditions won prestige and veneration for having done so, but there was never a formal legal challenge to imperial authority. Likewise, as the centuries went on and many emperors came to seize power through force, it was painfully apparent that the letter of the law was less important than the personal power of a given emperor in all too many cases.



One of the more spectacular surviving statues of Augustus. Augustus was, among other things, a master of propaganda, commissioning numerous statues and busts of himself to be installed across the empire.

This extraordinary power did not prompt resistance in large part because the practical reforms Augustus introduced were effective. He transformed the Senate and equestrian class into a real civil service to manage the enormous empire. He eliminated tax farming and replaced it with taxation through salaried officials. He instituted a regular messenger service. His forces even attacked Ethiopia in retaliation for attacks on Egypt and he received ambassadors from India and Scythia (present-day Ukraine). In short, he supervised the consolidation of Roman power after the decades of civil war and struggle that preceded his takeover, and the large majority of Romans and Roman subjects alike were content with the demise of the Republic because of the improved stability Augustus's reign represented. Only one major failure marred his rule: three legions (perhaps as many as 20,000 soldiers) were destroyed in a gigantic ambush in the forests of Germany in 9 CE, halting any attempt to expand Roman power past the Rhine and Danube rivers. Despite that disaster, after Augustus's death the senate voted to deify him: like his great-uncle Julius, he was now to be worshipped as a god.

The Imperial Dynasties

The period of the *Pax Romana* included three distinct dynasties:

The Julian dynasty: 14 – 68 CE – those emperors related (by blood or adoption) to Caesar’s line.

The Flavian dynasty: 69 – 96 CE – a father and his two sons who seized power after a brief civil war.

The “Five Good Emperors”: 96 – 180 CE – a “dynasty” of emperors who chose their successors, rather than power passing to their family members.

The Julian Dynasty

There is a simple and vexing problem with any discussion of the Roman emperors: the sources. While archaeology and the surviving written sources create a reasonably clear basis for understanding the major political events of the Julian dynasty, the biographical details are much more difficult. All of the surviving written accounts about the lives of the Julian emperors were written many decades, in some cases more than a century, after their reign. In turn, the two most important biographers, Tacitus and Suetonius, detested the actions and the character of the Julians, and thus their accounts are rife with scandalous anecdotes that may or may not have any basis in historical truth (Tacitus is universally regarded as the more reliable, although Suetonius’s *The Twelve Caesars* does make for very entertaining reading). Thus, the biographical sketches below are an attempt to summarize what is known for sure, along with some notes on the scandalous assertions that may be at least partly fabricated.

When Augustus died in 14 CE, his stepson Tiberius (r. 14 – 37 CE) became emperor. While it was possible that the Senate might have tried to reassert its power, there was no political will to do so. Only idealistic or embittered senators really dreamed of restoring the Republic, and a coup would have been rejected by the vast majority of Roman citizens. Under the Caesars, after all, the empire had never been more powerful or wealthy. Genuine concessions had been made to the common people, especially soldiers, and the only people who really lost out in the short term were the old elite families of patricians, who no longer had political power independent of the emperor (although they certainly retained their wealth and status).

Tiberius began his rule as a cautious leader who put on a show of only reluctantly following in Augustus’s footsteps as emperor. He was a reasonably competent emperor for over a decade, delegating decisions to the Senate and ensuring that the empire remained secure and financially solvent. In addition, he oversaw a momentous change to the priorities of the Roman state: the Roman Empire no longer embarked on a sustained campaign of expansion as it had done ever since the early decades of the Republic half a millennium earlier. This does not appear to have been a conscious policy choice on the part of Tiberius, but instead a shift in priorities: the Senate was now staffed by land-owning elites who did not predicate their identities on warfare, and Tiberius himself saw little benefit in warring against Persia or invading Germany (he also feared that successful generals might threaten his power, at one point ordering one to call off a war in Germany). The Roman Empire would continue to expand at times in the following centuries, but never to the degree or at the pace that it had under the Republic.

Eventually, Tiberius retreated to a private estate on the island of Capri (off the west coast of Italy). Suetonius’s biography would have it that on Capri, Tiberius indulged his penchant for bloodshed and sexual abuse, which is highly questionable – what is not questionable is that Tiberius became embittered and suspicious, ordering the murders of

various would-be claimants to his throne back in Rome, and sometimes ignoring affairs of state. When he died, much to the relief of the Roman populace, great hopes were pinned on his heir.

That heir was Gaius (r. 37 – 41 CE), much better known as “Caligula,” literally meaning “little boots” but which translates best as “bootsie.” As a boy, Caligula moved with his father, a famous and well-liked general related by marriage to the Julians, from army camp to army camp. While he did so he liked to dress up in miniature legionnaire combat boots; hence, he was affectionately dubbed “Bootsie” by the troops (one notable translation of the work of Suetonius by Robert Graves translates Caligula as “Bootikins” instead).

Even if some of the stories of his personal sadism are exaggerated, there is no doubt that Caligula was a disastrous emperor. According to the biographers, Caligula quickly earned a reputation for cruelty and megalomania, enjoying executions (or simple murders) as forms of entertainment and spending vast sums on shows of power. Convinced of his own godhood, Caligula had the heads of statues of the gods removed and replaced with his own head. He liked to appear in public dressed as various gods *or* goddesses; one of his high priests was his horse, Incitatus, whom he supposedly appointed as a Roman consul. He staged an invasion of northern Gaul of no tactical significance which culminated in a Triumph (military parade, traditionally one of the greatest demonstrations of power and glory of a victorious general) back in Rome.

Much of the scandalous gossip about him, historically, is because he was unquestionably the enemy of the Senate, seeing potential traitors everywhere and inflicting waves of executions against former supporters. He used trials for treason to enrich himself after squandering the treasury on buildings and public games. He also made senators wait on him dressed as slaves, and demanded that he be addressed as “*dominus et deus*,” meaning “master and god.” He was finally murdered by a group of senators and guardsmen.

The next emperor was Claudius (r. 41 – 54 CE), the one truly competent emperor of the Julian line after Augustus. Claudius had survived palace intrigues because he walked with a limp and spoke with a pronounced stutter; he was widely considered to be a simpleton, whereas he was actually highly intelligent. Once in power Claudius proved himself a competent and refreshingly sane emperor, ending the waves of terror Caligula had unleashed. He went on to oversee the conquest of England, first begun by Julius Caesar decades earlier. He was also a scholar, mastering the Etruscan and Punic languages and writing histories of those two civilizations (the histories are now lost, unfortunately). He restored the imperial treasury, depleted by Tiberius and Caligula, and maintained the Roman borders. He also established a true bureaucracy to manage the vast empire and began the process of formally distinguishing between the personal wealth of the emperor and the official budget of the Roman state.

According to Roman historians, Claudius was eventually betrayed and poisoned by his wife, who sought to have her son from another marriage become emperor. That son was Nero. Nero (r. 54 – 68 CE) was another Julian who acquired a terrible historical reputation; while he was fairly popular during his first few years as emperor, he eventually succumbed to a Caligula-like tendency of having elite Romans (including his domineering mother) killed. In 64 CE, a huge fire nearly destroyed the city, which was largely built out of wood. This led to the legend of Nero “playing his fiddle while Rome burned” – in fact, in the fire’s aftermath Nero had shelters built for the homeless and set about rebuilding the roughly half of the city that had been destroyed, using concrete buildings and grid-based streets. That said, he did use space cleared by the fire to begin the construction of a gigantic new palace in the middle of Rome called the “golden house,” into which he poured state revenues.

Nero’s terrible reputation arose from the fact that he unquestionably hounded and persecuted elite Romans, using a law called the *Maiestas* that made it illegal to slander the emperor to extract huge amounts of money from senators and equestrians. He also ordered imagined rivals and former advisors to kill themselves, probably out of mere

jealousy. Besides Roman elites, his other major target was the early Christian movement, whom he blamed for the fire in Rome and whom he relentlessly persecuted (thousands were killed in the gladiatorial arena, ripped apart by wild animals). Thus, the two groups in the position to write Nero's history – elite Romans and early Christians – had every reason to hate him. In addition, Nero took great pride in being an actor and musician, two professions that were considered by Roman elites to be akin to prostitution. His artistic indulgences were thus scandalous violations of elite sensibilities. After completely losing the support of both the army and the Senate, Nero committed suicide in 68 CE.

Another note on the sources: what the “bad” emperors of the Julian line (Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero) had in common is that they violated the old traditions of *Romanitas*, squandering wealth and glorifying themselves in various ways, thus inspiring hostility from many elite Romans. Since it was other elite Romans (albeit many years later) who became their biographers, we in the present cannot help but have a skewed view of their conduct. Historians have rehabilitated much of the rule of Tiberius and (to a lesser extent) Nero in particular, arguing that even if they were at loggerheads with the Senate at various times and probably did unfairly prosecute at least some senators, they did a decent job of running the empire as well.

The Flavian Dynasty

In the aftermath of Nero's death, a brief civil war broke out. Four generals competed for the emperorship, supported by their armies. In the end, a general named Vespasian (r. 69 – 79 CE) seized power and founded a fairly short-lived dynasty consisting of himself and his two sons, known to history as the Flavians. The importance of Vespasian's takeover was that it reinforced the idea that real power in Rome was no longer that of the old power-broking families, but instead the armies; Vespasian had no legal claim to the throne, but his emperorship was ratified by the Senate nevertheless. The emperor's major concern had to be maintaining the loyalty of the armies above all else, because they could and would openly fight to put their man on the throne in a time of crisis – this occurred numerous times in the centuries to come.

Vespasian was one of the great emperors of the early empire. He pulled state finances back from the terrible state they had been left in by Nero and restored the relationship between the emperor and the Roman elite; it certainly did not hurt his reputation that he was a successful general, one of the traditional sources of status among Roman leaders. He was also renowned for his openness and his grounded outlook. Reputably, he did not keep a guard and let people speak to him directly in public audiences. In an act of classic *Romanitas*, he started work on the famous Colosseum (known at the time as the Flavian Amphitheater) in Rome in order to provide a grand setting for public games and performances. All of this happened in just a decade; he died of natural causes in 79 CE.



The outside of the Colosseum in present-day Rome.

Vespasian's older son Titus (r. 79 – 81 CE) had been groomed to follow his father and began as a promising and competent emperor. Unfortunately, almost as soon as he took the throne a volcano in southern Italy, Mt. Vesuvius, erupted, followed shortly by another huge fire as well as an epidemic in Rome. Titus struggled to aid victims of all three disasters, but was then struck by fever and died in 81 CE.

Vespasian's second son, Domitian (r. 81 – 96 CE), who was not “supposed” to take the throne, proved to be a terrible ruler. He created an atmosphere of terror in elite Roman circles in an effort to watch out for potential rebels, murdering senators and elites he suspected. He adopted a Caligula-like concern for glorifying himself (like Caligula, he insisted that he be addressed as “*dominus et deus*”) and liked to appear before the senate in the armor of a Roman commander returning from victory. He was moralistic about both sex and the divinity of the emperors, instituting the policy that all oaths had to be sworn to the godhood of the emperor. About the only positive undertaking in his rule was major building projects, both for palaces for himself and public works (including roads and fortifications), and it is also worth noting that the empire remained under a stable administration during his reign. That noted, Domitian became increasingly paranoid and violent between 89 and 96 CE, until he was finally killed by assassins in the palace.

The “Five Good Emperors” and the Severans

Following the work of the great eighteenth-century English historian Edward Gibbon, historians frequently refer to the rulers of the Roman Empire who followed the death of Domitian as the “Five Good Emperors,” those who successfully managed the Empire at its height. For almost a century, emperors appointed their own successors from the most competent members of the younger generation of Roman elites. Not least because none of them (except the last, to disastrous consequences) had surviving direct heirs of their own, each emperor would adopt a younger man as his son,

thereby ensuring his succession. Rome prospered during this period under this relatively meritocratic system of political succession. It was under one of these emperors, Trajan, that the empire achieved its greatest territorial expanse.

One of the important aspects of the behavior of the “good emperors” is that they fit the model of a “philosopher-king” first described by Plato centuries earlier. Even though monarchy had been repugnant to earlier Romans, during the period of the Republic, the good emperors tried to live and act according to traditional Roman *Romanitas*, undertaking actions not only for their own glorification but for the good of the Roman state. The borders were maintained (or, as under Trajan, expanded), public works and infrastructure built, and infighting among elites kept to a minimum.

Trajan’s accomplishments deserve special mention, not only because of his success in expanding the Empire, but in how he governed it. He was a fastidious and straightforward administrator, focusing his considerable energies on the practical business of rule. He personally responded to requests and correspondence, he instituted a program of inexpensive loans to farmers and used the interest to pay for food for poor children, and he worked closely and successfully with the Senate to maintain stability and imperial solvency. The fact that he personally led the legions on major military campaigns capped his reign in the military glory expected of an emperor following the rule of the Flavians, but he was remembered at least as well for his skill as a leader in peacetime.

The next two emperors, Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, did not win comparable military glory, but they did defend the borders (Hadrian gave up Trajan’s conquests in Mesopotamia to do so, recognizing that they were unsustainable), oversaw major building projects, and maintained Roman stability. Hadrian spent much of his reign touring the Roman provinces, particularly Greece. It was clear by his reign that the emperor’s authority was practically limitless, with both emperors issuing imperial proclamations known as “rescripts” while away from Rome that carried the force of law.

This period of successful rule eventually broke down when the practice of choosing a competent follower ended – the emperor Marcus Aurelius, a brilliant leader and Stoic philosopher (161 – 180 CE) named his arrogant and foolish son Commodus (r. 177 – 192 CE) his co-emperor three years before Aurelius’s death. Storm clouds had already been gathering under Aurelius, who found himself obliged to lead military campaigns against incursions of Germanic tribes in the north despite his own lack of a military background (or, really, temperament). He had, however, been a scrupulously efficient and focused political leader. His decision to make Commodus his heir was due to a simple fact: Aurelius was the first of the Five Good Emperors to have a biological son who survived to adulthood. As emperor, Commodus indulged his taste for debauchery and ignored affairs of state, finally being assassinated after twelve years of incompetence.

One last dynasty emerged in the aftermath of Commodus’s death, that of the Severans who ruled from 192 – 235 CE. They faced growing threats on the Roman borders, as Germanic tribes staged repeated (and often at least temporarily successful) incursions to the north and a new Persian dynasty known as the Sasanians pressed against Roman territory to the east. The last Severan emperor, Severus Alexander, died in 235 CE, ushering in a terrible period of military defeat and instability considered in the next chapter.

Beyond The Empire

As noted above, by the year 117 CE under Trajan the Empire reached its greatest size. It encompassed most of England across to Germany and Romania, all of North Africa from present-day Morocco, and extended to the borders of the Persian Empire. Beyond these borders were “barbarians” of various kinds; as far as the Romans were concerned there were no civilized people outside of their borders except the Persians. Trajan’s successor, the emperor Hadrian, built

an enormous series of fortifications to consolidate power on the frontiers – these were eventually (by the third century CE) known as the *limes*, permanent garrisons and fortresses that were meant to serve as barriers to prevent “barbarian” incursions. Some of these survive to the present, including Hadrian’s Wall in northern England. While fleets patrolled the rivers and oceans, these garrisons controlled access to the empire.



The Empire at the height of its territorial expanse under Trajan in 117 CE.

As far as the Romans were concerned, there were only two things beyond those borders: to the north and northeast, endless tracts of inhospitable land and semi-human barbarians like the Germanic tribes, and to the east, the only other civilization Rome was prepared to recognize: the Persians, ruled first by the Parthians and then the Sasanians. For the rest of the Roman Imperial period, Rome and Persia periodically engaged in both raiding and full-scale warfare, with neither side proving capable of conclusively defeating the other.

Persia Under the Parthians

Parthian history is difficult to establish because almost no sources survive besides Roman and Greek accounts of battle *against* the Parthians. What is clear is that the Parthians deliberately built on the achievements of the earlier Achaemenid and Seleucid periods, adopting the title of king of kings, basing their empire (as of the 120s BCE) out of Ctesiphon, a city near Babylon in Mesopotamia, and ruling over a shifting confederation of both the settled peoples of Mesopotamia and Persia itself and of nomadic tribal confederations. Importantly, the Parthians were able to clinch control of major Silk Road trade routes, even receiving the first ever formal diplomatic contact with China in the West in the process, and thus had a solid economic foundation for their military and political control of the region.

Persia had long stood as the only adversary Rome was unable to defeat. In a stark contrast to Roman tactics, Persia relied on cavalry instead of infantry, including both heavy, armored lancers and highly mobile mounted bowmen.

Persian forces refused to engage in hand combat with Roman soldiers whenever possible and simply rained arrows on them from horseback instead (using compound bows capable of penetrating Roman armor). Probably the most notorious Roman defeat was that of the forces led by Crassus, Julius Caesar's ally in the First Triumvirate. In 53 BCE at a site known as Carrhae, the Persians slew 20,000 Roman troops, took 10,000 prisoners, and killed Crassus to boot. That battle led to a grudging admiration on the part of the Romans, who were forced to acknowledge that they had finally met their match.

The closest Rome came to defeating the Persians was under Trajan when he managed to conquer Armenia and parts of Mesopotamia, but after his death Rome swiftly abandoned those territories. Even as they fought, however, Persia and Rome still traded, and Rome also adopted various Persian technologies and military tactics (for example, Rome adopted irrigation techniques from Persia, and Persia adopted engineering techniques from Rome). Out of necessity, Rome learned to add heavy cavalry units to its legions by the fourth century CE.

Little else is known about Persia during the Parthian period. The Roman sources would have it that the power of the ruling dynasty was limited by both court intrigue and the frequency of invasions from the steppes (the usual problem for the settled dynasties of Mesopotamia and Persia going back to the very origins of civilization). Both war and trade came and went between Rome and Persia, with the Euphrates River existing as the usual boundary between the two empires and the nearby kingdom of Armenia as a buffer state dominated by one power and then the other over time. In 224 CE the last Parthian ruler was overthrown by Ardashir I, the leader of the Sasanian clan, and Persian history moved into a new phase under Sasanian rule (described in the next chapter).

Farther East and North

Far beyond Persia was the Chinese Empire, already thousands of years old. China and Rome never established formal diplomatic ties, although the leaders of both empires knew of one another. During the entire period of Roman Imperial power, only China could produce silk, which was highly coveted in Rome. Shipments of silk moved along the aptly-named Silk Road across Central Asia, directly linking the two most powerful empires in the world at the time (via, as mentioned above, Persia, which derived huge profits in the process).

In addition, a major navigational breakthrough occurred during the time of Augustus, when the Romans learned to navigate the Indian Ocean using the Monsoon winds to reach western India. There, they could trade for Chinese silk at much better prices. This journey was hugely risky, but if a Roman merchant could pull it off and return to Rome with a cargo hold full of silk, he would earn fully 100 times his investment as profit. Along with spices (especially pepper), the trade for silk eventually drained enormous amounts of gold from Rome, something that added up to a serious economic liability over the hundreds of years of exchange.

The most important, and threatening, border for Rome was to its north, on the eastern and northern banks of the Rhine and Danube rivers. The region the Romans called *Germania* was an enormous stretch of heavily forested land, which was cold, wet, and uninviting from the Roman perspective. The “Germans” were a hugely diverse group of tribes practicing feudal law, the system of law in which offenses were met with clan-based violent retribution or blood payments. For hundreds of years there were complex relationships between various tribes and the Roman empire in which the Romans both fought with and, increasingly, hired German tribes to serve as mercenaries. Eventually, some of the Germanic tribes were allowed to settle along the Roman borders in return for payments of tribute to Rome.

The two major rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, were the key dividing lines to the north of Rome, with Roman legions manning permanent fortifications there. As far as the Romans were concerned, even if they were able to militarily

they did not *want* to conquer German territory. The Romans tended to regard the Germans as being semi-human at best, incapable of understanding true civilization. Some Romans did admire their bravery and codes of honor – the same Tacitus who provides much of the information on the early emperors contrasted the supposed weakness and dissolution of his contemporary Romans with the rough virtue of the Germans. That being noted, most Romans believed that the Celts, conquered by Caesar centuries earlier, were able to learn and assimilate to Roman culture, but the Germans, supposedly, were not. Likewise, *Germania* was assumed to be too cold, too wet, and too infertile to support organized farming and settlement. Thus, the role of the *limes* was to hold the Germans back rather than to stage new wars of conquest. For about three hundred years, they did just that, until the borders started breaking down by the third century CE.

The Army and Assimilation

Rome had established control over its vast territory thanks to the strength of the citizen-soldiers of the Republic. As described in the last chapter, however, the republican military system declined after the Punic Wars as the number of free, economically independent Roman citizens capable of serving in the army diminished. By the first century, most Roman soldiers became career soldiers loyal to a specific general who promised tangible rewards rather than volunteers who served only in a given campaign and then returned home to their farms.

Perhaps the most important thing Augustus did besides establishing the principate itself was to reorganize the Roman legions. He created a standing professional army with regular pay and retirement benefits, permanently ending the reliance on the volunteer citizen – soldiers that had fought for Rome under the republic. Instead, during the empire, Legionaries served for twenty years and then were put on reserve for another five, although more than half died before reaching retirement age. The major benefits of service were a very large bonus paid on retirement (equivalent to 13 years of pay!) and land: military colonies spread across the empire ensured that a loyal soldier could expect to establish a prosperous family line if he lived that long.

Service in the army was grueling and intense. Roman soldiers were expected to be able to march over 20 miles in a standard day's march carrying a heavy pack. They were subject to brutal discipline, up to and including summary execution if they were judged to have been derelict in their duties – one of the worst was falling asleep on guard duty, punishable by being beaten to death by one's fellow soldiers. Roman soldiers were held to the highest standards of unit cohesion, and their combat drills meant they were constantly ready for battle.

Starting in the Augustan period, the essential division in the Roman military was the *legion*, a self-sufficient army unto itself that could be combined with other legions to form a full-scale invasion force but could also operate on its own. During the Augustan period, each legion consisted of 5,400 infantry and 120 cavalry, along with hundreds of specialists such as engineers, arrow-makers, and blacksmiths who allowed the legion to operate independently while traveling. The legions were subdivided into cohorts of 480 men, each of which was led by a *centurion*, veterans who had risen through the ranks to lead. The legions were designed to be flexible, adaptable, and “standardized”: each legion was comparable in its organization, down to the placement of the tents in the camps built at the end of every day while the legion was on the march.

In turn, each legion was led by a *legionary legate*, usually a powerful noble appointed by the imperial government or the emperor himself. These legates were often politicians rather than soldiers, meaning that the key figures in actual

battle were the centurions, each of whom had earned his position through exemplary service. Perhaps most important of all was the lead centurion, the First Spear, who dictated tactics on the field.



Wall carvings of a Roman legion in battle, with the characteristic large rectangular shields. A regular legionnaire would typically fight in formation using a short sword after throwing javelins while closing with the enemy.

The legions were made up of Roman citizens, but not all members of the Roman military were citizens. Instead, as numerous as the legions were *auxiliaries*: Roman subjects (e.g. Celts, North Africans, Syrians, etc.) who nevertheless served the empire. The auxiliaries were divided into cohorts of infantry and *alae* (“wings”) of cavalry. In comparison to the infantry-focused Roman legions, the auxiliaries tended to vary their arms – auxiliaries could be slingers and archers as well as foot soldiers and cavalry. They tended to serve as scouts and support for the legions as well as engaging in combat in their own right. As of 23 CE they numbered about 150,000 men, which was the same as the legions at the time. The emperor Claudius rewarded 25 years of service with citizenship; by the early second century, all auxiliaries gained citizenship on discharge.

A key legion that stood apart from the rest of the military was the *Prætorian Guard*, whose major job was

defending the emperor himself, followed in priority by the defense of Italy and the city of Rome. The Praetorian Guard started as nine cohorts of 480 men, but later each cohort was grown to 1,000 men. The terms of service in the Praetorian Guard were very attractive: 16 years instead of 25 and pay that was significantly higher (this was a necessity: emperors started with Claudius knew that they were vulnerable to the Praetorians and needed to keep them happy and loyal). Not surprisingly, Praetorians were recruited from veteran legionaries. They did not simply serve the emperor in the city of Rome, instead actively campaigning both when defending Roman territory from invasion (which became an increasing problem by the fourth century CE), and with the emperor while on campaign.

The army was important in integrating provincial subjects into Roman culture. A soldier recruited from the provinces had to learn Latin, at least well enough to take orders and respond to them. Auxiliaries served with men from all over the empire, not just their own home regions, and what each soldier had in common was service to Rome. Commanding officers were often from the Italian heartland, forming a direct link to the Roman center. Military families were a reality everywhere, with sons often becoming soldiers after their fathers. Thus, the experience of serving in the legions or the auxiliaries tended to promote a shared sense of Roman identity, even when soldiers were drawn from areas that had been conquered by Rome in the recent past.

In the provinces, there was a pattern that took place over a few generations. After being conquered by the Romans, there were often resistance movements and rebellions. Those were put down with overwhelming and brutal force, often worse than that of the initial invasion. Eventually, local elites were integrated in the governor's office and ambitious people made sure their sons learned Latin. Locals started joining the army and, if lucky, returned eventually with money and land to show for it. Roman amenities like aqueducts and baths were built and roads linked the province with the rest of the empire. In short, assimilation happened. A few generations after Roman conquest, many (local elites especially) in a given province would identify with Roman civilization. Regular people in the countryside, meanwhile, would at least be obliged to tolerate Roman rule even if they did not embrace it.

Roman Society

Rome itself was opulent during this period. The city of Rome boasted eleven aqueducts, enormous structures that brought fresh water into the city from miles away. The houses of the rich had indoor plumbing with drains that led to public sewers. There were enormous libraries and temples, along with numerous public sites for recreation, including public baths, race tracks, and the famous Colosseum, used primarily for displays of lethal gladiatorial combat.

The empire as a whole enjoyed levels of commercial and agricultural productivity not seen again until the seventeenth century CE. Specialized craftsmen made high-quality goods to be sold on an empire-wide market, with better-off citizens enjoying access to quality tools, dishware, linens, and so on, much of which had been manufactured hundreds of miles away. While the long-term economic pattern was that the wealthier parts of society tended to become even richer at the expense of the common people, there was still a substantial “middle class” that enjoyed a relatively high standard of living.

We should note that, while the Romans are not famous as scientists, they are famous as architects and engineers. The Romans used concrete extensively in building projects. They mastered the art of building arches and domes to hold up ceilings without interior supports. Using only gravity, they could transport water dozens of miles, not just in Rome but in other major cities across the Empire. Roman roads were so well built that some survive to the present, now used by cars rather than the horse-drawn carts they were originally built for.

Each city built by the Romans in their conquered territory was laid out according to careful plans, with streets built in grids and centered on a public forum with public buildings. One of the reasons that the Romans were so effective in assimilating conquered peoples into Roman society was that they built a great deal of infrastructure; being conquered by Rome seemed less like a burden when an aqueduct, public baths, and street system appeared within a generation of the Roman conquest (the relative cultural and religious tolerance of Roman culture was also key). All of these cities were linked by the 40,000 miles of roads that stretched across the empire. The primary purpose of these administrative capitals was extracting taxes and other wealth from the local areas and funneling them back to Rome, but they also served as genuine cultural centers. Likewise, even though the roads were often built with troop movement in mind, people everywhere could take advantage of them for trade.

Social Classes

That all being said, there were vast social distances that separated elites and commoners. Even in the city of Rome, most of the citizens lived in squalor, packed into apartment buildings many stories high, made out of flammable wood, looming over open sewers. The rich lived in a state of luxury that probably would not be equaled until the Renaissance, but the majority of Romans lived in squalid conditions.

Most people in the empire were, of course, poor farmers; only a minority of the imperial population lived in cities. Peasants sometimes joined the army, but most were simply poor folk struggling to get by. They were seasonal laborers, they rented from wealthy landowners, or they owned farms but were perpetually threatened by the predatory rich. Over the centuries, poor farmers found it more and more difficult to hold on to their land, both because they could not compete with the enormous, slave-tilled plantations of the rich and because of outright extortion. There are numerous accounts of rich landowners simply forcing small farmers off of land and seizing it; the peasants could not afford to battle the rich in court and the rich had few scruples about hiring thugs to terrify the peasants into submission. Once in a great while, a poorer Roman citizen could petition an emperor personally for redress and succeed, as could the occasional provincial to a governor, but the immense majority of the time the poor (citizen and non-citizen alike) were simply at the mercy of elite landowners.

One percent of the population of the empire were members of the aristocracy, those men who were allowed to participate as officials in the imperial government and their families. In turn, access to political power was explicitly linked to wealth, a system first introduced by Augustus himself. To serve in the imperial senate required an annual income of 1,000,000 sesterces (the basic coin of the empire). To serve on the governing council of a small city or town required an annual income of 100,000 sesterces. Meanwhile, a typical soldier earned about 1,200 a year, and poor farmers much less. Land ownership was by far the major determinant of wealth, and with the prevalence of slavery, economies of scale dictated that the more land a given family controlled, the more wealth they could generate.

The overall pattern in the Roman Imperial period is that the wealthy were highly successful in becoming richer from generation to generation, at the expense of the rest of Roman society: the wealth of elite landowners grew approximately eight times from 1 CE to 400 CE, with almost no new wealth coming into the Roman economy during that period. Thus, as a whole, social mobility was so limited as to be almost nonexistent (to cite a single example, a member of the equestrian class in the Empire might have about 17,000 times the annual income of a poor laborer). Roman elites kept taxes on their own property low, but the provinces were often ruthlessly exploited and overall tax levels were high. The immense majority of Roman citizens and subjects were born into the social class they would stay in for their entire lives regardless of their own intelligence and competence.

Still, while they might prey on poor farmers, elite Romans were well aware of the threat posed by destitute city-dwellers. Thus, one striking characteristic of the Imperial period was “bread and circus government.” Building on a precedent originally established by the Gracchi during the Republic, the imperial state distributed free grain (and, later, wine and olive oil) to the male citizens of the city of Rome. Eventually, other Roman cities adopted the practice as well. In addition, public games and theater performances were free, subsidized by the state or by elites showing off their wealth (the most popular were circuses: horse races around a track). Thus, a Roman citizen in one of the large cities could enjoy free bread – although it was not enough to sustain an entire family, necessitating at least some source of supplemental income – and free entertainment. This policy was both a cynical move on the part of the state to keep down urban unrest and a legal right of urban citizens. Free bread or not, the average life expectancy was 45 years for men and 34 for women, the latter because of the horrible conditions of bearing children.

Meanwhile, fully 40% of the population of Italy were slaves when Augustus took power. Not only were slaves captured in war, but children born to slave mothers were automatically slaves as well. Some slaves did domestic labor, but most were part of the massive labor force on huge plantations and in mines. The conditions of life for slaves were often atrocious, and strict oversight and use of violent discipline ensured that no slave revolt ever succeeded (despite the best efforts of leaders of revolts, like Spartacus in the first century BCE). Relatively large numbers of slaves did earn their freedom, and the “freedmen” as a class tended to be innovative commercial entrepreneurs, but many slaves had little hope of freedom. Slavery declined by about 200 CE because supplies started drying up and prices rose; without the constant expansion of the empire, there were far fewer slaves available. By that time, however, the legal and social conditions of farmers had degenerated to the point that they were essentially serfs (known as *coloni*): unfree rural laborers, barely better than slaves themselves.

Law

For the republican period and the first few hundred years of the Empire, Roman jurisprudence was split in the provinces. Provincial people were accountable to their own legal systems so long as they were loyal to Rome and paid their taxes on schedule. The most famous historical example of the overlapping legal systems of the Empire was the biblical trial of Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. Pilate tried to hand the case off to the local Jewish puppet king, Herod, who in turn refused it and handed Jesus back over to Pilate. In the end, Jesus was executed by the Roman government for inciting rebellion, using the traditional Roman punishment of crucifixion.

Roman citizens could always appeal to Roman law if they wanted to, even if they lived in a province far from Rome. There were many benefits, not least exemption from the local laws that non-citizens were obliged to follow, and wealthy citizens were exempt from the more horrible forms of punishment and execution as well (such as crucifixion). This changed dramatically in 212 CE when the emperor Caracalla extended citizenship to all free men and women (to make it easier to collect taxes). This was an important event because it extended Roman law to almost everyone in the empire.

Some of the concepts and practices of Roman law were to outlive the empire itself. Rome initiated the tradition of using precedent to shape legal decisions, as well as the idea that there is a spirit to laws that is sometimes more important than a literal interpretation. The Romans were the first to codify the idea that someone accused of a crime was innocent until proven guilty; this was a totally radical idea in the area of justice, which in the rest of the ancient world normally held the accused guilty unless guilt could be conclusively disproved.

Much of Roman law still seems grossly unfair from a contemporary perspective. In particular, laws came to

establish a formal divide between the rich and the poor, even in the case of citizens. The rich were protected from torture and painful execution, while the poor were subject to both. Slaves were held in such a subservient position by the law that the testimony of a slave was only allowed in court cases if it *had* been obtained through torture. And, over everything else, the decrees of the emperor were the fundamental basis of law itself; they could not be appealed or contested in the name of some kind of imagined higher authority or written constitution. The emperor was not just about the law, he *was* the law.

Conclusion

For the first two centuries of its existence, Rome was overwhelmingly powerful, and its political institutions were strong enough to survive even prolonged periods of incompetent rule. Trouble was afoot on Rome's borders, however, as barbarian groups became more populous and better-organized, and as the meritocratic system of the "Five Good Emperors" gave way to infighting, assassination, and civil war. At the same time, what began as a cult born in the Roman territory of Palestine was making significant inroads, especially in the eastern half of the Empire: Christianity.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Augustus Caesar](#) – Till Niermann

[Colosseum](#) – Andreas Ribbefjord

[Empire 117 CE](#) – Eleassar

[Roman Legion](#) – Ursus

CHAPTER 10: THE LATE EMPIRE AND CHRISTIANITY

Rome underwent half a century of crisis in the middle of the third century CE. Beset along its borders and hobbled by constant infighting, the empire was at real risk of collapse for decades. It did not collapse, however, and in fact enjoyed a resurgence of a sort that held the Roman state together until the end of the fifth century (the western half of the Empire “fell” in 476 CE).

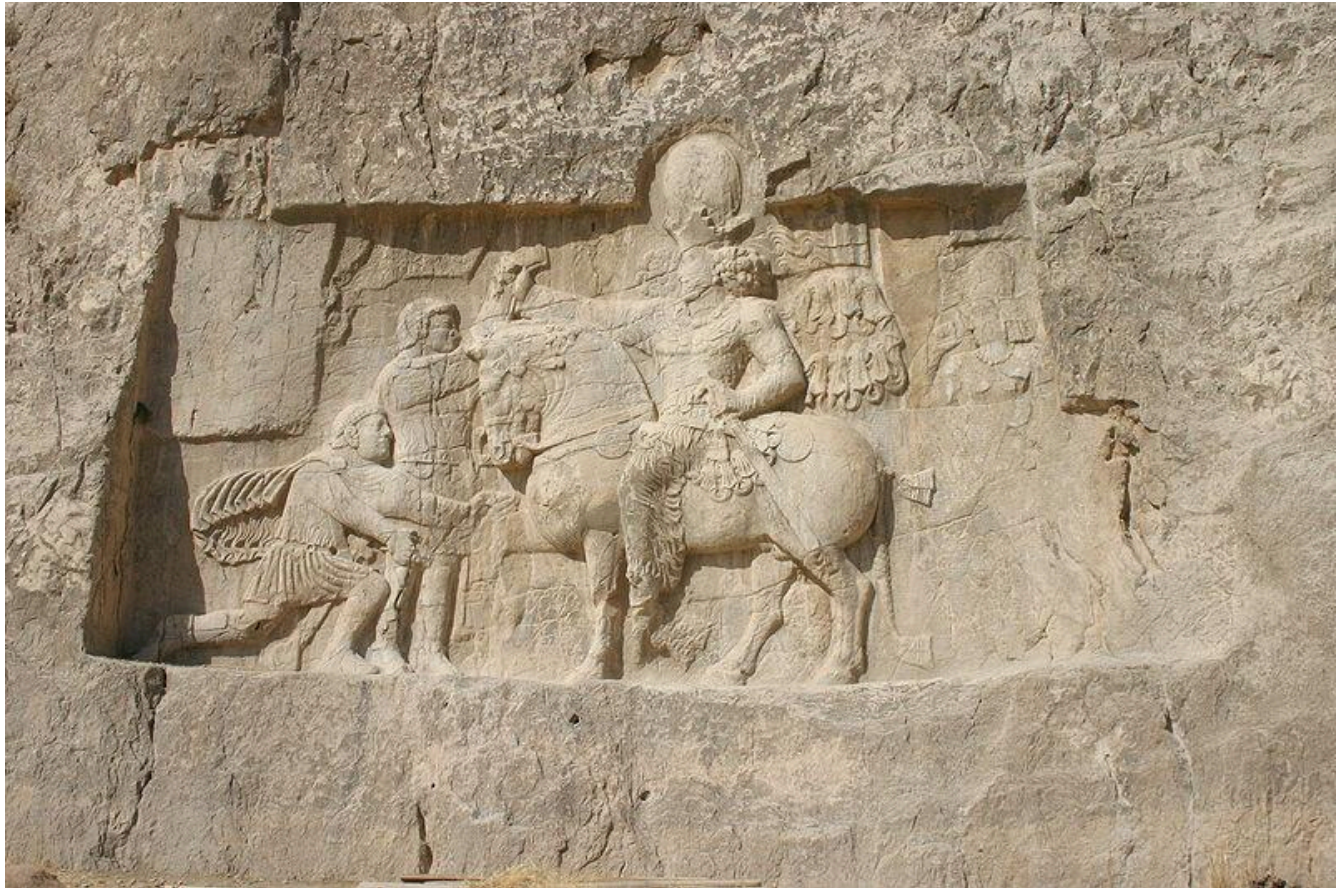
In fact, the period between the end of the five good emperors and the collapse of Rome was much more complex than one of simple decline and weakness, and even when the city of Rome could not defend itself, Roman civilization left an enormous, permanent impression on Western Civilization. Perhaps most importantly, what began as an obscure cult in Roman-ruled Judea eventually became one of the great world religions – Christianity – thanks to its success in spreading throughout the Roman Empire before the western Empire’s collapse.

Crisis and Recovery

Major crises affected the Empire from 235 to 284 CE. The basis of the crises was increasing pressure from foreign invaders on the Roman borders coupled with political instability within the Empire itself. The emperor Severus Alexander was murdered in 235 CE. All of the emperors to follow for the next fifty years were murdered or died in battle as well, save one; there were twenty-six emperors in those fifty years, and only one died of natural causes. Many emperors stayed on the throne for only a few months before they were killed. Not surprisingly, in this environment, most emperors were only concerned with either seizing the throne or staying alive once they had it, meaning they tended to neglect everything important to the stability of the Empire.

Rome’s internal political problems were somewhat of its own making – the Praetorian Guard auctioned off the throne, would-be emperors eagerly assassinated their rivals, and Roman elites largely retreated to their enormous estates to profit off of their serfs. Other factors, however, were external: Rome’s international environment grew much worse. In 220 BCE, a new clan – the Sasanians – seized control of Persia. The Sasanians were much more aggressive and well-organized than the earlier Parthian dynasty had been, and Rome was obliged to fight almost constant wars to contain the Persian threat. Simultaneously, the Germanic groups along Rome’s northern borders were growing larger and better-organized. Centuries of contact with Rome itself had improved agricultural techniques among the Germans, leading to population growth. Eventually, these larger, wealthier groups joined together into forces that posed serious threats to the Roman borders.

As the quality of Roman leadership declined and the threats grew worse, the results were predictable: Rome lost battles and territory. The emperor Valerian was captured by the Persian king Shapur I when he led a Roman army against Persia and, according to some accounts, was used as the Persian king’s personal footstool for climbing up onto his horse. Another emperor rebuilt walls around Rome itself in 270 CE because of the threat of Germanic invaders from the north, who had pushed all the way into northern Italy. Likewise, emperors, all being generals at this point, traveled constantly with their armies and made their courts wherever they had to while waging campaigns.



The defeat of the emperor Valerian, kneeling on the left, before the Persian king Shapur I, on horseback.

The problem was that the entire Roman imperial system hinged on the direct, personal decision-making of the emperor himself. The emperor was supposed to oversee all major building campaigns, state finances, and the worship of the Roman gods, not just military strategy. Thus, in an era when the speed a message could travel was limited by how fast a messenger could travel on horseback, the machinery of the Roman government ground to a halt whenever the latest emperor was weeks or even months away from Rome. Needless to say, the problem was exacerbated when the Empire was torn between rival claimants to the throne – for a few years toward the end of the crisis period the empire proper was split into three competing “empires” under rival imperial pretenders.



The three rival “Roman Empires” as of 271 CE.

Sasanian Persia

Persia was not, of course, simply the most powerful and well organized threat to the Roman Empire. It was an ancient and sophisticated civilization of its own, by the Sasanian period already nearly eight centuries old under the Achaemenids, Seleucids, and Parthians in turn. Drawing on an ancient term for the Persian people, the Sasanians identified their empire as *Iranshahr*, land of the Iranians, and from this point on it is appropriate to refer to Persia as Iran (this textbook will continue to use the term “Persia” for clarity’s sake, however). Under Sasanian rule, Persia reached the height of its organization, power, and sophistication during the ancient period.

While the Sasanian kings were obliged to govern both settled peoples and nomads, as had all earlier Persian dynasties, they were more successful in creating a stable *system* of rule, not just relying on their own charismatic authority. For the first time in its history, Zoroastrianism became the official state religion and its holy books were codified, in contrast to the earlier oral traditions of the religion. The state made major efforts to increase both agricultural productivity and the amount of land under cultivation, especially in Mesopotamia. The long-distance trade routes that had grown to such importance under Parthian rule continued to expand in scope and volume of trade, as did crafts and manufacturing in Sasanian territory (Sasanian silk textiles were of such high quality that they were even exported to China itself). The Sasanian rulers drew a direct connection between stability, centralization, and prosperity at precisely the same time that the chaos in Rome undermined the Roman commercial economy.

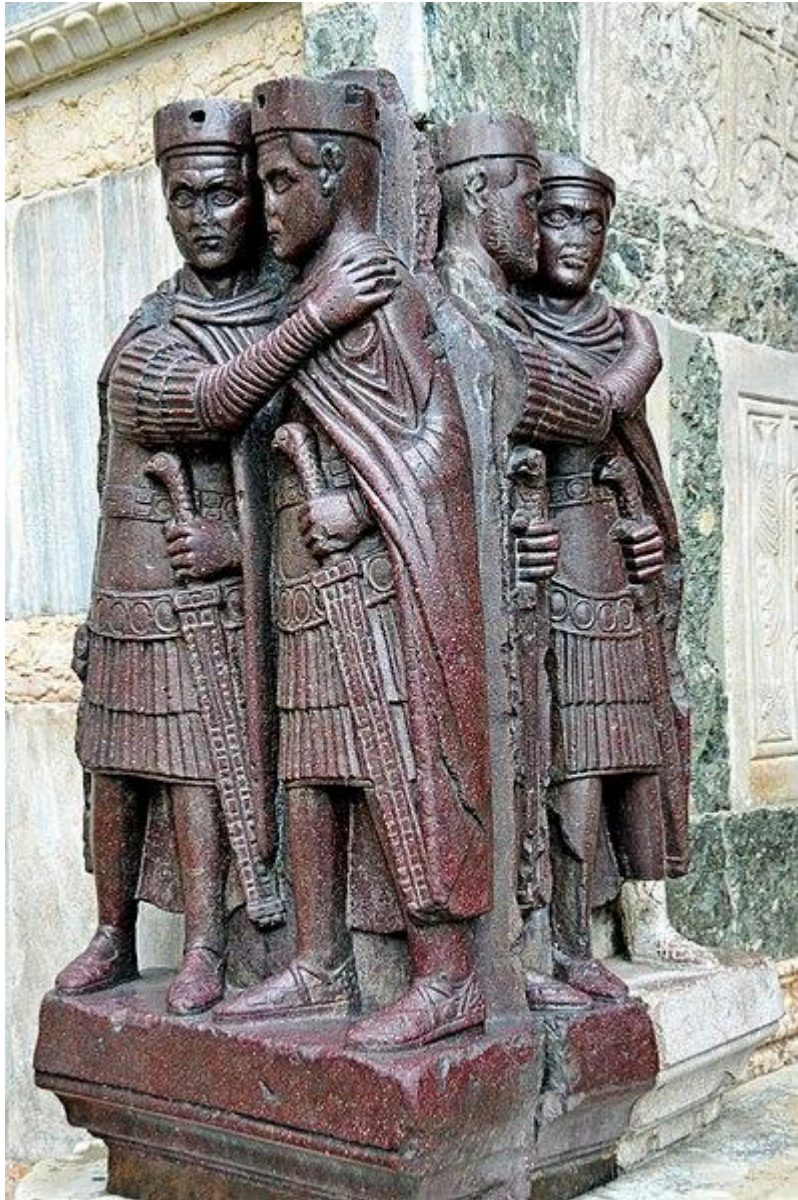
Sasanian centralization built on the (much earlier) Achaemenid tradition. All rulers were members of the Sasanian family line, and governors of the important provinces were also related to the extended family. Authority was understood to emanate from the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda himself, and while a degree of regional autonomy was

necessitated by the sheer size and diversity of the empire, regional rulers knew themselves to be inferior to the Sasanian Great King. A powerful institutional relationship between the rulers and the *magi* (Zoroastrian priesthood) emerged in which Sasanian rule was justified by the direct, unequivocal support of the religious power structure. And, of course, the religious power structure received the approval and support of the royal state in the process, up to and including the only campaigns of religious persecution against non-Zoroastrians in Persian history.

One symptom of the success of the Sasanian state is its longevity in the face of nearly constant challenges: it lasted from the Sasanian seizure of power in 220 CE until it was conquered during the Arab invasions in 651 CE. Rome and Persia did not war constantly, but when they did Persia was obligated to devote enormous resources to containing Roman rapacity (the buffer state of Armenia changed hands a bewildering number of times in the process). Invaders from the Central Asian steppes and the mountains of Afghanistan proved an ongoing security threat to the empire as well, as did the Arab tribes to the southwest well before they unified under the Islamic prophet Muhammad. Nevertheless, and in spite of some significant Roman victories, the Sasanian state remained stable and the economy prosperous for centuries. Likewise, the Sasanian identification of themselves, Iran, and the legacy of previous Persian dynasties fused together the essential ingredients of Persian historical identity. Subsequent dynasties would look back to the Sasanians as the model to emulate, just as the Sasanians had emulated the Achaemenids.

Diocletian

Turning back to Rome, the period of crisis that had made the eastern empire so vulnerable to Persian invasion ended with the ascension of the emperor Diocletian in 284 CE. Diocletian not only managed to survive for twenty years after taking the throne, he also reorganized the empire and pulled it back from the brink. Recognizing that the sheer size of the empire was a detriment to its effective governance, Diocletian decided to share power with a co-emperor: Diocletian ruled the eastern half of the empire and his co-emperor Maximian ruled the west. Then, about ten years after he took the throne, Diocletian decided to further divide responsibility and each emperor took on junior emperor. This created the *Tetrarchy*, the rule of four. Diocletian further subdivided the empire, so that for the rest of his reign, the four co-emperors (two “augusti” and two “caesars”) worked together to administer the entire territory.



A Roman depiction of the tetrarchy dating from the period of Diocletian's reign.

Diocletian's hope was that the tetrarchy would end the cycle of assassinations. The junior emperors were the senior emperors' respective heirs, destined to assume full power when their seniors stepped down. When that happened, each new senior emperor would then select new juniors. The overall effect was, if it worked, a neat succession of power instead of the constant bloodshed and uncertainty that had haunted Roman politics for half a century; this system was quite similar to the merit-based selection process of emperors that had held during the rule of the Five Good Emperors.

Diocletian also divided the Empire into smaller provinces so that governors had an easier time with administration. These provinces were grouped into larger units called *dioceses* overseen by an official called a "vicar." When Christianity moved from being an illegal cult to the official religion of the empire (see below), the division of imperial territory into dioceses, overseen by vicars, would be adopted by the Catholic Church. That practice persists all the way to the present in the administration of the Church.

To deal with the threat of both Persia and the Germanic tribes, Diocletian reorganized the Roman army and recruited more soldiers, making it larger than it ever had been. He built new roads for military use to be able to move

armies along the borders more efficiently. Borrowing from the Persian practice, he emphasized the use of heavy cavalry to respond quickly to threats. Finally, even though the army itself was now larger, he made individual legions smaller, so that each legion's commander no longer had enough power to take over with a single attack on the current emperor (that worked well enough for Diocletian himself, but it made little difference in the long run).

State finances were in shambles when Diocletian came to power. To try to deal with the problem, Diocletian reformed the tax system and instituted an official census for taxation purposes. He also tried to freeze wages and prices by decree, something that did not work since it created a black market for both goods and labor. Peasants bore the brunt of Diocletian's reforms; most independent farmers that still existed were turned into serfs (*coloni*), one step above slaves. State tax collectors were so feared that many peasants willingly gave their land to wealthy landowners who promised to protect them from the tax agents.

Finally, Diocletian tried to reinstate religious orthodoxy. He believed that too many people had turned away from worship of the Roman gods, which had in turn brought about the long period of crisis preceding his takeover. Thus, he went after sects that he thought threatened stability, including Christianity. He banned Christian worship and executed several thousand Christians who refused to renounce their beliefs in an attempt to wipe out the cult once and for all. Needless to say, this was a spectacular failure.

Diocletian retired in 305 CE due to failing health, as did (reluctantly) his co-emperor in the west. The idea behind the Tetrarchy was that the junior emperors would then become the senior emperors and recruit new juniors – this system worked exactly once, as the junior emperors under Diocletian and Maximian took power. Instead of a smooth transition inaugurating a stable new beginning, however, the Empire was yet again plunged into civil war. A general (at the time stationed in Britain) named Constantine, son of the Tetrarch Constantius, launched a military campaign to reunite Rome under his sole rule. By 312 CE he had succeeded, claiming total control and appointing no co-emperor.

Constantine

Constantine did away with the system of co-emperors (although it would re-emerge after his death), but otherwise he left things as they had been under Diocletian's reforms. The eastern and western halves of the Empire still had separate administrations and he kept up the size and organization of the army. He also took a decisive step toward stabilizing the economy by issuing new currency based on a fixed gold standard. The new coin, the *solidus*, was to be the standard international currency of the western world for 800 years.

Constantine's greatest historical impact, however, was in the realm of religion. He was the first Christian emperor, something that had an enormous effect on the history of Europe and, ultimately, the world. Before his climactic battle in 312 CE to defeat his last rival to the imperial throne, Constantine had a vision that he claimed was sent by the Christian God, promising him victory if he converted to Christianity. There are plenty of theories about a more cynical explanation for his conversion (most revolving around the fact that Constantine went on to plunder the temples of the old Roman gods), but regardless of the fact that he used his conversion to help himself to the wealth of "pagan" temples, he actively supported Christian institutions and empowered Christian officials. Ultimately, his sponsorship of Christianity saw it expand dramatically in his lifetime.

In 324 CE, Constantine founded a new capital city for the entire empire at the site of the ancient Greek town of Byzantium, at the intersection of Europe and Anatolia (he renamed it "Constantine's City," Constantinople, which is today Istanbul). It was at the juncture of the eastern and western halves of the Empire, with all trade routes between Asia and Europe passing through its area of influence. It became the heart of wealth and power in the Empire and a Christian

“new beginning” for Roman civilization itself. The city grew to become one of the great cities of late antiquity and the Middle Ages, fed by grain from Egypt and bringing in enormous wealth through trade. Subsequent emperors also built up massive fortifications, walls so strong that it took 1,000 years for an enemy to be able to breach them (namely the Ottoman Turks, who finally conquered the city in 1453 CE).

Religion: Roman Faiths and the birth of Christianity

Rome had always been a hotbed of religious diversity. While the official Roman gods were venerated across the Empire, Roman elites had no objections to the worship of other deities, and indeed many Romans (elites and commoners alike) eagerly embraced foreign faiths. Originating in the Hellenistic kingdoms, many Romans were attracted to *mystery religions*, cults that promised spiritual salvation to their members. These mystery religions shared a belief that the universe was full of magical charms that could lead to spiritual salvation or eternal life itself. In many ways, they were more like cults of magic than traditional religious faiths. A worshiper could join multiple mystery religions, intoning chants and prayers and participating in rituals in hopes of securing good fortune and wealth in life and the possibility of spiritual immortality after death.

Even Rome’s perennial adversary Persia supplied sources of spiritual inspiration to Rome. Mithras, the Zoroastrian god of war, the sun, and rebirth became immensely popular among Romans. Mithras believed that Mithras had been a soldier, slain by his enemies, who then rose to enjoy eternal life. Roman soldiers campaigning in Persia brought Mithraism back to Rome since Mithras’s identity as a former soldier made his worship all the more appealing to members of the Roman military. The worship of Mithras was so popular that, some historians have noted, it is easy to imagine the Roman Empire becoming Mithran instead of Christian if Constantine had not converted to the latter faith.



A relief from an altar of Mithras dating from the second or third century CE. In all of the discovered Mithraic temples, Mithras is depicted slaying a bull, which somehow (the details of the myth are long lost) helped to create the world.

In some cases, non-Roman gods even came to supplant Roman ones; one of the Severan emperors embraced the worship of the Syrian sun god Sol Invictus (meaning “the unconquered sun”) and had a temple built in Rome to honor the god alongside the traditional Roman deities. The notion of being as powerful and unstoppable as the sun appealed to future emperors, so subsequent emperors tended to venerate Sol Invictus along with the Roman Jupiter until the triumph of Christianity. In other cases, the worship of non-Roman gods was so popular that it simply could not be suppressed in the few cases in which Roman leaders saw a need to. The Egyptian goddess Isis, who was at the heart of the largest mystery cult in the entire Mediterranean region, was so popular among both women and men that repeated attempts to purge her cult from Rome for being socially disruptive utterly failed.

The Jews and Jesus

The Roman territory of Palestine was a thorn in Rome's side thanks to the unshakable opposition of the Jews. Palestine suffered from heavy taxation and deeply-felt resentment toward the Romans. One key point of contention was that the Jews refused to pay lip service to the divinity of the emperors. The Romans insisted that their subjects participate in symbolic rituals acknowledging the primacy of the emperors, but since the Jews were strict monotheists, they would not do so.

In 66 CE there was a huge uprising against Rome. It took four years for imperial forces to crush the uprising, resulting in the greatest disaster in ancient Jewish history: the permanent destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem in 70 CE. In the aftermath, the Romans enslaved or deported much of the Jewish population, which contributed to the phenomenon of the Jewish *diaspora*, the people without a homeland united only by the Hebrew Bible, the teaching of the rabbis, and Jewish cultural traditions. Another uprising decades later (between 132 – 136 CE) resulted in the almost complete dispersal of the Jews, to the point that the Jewish homeland was truly lost to them until the foundation of the modern state of Israel in 1948 CE.

In the first century CE, Jewish society, especially its leadership, was divided between rival groups. Some powerful priests, the Sadducees, claimed that all Jews should follow the 10 Commandments, but only the priests of the Temple needed to follow the 613 laws and injunctions laid down by Moses. They were opposed by the Pharisees, who insisted that all Jews had to abide by all of the laws of Moses, and they also preached that a messiah – a savior – would soon come to bring about a day of judgment before Yahweh and bring about the fulfillment of the Biblical Covenant. In the deserts outside of the major cities, a group called the Essenes emphasized a life of asceticism and mysticism, while across Palestine anti-Roman revolutionaries known as the Zealots advocated for armed revolt against the Roman occupier.

The Jewish uprising that occurred against the Romans in 66 CE happened a generation after the death of another Jewish revolutionary of sorts: Jesus of Nazareth. The major source of information on the life of Jesus are the four Gospels, accounts of his life and teachings composed after his death by three of his apostles (his closest followers and students), Matthew, Mark, and John, and another early Christian leader, Luke. The Gospels were transmitted orally for decades before being recorded in their definitive versions; most scholars now date the written gospels to approximately 90 CE (about sixty years after the death of Jesus). While the specific language of the Gospels is, of course, different, and some of the events described are also described differently, the Gospels agree on most of the major aspects of the life of Jesus.

According to the Gospels, Jesus was the son of the miraculous union of the Holy Spirit, one of the aspects of the Jewish God Yahweh, and a virgin named Mary. Jesus showed an aptitude for theological and spiritual understanding at a young age, debating Jewish doctrine with learned Jewish priests when he was still a boy. At the age of thirty, having earned his living as a carpenter up to that point, Jesus began to preach a message of salvation that revolved around the concept that mankind as a whole could be saved if it sought forgiveness from God for its sins. He traveled and delivered his teachings in the Roman province of Palestine and the nearby puppet kingdoms dominated by the Romans for three years, but was then arrested by the Roman authorities for inciting rebellion. In the end, Jesus was executed in the customary Roman fashion of crucifixion at the age of 33.

According to the Gospels, Jesus returned to life, with an angel rolling the boulder back from the entrance to the tomb in which his body had been laid to rest. He renewed his call for devotion to God and the offer of salvation for those who sought forgiveness, then passed into the divine presence. Jesus's followers, led by the twelve apostles, began to teach

his lessons to others, and the new religion of Christianity was born. His followers began to refer to Jesus as “the Christ,” meaning “the anointed one” in Greek, a reference to the idea that Jesus was anointed to provide salvation for humanity.

Early Christianity

At the beginning of the Christian faith, there was no single set of texts or beliefs that united Christians. The four major Gospels do not agree on everything, because they were written by different people from memory (decades after the apostles themselves were alive). It was St. Paul, a Jewish leader who underwent a profound conversion experience and became the foremost Christian evangelist, who popularized the notion that the death of Jesus on the cross was part of a divine plan that canceled out human sin. For hundreds of years, Christians debated and argued about what Christ’s message had “really” been because many of Jesus’s teachings were, and are, open to interpretation. Early Christians were divided on very significant issues, including:

What God did Jesus represent? One cult believed that the God of Christ was not the Jewish God, who had been vengeful and warlike. According to this sect, Christ’s God was a more powerful and loving deity come to save the world from Yahweh.

Was Jesus the messiah? In Jewish doctrine, the messiah was to be a figure who liberated the Jews from oppression and made good on the Covenant between the Jews and God, delivering the Promised Land for all eternity. Many Jews had hoped that Jesus would be a revolutionary against Roman rule and, since Judea remained in Roman hands after his death, they did not believe that Jesus had been the messiah. Early Christians came to insist, following Paul, that Jesus had indeed been the messiah, but that the “liberation” he offered was spiritual in nature, rather than having to do with prosaic politics. In other words, the potential to save one’s soul from damnation superseded the old Covenant.

Was Jesus human, or was he instead somehow God Himself? He lived like a normal man, but according to the gospels he had also performed miracles, and he claimed to be the son of God. Likewise, while Jesus lived an exemplary life, he also displayed traits like anger and doubt (the latter most famously on the cross when he asked God why He had “forsaken” Jesus), traits that did not seem those of a “perfect” being. This debate would go on for centuries, with equally pious groups of Christians coming to completely different conclusions about Christ’s divine and human natures.

Likewise, early Christians were torn as to whether everyone could be a Christian, or instead, if membership was limited to the Jews. If Jesus was indeed the specifically Jewish messiah, after all, it did not make sense for a Roman or a Persian or a Celt to be able to convert. In the end, thanks largely to the influence of St. Paul again, most Christians came to believe that the salvation offered by Christ was potentially universal, and that not just Jews could become Christians as a result.

Under the influence of the mystery religions noted above, many early Christians were *Gnostics*, meaning “those who know” in Greek. The Gnostics believed that Jesus had been a secret-teller, almost a magician, who provided clues in his life and teachings about how to achieve union with God. This had more to do with magic than with a recognizable set of religious rituals or customs – for example, many Gnostics believed that it was possible to deduce a series of incantations from Christ’s teachings that included hundreds of secret “names of God.” If a Gnostic was to properly chant all of the names of God, he would not only achieve salvation but might enjoy power on earth, as well. The Gnostics had no interest in converting people to their version of Christianity; it was a secret they wanted to keep for themselves.

Still, despite the bewildering diversity of beliefs among early Christians, there were common themes, most importantly the emphasis Jesus Himself had placed on the spiritual needs of the common people, even social outcasts. The most radical aspect of Christianity was its universalism. From Judaism, it inherited the idea that all human beings are

spiritually equal. Once the debate about whether non-Jews could become Christians was resolved, it was also potentially open to anyone who heard Christianity's teachings and doctrine. Early Christians recognized no social distinctions, which was fundamentally at odds with the entire Roman system, reliant as it was on formal legal separations between social classes and a stark system of social hierarchy. Likewise, one unequivocal requirement placed on Christians was to love their neighbors, meaning in practice showing kindness and compassion to others regardless of their social rank. Few concepts could have been more alien to Roman sensibilities.

Christianity thus at least potentially threatened the hierarchical nature of Roman society. Likewise, it inherited from Judaism a strict monotheism that refused to accept the worship of the Roman emperors. What made it even more threatening than Judaism, however, was that Christianity actively sought out new converts (i.e. Christianity was inherently evangelical, in stark contrast to Judaism which did not seek new members). Roman authorities were thus already very much inclined to be suspicious of the Christians as potential rabble-rousers. In 68 CE, Nero blamed the Christians for the huge fire that consumed much of the city of Rome, and hundreds of Christians were rounded up and slaughtered in the arena. The persecution of Christians became a potent symbol for Christianity as a whole. Over a thousand years later, when Christianity was firmly entrenched as the religion of Europe, the trope of martyrdom was still used to explain righteous suffering.

Early Christian Organization

Before Constantine's conversion, Christianity expanded through missionary work, which succeeded in founding congregations across the Empire but did not seriously disrupt polytheism or the Empire's religious diversity. Imperial sponsorship changed that because it linked secular power to Christian identity. Following Constantine's conversion, being a Christian became a way to get ahead in the Roman power structure, and over time it became a liability to remain a polytheist. Thus, whereas early Christianity had been a religion of the common people, Roman elites flocked to convert after Constantine did so in order to stay in the emperor's good graces.

Early Christians had already developed a distinct hierarchy of worshipers, a divide between priests and worshipers. Bishops were the head of each city's congregation, and they supervised a staff of priests and deacons who interacted with everyday worshipers and led services. The bishops of main cities, usually the imperial capitals of their respective provinces, came to be called an archbishop. Each bishop oversaw activity in the diocese, again following the imperial structure, in instructing people in Christian doctrine and in building charity networks. One important effect was that the church actively supported charities for the poor and hungry, a practice which won over new converts. This was one of the notable moments in history when a religion linked together a message of compassion for the needy and real, practical efforts to *help* the needy. In another strong contrast with Roman practice, Christianity saw disenfranchised groups like women and the poor (not to mention poor women) play major roles in the church's organization, especially before "official" Christianity came into being under Constantine.

Almost immediately after Constantine became a Christian, bishops saw their secular power increase dramatically. He allowed bishops to serve as official judges, giving Christians the ability to request a bishop instead of a non-Christian judge in trial. Bishops also moved in administrative circles, representing not just the church but their cities in actions and requests before governors and assemblies. In short, bishops suddenly assumed power on par with that of the traditional Roman nobility, directly linking power within the Christian church hierarchy to power within the Roman political system.

The most important bishop was the archbishop of Rome, who for the first few centuries of Christianity was

just one among several major church leaders. Originally, the archbishops of cities like Alexandria and Damascus were of comparable importance to the Roman archbishop, but over time Roman archbishops tried to assert authority over the entire church hierarchy in the west. Their authority, however, was not recognized in much of the eastern part of the Empire, and it should be emphasized that it took more than six *centuries* after Constantine for the Roman archbishop's authority to receive acceptance even in the west. Eventually, however, that authority was at least nominally in place, and the Roman archbishop came to be known as the "pope," meaning simply "father," of the church.

The pope's role as leader of the church emerged for a few reasons. First and foremost, the symbolic power of the city of Rome itself gave added weight to the Roman archbishop's authority. Second, there was a doctrinal tie to the Apostle Peter, who was supposed to have been given the symbolic keys to heaven directly from Christ, which were in turn passed on to his successor in Rome (the archbishop of Rome) before being crucified. Roman archbishops could thus argue that the Christian church itself was centered in Rome, and that they inherited the spiritual keys to heaven upon taking office – this concept was known as the "Petrine Succession." By the mid-fifth century CE, the popes were claiming to have total authority over all other bishops, and at least some of those bishops (in Western Europe, at any rate) did look to Rome for guidance. In later centuries, the mere fact that the early popes had claimed that authority, and certain bishops had acknowledged it, was cited as "proof" that the Roman papacy had always been the supreme doctrinal power in the Church as a whole.

Christianity's Relationship with Non-Christian Religions

All across the Empire, massive church buildings were erected by emperors. Right from the beginning of "official" Christianity, Constantine financed construction of huge churches, including the Basilica of St. Peter in what is today the Vatican (at the time it was an obscure graveyard in Rome). The traditional Roman public buildings, including forums, theaters, bathhouses and so on, were often neglected in favor of churches, and many temples to Roman gods and other public buildings were repurposed as churches.

Once it enjoyed the support of the Roman elite, the Christian church began incorporating non-Christian holidays into its own liturgical calendar. December 25 had been the major festival of the sun god Sol Invictus, and early Christians embraced the overlap between that celebration and Christmas, noting that Christ was like the sun as a source of spiritual life. Other Christian holidays like Easter coincided with various fertility festivals that took place in early spring, around the time of the spring equinox. The tradition of saint's days, holidays celebrated in veneration of specific saints, often overlapped with various non-Christian celebrations. Most church leaders saw no theological problem with this practice, arguing that the ultimate goal was the salvation of souls through conversion, so it made perfect sense to use existing holy days and rituals in order to ease the transition for new converts.

That being noted, the incorporation of non-Christian celebrations into the liturgical calendar did not imply that Christians were willing to accept polytheism. Unlike most ancient faiths, Christians could not tolerate the worship of other gods, which they regarded as nothing more than nonexistent delusions that endangered souls. They used the term "pagan," coming from the Latin *paganus*, which means "country bumpkin" or "redneck," to describe all worshipers of all other gods, even gods that had been worshiped for thousands of years at that point. Christians thus used scorn and contempt to vilify worshipers of other gods – "pagan" indicated that the non-Christian was both ignorant and foolish, even if he or she was a member of the Roman elite.

It took about a century for the believers in the old Roman gods, especially the conservative aristocracy of Rome, to give up the fight. As money shifted toward building Christian churches and away from temples, so did Christians

sometimes lead attacks to desecrate the sites of pagan worship. Riots occasionally broke out as Christian mobs attacked worshipers of other gods, all with the tacit support of the emperors. In 380 CE the Empire was officially declared to be Christian by the emperor Theodosius I and all people of importance had to be, at least nominally, Christians. There was no sustained resistance to Christianity simply because “polytheism” or “paganism” was never a unified system, and it was impossible for people who worshiped a whole range of gods to come together “against” Christianity, especially when it was the official religion of the Empire itself.

A much more difficult battle, one that in some ways was never really won, had to do with “pagan” practices. Everyone in the ancient world, Christians among them, believed in the existence of what is now thought of as “magic” and “spirits.” Christian leaders came to believe that, in general, magic was dangerous, generated by the meddling of the devil, and that the spirits found in nature were almost certainly demons in disguise. There was very little they could do, however, to overturn the entire worldview of their followers, considering that even Christian leaders themselves very much believed that spirits and magic were present in the world, demonic or not. Thus, pagan practices like blessing someone after they sneezed (to keep out an invading spirit or demon), throwing salt over one’s shoulder to ward off the devil, and employing all manner of charms to increase luck were to survive to the present.

Orthodoxy and Heresy

Christianity united self-understood “Western Civilization” just as Roman culture had a few centuries earlier. At the same time, because of the peculiarities of Christian belief, it was also a potentially divisive force. Christians spoke a host of different languages and lived across the entire expanse of the Empire. As noted above, there were serious debates around who or what Jesus was. For centuries, there could be no “orthodoxy,” meaning “correct belief,” because there was no authority within the church (very much including the popes) who could enforce a certain set of beliefs over rival interpretations.

The beginning of orthodoxy was in the second and third centuries, when a group of theologians argued that there were three personas or states of the divine being, referred to as the Holy Trinity. In this view, God could exist simultaneously as three beings: God the Father, the being that spoke in the Old Testament, God the Son, Jesus himself, and God the Holy Spirit, the presence of God throughout the universe. This concept did not quell controversy at all, though, because it created a distinct stance that people could disagree with – rival groups of Christians came to refer to their enemies as “heretics,” from the word “heresy,” meaning simply “choice.”

In the late third century, an Egyptian Christian priest named Arius created a firestorm of controversy when he made a simple logical argument: God the father had created Jesus, so it did not make any sense for Jesus to be the same thing as God. Furthermore, it was impossible to be both human and perfect; since Jesus was human, he was imperfect and could not therefore be God, who was perfect. This belief came to be known as “Arianism” (note that the word has nothing whatsoever to do with the misguided belief in some kind of ancient Germanic race – the “Aryans” – so important to Nazi ideology almost two thousand years later). Arianism quickly took hold among many people, most importantly among the Germanic tribes of the north, where Arian Christian missionaries made major inroads. Thus, Arianism quickly became the largest and most persistent heresy in the early Christian church.

In 325 CE, only a little over a decade after he had converted to Christianity, Constantine assembled a council of church leaders, the Council of Nicaea, to lay Arianism to rest. One of the results was the Nicene Creed (now usually referred to as the Apostles’ Creed), to this day one of the central elements of Catholic Mass. In a single passage short enough to commit to memory, the Creed declared belief in Christ’s identity as part of God (“consubstantial to the

Father” in its present English translation), Christ’s status as the son of God and the Virgin Mary, Christ’s resurrection, and the promise of Christ’s return at the end of the world. There was now the first “party line” in the early history of Christianity: a specific set of beliefs backed by institutional authority.

While united in belief, Christians were divided by language, since the western Empire still spoke Latin and the eastern Empire Greek. In 410 the monk Jerome produced a version of the Christian Bible in Latin, the Vulgate, which was to be the main edition in Europe until the sixteenth century. Surprising from a contemporary perspective, however, is that it was not until 1442 (during the Renaissance) that the definitive and in a sense “final” version of the Bible was established by the Western Church when it defined exactly which books of the Old Testament were to be included and which were not.

Meanwhile, in the east, Greek was not only the language of daily life for many, it was the official language of state in the Empire and the language of the church. The books of the New Testament, starting with the Gospels, were written in Greek in the first place, and the Greek intellectual legacy was still very strong. There was an equally strong Jewish intellectual legacy that provided accurate translations from Hebrew and Aramaic to Greek, providing Greek-speaking Christians with access to a reliable version of the Old Testament.

While it certainly clarified the beliefs of the most powerful branch of the institutional church, as the Council of Nicaea defined the official orthodoxy, it guaranteed that there would always be those who rejected that orthodoxy in the name of a different theological interpretation. Likewise, the practical issues of lingual and cultural differences undermined the universalism (“Catholicism”) of the Christian Church. Those differences and the diversity of belief would only grow over time.

Monasticism and Christian Culture

Near the end of the third century, a new Christian movement emerged that was to have major ramifications for the history of the Christian world: monasticism. Originally, monasticism was tied to asceticism, meaning self-denial, following the example of an Egyptian holy man named Antony. In about 280, Antony sold his goods and retreated to the desert to contemplate the divine, eschewing all worldly goods in imitation of the poverty of Christ. He would have remained in obscurity except for a book about him written by the bishop Athanasius, *The Life of Antony*, that celebrated Antony’s rejection of the material world and embrace of divine contemplation. According to Athanasius, normal life was full of temptation, greed, and sin, and that the holiest life was thus one that rejected it completely in favor of prayer and meditation away from human company. Thousands of people followed Antony’s example, retreating to the wilderness. These early monks were called Anchorites: hermits who lived in deserts, forests, or mountains away from the temptations of a normal social existence (although they had to live close enough to civilization for the donations of food that kept them alive).

One particularly extreme sect of early monks were the *Stylites*, from the Greek word *stylos*, meaning “column.” The founder of the group, St. Simeon the Stylite, climbed up a pillar in Syria and spent the next 30 years living on top of it. He was so famous for his holiness and endurance in the face of the obvious physical toll of living on top of a pillar that he attracted followers from all over the Roman world who came to listen to him preach. Soon, many others sought out columns in imitation of Simeon.



A depiction of St. Simeon from the sixth century CE. The snake symbolizes the temptation to abandon his holy life, presumably by getting down off of the pillar.

Ultimately, pillar-sitting did not become the predominant model of Christian life. Instead, groups of ascetics came together in communities called monasteries. Originally, these early monks spent almost all of their time in prayer, but over time most monastic communities came to embrace useful work as well as prayer and meditation. The most important development in the development of monasticism was the work of Benedict, an Italian bishop, who wrote a book known as the Rule in about 529 that laid out how monks should live. The Rule dictated a strict schedule for daily life that revolved around prayer, study, and useful work for the monastery itself (tending crops and animals, performing labor around the monastery, and so on). Going forward, many monasteries became economic powerhouses, owning large tracts of land and selling their products at a healthy profit.

More important than their economic productivity, at least from the perspective of the history of ideas, is that monasteries became the major centers of learning, especially in Western Europe after the collapse of the western Roman Empire. One of the tasks undertaken by monks was the painstaking hand-copying of books, almost all of which had to do

with Christian theology (e.g. the Bible itself, commentaries from important Christian leaders, etc.), but some of which were classical Greek or Roman writings that would have otherwise been lost. Often, these books were beautifully illustrated by the monks and are referred to as illuminated manuscripts – among the finest examples of medieval art.

Outside of monasteries, churches were built in practically every city and town (and many small villages) in the Roman sphere of influence. One interesting and, from a contemporary perspective, somewhat peculiar phenomenon in early Christianity was the focus on relics: holy objects. Relics were everything from the bones of saints to fragments of the “True Cross” on which Christ was crucified. Each church had to have a relic in its altar (contained in a special box called a reliquary) or it was not considered to be truly holy ground. All relics were not created equal: the larger the object, or the closer it had been to Christ or the apostles, the more holy power it was believed to contain. Thus, a thriving trade in relics (plagued by counterfeits – it was not easy to determine if a given finger bone was *really* the finger bone of St. Mark!) developed in Europe as rival church leaders tried to secure the most powerful relic for their church. This was not just about the symbolic importance of the relics, as pilgrims would travel from all over the Roman world to visit the site of noteworthy relics, bringing with them considerable wealth. Whole regional economies centered on pilgrimage sites as a result.

Christian Learning

Christian learning was a complex issue, because, strictly speaking, spiritual salvation was thought to be available to anyone simply by accepting the basic tenets of Christian doctrine. In other words, the whole intellectual world of Greek and Roman philosophy, literature, science, and so on did not necessarily relate to the Church’s primary task of saving souls. Many church leaders were learned men and women, however, and insisted that there was indeed a place for learning within Christianity. The issue was never settled – one powerful church leader, Tertullian, once wrote “what does Athens have to do with Rome?”, meaning, why should anyone study the Greek intellectual legacy when it was produced by pre-Christian pagans?

Once Christianity was institutionalized, church leaders generally came around to the importance of classical learning because it proved useful for administration. A vast Greco-Roman literature existed describing governance, science, engineering, etc., all of which was necessary in the newly-Christian Empire. A kind of uneasy balance was struck between studying classical learning, especially things like rhetoric, while warning against the spiritual danger of being seduced by its non-Christian messages.

The most important thinker who addressed the intersection of Christian and classical learning was St. Augustine of Hippo (a Roman city in North Africa), whose life spanned the late fourth and early fifth centuries. Augustine lived through the worst period of Roman decline, completing his work while his own city was besieged by a Germanic group called the Vandals. To Roman Christians, this posed a huge challenge – if all-powerful God had embraced them, why was their empire falling apart? Augustine’s answer was that life on earth is not ultimately significant. In his work *The City of God*, Augustine distinguished between the perfect world of heaven, attainable through Christian faith, versus the flawed and imperfect world of the living. This concept explained the decline of the Empire as being irrelevant to the greater mission of salvation. Thus, according to Augustine, all of learning was just a facet of material life; useful in its way but totally insignificant compared to the necessity of laying one’s soul bare to God and waiting for the second coming of Christ.

The irony of these struggles over Christian doctrine versus ancient learning was that the issue was decided by the collapse of Rome. When Rome fell to Germanic invaders in the mid-fifth century, so began the decline of organized

learning – there simply was no funding from Roman elites for what had been a robust private school system. In the absence of instruction, literature and philosophy and engineering all but vanished, preserved only in monasteries and in the eastern Empire. Once the western Empire collapsed, the church was the only institution that still supported scholarship (including basic literacy), but over time the levels of literacy and education in Europe unquestionably declined. This decline inspired the contempt of later Renaissance thinkers who wrote off the period between the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Renaissance in about 1300 CE as the “Dark Ages.”

Ultimately, after the western part of the Roman Empire fell in the late fifth century, it was the Christian Church that carried on at least parts of Roman civilization, learning, and culture. One of the historical ironies of this period of history is that even though Rome’s Empire began to decline and (eventually) collapse *politically*, it lived on thanks to ideas and beliefs that originally arisen in the Roman context – it lived on *ideologically* and *spiritually*.

The Fall of Rome

The fall of Rome, conventionally dated to 476 CE, is one of the most iconic events in the history of the western world. For centuries, people have tried to draw lessons from Rome’s decline and fall about their own societies, a practice inspired by the question of how so mighty and, at one time, stable a civilization could so utterly disintegrate. The answers have varied considerably: Rome grew corrupt and weak over time, Rome was infiltrated by “barbarian” cultures, Rome was simply overcome by overwhelming odds, or perhaps Rome was simply transformed into a different, more diverse set of societies rather than destroyed in so many words. However the events of the period are interpreted, the simple fact remains: the political unity of the Roman Empire was shattered by the end of the fifth century CE.

While the debate as to the causes of Rome’s fall will probably never be definitively answered, an important caveat should be noted: Rome did not “really” fall for another thousand years, even though the city of Rome itself, along with the western half of the Empire, did indeed lose its sovereignty in the face of invasion by Germanic “barbarians.” The Roman capital had already been moved to Constantinople in the early fourth century, and the eastern half of the empire remained intact, albeit under constant military pressure, until 1453. Arguably, one of the major causes for the collapse of the western empire was the fact that the Empire as a whole had focused its resources in the east for a century by the time waves of invaders appeared on the horizon starting in the fourth century CE.

At the time, most Christians blamed polytheism and heresy for Rome’s fall: it was God’s wrath exacted on a sinful society. In turn, the remaining polytheists blamed Christians for undermining the worship of the gods who had presided over the Empire while Rome was great.

From the contemporary perspective, Rome’s fall seems to have less to do with divine intervention than routine defeats and growing threats.

A note on nomenclature: this section will refer to the groups responsible for the destruction of the western empire as barbarians when referring to the Roman perception of Germanic and Central Asian groups. The point is not to vilify those groups, but to emphasize the degree to which Romans were both contemptuous towards and, it turns out, vulnerable to them. When possible, it will refer to specific groups by name such as the Goths and the Huns. In addition, it will refer to “Germans” when discussing the specific groups native to Central Europe that played such a key role in the fall of Rome. That is something of a misnomer, however, since there was no kingdom or empire called “Germany” until 1871 CE (i.e. about 1,400 years later). Thus, when using the term “Germans,” this section is referring to any of the Germanic cultural groups of the era rather than the citizens or subjects of a unified country.

Roman Relations with Barbarians

Romans had always held “barbarians” in contempt, and they believed that the lands held by barbarians (such as Scotland and Germany) were largely unsuitable for civilization, being too cold and wet for the kind of Mediterranean agriculture Romans were accustomed to. Romans believed that barbarian peoples like the Germans were inferior to subject peoples like the Celts, who could at least be made useful subjects (and, later, citizens) of the Empire. For the entire history of the Empire, the Romans never seem to have figured out exactly which groups they were interacting with; they would simply lump them together as “Goths” or even “Scythians,” a blanket term referring to steppe peoples. Occasionally, hundreds of years after they “should have known better,” Roman writers would actually refer to Germans as Celts.

It is easy to overstate this attitude; there were many members of Germanic tribes who did rise to prominence in Rome (one, Stilicho, was one of the greatest Roman generals in the late Empire, and he was half Vandal by birth). Likewise, it is clear from archaeology that many Germans made a career of fighting in the Roman armies and then returning to their native areas, and that many Germans looked up to Rome as a model of civilization to be emulated, not some kind of permanent enemy. Some Romans clearly did admire things about certain barbarian groups, as well – the great Roman historian Tacitus, in his *Germania*, even praised the Germans for their vigor and honor, although he did so in order to contrast the Germans with what he regarded as his own corrupt and immoral Roman society.

That said, it is clear that the overall pattern of contact between Rome and Germania was a combination of peaceful coexistence punctuated by many occasions of extreme violence. Various tribes would raid Roman lands, usually resulting in brutal Roman reprisals. As the centuries went on, Rome came increasingly to rely on both Germanic troops and on playing allied tribes off against hostile ones. In fact, by the late fourth century CE, many (sometimes even most) soldiers in “Roman” armies in the western half of the Empire were recruited from Germanic groups.

The only place worthy of Roman recognition as another “true” civilization was Persia. When Rome was forced to cede territory to Persia in 363 CE after a series of military defeats, Roman writers were aghast because the loss of territory represented “abandoning” it to the other civilization and state. When “barbarians” seized territory, however, it rarely warranted any mention among Roman writers, since it was assumed that the territory could and would be reclaimed whenever it was convenient for Rome.

Meanwhile, there had been *hundreds of years* of on-again, off-again wars along the Roman borders before the “fall” of Rome actually occurred. Especially since the third century, major conflicts were an ongoing reality of the enormous borders along the Rhine and Danube. Those conflicts had prompted emperors to build the system of *limes* meant to defend Roman territory, and from that point on, the majority of Roman legions were usually deployed along the semi-fortified northern borders of the empire. There is evidence that many of those soldiers spent their careers as not-so-glorified border guards and administrators and never experienced battle itself; there is no question that the performance of the Roman military was far poorer in the late imperial period than it had been, for instance, under the Republic.

In turn, many of the Germans who settled along those borders were known as *federatii*, tribal groups who entered into treaties with Rome that required them to pay taxes in kind (i.e. in crops, animals, and other forms of wealth rather than currency) and send troops to aid Roman conquests, and who received peace and recognition (and usually annual gifts) in return. The problem for Rome was that most Germanic peoples regarded treaties as being something that only lasted as long as the emperor who had authorized the treaty lived; on his death, there would often be an incursion

since the old peace terms no longer held. The first task new emperors had to attend to was often suppressing the latest invasion from the north. One example was the Goths, settled at the time somewhere around present-day Romania, whom Constantine severely punished after they turned on his forces during his war of conquest leading up to 312 CE.

The bottom line is that, as of the late fourth century CE, it seemed like “business as usual” to most political and military elites in the Roman Empire. The borders were teeming with barbarians, but they had *always* been teeming with barbarians. Rome traded with them, enlisted them as soldiers, and fought them off or punished them as Roman leaders thought it necessary. No one in Rome seemed to think that this state of affairs would ever change. What contemporary historians have determined, however, is that things *had* changed: there were *more* Germans than ever before, they were *better-organized*, and they were capable of defeating large Roman forces. What followed was a kind of “barbarian domino effect” that ultimately broke the western Empire into pieces and ended Roman power over it.

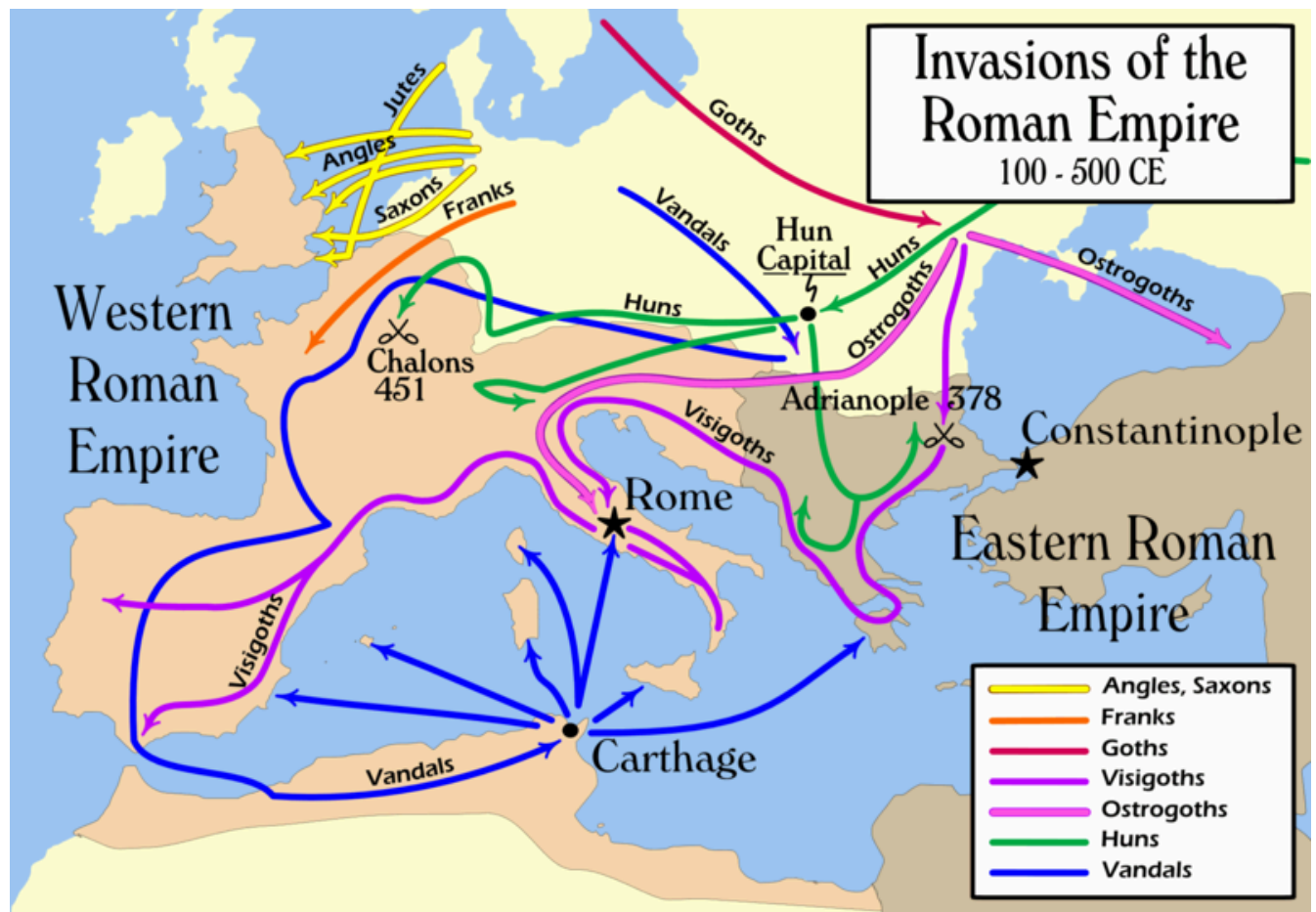
One other factor in the collapse of the western half of the Empire should be emphasized: once Rome began to lose large territories in the west, tax revenues shrunk to a fraction of what they had been. While the east remained intact, with taxes going to pay for a robust military which successfully defended Roman sovereignty, Roman armies in the west were under-funded, under-manned, and vulnerable. There was thus a vicious cycle of lost land, lost revenue, and poor military performance that saw Roman power simply disintegrate over the course of less than a century. Even the handful of effective emperors and generals in the west during that period could not staunch the tide of defeat.

Invasions

The beginning of the end for the western empire was the Huns. The Huns were warriors of the central Asian steppes: expert horsemen, skillful warriors, unattached to any particular land. They had much in common with other groups of steppe peoples like the Scythians who had raided civilized lands going back to the very emergence of civilization in Mesopotamia. They were believed to be so cruel and so unstoppable that the Germanic groups farther west claimed that they were the product of unions between demons and witches, rather than normal humans.

In 376 the Huns drove a tribe of Goths from their lands in southern Russia. Those Goths were allowed to settle in the Balkans by the Romans, but were soon extorted by Roman officials, causing the Goths to rise up against Rome in retribution. In 378 the Goths killed the emperor, Valens, and destroyed a Roman army in an open battle. The new emperor made a deal with the Goths, allowing them to serve in the Roman army under their own commanders in return for payment. This proved disastrous for Rome in the long run as the Goths, under their king Alaric, started looting Roman territory in the Balkans, finally marching into Italy itself and sacking Rome in 410 CE. The Roman government officially moved to the city of Ravenna in the north (which was more defensible) following this sack.

The Gothic attack on Rome was the first time in roughly seven hundred years that the walls of Rome had been breached by non-Romans. The entire Roman world was shocked and horrified that mere barbarians could have overwhelmed Roman armies and struck at the heart of the ancient Empire itself. Rome’s impregnability was itself one of the founding stories Romans told themselves; Romans had long vowed that the Celtic sack of 387 BCE would be the last, and yet the Goths had shattered that myth. With the benefit of historical hindsight, we can see the arrival of the Huns as the beginning of a “domino effect” in which various groups were pushed into Roman territory, with the sack of Rome merely one disaster of many for the Empire.



The major invasions of the Roman Empire leading up to its fall. Note, among other things, their astonishing scope: the Goths may have originated in Scandinavia but some of their descendents ended up ruling over Spain, while the Vandals came from somewhere in present-day Germany and conquered Roman North Africa.

Leading up to that event, the Roman legions were already losing their former coherence and unity. In 406 CE a very cold winter froze the Rhine river, and armies of barbarians invaded (literally walking across the frozen river in some cases), bypassing the traditional Roman defenses. One group, the Vandals, sacked its way to the Roman provinces of Spain and seized a large swath of territory there. The entire army of Britain left in 407 CE, when yet another ambitious general tried to seize the imperial throne, and Roman power there swiftly collapsed.

Roman armies from the western empire hastily marched back to Italy to fight the Goths, abandoning their traditional defensive posts. For the next fifty years, various groups of Germanic invaders wandered across Europe, both looting and, soon, settling down to occupy territory that had only recently been part of the Roman Empire. Most of these groups soon established kingdoms of their own. The Vandals pushed through Spain and ended up conquering most of Roman North Africa. After the Goths sacked Rome itself in 410, the emperor Honorius gave them southern Gaul to get them to leave; they ended up seizing most of Spain (from the Vandals who had arrived before them) as well. At that point, the Romans came to label this group the *Visigoths* – “western Goths” – to distinguish them from other Gothic tribes still at large in the Empire.

Back in Italy, the Huns, under the leadership of the legendary warlord Attila, arrived in the late 440s, pushing as far as the gates of Rome in 451. There, the Pope (Leo I) personally appealed to Attila not to sack the city and paid them a hefty bribe. Attila died in 453 and the Huns were soon defeated by a combined army of their former Germanic

subjects and a Roman army. By then, however, the damage was done: the domino effect set off by the Hunnic invasion of the previous century had already almost completely swallowed up the western empire. Only two years after the Huns were defeated, the Vandals sailed over from Africa in 455 and sacked Rome again. This sacking, despite occurring with relatively little carnage, nevertheless led to the use of the word “vandal” to mean a malicious destroyer of property.

Italy itself held out until 476, when an Ostrogothic (“eastern Goth”) warlord named Odoacer deposed the last emperor and declared himself king of Italy; the Roman emperor in Constantinople (having little choice) approved of Odoacer’s authority in Italy in return for a nominal pledge of loyalty. In 493, Odoacer was deposed and killed by a different Ostrogothic king, Theodoric, but the link with Constantinople remained intact. The Roman emperor worked out a deal with Theodoric to stabilize Italy, and Theodoric went on to rule for decades (r. 493 – 526). Thus, by 500 CE Italy and the city of Rome were no longer part of the empire still called “Roman” by the people of the eastern empire. By the end of the fifth century, the western empire was gone, replaced by a series of kingdoms ruled by Germanic peoples but populated by former citizens of the Roman Empire.

Theodoric presided over a few decades of prosperity, restoring peace to the Italian peninsula and joining together with other Gothic territories to the west. He maintained excellent relations with the Pope even though he was an Arian Christian, and he set up a system in which a government existed for his Goths that was distinct from the Roman government (with him at the head of both, of course). Some historians have speculated that Theodoric and the Goths might have been able to forge a new, stable Empire in the west and thereby obviate the coming of the “Dark Ages,” but that possibility was cut short when the Byzantine Empire invaded to try to reconquer its lost territory (that invasion is considered in the next chapter).

In Gaul, a fierce tribe called the Franks, from whom France derives its name, came to power, driving out rivals like the Visigoths. Unlike the other Germanic tribes, the Franks did not abandon their homeland when they set out for new territory. From the lower Rhine Valley, they gradually expanded into northern Gaul late in the fifth century. Under the leadership of the warrior chieftain Clovis (r. 481/482 – 511), the various Frankish tribes were united, which gave them the military strength to depose the last Roman governor in Gaul, drive the Visigoths into Spain, absorb the territory of yet another barbarian group known as the Burgundians, and eventually conquer most of Gaul. Thus, what began as an invasion and occupation of Roman territory evolved in time to become the earliest version of the kingdom of France.

In almost every case, the new Germanic kings pledged formal allegiance to the Roman emperor in Constantinople in return for acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their rule. They often did their best to build on the precedent of Roman civilization as well; for example, Clovis of the Franks made a point of having the Frankish laws recorded in Latin, and over time the Frankish language vanished, replaced by the early form of French, a Latinate language. In fact, for well over a century, most Germanic “kings” were, officially, treaty-holding, recognized Roman officials from the legal and diplomatic perspective of Constantinople. That said, the “Roman” emperors of Constantinople had plenty of legal pretext to regard those kings as usurpers as well, since the treaties of acknowledgment were often full of loopholes. Thus, when the emperor Justinian invaded Italy in the sixth century, he was doing so to reassert not just the memory of the united Empire, but to restore the Empire to the legal state in which it already technically existed.

Conclusion

While interpretations of the collapse of the Empire will continue to differ as long as there are people interested

in Roman history, there is no question about the basic facts: half of what had once been an enormous, coherent, and amazingly stable state was splintered into political fragments by the end of the fifth century.

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CHAPTER 11: BYZANTIUM

As noted in the last chapter, the eastern half of the Roman Empire survived for 1,000 years after the fall of the western one. It carried on most of the traditions of Rome and added many new innovations in architecture, science, religion, and learning. It was truly one of the great civilizations of world history. And yet, as demonstrated in everything from college curricula to representations of ancient history in popular culture, the eastern empire, remembered as “Byzantium,” is not as well represented in the contemporary view of the past as is the earlier united Roman Empire. Why might that be?

The answer is probably this: like the western empire before it, Byzantium eventually collapsed. However, Byzantium did not just collapse, it was absorbed into a distinct culture with its own traditions: that of the Turkish Ottoman Empire. More to the point, the religious divide between Christians and Muslims, at least from the perspective of medieval Europeans, was so stark that Byzantium was “lost” to the tradition of Western Civilization in a way that the western empire was not. Even though the Ottoman Empire itself was a proudly “western” civilization, one that eagerly built on the prosperity of Byzantium after absorbing it, there is a (misguided) centuries-long legacy of distinguishing between the Byzantine – Ottoman culture of the east and the Roman – European medieval culture of the west.

Byzantine civilization’s origins are to be found in the decision by the emperor Constantine to found a new capital in the Greek village of Byzantium, renamed Constantinople (“Constantine’s city”). By the time the western empire fell, the center of power in the Roman Empire had long since shifted to the east: simply put, by the fifth century CE the majority of wealth and power was concentrated in the eastern half of the empire. The people of Constantinople and the eastern empire did not call it “Byzantium” or themselves “Byzantines” – they continued to refer to themselves as “Romans” long after Rome itself was permanently outside of their territory and control.

After the fall of the western empire, the new Germanic kings acknowledged the authority of the emperor in Constantinople. They were formally his vassals (lords in his service) and he remained the emperor of the entire Roman Empire in name. At least until the Byzantine Empire began to decline in the seventh century, this was not just a convenient fiction. Even the Franks, who ruled a kingdom on the other end of Europe furthest from the reach of Constantinople, lived in genuine fear of a Byzantine invasion since the treaties they had established with Constantinople were full of loopholes and could be repudiated by any given emperor.

East versus West

Why was it that the west had fallen into political fragmentation while the east remained rich, powerful, and united? There are a few major reasons. First, Constantinople itself played a major role in the power and wealth of the east. Whereas Rome had shrunk steadily over the years, especially after its sacking in 410 and the move of the western imperial government to the Italian city of Ravenna (which was more easily defensible), Constantinople had somewhere around 500,000 residents. That can be compared to the capital of the Gothic kingdom of Gaul, Toulouse, which had 15,000 (which was a large city by the standards of the time for western Europe!). Not only was Constantinople impregnable to invaders, but its population of proud Romans repeatedly massacred barbarians who tried to seize power, and they

deposed unpopular emperors who tried to rule as military tyrants rather than true emperors possessing sufficient Roman “virtue.”



The Roman Empire after its political division between east and west under Diocletian. From the third through fifth centuries CE, the eastern part of the empire became the true locus of power and wealth, and as of the late fifth century, the entire western half “fell” to barbarian invasions.

The east had long been the richest part of the empire, and because of its efficient bureaucracy and tax-collecting systems, much more wealth flowed into the imperial coffers in the east than it did in the west. Each year, the imperial government in Constantinople brought in roughly 270,000 pounds of gold in tax revenue, as compared to about 20,000 in the west. This made vastly better-equipped, trained, and provisioned armies possible in the east. Furthermore, the west was still dominated by various families of unbelievably rich Roman elites who undermined the power, authority, and financial solvency of the western imperial government by refusing to sacrifice their own prerogatives in the name of a stronger united empire. In the east, while nobles were certainly rich and powerful, they were nowhere near as powerful as their western counterparts.

There is another factor to consider, one that is more difficult to pin down than the amount of tax revenue or the existence of Constantinople’s walls. Simply put, Roman identity – the degree to which social elites, soldiers, and possibly regular citizens considered themselves “Roman” and remained loyal to the Empire – seems to have been stronger in the east than the west. This might be explained by the reverse of the “vicious cycle” of defeat and vulnerability described in the last chapter regarding the west. In the east, the strength of the capital, the success of the armies, and the allegiance of elites to Rome as an idea encouraged the continued strength of Roman identity. Even if poor farmers still had little to thank the Roman state for in their daily lives, their farms were intact and local leaders were still Roman, not Gothic or Frankish or Vandal.

Lastly, the east enjoyed a simple stroke of good luck in the threats it faced from outside of the borders: the barbarians went west and Persia did not launch major invasions. The initial Gothic uprising that sparked the beginning

of the end for the west was in the Balkans, but the Goths were then convinced to go west. Subsequent invasions from Central Europe were directed at the west. Even though the Huns were from the steppes of Central Asia, they established their (short-lived) empire in the west. Eastern Roman armies had to repulse threats and maintain the borders, but they did not face the overwhelming odds of their western Roman counterparts. Finally, despite Persia's overall strength and coherence, there was a lull in Persian militarism that lasted through the entire fifth century.

Justinian

The most important early emperor of Byzantium was Justinian, who ruled from 527 to 565. Justinian was the last Roman emperor to speak Latin as his native tongue; afterwards, all emperors spoke Greek. He is remembered for being both an incredibly fervent Christian, a major military leader, the sponsor of some of the most beautiful and enduring Byzantine architecture in existence, and the husband of probably the most powerful empress in the history of the empire, a former actress and courtesan named Theodora.

Justinian created a tradition that was to last for all of Byzantine history: that of the emperor being both the spiritual leader of the Christian Church and the secular ruler of the empire itself. By the time the western empire fell, the archbishops of Rome had begun their attempts to assert their authority over the church (they would not succeed even in the west for many centuries, however). Those claims were never accepted in the east, where it was the emperor who was responsible for laying down the final word on matters of religious doctrine. Justinian felt that it was his sacred duty as leader of the greatest Christian empire in the world to enforce religious uniformity among his subjects and to stamp out heresy. He called himself “beloved of Christ,” a title the later emperors would adopt as well. While he was never able to force all of his subjects to conform to Christian orthodoxy (especially in rural regions far from the capital city), he did launch a number of attacks and persecutory campaigns against heretical sects.

One aspect of Justinian's focus on Christian purification was the destruction of the ancient traditions of paganism in Greece and the surrounding areas initiated by his Christian predecessors. The Olympics had already been shut down by the emperor Theodosius I back in 393 CE (he objected to their status as a pagan religious festival, not an athletic competition). Justinian insisted that all teachers and tutors convert to Christianity and renounce their teaching of the Greek classics; when they refused in 528, he shut down Plato's Academy, functioning at that point for almost 1,000 years. (Many of the now-unemployed scholars fled to Persia, where they were welcomed by the Sasanian rulers.)

Justinian did not just enforce religious uniformity, he also imposed Roman law on all of his subjects. The empire had traditionally left local customs and laws alone so long as they did not interfere in the important business of tax collection, troop recruitment, and loyalty to the empire. Justinian saw Roman law as an aspect of Roman unity, however, and sought to stamp out other forms of law under his jurisdiction. He had legal experts go through the entire corpus of Roman law, weed out the contradictions, and figure out the laws that needed to be enforced. He codified this project in the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, which forms the direct textual antecedent for most of the legal systems still in use in Europe.

Theodora, who had come from decidedly humble origins as an entertainer, worked diligently both to free prostitutes from sexual slavery, expand the legal rights and protections of women, and protect children from infanticide. She was Justinian's confidant and supporter throughout their lives together, helping to conceive of not just legal revisions, but the splendid new building projects they supervised in Constantinople. In a famous episode from early in Justinian's reign, Theodora prevented Justinian and his advisors from fleeing from a massive riot against his rule, instead inspiring Justinian to order a counter-attack that may well have saved his reign. While most political marriages

in Byzantium, as in practically every pre-modern society, had nothing whatsoever to do with love or even attraction, Theodora and Justinian clearly shared both genuine affection for one another and intellectual kinship.



The best-known surviving depiction of Justinian from a mosaic in Ravenna, Italy. In the mosaic, Justinian is dressed in the “royal purple,” a color reserved for the imperial family.

Justinian was intent on re-conquering the western empire from the Germanic kings that had taken over. He was equally interested in imposing Christian uniformity through the elimination of Christian heresies like Arianism. He sent a brilliant general, Belisarius, to Vandal-controlled North Africa in 533 with a fairly small force of soldiers and cavalry, and within a year Belisarius soundly defeated the Vandal army and retook North Africa for the empire. From there, Justinian dispatched Belisarius and his force to Italy to seize it from the Ostrogoths.

What followed was twenty years of war between the Byzantines and the Gothic kingdom of Italy. The Goths had won over the support of most Italians through fair rule and reasonable levels of taxation, and most Italians thus fought against the Byzantines, even though the latter represented the legitimate Roman government. In the end, the Byzantines succeeded in destroying the Gothic kingdom and retaking Italy, but the war both crippled the Italian economy and drained the Byzantine coffers. Italy was left devastated; it was the Byzantine invasion, not the “fall of Rome” earlier, that crippled the Italian economy until the late Middle Ages.

In 542, during the midst of the Italian campaign, a horrendous plague (the “Plague of Justinian”) killed off half the population of Constantinople and one-third of the empire’s population as a whole. This had an obvious impact on military recruiting and morale. In the long term, the more important impact of the plague was in severing many of the trade ties between the two halves of the empire. Economies in the west became more localized and less connected

to long-distance trade, which ultimately impoverished them. A few years earlier, in 536, a major volcanic eruption in Iceland spewed so much debris in the air that Europe's climate cooled considerably with "years without a summer," badly undermining the economy as well. Thus, war, natural disaster, and disease helped usher in the bleakest period of the Middle Ages in the west, as well as leading to a strong economic and cultural division between west and east.

Even as the Byzantine forces struggled to retake Italy, Justinian, like the emperors to follow him, had a huge problem on his eastern flank: the Persian Empire. Still ruled by the Sasanians, the Persians were sophisticated and well-organized rivals of the empire who had never been conquered by Rome. Ongoing wars with Persia represented the single greatest expense Justinian faced, even as he oversaw the campaigns in Italy. The Byzantines and Persians battled over Armenia, which was heavily populated, and Syria, which was very rich. Toward the end of his reign, Justinian simply made peace with the Persian king Khusro I by agreeing to pay an annual tribute of 30,000 gold coins a year. It was ultimately less expensive to spend huge sums of gold as bribes than it was to pay for the wars.

The problem with Justinian's wars, both the reconquest in the west and the ongoing battles with the Persians in the east, was that they were enormously expensive. Because his forces won enough battles to consistently loot, and because the empire was relatively stable and prosperous under his reign, he was able to sustain these efforts during his lifetime. After he died, however, Byzantium slowly re-lost its conquests in the west to another round of Germanic invasions, and the Persians pressed steadily on the eastern territories as well.

Division and Decline

The relative political and religious unity Justinian's campaigns brought back to Byzantium declined steadily after his death. For almost 1,000 years, the two kinds of Christianity – later called "Catholic" and "Eastern Orthodox," although both terms speak to the idea of one universal and correct form of Christian doctrine – were sundered by the great political divisions between the Germanic kingdoms of the west and Byzantium itself in the east. In Eastern Europe, small kingdoms and poor farmers played host to rival missionaries preaching the slightly-different versions of Christianity. Trade existed, but was never as strong as it had been during the days of the united empire.

Byzantium's major ongoing problem was that it faced a seemingly endless series of external threats. Byzantium was surrounded by hostile states and groups for most of its existence, and it slowly but steadily lost territory until it was little more than the city of Constantinople and its immediate territories. It is important to remember, however, that this process took many centuries, longer even than the Roman Empire itself had lasted in the west. During that time, Constantinople was one of the largest and most remarkable cities on the planet, with half a million people and trade goods and visitors from as far away as Scandinavia, Africa, and England. Its people believed that their empire and their emperor were preserved by God Himself as the rightful seat of the Christian religion. Thanks to the resilience of its people, the prosperity of its trade networks, and the leadership of its emperors (the effective ones, anyway), Byzantium remained a major state and culture for centuries despite its long-term decline in power from the days of Justinian.

The most significant leader after Justinian was the emperor Heraclius (r. 610 – 641). He was originally a governor who returned from his post in Africa to seize the throne from a rival named Phocas in the midst of a Persian invasion. The empire was in such disarray at the time that the Persians seized Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt, cutting off a huge part of the food supply to Constantinople. In the process, the Persians even seized the "True Cross," the cross on which (so Christians at the time believed) Christ Himself had been crucified, from its resting place in Jerusalem.

Simultaneously, the Avars and Bulgars, steppe peoples related to the Huns, were pressing Byzantine territory from the north, and piracy was rife in the Mediterranean.

Heraclius managed to save the core of the empire, Anatolia and the Balkans, by recruiting free peasants to fight instead of relying on mercenaries. He also focused on Anatolia as the breadbasket of the empire, temporarily abandoning Egypt but keeping his people fed. He led Byzantine armies to seize back Jerusalem and the True Cross from the Persians, soundly defeating them in 628, and in 630 he personally returned the True Cross to its shrine in Jerusalem. The fighting during this period was often desperate – Constantinople itself was besieged by an allied force of Avars and Persians at one point – but in the end Heraclius managed to pull the empire back from the brink.

Despite his success in staving off disaster, however, a new threat to Byzantium was growing in the south. The very same year that Heraclius returned the True Cross to Jerusalem, the Islamic Prophet Muhammad returned to his native city of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula with the first army of Muslims. Heraclius had no way of knowing it, but Byzantium would soon face a threat even greater than that of the Persians: the Arab caliphates (considered in the following chapter). Indeed, Heraclius himself was forced to lead Byzantium during the first wave of the Arab invasions, and despite his own leadership ability vital territories like Syria, Palestine, and Egypt were lost during his own lifetime (he died in 641, the same year that most of Egypt was conquered by the Arabs).

Themes and Organization

Heraclius created a new administrative system to try to defend the remaining Byzantine territory: *themes*. He began by seizing lands from wealthy landowners and monasteries in Asia Minor, then using the seized land as the basis for new territories from which to recruit soldiers. A theme was a territory, originally about a quarter of the empire in size, organized around military recruitment. A single general appointed directly by the emperor controlled each theme. In turn, only soldiers from that theme would serve in it; this led to local pride in the military prowess of the theme, which helped morale. It was only because of the success of the themes that Byzantine losses were not much worse, considering the strength of their foreign enemies. Eventually, the themes changed further into self-sustaining military systems. Soldiers were granted land to become farmers. From there, they were to fund the purchase of weapons for themselves and their sons. Young men still joined the army, but the system could operate without significant cash-flow from the imperial treasury back in Constantinople.

In essence, the theme system was a return to the ancient manner of military recruitment that had been so successful during the days of the Roman Republic: free citizens who provided their own arms, thereby relieving some of the financial burden on the state. At their height, the themes supported an army of 300,000 men (comparable to the Roman army under Augustus), with the financial burden evenly distributed across the empire. The four themes were divided over the centuries, with villages being watched by commander and people fighting directly alongside their neighbors and families. Ultimately, it was this system, one that encouraged morale and loyalty, that preserved the empire for many centuries. One straightforward demonstration of the strength of the system was that the perennial enemy of Rome, the Persians, fell against the Arab invasion of the seventh century while the Byzantines did not.

There is an important caveat regarding the consideration of the themes, however. While Byzantium did indeed survive as a state for many centuries while neighboring empires like Persia fell, Byzantium itself arguably ceased to be an “empire” by the middle of the seventh century CE. The Arab invasions swiftly destroyed Byzantine power in the Near East and North Africa, and while fragments of Justinian’s reconquest remained in Byzantine hands until the eighth century, “Byzantium” was basically synonymous with the contiguous territory of the Balkans, Greece, and most

of Anatolia by then. It was, despite its continued pretensions to empire, really a kingdom after the territorial losses, populated almost entirely by Greek-speaking “Romans” rather than by those Romans as well as its former Syrian, Jewish, African, Italian, and Spanish subjects.

Imperial Control and Foreign Threats

Justinian’s successors tried to hold on to North Africa, Italy, and Spain by establishing territories called exarchates ruled by governors known as exarchs; exarchates were military provinces in which civilian and military control were united. They held out in Spain until the 630s, Africa until the end of the seventh century, and Italy until 751, when a Germanic tribe called the Lombards captured it.

While the losses of territory in Europe were mourned by Byzantines at the time, they proved something of a blessing in disguise to the empire: with its territory limited to the Balkans and Anatolia, the smaller empire had much more coherent and easily-defended borders. Thus, those core areas remained under Byzantine control despite various losses for many centuries to come. The emperor Leo the Isaurian (r. 717 – 741) used themes-recruited soldiers to both fight off Arab sieges of Constantinople and to cement control of Anatolia. By the end of his reign, Anatolia was secure from the Arabs and would remain the major part of the Byzantine Empire for centuries.

In addition to the themes system, the empire added heavy cavalry to its roster and, famously, used a substance called Greek Fire in naval warfare; there are very few details, but it appears to have been an oil-based incendiary substance used to attack enemy ships. Finally, the empire made liberal use of spies and agents who infiltrated enemy governments and bribed or assassinated their targets to disrupt, or to start, wars.



A medieval illustration of Greek fire.

In the Balkans, Slavic tribes proved a major ongoing problem for the Byzantines. A people known as the Avars invaded from the north in the sixth century and raided not just the Balkans but all across Europe, making it as far as the newly-created Frankish kingdom in present-day France. In the eighth century an even more ferocious nomadic people, the Bulgars (for whom the present-day country of Bulgaria is named), invaded. While the Avars had converted to

Christianity during the period of their invasions, the Bulgars remained pagan. They destroyed the remaining Byzantine cities in the northern Balkans, slaughtered or enslaved the inhabitants, and crushed Byzantine armies. In one especially colorful moment in Bulgarian history, the Bulgar Khan, Krum, converted the skull of a slain emperor into a goblet in about 810 CE to toast his victory over a Byzantine army. Fifty years later, however, another Khan, Boris I, converted to Christianity and opened diplomatic relations with Constantinople.

This was an interesting and surprisingly common pattern: many “barbarian” peoples and kingdoms willingly converted to Christianity rather than having Christianity imposed on them through force. The Bulgars were consistently able to defeat Byzantine armies and they occupied territory seized from the Byzantine Empire, yet Boris I chose to convert (and to insist that his followers do as well). The major reason for this deliberate conversion revolved around the desire on the part of barbarian kings to, simply, stop being barbarians. Most kings recognized that Christianity was a prerequisite to entering into trade and diplomatic relations with Byzantium and the Christian kingdoms of the west. Once a kingdom converted, it could consider itself a member of the network of civilized societies, carry out alliances and trade with other kingdoms, and receive official recognition from the emperor (who still wielded considerable prestige and authority, even outside of the areas of direct Byzantine control).

An important figure in the history of eastern Christianity was St. Cyril, who in the ninth century created an alphabet for the Slavic languages, now called Cyrillic and still used in many Slavic languages including Russian. He then translated Greek liturgy into Slavonic and used it to teach and convert the inhabitants of Moravia and Bulgaria. Monasteries sprung up, from which monks would go further into Slavic lands, ultimately tying together a swath of territory deep into what would one day be Russia. The success of these missionary efforts united much of Eastern Europe and Byzantium in a common religious culture – that of Eastern Orthodoxy. Thus, up to the present, the Greek, Russian, Ukrainian, and Serbian Orthodox churches all share common historical roots and a common set of beliefs and practices.

The origins of Russia emerged out of this interaction, and out of the relationship between Byzantium and the Viking kings of the Slavs in Russia. Originally, the “Rus” were Vikings who ruled small cities in the vast steppes and forests of western Russia and the Ukraine. They were united in about 980 CE by a king, Vladimir the Great, who conquered all of the rival cities and imposed control from his capital in Kiev. He converted to Orthodox Christianity and forbade his subjects to continue worshiping Odin, Thor, and the other Norse gods. Just as Boris of Bulgaria had a century earlier, Vladimir used conversion to legitimize his own rule, by connecting his nascent kingdom to the prestige, power, and glory of ancient Rome embodied in the Byzantine Empire.

The City and the Emperors

A major factor in the success of Orthodox conversion among the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe was the splendor of Constantinople itself. Numerous accounts survive of the sheer impact Constantinople’s size, prosperity, and beauty had on visitors. Constantinople was simply the largest, richest, and most glorious city in Europe and the Mediterranean region at the time. It enjoyed a cash economy, impregnable defensive fortifications, and abundant food thanks to the availability of Anatolian grain and fish from the Aegean Sea. Silkworms were smuggled out of China in roughly 550, at which point Constantinople became the heart of a European silk industry, an imperial monopoly which generated tremendous wealth. The entire economy was regulated by the imperial government through a system of guilds, which helped ensure steady tax revenues.



Constantinople was impregnable for centuries. Strong walls protected it in the west, and it was surrounded by cliffs leading down to the sea (and its ports) on all of the other sides.

Meanwhile, in the heart of the empire, the emperor held absolute authority. A complex and formal ranking system of nobles and courtiers, clothed in garments dyed specific colors to denote their respective ranks, separated the person of the emperor from supplicants and ambassadors. This was not just self-indulgence on the part of the emperors, of showing off for the sake of feeling important; this was part of the symbolism of power, of reaching out to a largely illiterate population with visible displays of authority.

The imperial bureaucracy held enormous power in Byzantium. Provincial elites would send their sons to Constantinople to study and obtain positions. Bribery was rife and nepotism was as common as talent in gaining positions; there was even an official list of maximum bribes that was published by the government itself. That said, the bureaucracy was somewhat like the ancient Egyptian class of scribes, men who maintained coherence and order within the government even when individual emperors were incompetent or palace intrigue rendered an emperor unable to focus on governance.

The imperial office controlled the minting of coins, still the standard currency as far away as France and England because the coins were reliably weighted and backed by the imperial government. The emperor's office also controlled imperial monopolies on key industries like silk, which were hugely lucrative. It was illegal to try to compete with the imperial silk industry, so enormous profits were directed straight into the royal treasury.

Constantinople had as many as a million people in the late eighth century (as compared to no more than 15,000 in any "city" in western Europe), but there were many other rich cities within its empire. As a whole, Byzantium traded its high-quality finished goods to western Europe in return for raw materials like ore and foodstuffs. Despite its wars with its neighbors to the east and south, Byzantium also had major trade links with the Arab states.

Orthodox Christianity and Learning

To return to Orthodox Christianity, it was not just because Constantinople was at the center of the empire that Byzantines thought it had a special relationship with God. Its power was derived from the sheer number of churches and relics present in the city, which in turn represented an enormous amount of *potentia* (holy power). Byzantines believed that God oversaw Constantinople and that the Virgin Mary interceded before God on the behalf of the city. Many priests taught that Constantinople was the New Jerusalem that would be at the center of events during the second coming of Christ, rather than the actual Jerusalem.

The piety of the empire sometimes undermined secular learning, however. Over time, the church grew increasingly suspicious of learning that did not have either center on the Bible and religious instruction or have direct practical applications in crafts or engineering. Thus, there was a marked decline in scholarship throughout the empire. Eventually, the whole body of ancient Greek learning was concentrated in a small academic elite in Constantinople and a few other important Greek cities. What was later regarded as the founding body of thought of Western Civilization – ancient Greek philosophy and literature – was thus largely analyzed, translated, and recopied outside of Greece itself in the Arab kingdoms of the Middle Ages. Likewise, almost no one in Byzantium understood Latin well by the ninth century, so even Justinian's law code was almost always referenced in a simplified Greek translation.

This was a period in which, in both the Arab kingdoms and in Byzantium, there was a bewildering mixture of language, place of origin, and religious affiliation. For example, a Christian in Syria, a subject of the Muslim Arab kingdoms by the eighth century, would be unable to speak to a Byzantine Christian, nor would she be welcomed in Constantinople since she was probably a Monophysite Christian (one of the many Christian heresies, at least from the Orthodox perspective) instead of an Orthodox one. Likewise, men in her family might find themselves enlisted to fight against Byzantium despite their Christian faith, with political allegiances outweighing religious ones.

Iconoclasm

One of the greatest religious controversies in the history of Christianity was iconoclasm, the breaking or destroying of icons. Iconoclasm was one of those phenomena that may seem almost ridiculously trivial in historical hindsight, but it had an enormous (and almost entirely negative) impact at the time. For people who believed in the constant intervention of God in the smallest of things, iconoclasm was an enormously important issue.

The conundrum that prompted iconoclasm was simple: if Byzantium was the holiest of states, watched over by the Virgin Mary and ruled by emperors who were the "beloved of God," why was the empire declining? Just as Rome had

fallen in the west, Byzantium was beset by enemies all around it, enemies who had the depressing tendency of crushing Byzantine armies and occasionally murdering its emperors. Byzantine priests repeatedly warned their congregations to repent of their sins, because it was sin that was undermining the empire's survival. The emperor Leo III, who ruled from 717 – 741, decided to take action into his own hands. He forced communities of Jews in the empire to convert to Christianity, convinced that their presence was somehow angering God. He then went on to do something much more unprecedented than persecuting Jews: attacking icons.

Icons were (and are) one of the central aspects of Eastern Orthodox Christian worship. An icon is an image of a holy figure, almost always Christ, the Virgin Mary, or one of the saints, that is used as a focus of Christian worship both in churches and in homes. Byzantine icons were beautifully crafted and, in a largely illiterate society, were vitally important in the daily experience of most Christians. The problem was that it was a slippery slope from venerating God, Christ, and the saints “through” icons as symbols, versus actually worshipping the icons themselves as idols, something expressly forbidden in the Old Testament. Frankly, there is no question that thousands of believers did treat the icons as idols, as objects with *potentia* unto themselves, like relics.



A fourteenth-century icon of the Virgin Mary.

In 726, a volcano devastated the island of Santorini in the Aegean sea. Leo III took this as proof that icon veneration had gone too far, as some of his religious advisers had been telling him. He thus ordered the destruction of holy images, facing outright riots when workers tried to make good on his proclamation by removing icons of Christ affixed to the imperial palace. In the provinces, whole regions rose up in revolt when royal servants showed up and tried to destroy icons. In Rome, Pope Gregory II was appalled and excommunicated Leo. Leo, in turn, declared that the pope no longer had any religious authority in the empire, which for practical purposes meant the regions under Byzantine control in Italy, Sicily, and the Balkans.

The official ban of icons lasted until 843, over a century, before the emperors reversed it (it was an empress, named Theodora like the famous wife of Justinian centuries earlier, who led the charge to officially restore icons). The controversy weakened the empire by dividing it between iconoclasts loyal to the official policy of the emperors and traditionalists who venerated the icons, while the empire itself was still beset by invasions. Iconoclasm also lent itself to what would eventually become a permanent split between the eastern and western churches – Orthodoxy and Catholicism. The final and permanent split between the western and eastern churches, already *de facto* in place for centuries, was in 1054, when Pope Leo IX and Patriarch Michael I excommunicated each other after Michael refused to acknowledge Leo's preeminence – this event cemented the “Great Schism” (schism means “break” or “split”) between the western and eastern churches.

In the wake of iconoclasm, the leaders of the Orthodox church, the patriarchs of Constantinople, would claim that innovations in theology or Christian practice were heresies. This attitude extended to secular learning as well – it was acceptable to study classical literature and even philosophy, but new forms of philosophy and scholarly innovation was regarded as dangerous. The long-term pattern was thus that, while it preserved ancient learning, Byzantine intellectual culture did not lend itself to progress.

The Late Golden Age and the Final Decline

Byzantium's last period of strength was under a Macedonian dynasty, lasting from 867 – 1056. A murderous leader named Basil I, originating from Macedonia, seized the throne in 867 and initiated a line of ruthless but competent leaders who governed for about two hundred years. Under the Macedonians, Byzantine territorial lines were pushed back to part of Mesopotamia and Armenia in the east and Crete and Cyprus in the Mediterranean. The important effect of these reconquests was trade; once again, Byzantium was at the center of an international trade network stretching across Europe and the Middle East. This vastly enriched Constantinople and its region, leading to a renaissance in building and art. Under the patronage of the Macedonian dynasty, some ancient learning was revived, as scholars tried to find ways to make the work of the ancient Greek masters compatible with Orthodox Christian teachings.

During this late golden age, Constantinople's population rebounded, with food supplies guaranteed by the imperial government. Even the poor lived better lives in Constantinople than did the relatively well-off in Western Europe, much of which was barbaric by comparison. An elite class of administrators occupied a social position somewhat like the ancient Egyptian scribes and were educated in Christianized versions of Greek learning and classics; one scholar named Photius produced an encyclopedia of ancient Greek writings that is the only record of many texts that would have been otherwise permanently lost.



Byzantium in its late golden age – note that Constantinople remained both geographically and politically central.

These happy times for Byzantium ended when the emperor Basil II died in 1025 with no male heirs. Simultaneously, a series of bad harvests hit the empire. Byzantium's military success was based on the themes, which were in turn based on the existence of reasonably prosperous independent farmers. Bad harvests saw those farmers vanish, their lands swallowed up by the holdings of wealthy aristocrats. As had happened in the Roman Republic so long ago, the problem was that there were thus no soldiers to recruit, and the armies shrank.

Likewise, the relative calm of the Macedonian period ended with the rise of a new group of invaders from the east: the Seljuk Turks. A powerful group of nomadic raiders from the western part of Central Asia, the Turks had converted to Islam centuries earlier. Despite having no centralized leadership (the Seljuks themselves were just one of the dominant clans with no real authority over most of their fellow raiders), by about the year 1000 CE they began invading both Byzantine territories and those of their fellow Muslims, the Arabs. Over the next few centuries, the Turks grew in power, steadily encroaching on Byzantium's territories in Anatolia.

Fewer independent citizens meant fewer good soldiers, and the armies of Byzantium thus became dominated by foreign mercenaries paid out of the imperial treasury, representing an enormous financial burden for the empire. Another disaster occurred in 1199 when Constantinople itself was invaded and sacked by crusaders (during the Fourth Crusade) from Western Europe who were supposed to be sailing to fight in the Holy Land. For about fifty years, Byzantium (already reduced to a fraction of its former size) was ruled by a Catholic king. Even when the king was deposed and a Greek dynasty restored, nothing could be done to recapture lost territory. The Muslim empires that surrounded Byzantium occupied its territory until Constantinople finally fell in 1453 to the Ottoman Turks. With it, the last vestige of Roman civilization, founded over two thousand years earlier on the banks of the Tiber River in Italy, ceased to exist as a political reality.

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CHAPTER 12: ISLAM AND THE CALIPHATES

The history of Islam is an integral part of the history of Western Civilization. Consider the following:

Islam was born in the heartland of Western Civilization: the Middle East.

Islam is a religion of precisely the same religious tradition as Judaism and Christianity. In Islam, the prophets that came before Muhammad, from Abraham and Moses to Jesus, are venerated as genuine messengers of God. The distinction is that, for Muslims, Muhammad was the *last* prophet, bringing the “definitive version” of God’s message to humanity. The word *Allah* simply means “God” in Arabic – He is the same God worshiped by Jews and Christians.

The Islamic empires were the most advanced in the world, alongside China, during the European Middle Ages. During that period, they created and preserved all important scholarship worthy of the name. As noted in the previous chapter, it was Arab scholarship that preserved ancient Greek learning, and Arab scholars were responsible for numerous technological and scientific discoveries as well.

The Islamic empires were often the enemies of various Christian ones. They were certainly the target of the European crusades. But, at the same time, the Christian kingdoms were often the enemies of one another as well. Likewise, different Islamic states were often in conflict. The political, and military, history of medieval Europe and the Middle East is one of different political entities both warring and trading; religion was certainly a major factor, but there are many cases where it was secondary to more prosaic economic or political concerns.

The Islamic states were the active trading partners and sometimes allies of their neighbors from India and Central Asia to Africa and Europe. Islam’s initial spread was due to an enormous, unprecedented military campaign, but after that campaign ended the resulting empires and kingdoms entered into a more familiar economic and diplomatic relationship with their respective neighbors.

Thus, it is important to include the story of Islam as an inherent, intrinsic part of the history of Western Civilization, not the religious bogeyman Medieval Europeans sometimes imagined it to be. That being noted, it is not just medieval prejudices or contemporary geopolitical conflict that has created the conceit that Islam is some alien entity to Western Civilization. After the rise of Christianity and the conversion of the Roman Empire, the idea of a single, unified empire of Christianity, “Christendom” became central to the identity of Christians in Europe. Once Rome itself fell, this idea became even more important. The Germanic Kingdoms, what was left of the western empire, the new rising empires like the Kievan Rus, and of course Byzantium were all linked in the concept of Christendom. For many of those Christian states, Islam was indeed the enemy, because the rise of Islam coincided with one of the most extraordinary series of military conquests in world history: the Arab conquests.

Thus, from its very beginning, there have been historical reasons that Christians and Muslims sometimes considered themselves enemies. The first generations of Muslims did indeed try to conquer every culture and kingdom they encountered, although not initially in the name of conversion. The important thing to bear in mind, however, is that throughout the Middle Ages many of the struggles between Christian and Muslim kingdoms, and Christian and Muslim people, were as often about conventional battles over power, wealth, and politics as religious belief. Likewise, once the years of conquest were over, Islamic states settled into familiar patterns of peaceful trade and they contained religiously diverse populations.

Origins of Islam

The pre-Islamic Arabian peninsula, most of which is today the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, was populated by the Arab people. The Arabs were herders and merchants. They were organized tribally, with tribes claiming descent from common ancestors and governing through meetings of the patriarchs of each clan. The Arabs were well known in the Roman and Byzantine world as merchants for their camel caravans that linked Europe to a part of the Spice Road, transporting goods from India and China. They were also known to be some of the most fierce and effective mercenary warriors in the eastern Mediterranean region; they rode slim, fast, agile horses and fought as light cavalry.

Arab trade, and population, was concentrated in the more fertile southern and western regions, especially in what is today the country of Yemen. By the late Roman Empire, small but prosperous Arab kingdoms were in diplomatic contact with both Rome and Persia (as well as the Christian kingdom of Ethiopia, then called Aksum). As the wars between Rome and Persia became even more destructive after the Sasanian takeover in 234 CE, the Arabs emerged as important mercenaries and political clients for both empires. Persia in particular invested heavily in employing Arab soldiers and in cultivating the maritime trade route across the Indian Ocean and along the south and west coasts of Arabia. For a time, the southern coast of Arabia was ruled by Persia through Arab clients and Persia was clearly a major cultural influence (so great was the renown of the Persian Great King Khusrau that his name became the root of an Arabic word for king: *kisra*). This contact and trade enriched the Arabic economy and led to a high degree of tactical sophistication among Arab soldiers.



Arabia in 600 CE. The names in black on the map are the clan groups at the time. Mecca is spelled “Makkah,” with Yathrib to its north.

The Arabs were polytheists – they worshiped a variety of gods linked to various oases in the desert. One important holy site that would take on even greater importance after the rise of Islam was the city of Mecca. Mecca had been a major center of trade for centuries, lying at the intersection of trade routes and near oases. In the center of Mecca was a shrine, called the *Ka'aba*, built around a piece of volcanic rock worshiped as a holy object in various Arabic faiths, and Mecca was a major pilgrimage site for the Arabs well before Islam.

Muhammad

Everything changed in the Arab world in the sixth century CE. A man named Muhammad was born in 570 CE to a powerful clan of merchants, the Quraysh, who controlled various trade enterprises in Mecca and surrounding cities. He grew up to be a merchant, marrying a wealthy and intelligent widow named Khadija (who was originally his employer) and traveling with caravans. He was particularly well known as a fair and perceptive arbitrator of disputes among other Arab tribes and merchants. He traveled widely on business, dealing with both Christians and Jews in Palestine and Syria, where he learned about their respective religions.

An introspective man who detested greed and corruption, Muhammad was in the habit of retreating to hills near Mecca, where there was a cave in which he would camp and meditate. When he was about forty, he returned to Mecca and reported that he had been contacted by the archangel Gabriel, who informed him that he, Muhammad, was to bear God's message to the people of Mecca and the world. The core of that message was that the one true God, the God of Abraham, venerated already by the Jews and Christians, had called the Arabs to cast aside their idols and unite in a community of worshippers.

Muhammad did not meet with much success in Mecca in his initial preaching. The temples of the many gods there were rich and powerful and people resented Muhammad's attempts to get them to convert to his new religion, in large part because he was asking them to cast aside centuries of religious tradition. The real issue with Muhammad's message was its call for exclusivity – if Muhammad had just asked the Meccans to venerate the God of Abraham in addition to their existing deities, it probably would not have incited such fierce resistance, especially from the clan leaders who dominated Meccan society. Those clan leaders were fearful that if Muhammad's message caught on, it would threaten the pilgrims who flocked to Mecca to venerate the various deities: that would be bad for business.

Thus, in 622 CE, Muhammad and a group of his followers left Mecca, exiled by the powerful families that were part of Muhammad's own extended clan, and traveled to the city of Yathrib, which Muhammad later renamed Medina ("the city of the Prophet"), 200 miles north. They were welcomed there by the people of Medina who hoped that Muhammad could serve as an impartial mediator in the frequent disputes between clans and families. Muhammad's trek to Medina is called the *Hejira* (also spelled *Hijra* in English) and is the starting date of the Islamic calendar.

In Medina, Muhammad met with much more success in winning converts. He quickly established a religious community with himself as the leader, one that made no distinction between religious and political authority. His followers would regularly gather to hear him recite the *Koran*, which means "recitations": the repeated words of God Himself as spoken to Muhammad by the angel. In 624, just two years after his arrival in Medina, Muhammad led a Muslim force against a Meccan army, and then in 630 CE, he conquered Mecca, largely by skillfully negotiating with his former enemies there – he promised to make Mecca the center of Islam, to require pilgrimage, and to incorporate it into his growing kingdom. He sent missionaries and soldiers across Arabia, as well as to foreign powers like Byzantium and Persia. By his death in 632, Muhammad had already rallied most of the Arab tribes under his leadership and most willingly converted to Islam.

Islam

The word Islam means "submission." Its central tenet is submission before the will of God, as revealed to humanity by Muhammad. An aspect of Islam that distinguishes it from Judaism and Christianity is that the Koran has a single point of origin, the recitations of Muhammad himself, and it is believed by Muslims that it cannot be translated from Arabic and remain the "real" holy book. In other words, translations can be made for the sake of education, but every word in the Koran, spoken in the classical Arabic of Muhammad's day, is believed to be that true language of God – according to traditional Islamic belief, the angels speak Arabic in paradise.

According to Islam, Muhammad was the last in the line of prophets stretching back to Abraham and Moses and including Jesus, whom Muslims consider a major prophet and a religious leader, but not actually divine. Muhammad delivered the "definitive version" of God's will as it was told to him by Gabriel on the mountainside. The core tenets of Islamic belief are referred to as the "five pillars":

There is only one God and Muhammad is his prophet.

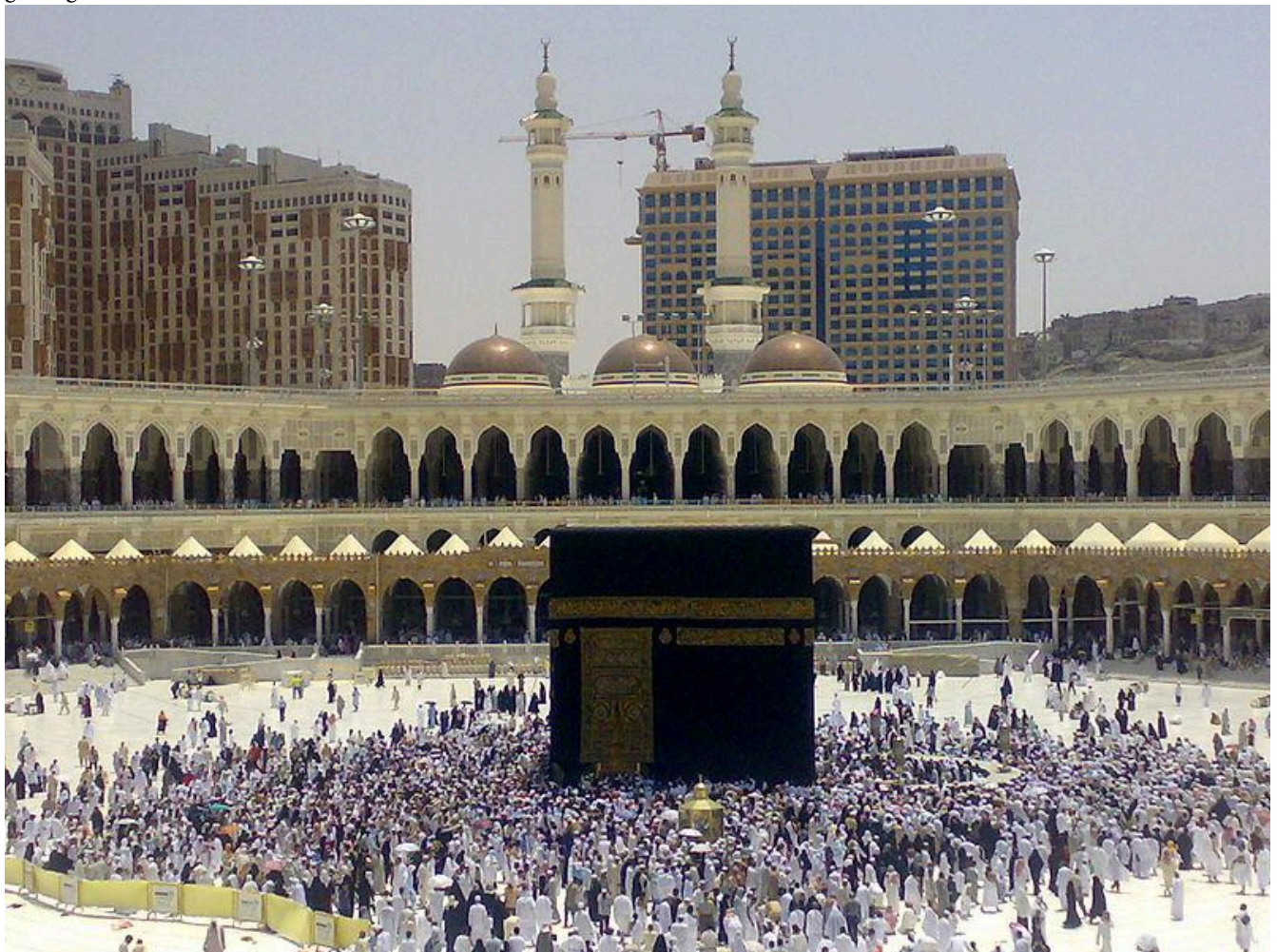
Each Muslim must pray five times a day, facing toward the holy city of Mecca.

During the holy month of Ramadan, each Muslim must fast from dawn to sundown.

Charity should be given to the needy.

If possible, at least once in his or her life, each Muslim should undertake the *Haaqj*: the pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

In turn, a central concept of Islam is that of the worldwide community of Muslims, the *Ummah*, meaning “community of believers.” The Ummah was a central idea from the lifetime of Muhammad onward, referring to a shared identity among Muslims that is supposed to transcend differences of language, ethnicity, and culture. All Muslims are to follow the five pillars, just as all Muslims are to meet other members of the Ummah at least once in their lives while on pilgrimage.



The Ka'aba (contemporary photograph).

One term associated with Islam, Jihad, has sparked widespread misunderstanding among non-Muslims. The word itself simply means “struggle.” It does mean “holy war” in some cases, but not in most. The concept of Jihad revolves around the struggle for Muslims to live according to Muhammad’s example and by his teachings. Its most common use is the “jihad of the heart,” of struggling to live morally against the myriad corrupting temptations of life.

The Koran itself was written down starting during Muhammad’s life (his revelations were delivered over the course of about twenty years, and were initially transmitted orally). The definitive version was completed in the years

following his death. Of secondary importance to the Koran is the *Hadith*, a collection of stories about Muhammad's life, behavior, and sayings, all of which provided a model of a righteous and ethical life. In turn, in the generations following his death, Muslim leaders created the *Sharia*, the system of Islamic law based on the Koran and Hadith.

The Political History of the Arabs After Muhammad

When Muhammad died, there were immediate problems among the Muslim Arabs. He did not name a successor, but he had been the definitive leader of the Islamic community during his life; it seemed clear that the community was *meant* to have a leader. The Muslim elders appointed Muhammad's father-in-law, Abu Bakr (r. 632 – 634), as the new leader after a period of deliberation. He became the first *Caliph*, meaning “successor”: the head of the *Ummah*, the man who represented both spiritual and political authority to Muslims.

Under Abu Bakr and his successors, Umar (another of Muhammad's fathers-in-law; r. 634 – 644), and Uthman (r. 644 – 655), Muslim armies expanded rapidly. This began as a means to ensure the loyalty of the fractious Arab tribes as much as to expand the faith; both Abu Bakr and Umar were forced to suppress revolts of Arab tribes, and Umar hit upon the idea of raiding Persia and Byzantium to keep the tribes loyal. For the first time in history, the Arabs embarked on a sustained campaign of conquest rather than serving others as mercenaries.

Riding their swift horses and camels and devoted to their cause, the Arab armies conquered huge amounts of territory extremely rapidly. It was the Arab army that finally conquered Persia in 637 (although it took until 650 for all Persian resistance to be vanquished), that hitherto-unconquered adversary of Rome. The Arabs conquered Syria and seized Byzantine territory in Anatolia equally quickly: Egypt was conquered by 642, with an attempted Byzantine counter-attack fought off in 645. Within twenty years of the death of Muhammad, the heartland of the Middle East was firmly in Arab Muslim hands.

Part of the success of the first decades of the Arab conquests was because of the vulnerability of Byzantium and Persia at the time, and another part was the tactical skill of Arab soldiers. The Arabs conquered Persia not just because it was weakened by its wars with Byzantium (most importantly its defeat by Heraclius in 627), but because many Arab clans had fought as mercenaries for both sides in the conflict; great wealth had been flowing into Arabia for decades, and the Arabs were already veteran soldiers. They had learned both Roman and Persian tactics and strategy and they were skilled at siegecraft, intelligence-gathering, and open battle alike.

The Arab armies were easily the match of the Byzantine and Persian forces. The Arabs were able to field armies of about 20,000 – 30,000 men, with a total force of closer to 200,000 by about 700 CE. Most were Arabs from Arabia itself, along with Arabs who had settled in Syria and Palestine and were then recruited. A smaller percentage were non-Arabs who converted and joined the armies. Tactically, the majority were infantry who fought with spears and swords and were lightly-armored.

The major tactical advantage of the Arab armies was their speed: horses and camels were important less as animals to fight from than as means of transportation for the lightly-armored and equipped armies. Soldiers were paid in coins captured as booty and whole armies were expected to buy their supplies as they marched rather than relying on heavy baggage trains. Their conquests were a kind of sustained sprint as a result. Likewise, one specific military “technology” that the Arabs used to great effect was camels, since no other culture was as adept at training and using camels as were the Arabs. Camels allowed the Arab armies to cross deserts and launch sudden attacks on their enemies, often catching them by surprise.

Finally, especially in Byzantine territories, high taxes and ongoing struggles between the official Orthodox form of Christianity and various other Christian sects led many Byzantine citizens to welcome their new Arab rulers; taxes often went *down*, and the Arabs were indifferent to which variety of Christian their new subjects happened to be. In addition, the Arabs made little effort to convert non-Arabs to Islam for several generations after the initial conquests. To be clear, there was plenty of bloodshed during the Arab conquests, including the deaths of many civilians, but the long-term experience of Arab rule in former Byzantine territories was no more, and probably less, oppressive than it had been under Byzantium.

The Umayyad Caliphate and the Shia

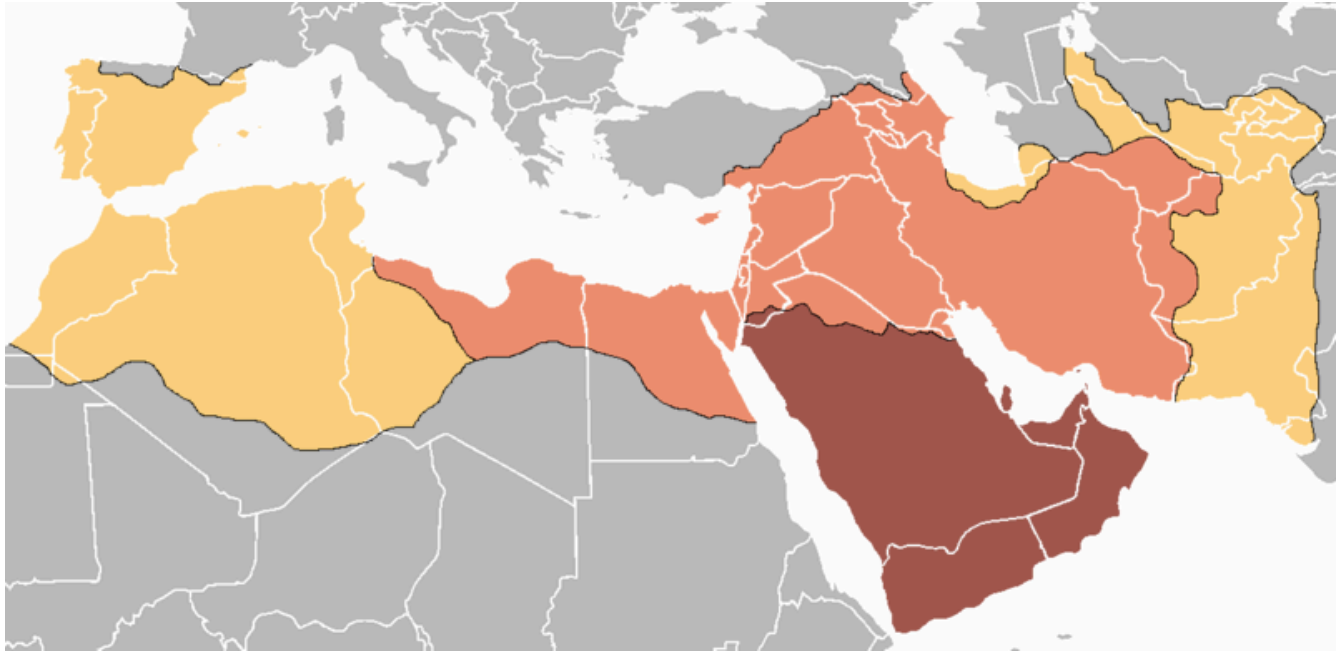
The second caliph, Umar, was murdered by a slave in 644 and the Muslim leaders had to pick the next caliph. They chose an early convert and companion of Muhammad, Uthman. Many members of the Muslim community, however, supported Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali, claiming he should be the head of the Ummah, as someone who was part of Muhammad's direct family line. That group was known as the "party" or "faction" of Ali: the *Shia* of Ali (note that Shia is also frequently spelled "Shi'ite" in English). For Shia Muslims, the central idea was that only descendants of Muhammad should lead the Ummah. The majority of Muslims, known as Sunnis ("traditionalists"), however, argued that any sufficiently righteous and competent leader could be appointed caliph.

While the Shia rejected Uthman's authority in theory, there was as yet no outright violence between the two factions within the larger Muslim community. In 656 Uthman died, the victim of a short-lived Egyptian rebellion against the Arabs. Ali was elected as the next caliph, seemingly ending the dispute over who should lead the Ummah. Unfortunately for Muslim unity, however, a significant number of Arab leaders disagreed with Ali's policies and chose to support a rival would-be caliph, a relative of Uthman named Mu'awiya, a member of the Umayyad clan governing Syria. Ali was murdered by a rebel (unrelated to the power struggle over the caliphate) in 661, cementing the Umayyad claim on power, but not the doctrinal dispute between Shia and Sunni.

It was thus under the leadership of caliphs who were not themselves related to Muhammad's family line that the Arab conquests not only continued, but stabilized in the form of a true empire. The Umayyad clan created the first long-lasting and stable Muslim state: the Umayyad Caliphate. It was centered in Syria and lasted almost 100 years. It supervised the consolidation of the gains of the Arab armies to date, along with vast new conquests in North Africa and Spain. The Umayyads were capable administrators and skilled generals and the majority of Muslims saw the Umayyad rulers as the legitimate caliphs.

What they could not do, however, was destroy the Shia, despite Ali's death. Shia Muslims, representing about 10% of the population of the Ummah (then and now), viewed the Umayyad government as fundamentally illegitimate, rejecting the very idea of a caliphate and arguing instead that the faithful should be led by an *Imam*: a direct biological and spiritual descendant of Muhammad's family. When Ali's son Hussein, then the leader of the Shia and a grandson of Muhammad himself, was killed by the Umayyads in 680, the permanent breach between Sunni and Shia was cemented.

By 700 CE, the Umayyads had conquered all of North Africa as far as the Atlantic. Then, in 711, they invaded Spain and smashed the Visigothic kingdom, definitively ending Arian Christianity across both North Africa and Spain. They were finally stopped in 732 by a Frankish army led by the Frankish lord Charles Martel at the Battle of Poitiers; this marked the end of the Arab conquests in Europe. Likewise, despite conquering large amounts of Byzantine territory, Constantinople itself withstood a huge siege in 718 and Byzantine forces then pushed back Arab forces in Anatolia.



The Arab Conquests, stretching from Persia in the east to Morocco and Spain in the west. The colors correspond to chronology: Arabia itself was united under Muhammad and his immediate successors, the regions in orange under the first four caliphs, and the regions in yellow under the Umayyads.

In Africa, Umayyad armies also attacked Nubia, still one of the richest kingdoms in the region, but were unable to defeat it. For the first time, the caliphate signed a peace treaty with a non-Muslim state; this was an important precedent because it established the idea that a Muslim state could acknowledge the political legitimacy of a non-Muslim one. Afterwards, the Umayyad Caliphate came to deal with non-Muslim powers primarily in terms of normal diplomacy rather than through the lens of holy war.

In 751, Arab forces went so far as to defeat a Chinese army in Central Asia outside of the caravan city of Samarkand (they fought an army of the Tang dynasty, which had been expanding along the Silk Road). The last Umayyad caliph had been murdered shortly before this conflict, however, and the Muslim forces thus had little reason to continue their expansion. This battle marked the furthest extent of the core Muslim-ruled territories. For several centuries to follow, the Muslim world thus consisted of the Middle East, North Africa, and Spain.

The Umayyad Government and Society

The Umayyads did not just complete and consolidate the conquests of the Arabs. They also established lasting forms of governance. They quickly abandoned the practice of having elders come together to appoint leadership, insisting on a hereditary line of caliphs. This alone caused a civil war in the late seventh century, as some of their Muslim subjects rose up, claiming that they had perverted the proper line of leadership in the community. The Umayyads won that war, too.

The major problem for the Umayyads was the sheer size of their empire. Just like other rapid conquests, like that of Alexander the Great 1,000 years earlier, in the course of just a few decades a people found itself in control of

enormous swaths of territory. The Arabs had a strong lingual and cultural identity and many of the Arab conquerors saw themselves as a people apart from their new subjects, regardless of religious belief. Thus, while non-Arabs were certainly encouraged to convert to Islam, the power structure of the Caliphate remained resolutely Arabic. As with the Greeks under Alexander, the Romans during their centuries of conquest, and the Germanic tribes that sliced up the western Roman empire, the Arabs found themselves a small minority ruling over various other groups.

To try to effectively govern this vast new empire, the Umayyads took over and adapted the bureaucracies of the people they conquered, including those of both the Byzantines and, especially, the Persians. They created new borders and provinces to better suit their administration and ensure that tax revenue made it back to the capital at Damascus, with the idiosyncratic additional factor of needing to pay an ongoing salary to all Arab soldiers, even after those soldiers had retired.

One change that was to last until the present was lingual. Unlike in the Greek case during the Hellenistic period, Arabic was to replace the vernacular of the land conquered during the Arab conquests. The only exceptions were Persian, which would eventually become the modern language of Farsi (the vernacular of the present-day country of Iran), and Spain, where Arabic and Spanish coexisted until Christian kingdoms reconquered Spain many centuries later. This lingual uniformity was a huge benefit to trade and cultural and intellectual exchange, because one could travel from Spain to India and speak a single language, as well as be protected from bandits by a single administration.

Arabs also followed the patterns of Greek and Roman conquerors by colonizing the places they conquered. At first, they settled in garrison and administrative towns, but they also set up communities within conquered cities. As Arabic became the language of daily life, not just of administration, Arabs and non-Arabs mixed more readily. Arabs also built new cities all across their empire, the most notable being a small town in Egypt that would eventually grow into Cairo. They built these cities on the Hellenistic and Roman model: planned grids of streets at right angles. In the center of each city was the mosque, which served not only as the center of worship, but in various other functions. Mosques were both figuratively and literally central to the cities of the Umayyad caliphate. They were the predominant public spaces for discussion among men. They were the courthouses and the banks. They provided schooling and instruction. They were also often attached to administrative offices and governmental functions.

The Umayyads imposed taxes across their entire empire, even insisting that their fellow Arabs pay a tax on their land, which was met with enormous resistance because, to Arabs unused to paying taxes at all, it implied subordination. By channeling taxes through their new, efficient bureaucracy, the Umayyads were able to support a very large standing army. That allowed them not only to keep up the pressure on surrounding lands, but to quash rebellions.

The Umayyads supervised a tremendous expansion in trade and commerce across the Middle East and North Africa as well. Muhammad had been a merchant, after all, and the longstanding commercial practices and regulations of Arabic society were codified in Sharia law – in that sense, commercial law was directly linked to religious righteousness. Likewise, even from this early period, the caliphate supported maritime trade networks. Muslim traders regularly sailed all across the Mediterranean, the Persian Gulf, the Indian Ocean, and eventually as far as China and the Philippines. In waters controlled by the caliphate, piracy was contained, so trade prospered even more.

One effect of Arab seafaring is that Islam spread along sea routes well beyond the political control of any of the Arab empires and kingdoms to come; today the single largest predominantly Muslim country is Indonesia, thanks to Muslim merchants that brought their faith along the trade routes. By the time European explorers began to establish permanent ties to Asian kingdoms and empires in the sixteenth century, Islam was established in various regions from India to the Pacific, thousands of miles from its Middle Eastern heartland.

Other Faiths

One of the noteworthy aspects of the Arab conquests is the complex role of conversion. The Koran specifically forbids the forcible conversion of Jews and Christians. It does allow that non-Muslim monotheists pay a special tax, however. For the century of Umayyad rule, only about 10% of the population was Muslim. Non-Muslims, called *dhimmis* (followers of religions tolerated by law) had to pay a head tax and were not allowed to share in governmental decision-making or in the spoils of war. Many Jews and Christians found Arab rule preferable to Byzantine rule, however, because the Byzantine government had actively persecuted religious dissenters and the Arabs did not. Likewise, taxes were lower under the Arabs as compared to Byzantium. These traditions of relative tolerance would continue all the way up to the modern era in places like the Ottoman Empire. However, even without forcible pressure, many people did convert to Islam either out of a heartfelt attraction to Islam or because of simple pragmatism; in some cases, Muslim generals rejected the attempted conversions of local people because it threatened their tax base so much.

There was also the case of the nomadic peoples of North Africa, collectively referred to as “Berbers” by the Arabs. The Berbers were hardy, warlike tribesmen living in rugged mountainous regions across North Africa. They had already seen the Romans and the Vandals come and go and simply kept up their traditions with the arrival of the Arabs. They were, however, polytheists, which the Muslims were unwilling to tolerate. Thus, faced with the choice of forcible conversion or death, the Berbers converted and then promptly joined the Arab armies as auxiliaries. This lent tremendous strength to the Arab forces and helps explain the relative ease of their conquests, especially in Spain.

The members of other monotheistic faiths who chose not to convert were often left much more free to practice their religions than they would have been in Christian lands, because the Umayyads simply did not care about theological disagreements among their Jewish and Christian subjects so long as the taxes were paid. Over time, various sects of Christianity survived in Muslim lands that vanished in kingdoms that were officially, and rigidly, Christian. Likewise, Jews found that they were generally better off in Muslim lands than in Christian kingdoms because of their safety from official persecution. Jews became vitally important merchants, scholars, bankers, and traders all across the caliphate.

Zoroastrianism, however, declined in the long run. The first generations of Muslim rulers accepted Zoroastrians as People of the Book like Jews and Christians, but that acceptance atrophied over time. Muslims were less tolerant of Zoroastrianism because it did not venerate the God of Abraham and its traditions were markedly different from those of Judaism and Christianity. Likewise, as Muslim rule over Persia was consolidated over time, the practical necessity of respecting Zoroastrianism as the majority religion of the Persian people weakened. By the tenth century, most Zoroastrians who had not converted to Islam migrated to India, where they remain today in communities known as the Parsees.

The Abbasids

The Umayyads fell from power in 750 because of a revolutionary uprising against their rule led by the Abbasids, a clan descended from Muhammad’s uncle. The Abbasids were supported by many non-Arab but Muslim subjects of the Caliphate (called *mawali*) who resented the fact that the Umayyads had always protected the status of Arabs at the expense of non-Arab Muslims in their empire. After seizing control of the Caliphate, the Abbasids went on a concerted murdering spree, trying to eliminate all potential Umayyad competitors, with only a single member of the Umayyad leadership surviving. The Abbasids lost control of some of the territories that had been held by the Umayyads (starting

with Spain, which formed its own caliphate under the surviving Umayyad), but the majority of the lands conquered in the Arab conquests a century earlier remained in their control.

The true golden age of medieval Islam took place during the Abbasid Caliphate. The Abbasids moved the capital of the caliphate from Damascus to Baghdad, which they founded in part to be nearer to the heart of Persian governmental traditions. There, they combined Islam even more closely with Persian traditions of art and learning. They also created a tradition of fair rulership, in contrast to the memory of Umayyad corruption. The Abbasid caliphs were the leaders of both the political and spiritual orders of their society, seeking to make sure everything from law to trade to religious practice was running smoothly and fairly. They enforced fair trade practices and used their well-trained armies primarily to ensure good trade routes, to enforce fair tax collection, and to put down the occasional rebellion. The Abbasid rulers represented, in short, a kind of enlightened despotism that was greatly ahead of Byzantium or the Latin kingdoms of Europe in terms of its cosmopolitanism. The Abbasids abandoned Arab-centric policies and instead adopted Muslim universalism that allowed any Muslim the possibility of achieving the highest state offices and political and social importance.

Perhaps the most important phenomenon within the Abbasid caliphate was the great emphasis and respect the caliphs placed on learning. New discoveries were made in astronomy, metallurgy, and medicine, and learned works from a variety of languages were translated and preserved in Arabic. The most significant tradition of scholarship surrounding Aristotle's works, in particular, took place in the Abbasid caliphate.

The major library in Baghdad was called the House of Wisdom; it was one of the great libraries of the world at the time. The various advances that took place in the Abbasid Caliphate included:

Medicine: far more accurate diagnoses and treatments than existed anywhere else (outside of China).

Optics: early telescopes, along with the definitive refutation of the idea that the eye sends out beams to detect things and instead receives information reflected off of objects.

Chemistry: various methods including evaporation, filtration, sublimation, and even distillation. Despite the specific ban on intoxicants in the Koran, it was Abbasid chemists who invented distilled spirits: *al-kuhl*, meaning "the essence," from which the English word alcohol derives.

Mathematics: the creation of Arabic numerals, based on Hindu characters, which were far easier to work with than the clunky Roman equivalents. In turn, the Abbasids invented algebra and trigonometry.

Geography and exploration: accurate maps of Asia and East Africa, thanks to the presence of Muslim merchant colonies as far as China, along with new navigational technologies like the astrolabe (a device that is used to determine latitude while at sea).

Banking: the invention of checks and forms of commercial insurance for merchants.

Massive irrigation systems, which made Mesopotamia nearly on par with Egypt as the richest farmland in the world.



Scholars in the House of Wisdom in Baghdad.

In addition, the Abbasid Caliphate witnessed a major increase in literacy. Not only were Muslims (men and women alike) encouraged to memorize the Koran itself, but scholars and merchants were often interchangeable; unlike medieval Christianity, Islam did not reject commerce as being somehow morally tainted. Thus, Muslims, whose literacy was due to study of specifically Islamic texts, the Koran and the Hadith especially, easily used the same skills in commerce. The overall result was a higher literacy rate than anywhere else in the world at the time, with the concomitant advantages in technological progress and commercial prosperity.

The success of the Abbasids in ruling a huge, diverse empire arose in part from their willingness to follow Persian traditions of rule (a pattern that would be repeated by later Turkic and Mongol rulers). The Abbasid caliphs employed Persian bureaucrats and ruled in a manner similar to the earlier Persian Great Kings, although they did not adopt that title. Their role as caliphs was in protecting the *ummah* and providing a political framework in which *sharia* law could prosper – it was in the Abbasid period that Islamic law was truly developed and codified. From the Persian tradition the Abbasid caliphs borrowed both practical traditions of bureaucracy and administration and an equally important tradition of political status: they were the rulers over many peoples, acknowledging local identities while expecting deference and, of course, taxes.

At its height, the Abbasid Empire was truly enormous– it covered more land area than had the Roman Empire. Its merchants traveled from Spain to China, and it maintained diplomatic relations with the rulers of territories thousands of miles from Baghdad. The Caliphate reached its peak during the rule of the caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786 – 809). His palace was so enormous that it occupied one-third of Baghdad. He and the greatest early-medieval European

king, Charlemagne, exchanged presents and friendly letters, albeit out of political expediency: Charlemagne was the enemy of the Cordoban Caliphate of Spain, the last vestige of Umayyad power, and the Abbasids acted as an external pressure that Charlemagne hoped would make the Byzantine emperors recognize the legitimacy of his imperial title (as an aside, one of Charlemagne's prized possessions was his pet elephant, sent to his distant court by al-Rashid as a goodwill gift).

Already by al-Rashid's reign, however, the Caliphate was splintering; it was simply too large to run efficiently without advanced bureaucratic institutions. North Africa west of Egypt seceded by 800, emerging as a group of rival Islamic kingdoms. Other territories followed suit during the rest of the ninth century, leaving the Caliphate in direct control of only the core lands of Mesopotamia. Within its remaining territory the caliphs faced uprisings as well. Even the idea of a united (Sunni) ummah was a casualty of this political breakdown – the ruler of the Spanish kingdom claimed to be the “true” caliph, with a Shia dynasty in Egypt known as the Fatimids contesting both claims since it rejected the very idea of a Sunni caliph.

The political independence of the Caliphate ended in 945 when it was conquered by Persian tribesmen, who took control of secular power while keeping the Caliph alive as a figurehead. In 1055, a Turkish group, the Seljuks (the same group then menacing Byzantium), seized control and did exactly the same thing. For the next two centuries the Abbasid caliphs enjoyed the respect and spiritual deference of most Sunni Muslims, but exercised no political power of their own.

As Seljuk power increased, that of the Caliphate itself waned. Numerous independent, and rival, Islamic kingdoms emerged across the Middle East, North Africa, and northern India, leaving even the Middle Eastern heartland vulnerable to foreign invasion, first by European crusaders starting in 1095, and most disastrously during the Mongol invasion of 1258 (under a grandson of Genghis Khan). It was the Mongols who ended the Caliphate once and for all, murdering the last caliph and obliterating much of the infrastructure built during Abbasid rule in the process.

Europe

Two parts of Europe came under Arab rule: Spain and Sicily. Spain was the last of the large territories to be conquered during the initial Arab conquests, and Sicily was eventually conquered during the Abbasid period. In both areas, the rulers, Arab and North African immigrants, and new converts to Islam lived alongside those who remained Christian or Jewish. During the Abbasid period in particular, Spain and Sicily were important as bridges between the Islamic and Christian worlds, where all faiths and peoples were tolerated. The city of Cordoba in Spain was a glorious metropolis, larger and more prosperous than any in Europe and any but Baghdad in the Arab world itself – it had a population of 100,000, paved streets, street lamps, and even indoor plumbing in the houses of the wealthy. All of the Arabic learning noted above made its way to Europe primarily through contact between people in Spain and Sicily.

The greatest period of contrast between the eastern lands of Byzantium and the caliphates, on the one hand, and most of Europe, on the other, was between the eighth and eleventh centuries. During that period, there were no cities in Europe with populations of over 15,000. The goods produced there, not to mention the quality of scholarship, were of abysmal quality compared to their Arab (or Byzantine) equivalents, and Christian Europe thus imported numerous goods from the Arab world, often through Spain and Sicily. Europe was largely a barter economy while the Muslim world was a currency-based market economy, with Shariah law providing a sophisticated legal framework for business transactions. Especially as Byzantium declined, the Muslim kingdoms stood at the forefront of scholarship, commerce, and military power.

Conclusion

As should be clear, the civilizations of the Middle East and North Africa were transformed by Islam, and the changes that Islam's spread brought with it were as permanent as were the results of the Christianization of the Roman Empire earlier. The geographical contours of these two faiths would remain largely in place up to the present, while the shared civilization that brought them into being continued to change.

Image Citations (Creative Commons):

[Map of Arabia](#) – Murraytheb

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[The Arab Conquests](#) – Brian Szymanski

[House of Wisdom](#) – Zereschk

CHAPTER 13: EARLY MEDIEVAL EUROPE

Introduction

Once the last remnants of Roman power west of the Balkans were extinguished in the late fifth century CE, the history of Europe moved into the period that is still referred to as “medieval,” meaning “middle” (between). Roughly 1,000 years separated the fall of Rome and the beginning of the Renaissance, the period of “rebirth” in which certain Europeans believed they were recapturing the lost glory of the classical world. Historians have long since dismissed the conceit that the Middle Ages were nothing more than the “Dark Ages” so maligned by Renaissance thinkers, and thus this chapter seeks to examine the early medieval world on its own terms – in particular, what were the political, social, and cultural realities of post-Roman Europe?

The Latin Church

After the fall of the western Roman empire, it was the Church that united Western Europe and provided a sense of European identity. That religious tradition would persist and spread, ultimately extinguishing the so-called “pagan” religions, despite the political fragmentation left in the wake of the fall of Rome. The one thing that nearly all Europeans eventually came to share was membership in the Latin Church (a note on nomenclature: for the sake of clarity, this chapter will use the term “Latin” instead of “Catholic” to describe the western Church based in Rome during this period, because both the western and eastern “Orthodox” churches claimed to be equally “catholic”: universal). As an institution, it alone was capable of preserving at least some of the legacy of ancient Rome.

That legacy was reflected in the learning preserved by the Church. For example, even though Latin faded away as a spoken language, all but vanishing by about the eighth century even in Italy, the Bible and written communication between educated elites was still in Latin. Latin went from being the vernacular of the Roman Empire to being, instead, the language of the educated elite all across Europe. An educated person (almost always a member of the Church in this period) from England could still correspond to an educated person in Spain or Italy, but that correspondence would take place in Latin. He or she would not be able to speak to their counterpart on the other side of the subcontinent, but they would share a written tongue.

Christianity displayed a remarkable power to convert even peoples who had previously proved militarily stronger than Christian opponents, from the Germanic invaders who had dismantled the western empire to the Slavic peoples that fought Byzantium to a standstill. Conversion often took place both because of the astonishing perseverance of Christian missionaries and the desire on the part of non-Christians to have better political relationships with Christians. That noted, there were also straightforward cases of forced conversions through military force – as described below, the Frankish king Charlemagne exemplified this tendency. Whether through heartfelt conversion or force, by the eleventh century almost everyone in Europe was a Christian, a Latin Christian in the west and an Orthodox Christian in the east.

The Papacy

The Latin Church was distinguished by the at least nominal leadership of the papacy based in Rome – indeed, it was the papal claim to leadership of the Christian Church as a whole that drove a permanent wedge between the western and eastern churches, since the Byzantine emperors claimed authority over both church and state. The popes were not just at the apex of the western church, they often ruled as kings unto themselves, and they always had complex relationships with other rulers. For the entire period of the early Middle Ages (from the end of the western Roman Empire until the eleventh century), the popes were rarely acknowledged as the sovereigns of the Church outside of Italy. Instead, this period was important in the longer history of institutional Christianity because many popes at least *claimed* authority over doctrine and organization – centuries later, popes would look back on the claims of their predecessors as “proof” that the papacy had *always* been in charge.

An important example of an early pope who created such a precedent is Gregory the Great, who was pope at the turn of the seventh century. Gregory still considered Rome part of the Byzantine Empire, but by that time Byzantium could not afford troops to help defend the city of Rome, and he was keenly interested in developing papal independence. As a result, Gregory shrewdly played different Germanic kings off against each other and used his spiritual authority to gain their trust and support. He sent missionaries into the lands outside of the kingdoms to spread Christianity, both out of a genuine desire to save souls and a pragmatic desire to see wider influence for the Church.

Gregory’s authority was not based on military power, nor did most Christians at the time assume that the pope of Rome (all bishops were then called “pope,” meaning simply “father”) was the spiritual head of the entire Church. Instead, popes like Gregory slowly but surely asserted their authority by creating mutually-beneficial relationships with kings and by overseeing the expansion of Christian missionary work. In the eighth century, the papacy produced a (forged, as it turned out) document known as the Donation of Constantine in which the Roman emperor Constantine supposedly granted authority over the western Roman Empire to the pope of Rome; that document was often cited by popes over the next several centuries as “proof” of their authority. Nevertheless, even powerful and assertive popes had to be realistic about the limits of their power, with many popes being deposed or even murdered in the midst of political turmoil.

Thus, Christianity spread not because of an all-powerful, highly centralized institution, but because of the flexibility and pragmatism of missionaries and the support of secular rulers (the Franks, considered below, were critical in this regard). All across Europe, missionaries had official instructions not to battle pagan religious practice, but to subtly reshape it. It was less important that pagans understood the nuances of Christianity and more important that they accepted its essential truth. All manner of “pagan” practices, words, and traditions survive into the present thanks to the crossover between Christianity and old pagan practices, including the names of the days of the week in English (Wednesday is Odin’s, or Wotan’s, day, Thursday is Thor’s day, etc). and the word “Easter” itself, from the Norse goddess of spring and fertility named Eostre.

As an example, in a letter to one of the major early English Christian leaders (later a saint), Bede, Pope Gregory advised Bede and his followers not to tear down pagan temples, but to consecrate and reuse them. Likewise, the existing pagan days of sacrifice were to be rededicated to God and the saints. Clearly, the priority was not an attempted purge of pagan culture, but instead the introduction of Christianity in a way that could more easily truly take root. Monks sometimes squabbled about the nuances of worship, but the key development was simply the spread of Christianity and the growing influence of the Church.

Characteristics of Medieval Christianity

The fundamental belief of medieval Christians was that the Church as an institution was the only path to spiritual salvation. It was much less important that a Christian understand any of the details of Christian theology than it was that they participate in Christian worship and, most importantly, receive the sacraments administered by the clergy. Given that the immense majority of the population was completely illiterate, it was impossible for most Christians to have access to anything but the rudiments of Christian belief. The path to salvation was thus not knowing anything about the life of Christ, the characteristics of God, or the names of the apostles, but of two things above all else: the sacraments and the relevant saints to pray to.

The sacraments were, and remain in contemporary Catholicism, the essential spiritual rituals conducted by ordained priests. Much of the practical, day-to-day power and influence exercised by the Church was based on the fact that *only* priests could administer the sacraments, making access to the Church a prerequisite for any chance of spiritual salvation in the minds of medieval Christians. The sacraments are:

Baptism – believed to be necessary to purge original sin from a newborn child. Without baptism, medieval Christians believed, even a newborn who died would be denied entrance to heaven. Thus, most people tried to have their newborns baptized immediately after birth, since infant mortality was extremely high.

Communion – following the example of Christ at the last supper, the ritual by which medieval Christians connected spiritually with God. One significant element of this was the belief in *transubstantiation*: the idea that the wine and holy wafer literally transformed into the blood and body of Christ at the moment of consumption.

Confession – necessary to receive forgiveness for sins, which every human constantly committed.

Confirmation – the pledge to be a faithful member of the Church taken in young adulthood.

Marriage – believed to be sanctified by God.

Holy orders – the vows taken by new members of the clergy.

Last Rites – a final ritual carried out at the moment of death to send the soul on to purgatory – the spiritual realm between earth and heaven where the soul's sins would be burned away over years of atonement and purification.

Unlike in most forms of contemporary Christianity, which tend to focus on the relationship of the individual to God directly, medieval Christians did not usually feel worthy of direct contact with the divine. Instead, the saints were hugely important to medieval Christians because they were both holy and yet still human. Unlike the omnipotent and remote figure of God, medieval Christians saw the saints as beings who cared for individual people and communities and who would potentially intercede on behalf of their supplicants. Thus, every village, every town, every city, and every kingdom had a patron saint who was believed to advocate on its behalf.

Along with the patron saints, the figures of Jesus and Mary became much more important during this period. Saints had served as intermediaries before an almighty and remote deity in the Middle Ages, but the high Church officials tried to advance veneration of Christ and Mary as equally universal but less overwhelming divine figures. Mary in particular represented a positive image of women that had never existed before in Christianity. The growing importance of Mary within Christian practice led to a new focus on charity within the Church, since she was believed to intervene on behalf of supplicants without need of reward.

Medieval Politics

While most Europeans (excluding the Jewish communities, the few remaining pagans, and members of heretical groups) may have come to share a religious identity by the eleventh century, Europe was fragmented politically. The numerous Germanic tribes that had dismantled the western Roman Empire formed the nucleus of the early political units of western Christendom. The Germanic peoples themselves had started as minorities, ruling over formerly Roman subjects. They tended to inherit Roman bureaucracy and rely on its officials and laws when ruling their subjects, but they also had their own traditions of Germanic law based on clan membership.

The so-called “feudal” system of law was one based on codes of honor and reciprocity. In the original Germanic system, each person was tied to his or her clan above all else, and an attack on an individual immediately became an issue for the entire clan. Any dishonor had to be answered by an equivalent dishonor, most often meeting insult with violence. Likewise, rulership was tied closely to clan membership, with each king being the head of the most powerful clan rather than an elected official or even necessarily a hereditary monarchy that transcended clan lines. This unregulated, traditional, and violence-based system of “law,” from which the modern English word “feud” derives, stood in contrast to the written codes of Roman law that still survived in the aftermath of the fall of Rome itself.

Over time, the Germanic rulers mixed with their subjects to the point that distinctions between them were nonexistent. Likewise, Roman law faded away to be replaced with traditions of feudal law and a very complex web of rights and privileges that were granted to groups within society by rulers (to help ensure the loyalty of their subjects). Thus, clan loyalty became less important over the centuries than did the rights, privileges, and pledges of loyalty offered and held by different social categories: peasants, townsfolk, warriors, and members of the church. In the process, medieval politics evolved over time into a hierarchical, class-based structure in which kings, lords, and priests ruled over the vast majority of the population: peasants.

Eventually, the relationship between lords and kings was formalized in a system of mutual protection (or even protection racket). A lord accepted pledges of loyalty, called a pledge of fealty, from other free men called his vassals; in return for their support in war he offered them protection and land-grants called fiefs. Each vassal had the right to extract wealth from his land, meaning the peasants who lived there, so that he could afford horses, armor, and weapons. In general, vassals did not have to pay their lords taxes (all tax revenue came from the peasants). Likewise, the Church itself was an enormously wealthy and powerful landowner, and church holdings were almost always tax-exempt; bishops were often lords of their own lands, and every king worked closely with the Church’s leadership in his kingdom.



Depiction of a feudal pledge of fealty from Harold Godwinson, at the time a powerful Anglo-Saxon noble and later the king of England, to William of Normandy, who would go on to defeat Harold and replace him as king of England. William claimed that Harold had pledged fealty to him, which justified his invasion (while Harold denied ever having done so).

This system arose because of the absence of other, more effective forms of government and the constant threat of violence posed by raiders. The system was never as neat and tidy as it sounds on paper; many vassals were lords of their own vassals, with the king simply being the highest lord. In turn, the problem for royal authority was that many kings had “vassals” who had more land, wealth, and power than they did; it was very possible, even easy, for powerful nobles to make war against their king if they chose to do so. It would take centuries before the monarchs of Europe consolidated enough wealth and power to dominate their nobles, and it certainly did not happen during the Middle Ages.

One (amusing, in historical hindsight) method that kings would use to punish unruly vassals was simply visiting them and eating them out of house and home – the traditions of hospitality required vassals to welcome, feed, and entertain their king for as long as he felt like staying. Kings and queens expected respect and deference, but conspicuously absent was any appeal to what was later called the “Divine Right” of monarchs to rule. From the perspective of the noble and clerical classes at the time the monarch had to hold on to power through force of arms and personal charisma, not empty claims about being on the throne because of God’s will.

Unsurprisingly, there are many instances in medieval European history in which a powerful lord simply usurped the throne, defeated the former king’s forces, and became the new king. Ultimately, medieval politics represented a “warlord” system of political organization, in many cases barely a step above anarchy. Pledges of loyalty between lords and vassals served as the only assurance of stability, and those pledges were violated countless times throughout the period.

The Church tried to encourage lords to live in accordance with Christian virtue, but the fact of the matter was that it was the nobility's vocation, their very social role, to fight, and thus all too often "politics" was synonymous with "armed struggle" during the Middle Ages.

England and France

Anglo-Saxon England

By about 400 CE, the Romans abandoned Britain. Their legions were needed to help defend the Roman heartland and Britain had always been an imperial frontier, with too few Romans to completely settle and "civilize" it outside of southern England. For the next three hundred years, Germanic invaders called the Anglo-Saxons (from whom we get the name "England" itself – it means "land of the Angles") from the areas around present-day northern Germany and Denmark invaded, raided, and settled in England. They fought the native Britons (i.e. the Romanized, Christian Celts native to England itself), the Cornish, the Welsh, and each other. Those Romans who had settled in England were pushed out, either fleeing to take refuge in Wales or across the channel to Brittany in northern France. England was thus the most thoroughly de-Romanized of the old Roman provinces in the west: Roman culture all but vanished, and thus English history "began" as that of the Anglo-Saxons.

Starting in the late eighth century, the Anglo-Saxons suffered waves of Viking raids that culminated in the establishment of an actual Viking kingdom in what had been Anglo-Saxon territory in eastern England. It took until 879 for the surviving English kingdom, Wessex, to defeat the Viking invaders. For a few hundred years, there was an Anglo-Saxon kingdom in England that promoted learning and culture, producing an extensive literature in Old English (the best preserved example of which is the epic poem *Beowulf*). Raids started up again, however, and in 1066 William the Conqueror, a Viking-descended king from Normandy in northern France, invaded and defeated the Anglo-Saxon king and instituted Norman rule.

France

The former Roman province of Gaul is the heartland of present-day France, ruled in the aftermath of the fall of Rome by the Franks, a powerful Germanic people who invaded Gaul from across the Rhine as Roman power crumbled. The Franks were a warlike and crafty group led by a clan known as the Merovingians. A Merovingian king, Clovis (r. 481 – 511) was the first to unite the Franks and begin the process of creating a lasting kingdom named after them: France. Clovis murdered both the heads of other clans who threatened him as well as his own family members who might take over command of the Merovingians. He then expanded his territories and defeated the last remnants of Roman power in Gaul by the end of the fifth century.

In 500 CE Clovis and a few thousand of his most elite warriors converted to Latin Christianity, less out of a heartfelt sense of piety than for practical reasons: he planned to attack the Visigoths of Spain, Arian Christians who ruled over Latin Christian former Romans. By converting to Latin Christianity, Clovis ensured that the subjects of the Goths were likely to welcome him as a liberator rather than a foreign invader. He was proved right, and by 507 the Franks controlled almost all of Gaul, including formerly-Gothic territories along the border.

The Merovingians held on to power for two hundred years. In the end, they became relatively weak and

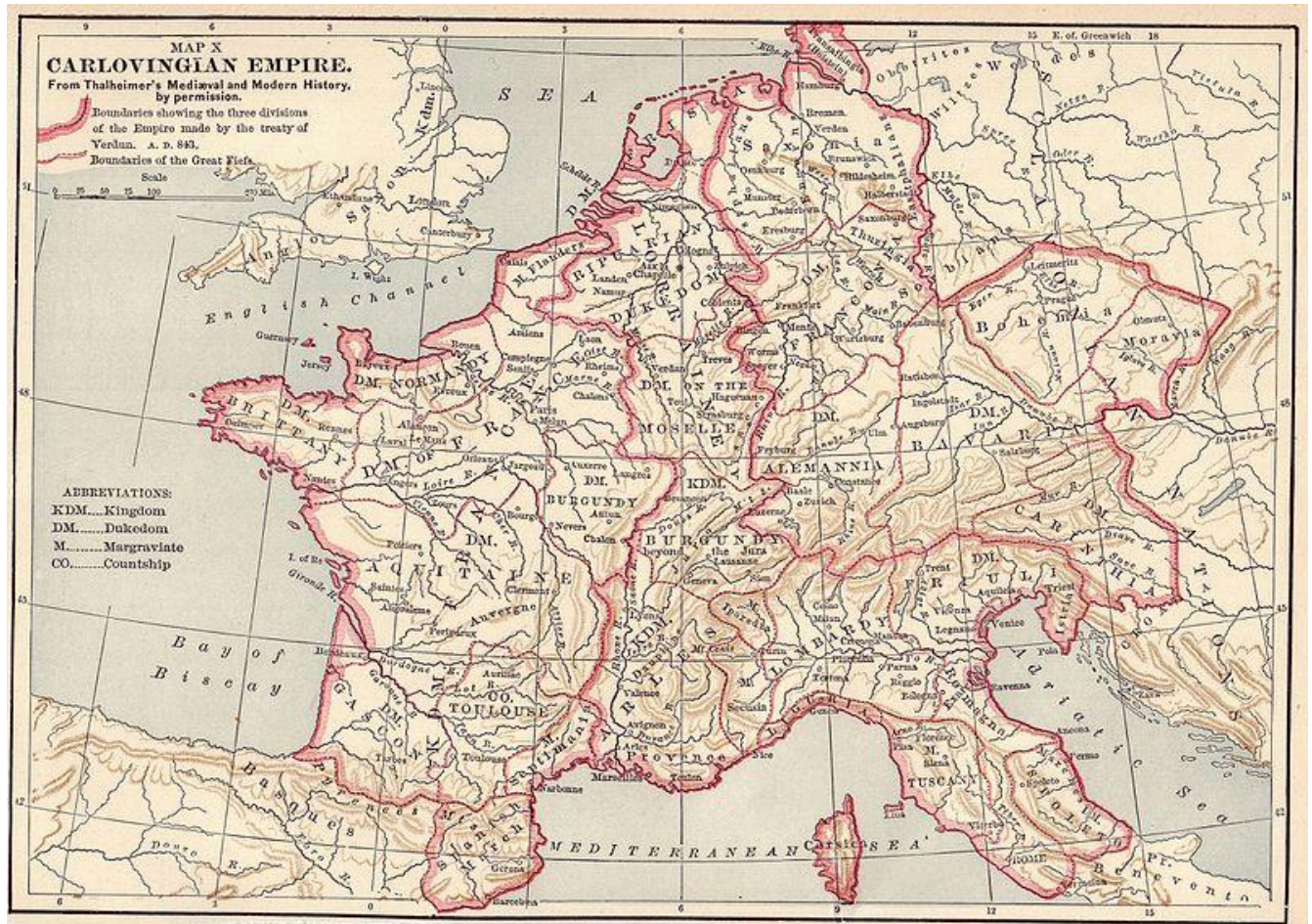
ineffectual, with another clan, the Carolingians, running most of their political affairs. It was a Carolingian, Charles Martel, who defeated the invading Arab armies at the Battle of Tours (also referred to as the Battle of Poitiers) in 732. Soon afterwards, Charles Martel's son Pepin seized power from the Merovingians in a coup, one later ratified by the pope in Rome, ensuring the legitimacy of the shift and establishing the Carolingians as the rightful rulers of the Frankish kingdom.

Only the first few kings in the Merovingian dynasty of the Franks were particularly smart or capable. When Pepin seized control in 750 CE, he was merely assuming the legal status that his clan had already controlled behind the scenes for years. The problem facing the Franks was that Frankish tradition stipulated that lands were to be divided between sons after the death of the father. Thus, with every generation, a family's holdings could be split into separate, smaller pieces. Over time, this could reduce a large and powerful territory into a large number of small, weak ones. When Pepin died in 768, his sons Charlemagne and Carloman each inherited half of the kingdom. When Carloman died a few years later, however, Charlemagne ignored the right of Carloman's sons to inherit his land and seized it all (his nephews were subsequently murdered).

Charlemagne (r. 768 – 814) was one of the most important kings in medieval European history. Charlemagne waged constant wars during his long reign (lasting over 40 years) in the name of converting non-Christian Germans to his east and, equally, in the name of seizing loot for his followers. From his conquests arose the concept of the Holy Roman Empire, a huge state that was nominally controlled by a single powerful emperor directly tied to the pope's authority in Rome. In truth, only under Charlemagne was the Empire a truly united state, but the concept (with various emperors exercising at least some degree of authority) survived until 1806 when it was finally permanently dismantled by Napoleon. Thus, like the western Roman Empire that it succeeded, the Holy Roman Empire lasted almost exactly 1,000 years.

Charlemagne distinguished himself not just by the extent of the territories that he conquered, but by his insistence that he rule those territories as the new, rightful king. In 773, at the request of the pope, Charlemagne invaded the northern Italian kingdom of the Lombards, the Germanic tribe that had expelled Byzantine forces earlier. When Charlemagne conquered them a year later, he declared himself king of the Lombards, rather than forcing a new Lombard ruler to become a vassal and pay tribute. This was an unprecedented development: it was untraditional for a Germanic ruler to proclaim himself king of a different people – how could Charlemagne be “king of the Lombards,” since the Lombards were a separate clan and kingdom? This bold move on Charlemagne's part established the answer as well as an important precedent (inspired by Pepin's takeover): a kingship could pass to a different clan or even kingdom itself depending on the political circumstances. Charlemagne was up to something entirely new, intending to create an empire of various different Germanic groups, with himself (and by extension, the Franks) ruling over all of them.

In 800, Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor by the pope, Leo III. While Charlemagne's biographers claimed that this came as a surprise to Charlemagne, it was anything but; Charlemagne completely dominated Leo and looked to use the prestige of the imperial title to cement his hold on power. Charlemagne had already restored Leo to his throne after Leo was run out of Rome by powerful Roman families who detested him. While visiting Italy (which was now part of his empire), Charlemagne was crowned and declared to be the emperor of Rome, a title that no one had held since the western empire fell in 476. Making the situation all the stranger was the fact that the Byzantine emperors considered themselves to be fully “Roman” – from their perspective, Leo's crowning of Charlemagne was a straightforward usurpation.



Charlemagne's empire at its height stretched from northern Spain to Bohemia (the present-day Czech Republic). His major areas of conquest were in Central Europe, forming the earliest iteration of "Germany" as a state.

Charlemagne's empire was a poor reflection of ancient Rome. He had almost no bureaucracy, no standing army, not even an official currency. He spent almost all of his reign traveling around his empire with his armies, both leading wars and issuing decrees. He did insist, eventually, that these decrees be written down, and the form of "code" used to ensure their authenticity was simply that they were written in grammatically correct Latin, something that almost no one outside of Charlemagne's court (and some members of the Church scattered across Europe) could accomplish thanks to the abysmal state of education and literacy at the time.

Charlemagne organized his empire into counties, ruled by (appropriately enough) counts, usually his military followers but sometimes commoners, all of whom were sent to rule lands they did not have any personal ties to. He protected his borders with marches, lands ruled by margraves who were military leaders ordered to defend the empire from foreign invasion. He established a group of officials who traveled across the empire inspecting the counties and marches to ensure loyalty to the crown. Despite all of his efforts, rebellions against his rule were frequent and Charlemagne was forced to war against former subjects to re-establish control on several occasions.

Charlemagne also reorganized the Church by insisting on a strict hierarchy of archbishops to supervise bishops who, in turn, supervised priests. Likewise, under Charlemagne there was a revival of interest in ancient writings and in proper Latin. He gathered scholars from all of Europe, including areas like England beyond his political control, and sponsored the education of priests and the creation of libraries. He had flawed versions of the Vulgate (the Latin Bible) corrected and he revived disciplines of classical learning that had fallen into disuse (including rhetoric, logic,

and astronomy). His efforts to reform Church training and education are referred to by historians as the “Carolingian Renaissance.”

One innovation of note that arose during the Carolingian Renaissance is that Charlemagne instituted a major reform of handwriting, returning to the Roman practice of large, clear letters that are separated from one another and sentences that used spaces and punctuation, rather than the cursive scrawl of the Merovingian period. This new handwriting introduced the division between upper and lower-case letters and the practice of starting sentences with the former that we use to this day.

Ultimately, the Carolingian dynasty lasted for an even shorter period than had the Merovingian. The problem, again, was the Frankish succession law. Without an effective bureaucracy or law code, there was little cohesion to the kingdom, and areas began to split off almost immediately after Charlemagne’s death in 814. The origin of “Germany” (not politically united until 1871, over a thousand years after Charlemagne’s lifetime) was East Francia, the kingdom that Charlemagne’s son Louis the Pious left to one of his sons. A different line, not directly descended from the Carolingians, eventually ended up in power in East Francia. Its king, Otto I, was crowned emperor in 962 by the Pope, thereby cementing the idea of the Holy Roman Empire even after Charlemagne’s bloodline no longer ruled it.

Invaders

Post-Carolingian Europe was plunged into a period of disorder and violence that lasted until at least 1100 CE. Even though the specific invaders mentioned below had settled down by about 1000 CE, the overall state of lawlessness and violence lasted for centuries. In addition to attacks by groups like the Vikings, the major political problem of the Middle Ages was that the whole feudal system was one based on violence: lesser lords often had no livelihood outside of war, and they pressured their own lords to initiate raids on nearby lands. “Knights” were often little better than thugs who had the distinction of a minor noble title and the ability to afford weapons and armor. Likewise, one of the legacies of feudal law was the importance placed on honor and retribution; any insult or slight could initiate reprisals or even plunge a whole kingdom into civil war.

Meanwhile, a series of invasions began in the post-Carolingian era. Arab invaders called Saracens attacked southern European lands, even conquering Sicily in the ninth century, while a new group of steppe raiders, the Magyars, swept across Europe in the tenth century, eventually seizing land and settling in present-day Hungary. In Northern Europe, the most significant invaders of the period, however, were the Vikings.

The Vikings

Until the eighth century, the Scandinavian region was on the periphery of European trade, and Scandinavians (the Norse) themselves did not greatly influence the people of neighboring regions. Scandinavian tribesmen had long traded amber (petrified sap, prized as a precious stone in Rome and, subsequently, throughout the Middle Ages) with both other Germanic tribes and even with the Romans directly during the imperial period. While the details are unclear, what seems to have happened is that sometime around 700 CE the Baltic Sea region became increasingly economically significant. Traders from elsewhere in northern Europe actively sought out Baltic goods like furs, timber, fish, and (as before) amber. This created an ongoing flow of wealth coming into Scandinavia, which in turn led to Norse leaders becoming interested in the sources of that wealth. At the same time, the Norse added sails to their unique sailing vessels, longships. Sailed longships allowed the Norse to travel swiftly across the Baltic, and ultimately across and throughout the waterways of Europe.



The Oseberg ship, a surviving Viking longship discovered in a Viking burial mound in Norway and preserved in a dedicated museum in Oslo. Longships allowed the Vikings unprecedented mobility, being capable of both oceanic voyages and of sailing up rivers to raid inland communities.

The Norse, soon known as Vikings, exploded into the consciousness of other Europeans during the eighth century, attacking unprotected Christian monasteries in the 790s, with the first major raid in 793 and follow-up attacks over the next two years. The Vikings swiftly became the great naval power of Europe at the time. In the early years of the Viking period they tended to strike in small raiding parties, relying on swiftness and stealth to pillage monasteries and settlements. As the decades went on, bands of raiders gave way to full-scale invasion forces, numbering in the hundreds of ships and thousands of warriors. They went in search of riches of all kinds, but especially silver, which was their standard of wealth, and slaves, who were equally lucrative. Unfortunately for the monks of Europe, silver was most often used in sacred objects in monasteries, making the monasteries the favorite targets of Viking raiders. The raids were so sudden and so destructive that Charlemagne himself ordered the construction of fortifications at the mouth of the Seine river and began expanding his naval defenses to try to defend against them.

The word “Viking” was used by the Vikings themselves – it either meant “raider” or was a reference to the Vik region that spanned parts of Norway and Sweden. They were known by various other names by the people they raided, from the Middle East to France: the Franks called them “pagani” or “Northmen,” the Anglo-Saxons “haethene men,” the Arabs “al-Majus” (sorcerers), the Germanic tribes “ascomanni” (shipmen), and the Slavs of what would become Russia the “Rus” or “Varangians” (the latter are described below.) Outside of the lands that would eventually become Russia,

the Vikings were universally regarded as a terrifying threat, not least because of their staunch paganism and rapacious treatment of Christians.

At their height, the Vikings fielded huge fleets that raided many of the major cities of early medieval Europe and North Africa. By the late ninth century they were formally organized into a “Great Fleet” based in their kingdom in eastern England (they conquered the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of East Anglia in the 870s). While the precise numbers will never be known, not least because the surviving sources bear a pronounced anti-Viking bias, it is clear that their raids were on scale that dwarfed their earlier efforts. In 844 more than 150 ships sailed up the Garonne River in southern France, plundering settlements along the way. In 845, 800 ships forced the city of Hamburg in northern Germany to pay a huge ransom of silver. In 881, the Great Fleet pillaged across present-day Holland, raiding inland as far as Charlemagne’s capital of Aachen and sacking it. Then, in 885, at least 700 ships sailed up the Seine River and besieged Paris (note that their initial target, a rich monastery, had evacuated with its treasure; the wine cellar was not spared, however). In this attack, they extorted thousands of pounds of silver and gold. Vikings attacked Constantinople at least three times in the ninth and tenth centuries, extracting tribute and concessions in trade, and perhaps most importantly, they came to rule over what would one day become Russia. In the end, the Vikings became increasingly knowledgeable about the places they were raiding, in some cases actually working as mercenaries for kings who hired them to defend against other Vikings.

Starting in roughly 850 CE, the Vikings started to settle in the lands they raided, especially in England, Scotland, the hitherto-uninhabited island of Iceland, and part of France. Outside of Russia, their most important settlement in terms of its historical impact was Normandy in what is today northern France, a kingdom that would go on centuries later to conquer England itself. It was founded in 911 as a land-grant to the Viking king Rollo in order to defend against other Vikings. Likewise, the Vikings settled areas in England that would help shape the English language and literary traditions (for example, though written in the language of the Anglo-Saxons, the famous epic poem *Beowulf* is about Viking settlers who had recently converted to Christianity). Ultimately, the Vikings became so rich from raiding that they became important figures in medieval trade and commerce, trading goods as far from Scandinavia as Baghdad in the Abbasid Caliphate.

The Vikings were not just raiders, however. They sought to explore and settle in lands that were in some cases completely uninhabited when they arrived, like Iceland. They appear to have been fearless in quite literally going where no one had gone before. Much of their exploration required audacity as well as planning – they were the best navigators of their age, but at times their travels led them to forge into areas completely unknown to Europeans. Vikings were the first Europeans to arrive in North America, with a group of Icelandic Vikings arriving in Newfoundland, in present-day Canada, around the start of the eleventh century. An attempt at colonization failed, however, quite possibly because of a conflict between the Vikings and the Indigenous people they encountered, and the people of the Americas were thus spared the presence of further European colonists for almost five centuries.

In what eventually became Russia, meanwhile, Viking exploration, conquest, and colonization had begun even earlier. The Vikings started traveling down Russian rivers from the Baltic in the mid-eighth century, even before the raiding period began farther west. Their initial motive was trade, not conquest, trading and collecting goods like furs, amber, and honey and transporting them south to both Byzantium and the Abbasid Caliphate. The Vikings were slavers as well, capturing Slavic peoples and selling them in the south. In turn, the Vikings brought a great deal of Byzantine and Abbasid currency to the north, introducing hard cash into the mostly barter-based economies of Northern and Western Europe. Eventually, they settled along their trade routes, often invited to establish order by the native Slavs in cities like Kiev, with the Vikings ultimately forming the earliest nucleus of Russia as a political entity. The very name “Russia”

derives from “Rus,” the name of the specific Viking people (originally from Sweden) who settled in the Slavic lands bordering Byzantium.



Eleventh-century illustration of the Varangian Guard, the personal bodyguards of the Byzantine emperors starting in the tenth century. The guard was composed of warriors from the Rus, the Vikings who conquered and then settled in present-day Russia and Ukraine.

As the Vikings settled in the lands they had formerly raided and as powerful states emerged in Scandinavia itself, the Vikings ceased being raiders and came to resemble other medieval Europeans. By the mid-tenth century, the kings of the Scandinavian lands began to assert their control and to reign in Viking raids. Conversion to Christianity, becoming very common by 1000, helped end the raiding period as well. Denmark became a stable kingdom under its king Harald Bluetooth in 958, Norway in 995 under Olaf Trygvason, and Sweden in 995 as well under Olof Skötkonung. Meanwhile, in northern France, the kingdom of Normandy emerged as the most powerful of the former Viking states, with its duke William the Conqueror conquering England itself from the Anglo-Saxons in 1066.

Conclusion

While the Vikings are important for various reasons – expanding Medieval trade, settling various regions, establishing the first European contact with North America, and founding the first Russian states – they are also included here simply for their inherent interest; their raids and expansion were one of the most striking and sudden in world history.

Far more important to the historical record were the larger patterns of state and society that formed in the early Middle Ages. Above all, the feudal system would have a long legacy in forming the basis of later political structures, and the Latin Church would be the essential European intellectual and spiritual institution for centuries to come. Early medieval Europe was defined by shared cultural traits, above all having to do with religion. Despite having lost the

opulence and much of the learning of Rome, medieval Europe was not a static, completely backwards place. Instead, it slowly but surely constructed an entirely new form of society in place of what had been.

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[Carolingian Empire](#) – Electionworld

[Oseberg Ship](#) – Peulle

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SECTION II

CHAPTER 1: THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

Historians sometimes refer to the period between approximately 1000 and 1300 CE as the “high” Middle Ages to emphasize its dynamism, creativity, and importance in setting the stage for subsequent historical developments. During the high Middle Ages the European economy greatly expanded, leading to a revived cash economy and widespread trade and commerce. Towns and cities grew, and with them new centers of learning emerged. While still highly decentralized by the standards of later periods, kingdoms did start the gradual process of transforming into more highly organized states. Europe also re-engaged in significant ways with its neighboring regions, leading to both an influx of foreign trade goods and, unfortunately, tremendous bloodshed in the form of the crusades.

The Crusades

The Crusades were a series of invasions of the Middle East by Europeans in the name of Christianity. They went on, periodically, for centuries. They resulted in a shift in the identity of Latin Christianity, great financial benefits to certain parts of Europe, and many instances of horrific carnage. The Crusades serve as one of the iconic points of transition from the early Middle Ages to the high Middle Ages, in which the localized, barter-based economy of Europe transitioned toward a more dynamic commercial economic system.

The background to the Crusades was the power of a specific group of nomadic warriors in the Middle East, that of the Seljuk Turks. The Seljuks were fierce fighters, trained by their background as steppe nomads and raiders, who had converted to Islam prior to the eleventh century. The Seljuks were a tribal confederation, not a united kingdom or empire, and they invaded Muslim kingdoms as often as Christian ones. Despite their lack of political unity they proved even more deadly foes to the Byzantine Empire than had the Arab caliphates, and by late in the eleventh century the Byzantine emperor Alexius called for aid from the Christians of western Europe, despite the ongoing divide between the Latin and Orthodox churches.

In 1095, Pope Urban II responded by giving a sermon in France summoning the knights of Europe to holy war to protect Christians in and near the Holy Land. Urban spoke of the supposed atrocities committed by the Turks, the richness of the lands that European knights might expect to seize, and the righteousness of the cause of aiding fellow Christians. The idea caught on much faster and much more thoroughly than Urban could have possibly expected; knights from all over Europe responded when the news reached them. The idea was so appealing that not only knights, but thousands of commoners responded, forming a “people’s crusade” that marched off for Jerusalem, for the most part without weapons, armor, or adequate supplies.

Much of the impulse of the Crusades came from the fact that Urban II offered unlimited penance to the crusaders, meaning that anyone who took part in the crusade would have all of their sins absolved; furthermore, pilgrims were now allowed to be armed. Thus, the crusades were the first armed Christian pilgrimage, and in fact, the first “official” Christian holy war in the history of the religion. In addition to the promise of salvation, and equally important to many of the knights who flocked to the crusading banner, was the promise of loot (and, again, Urban’s speech

explicitly promised the crusaders wealth and land). Many of the crusaders were minor lords or landless knights, men who had few prospects back home but now had the chance to make something of themselves in the name of liberating the Holy Land. Thus, most crusaders combined ambition and greed with genuine Christian piety.

The backbone of the crusades were the knightly orders: organizations of knights authorized by the church to carry out wars in the name of Christianity. These orders came into being after the First Crusade, originally organized to provide protection to Christian pilgrims visiting the Holy Land. They were made up of “monk-knights” who took monastic vows (i.e. of obedience, poverty, and chastity) but spent their time fighting as well as praying. The concept already existed at the start of the crusading period, but the orders grew quickly thanks to their involvement in the invasions. Two orders in particular, the Hospitallers and the Templars, would go on to achieve great wealth and power despite their professed vows of poverty.

The First Four Crusades

The First Crusade (1095 – 1099), which lasted only four years following the initial declaration by Pope Urban, was amazingly successful. What had once been the great power of the Middle East, the Abbasid Caliphate, had long since splintered apart, with rival kingdoms holding power in North Africa and the Middle Ages. The doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shia Muslims further divided the Muslim *ummah* (community of believers). In addition, the Arab kingdoms battled the Seljuk Turks, who were intent on conquering everything, not just Christian lands. Thus, the crusaders arrived precisely when the Muslim forces were profoundly divided. By 1099, the crusaders had captured Jerusalem and much of the Levant, forming a series of Christian territories in the heart of the Holy Land. These were called The Latin Principalities, kingdoms ruled by European knights.



The Latin Principalities at their height. Note how the Seljuk (here spelled “Seljuq”) territories almost completely surrounded the principalities.

After their success in taking Jerusalem, the knightly orders became very powerful and very rich. They not only seized loot, but became caravan guards and, ultimately, money-lenders (the Templars became bankers after abandoning the Holy Land when Jerusalem was lost in 1187). Essentially, the major orders came to resemble armed merchant houses as much as monasteries, and there is no question that many of their members did a very poor job of living up to their vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity. Likewise, the rulers of the Latin Principalities made little effort to win over their Muslim and Jewish subjects.

Subsequent crusades were much less successful. The problem was that, once they had formed their territories, the westerners had to hold on to them with little but a series of strong forts up and down the coast. The European population centers were obviously hundreds or thousands of miles away and the local people were mostly Jews and Muslims who detested the cruel invaders. While generations of Europeans continued to regard crusading as a worthwhile

endeavor, that enthusiasm did ebb over time as the crusades came to resemble conventional invasions more so than genuine holy wars.

Attacks on the Latin Principalities resulted in the Second Crusade, which lasted from 1147 – 1149. The Second Crusade consisted of two crusades that happened simultaneously: some European knights sailed off to the Holy Land, while others fought against the Cordoban Caliphate in the Iberian Peninsula. The Europeans ultimately lost ground in the Middle East but managed to retake Lisbon in Portugal from the Muslim Caliphate there. In fact, the Second Crusade's significance is that crusaders began to wage an almost ceaseless war against the Cordoban Caliphate in Spain – in a sense, Christian Europeans, particularly the inhabitants of the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain, concluded that there were plenty of infidels much closer to home than Jerusalem and its environs. These wars of Christians against Spanish Muslims were called the Spanish “Reconquest” (*Reconquista*), and they lasted until the last Muslim kingdom fell in 1492 CE.

In 1187 an Egyptian Muslim general named Salah-ad-Din (his name is normally anglicized as Saladin) retook Jerusalem after crushing the crusaders at the Battle of Hattin. This prompted the Third Crusade (1189 – 1192), a massive invasion led by the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire (Frederick Barbarossa), the king of France (Philip II), and the king of England (Richard I – known as “The Lion-Hearted”). It completely failed, with the English king negotiating a peace deal with Saladin after Frederick died (he drowned trying to cross a river) and Philip returned to France. After this, only a few small territories remained in Christian hands.

Arguably the most disastrous (in terms of failing to achieve its stated goal of controlling the Holy Land) crusade was the Fourth Crusade, lasting from 1199 – 1204. This latest attempt to seize Jerusalem began with a large group of crusaders chartering passage with Venetian sailors, long since accustomed to profiting from crusader traffic. En route, the crusaders and sailors learned of a succession dispute in Constantinople and decided to intervene. The intervention turned into an outright invasion, with the crusaders carrying out a horrendously bloody sack of the ancient city. In the end, the crusaders set up a Latin Christian government that lasted for about fifty years while completely ignoring their original goal of sailing to the Holy Land. The only lasting effect of the Fourth Crusade was the further weakening of Byzantium in the face of Turkish invaders in the future. To emphasize the point: Christian knights from Western Europe set out to attack the Muslim kingdoms of the Middle East but ended up conquering a Christian kingdom, and the last political remnant of the Roman Empire at that, instead.

Many further crusades followed; popes would continue to authorize official large-scale invasions of the Middle East until the end of the thirteenth century, and the efforts of Christian knights in Spain during the Reconquest very much carried on the crusading tradition for centuries. Later crusades were often nothing more than politically-motivated power grabs on the part of popes, launched against a given pope's political opponents (i.e. fellow European Christians who happened to be at odds with a pope). Technically, the last crusade was the Holy League, an army drawn from various kingdoms in Central and Eastern Europe dispatched to fight the Ottoman Empire in 1684. None of the latter crusades succeeded in seizing land in the Middle East, but they did inspire a relentless drive to overthrow and destroy the now centuries-old Muslim kingdom of Spain, as noted above, and they also inspired the idea of the potential “holiness” of warfare itself among Christians.

Consequences of the Crusades

The crusades had numerous consequences and effects. Three were particularly important. First, the city-states of northern Italy, especially Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, grew rich transporting goods and crusaders back and forth between

Europe and the Middle East. As the transporters, merchants, and bankers of crusading expeditions, it was northern Italians that derived the greatest financial benefit from the invasions. The crusades provided so much capital that the northern Italian cities evolved to become the banking center of Europe and the site of the Renaissance starting in the fifteenth century.

Second, the ideology surrounding the crusades was to inspire European explorers and conquerors for centuries. The most obvious instance of this phenomenon was the Reconquest of Spain, which was explicitly seen through the lens of the crusading ideology at the time. In turn, the Reconquest was completed in 1492, precisely the same year that Christopher Columbus arrived in the Americas. With the subsequent invasions of South and Central America by the Spanish, the crusading spirit, of spreading Catholicism and seizing territory at the point of a sword, lived on.

Third, there was a new concern with a particularly intolerant form of religious purity among many Christian Europeans during and after the Crusades. One effect of this new focus was numerous outbreaks of anti-Semitic violence in Europe; many crusaders attacked Jewish communities in Europe while the crusaders were on their way to the Holy Land, and anti-Jewish laws were enacted by many kings and lords inspired by the fervent, intolerant new brand of Christian identity arising from the Crusades. Thus, going forward, European Christianity itself became harsher, more intolerant, and more warlike because of the Crusades.

The Northern Crusades and the Teutonic Knights

Often overlooked in considerations of the crusades were the “Northern Crusades” – invasions of the various Baltic regions of northeastern Europe (i.e. parts of Denmark, northern Germany, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, and Finland) between 1171, when the Pope Alexander III authorized a crusade against the heathens of the east Baltic region, and the early fifteenth century, when the converted kingdoms and territories of the Baltic began to seize independence from their crusading overlords: the Teutonic Knights.

The Teutonic Knights were a knightly order founded during the Third Crusade at a hospital in the Latin city of Acre. They were closely modeled after the Templars, adopting their “rule” (their code of conduct) and spending most of the twelfth century crusading in the Holy Land. Their focus shifted, however, in the middle of the century when they began leading crusades against the pagan peoples of the eastern Baltic, including the Lithuanians, Estonians, Finns, and other groups.

The Baltic lands were the last major region of Europe to remain pagan. Neither Latin nor Orthodox missionaries had made significant headway in converting the people of the region, outside of the border region between the lands of the Rus and the Baltic Sea. Thus, the Teutonic Knights could make a very plausible case for their Crusades as analogous to the Spanish Reconquest, and the Teutonic Knights proved very savvy at placing agents in the papal court that worked to maintain papal support for their efforts.

The Teutonic Order ultimately outlasted the other crusading orders by centuries. The order was very successful at drumming up support from European princes and knights, relying on annual expeditions of visiting warriors to do most of the fighting while the Teutonic Knights themselves literally held down the fort in newly-built castles. They were authorized by various popes not only to conquer and convert, but to rule over the peoples of the east Baltic, and thus by the thirteenth century the Teutonic Knights were in the process of conquering and ruling Prussia, parts of Estonia, and a region of southeastern Finland and present-day Lithuania called Livonia. These kingdoms lasted a remarkably long time; the Teutonic Order ruled Livonia until 1561, when it was finally ousted. Thus, for several centuries, the map of

Europe included the strange spectacle of a theocratic state: one ruled directly by monk-knights, with no king, prince, or lord above them.



The theocracy of the Teutonic Knights as of 1466 (marked in orange and purple along the shores of the Baltic). Note that 1466 falls squarely into the Renaissance period – the Northern Crusades began during the Middle Ages but their influence lasted far longer.

The Northern Crusades were, in some ways, as important as the crusades to the Holy Land in that they were responsible for extinguishing the last remnants of paganism in Europe – it was truly gone by the late fourteenth century in Lithuania, Estonia, and Livonia – and in conquering a large territory that would one day be a core part of Germany itself: Prussia.

The Middle East After the Caliphates

The irony of the crusades to the Holy Land is that the vast majority of people who lived in the Middle East did not think of politics in terms of Muslim versus Christian (or Jewish) identity. The fairly brief and ephemeral period of

political unity under the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates that saw most of the Middle East and North Africa united under the rule of “caliphs” (political successors to the prophet Muhammad, described in the previous volume of this textbook) was gone by the time the first European crusaders arrived. In turn, despite disrupting and transforming the Holy Land itself for time, the crusades had little overall impact on the societies of the Middle East themselves. Those societies represented a cross-section of ethnic, religious, and regional identities that underwent major transformations in the period of the High Middle Ages.

By the time the last Abbasid caliph was murdered by the Mongols in 1258 the caliphate itself had long degenerated into a legal fiction. The caliphs themselves had become honored prisoners of more powerful invading forces starting in 945, and the territories of the former caliphate were divided between numerous sultans, an Arabic word that simply means “ruler.” Many of those sultans petitioned for recognition from the captive caliphs as a form of spiritual and political currency, but the bottom line is that the caliphs themselves exercised no political authority of their own.

This was not, however, a period of stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa. First and foremost, the culture of learning that had blossomed during the Abbasid period continued to prosper. Expressed in both Arabic and “New Persian,” Persian (the vernacular language of Iran, which is the same thing as Persia) written in Arabic script, scholarship in fields as diverse as theology and astronomy was supported by numerous sultans. Persian became the international language of both scholarship and poetry during this period, with major works being written in Persian from northern India to Anatolia by writers of a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds. In fact, it was not until the nineteenth century that writers drifted away from Persian as the “default” language of learning. In that way, Persian was something of a parallel to Latin in Europe, with the major difference being that (unlike Latin) Persian remained a living language spoken by millions of people.

In addition to scholarship and literature, commerce thrived in the post-caliphate Middle East. Almost without exception, elites went out of their way to actively encourage trade by building and policing trade routes and founding *caravanserais*, fortified waystations for mercantile travelers. In contrast to the contempt for merchants felt by most elite Europeans at the time, merchants were an honored part of Persian, Turkic, and Arabic societies. The result was a thriving commercial economy across most of the region, although it is important to bear in mind that most people were still farmers in the Middle East just as they were everywhere else in the pre-modern world.

The Turkic Migrations and Ottoman Origins

By far the most important and far-reaching event in the Middle East during the post-caliphate period was the arrival of the Turks. As noted above, the group known as the Seljuks migrated from Central Asia starting in earnest in the tenth century CE, settling from Afghanistan to Anatolia over the course of the following centuries. The Turks were nomadic warriors organized into tribal confederations (the Seljuks were simply the leading tribe rather than the actual rulers during the first wave of migration), effective in warfare but generally poor at establishing stable governments. A series of Turkic dynasties across the region began in 998 under the Ghaznavids in Persia, but the history of those dynasties is a litany of invasion, assassination, and collapse, typically after a few generations of shaky rule.

Where Turkic dynasties were able to establish a stable rule for at least a century it was usually thanks to the infusion of Persian traditions of statecraft. The Seljuk dynasty that overthrew the Ghaznavids in 1040 drew on the long history of effective Persian administration to build up an actual government (rather than just meetings of tribal leaders) and to financially support the building projects associated with Islamic civilization like *madrasas* (schools for instruction in the Koran and Islamic law) and public baths. Likewise, as the Seljuks encroached on Byzantine territory to the west,

the first stable Turkic state there – the Sultanate of Rum (Rome) – relied heavily on Persian administrators and Persian political traditions.

The greatest literary work of medieval Islam was in Persian, the poet Firdausi's (d. 1020) *Shahnamah*, a mythologized account of Persian rulers reaching back to the ancient past that suggested a single cultural and political tradition. Even though they were not ethnically Persian, Turkic rulers embraced this idea of historical sovereignty, seeing themselves as the inheritors of over a thousand years of Persian rule. Simply put, Persian political culture was crucial in creating actual states out of tribal confederations, although it is important to acknowledge that many of those states were not especially long-lived during the medieval period.

Unfortunately for the Turkic dynasties at the time and for millions of ordinary people across the Middle East, the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century devastated much of the region. By 1256 the Seljuk territories had been crushed by the Mongols and a decades-long period of brutal exploitation and pillaging ensued. The Mongols established a kingdom known as the Il-Khanate in Persia in 1256, but it took until 1295 for the Mongol ruler Ghazan, the first to convert to Islam, to shift Mongol priorities away from plundering expeditions to more conventional rulership and taxation. While Egypt fought off the Mongols, most of the rest of the Middle East either experienced harsh Mongol rule itself or political fragmentation as a side effect of the invasions.

It was in the aftermath of the Mongol invasions that the Ottoman Turks began their ascent to power. Starting as nothing more than a small Turkic *beglik* (sultanate), the Turks defeated a Byzantine army in 1302 and seized part of Anatolia. Over the next few decades they built up a formidable reputation as *ghazis*, holy warriors, but they also made a point of taking over the lands of former Byzantine subjects without inflicting excessive destruction or cruelty (to Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike). In 1352 they took control of a key fortress near Constantinople, and from there they launched a stunning series of invasions in Greece and the Balkans. In the process, Byzantium was reduced to a pitiful fragment of its former glory, holding on to the city of Constantinople and its hinterlands but otherwise surrounded by Ottoman territories.

The Emergence of the High Middle Ages in Europe

Thus, the Middle East during the period of the crusades was already a prosperous and sophisticated, albeit politically splintered, region. Europe at the time was also politically disunited, and it had much further to climb in terms of wealth, scholarship, and commerce. Europe began a long period of transformation and growth starting in about 1000 CE that resulted in significant economic expansion, demographic growth, and cultural achievement.

The early Middle Ages, from about 500 CE – 800 CE, operated largely on the basis of subsistence agriculture and a barter economy. Economies were almost entirely local; local lords and kings extracted wealth from peasants, but because there was nowhere to sell a surplus of food, peasants tended to grow only as much as they needed to survive, using methods that went unchanged for centuries. There was a limited market for luxury goods even among those wealthy enough to afford them, and the only sources of reliable minted coins were over a thousand miles away, in Byzantium, Persia, and the Arab kingdoms.

This descent into subsistence had happened for various reasons over the course of the earlier centuries. The fall of the western empire of Rome had strangled the manufacture and trade in high-quality consumer goods (a trade that had been very extensive in Rome). Centuries of banditry, raids, and wars made long-distance travel perilous. In turn, the simple lack of markets meant that there was no incentive to grow more than was needed, and the nobility sought to

become more wealthy and powerful not by concerning themselves with agricultural productivity (let alone commerce), but by raiding one another's lands.

Europe had enjoyed brief periods of relative stability earlier, culminating around 800 CE during Charlemagne's rise to power. During the rest of the ninth and tenth centuries, however, the invasions of the Magyars, Saracens, and Vikings had undermined the stability of the fragile political order created by the Carolingians. Many accounts written at the time, almost exclusively by priests and monks, decried the constant warfare of the period, including the wars caused by invaders from beyond the European heartland and those between European rulers themselves. Historians now believe that market exchange was growing as a component of the European economy by about 800 CE, but the period between 800 – 1000 was still one of political instability and widespread violence.

Things started to change around the year 1000 CE. The major causes for these changes were twofold: the end of full-scale invasions from outside of the core lands of Europe, and changes in agriculture that seem very simple from a contemporary perspective, but were revolutionary at the time.

The Medieval Agricultural Revolution

In 600 CE, Europe had a population of approximately 14 million. By 1300 it was 74 million. That 500% increase was due to two simple changes: the methods by which agriculture operated and the ebb in large-scale violence brought about by the end of foreign invasions. The first factor in the dramatic increase in population was the simple cessation of major invasions. With relative social stability, peasants were able to consistently plant and harvest crops and not see them devoured by hungry troops or see their fields trampled. Those invasions stopped because the Vikings went from being raiders to becoming members of settled European kingdoms, the Magyars likewise took over and settled in present-day Hungary, and the Saracens were beaten back by increasingly savvy southern-European kingdoms. Warfare between states in Europe remained nearly constant, and banditry still commonplace in the countryside, but it appears that the overall levels of violence did drop off over the course of the eleventh century.

Simultaneously, important changes were underway in agricultural technology. Early medieval farmers had literally scratched away at the soil with light plows, usually drawn by oxen or donkeys. Plows were like those used in ancient Rome: the weight of the plow was carried in a pole that went across the animal's neck. Thus, if the load was too heavy the animal would simply suffocate. In turn, that meant that only relatively soft soils could be farmed, limiting the amount of land that could be made arable.

A series of inventions led to dramatic changes. Someone (we have no way of knowing who) developed a new kind of collar for horses and oxen that rested on the shoulders of the animal and thus allowed it to draw much heavier loads, enabling the use of heavier plows. Those plows were called *carruca*: a plow capable of digging deeply into the soil and turning it over, bringing air into the topsoil and refreshing its mineral and nutrient content. Simultaneously, iron horseshoes became increasingly common, which dramatically increased the ability of horses to produce usable muscle power, and iron plowshares proved capable of digging through the soil with greater efficiency.

In addition to the increase in available animal power thanks to those innovations, farmers started to take advantage of new techniques that greatly increased the output of the fields themselves. Up to that point, European farmers tended to employ two-field crop rotation, planting a field while leaving another "fallow" to recover its fertility for the next year. This system was sustainable but limited the amount of crops that could be grown. Starting around 1000 CE, farmers became more systematic about employing three-field crop rotation: working with three linked fields, they would plant one with wheat, one either with legumes (peas, beans, lentils) or barley, and leave one fallow, allowing

animals to graze on its weeds and leftover stalks from the last season, with their manure helping to fertilize the soil. After harvest, farmers would rotate: the fallow field would be planted with grain, the grain with legumes, and the legume field left fallow. This process dramatically enriched the soil by returning nutrients to it directly with legumes or at least allowing it to naturally recover while it lay fallow. Thus, the overall yields of edible crops dramatically increased. Likewise, with the greater variety, the actual nutritional content of food became better.

Finally, starting in earnest in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, windmills and watermills became increasingly common for grinding grain into usable flour. The difference in speed between hand-grinding grain and using a mill was dramatic – it could take most of a day to grind enough flour to bake bread for a family, but a mill could grind fifty pounds of grain in less than a half hour. While peasants resented having to pay for access to mills (which were generally controlled by landowners, often nobles or the Church), the enormous increase in productivity meant that much more food was available overall. Thus, mills were still cost effective for peasants, and milled flour became the norm across most of Europe by the end of the twelfth century.

The medieval agricultural revolution had tremendous long-term consequences for peasants and, ultimately, for all of European society. Thanks to the increase in animal power and the effects of crop rotation, existing fields became far more productive. Whole new areas were opened to cultivation, thanks to the ability of the *carruca* to cut through rocky soil. As a result, there was a major expansion between 1000 – 1300 from the middle latitudes of Europe farther north and east, as the farming population took advantage of the new technology (and growing population) to clear and cultivate what had been forest, scrub, or swamp. In turn, the existence of a surplus encouraged lords to convert payment in kind (i.e. taxes and rents paid in actual foodstuffs and livestock) to cash rent. Likewise, the relative stability allowed smaller kingdoms to mint their own coins, and over the course of a century or so (c. 1000 – 1100) much of Europe became a cash economy rather than a barter economy. This gave peasants an added incentive to cultivate as much as possible.

Peasants actually did very well for themselves in these centuries; they were often able to bargain with their lords for stabilized rents, and a fairly prosperous class of landowning peasants emerged that enjoyed traditional rights vis-à-vis the nobility. Thus, the centuries between 1000 CE – 1300 CE were relatively *good* for many European peasants. Later centuries would be much harder for them. As an aside, it is important to bear in mind that the progressive view of history, namely the idea that “things always get better over time” is actually factually *wrong* for much of history, as reflected in the lives of peasants in the Middle Ages and early modern period.

Cities and Economic Change

The increase in population tied to the agricultural revolution had another consequence: beyond simply improving life for peasants and increasing family size, it led to the growth of towns and cities. Even though most peasants never left the area they were born in, many did migrate to the nearest towns and cities and try to make a life there; serfs (unfree peasants) who made it to a town and stayed a year and day were even legally liberated from having to return to the farm. Likewise, whole families and even villages migrated in search of new lands to farm, generally speaking to the east and north as noted above.

This period saw the rebirth of urban life. Not since the fall of Rome had most towns and cities consisted of more than just central hubs of local trade with a few thousand inhabitants. By the twelfth century, however, many cities were expanding rapidly, sometimes by as much as six times in the course of a few centuries. Likewise, the leaders of these cities were often merchants who grew rich on trade, rather than traditional landowning lords.

Even as the agricultural revolution laid the foundation for growth and the cities took advantage of it, other

factors led to the economic boom of this period. Lords created new roads and repaired Roman ones from 1,000 years earlier, which allowed bulk trade to travel more cheaply and effectively. More important than bulk goods, however, were luxury goods, a trade almost entirely controlled by the Italian cities during this period. Caravans arrived in the Middle East from China and Central Asia and sold goods to Italian merchants waiting for them. From the Black Sea Region and what was left of Byzantium, the Italians then transported these goods back to the west. Silk and spices were worth far more than their weight in gold, and their trade created the foundation for early financial markets and banks.

Trade networks emerged not only linking Italy to the Middle East but southern to northern Europe. In the Champagne region of France annual fairs brought merchants together to trade their goods. German rivers saw the growth of towns and cities on their banks where goods were exchanged. Starting in the twelfth century, the German city of Lubeck became the capital of the Hanseatic League, a group of cities engaged in trade that came together to regulate exchange and maintain monopolies on goods.

The social consequences were dramatic and widespread, yet the status of merchants in European society was troubled. They were resented by the poor (still the vast majority of the population), often held in contempt by traditional land-owning nobles, and frequently condemned by the Church. *Usury*, the practice of lending money and charging interest, was classified as a sin by the Church even though the Church itself had to borrow money and pay interest constantly. Likewise, anti-Semitic stereotypes about Jews as greedy and ruthless arose from the simple fact that dealing in money and money-lending was one of the only professions Jews were allowed to pursue in most medieval kingdoms and cities. Christian Europeans needed loans (as it happens, loans and banking are essential to a functioning cash economy), but despised the Jews they got those loans from – hence the origins of some of the longest-lasting anti-Semitic stereotypes.

Even though cities did not “fit” in the medieval worldview very well, even the most conservative kings had to recognize the economic strength of the new cities. Just as peasants had been able to negotiate for better treatment, large towns and cities received official town charters from kings in return for stable taxation. In many cases, cities were practically politically independent, although they generally had to acknowledge the overall authority of the king or local lord.

The growth in trade did not, however, create a real “market economy” in the modern sense. For one thing, skilled trades were closely regulated by craft guilds, which maintained legal monopolies. Monopolies were granted to guilds by kings, lords, or city governments, and anyone practicing a given trade who was not a member of the corresponding guild could be fined, imprisoned, or expelled. Guilds jealously guarded the skills and tools of their trades – everything from goldsmithing to barrel making was controlled by guilds. Guilds existed to ensure that their members produced quality goods, but they also existed to keep out outsiders and to make the “masters” who controlled the guilds wealthy.

Medieval Politics

The feudal system flourished in the High Middle Ages. While it had its origins in the centuries after the collapse of the western Roman Empire, the formal system of vassals receiving land grants by pledging military service to kings (or, increasingly, in return for cash payments in lieu of military service) really came of age in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The lords themselves presided over a rigidly hierarchical social and political system in which one’s vocation was largely determined by birth, and the vocation of the nobility was clearly defined by landowning and making war.

Lords – meaning land-owning nobles – lived in “manors,” a term that denoted not only their actual houses but

the lands they owned. All of the peasants on their lands owed them rent, originally in the form of crops but eventually in cash, as well as a certain amount of labor each year. Peasants were subdivided into different categories, including the relatively-well off independent yeomen and freeholders, who owned their own plots of land, down to the serfs, semi-free peasants tied to the land, and then the cottagers, who were the landless peasants worse-off even than serfs. The system of land-ownership and the traditional rights enjoyed by not just lords, but serfs and freeholders who lived under the lords, is referred to as “manorialism,” the rural political and economic system of the High Middle Ages as a whole.

One of the traditional rights, and a vital factor in the lives of peasants, were the commons: lands not officially controlled by anyone that all people had a right to use. The commons provided firewood, grazing land, and some limited trapping of small animals, collectively serving as a vital “safety net” for peasants living on the edge of subsistence. Access to the commons was not about written laws, but instead the traditional, centuries-old agreements that governed the interactions between different social classes. Eventually, peasants would find their access to the commons curtailed by landowning nobles intent on converting them to cash-producing farms, but for the medieval period itself, the peasants continued to enjoy the right to their use.

The kingdoms of Europe up to this point were barely unified. In many cases, kings were simply the most powerful nobles, men who extracted pledges of loyalty from their subjects but whose actual authority was limited to their personal lands. Likewise, kings in the early Middle Ages were largely itinerant, moving from place to place all year long. They had to make an annual circuit of their kingdoms to ensure that their powerful vassals would stay loyal to them; a vassal ignored for too long could, and generally did, simply stop acknowledging the lordship of his king. Those patterns started to change during the High Middle Ages, and the first two kingdoms to show real signs of centralization were France and England.

In France, a series of kings named Philip (I through IV) ruled from 1060 to 1314, building a strong administrative apparatus complete with royal judges who were directly beholden to the crown. The kings ruled the region around Paris (called the *Île-de-France*, meaning the “island of France”), but their influence went well beyond it as they extended their holdings. Philip IV even managed to seize almost complete control of the French Church, defying papal authority. He also proved incredibly shrewd at creating new taxes and in attacking and seizing the lands and holdings of groups like the French Jewish community and the Knights Templar, both of whom he ransacked (the assault on the Knights Templar started in 1307).

In England, the line descending from William the Conqueror (following his invasion in 1066) was also effective in creating a relatively stable political system. All land was legally the king’s, and his nobles received their lands as “fiefs,” essentially loans from the crown that had to be renewed for payments on the death of a landholder before it could be inherited. Henry II (r. 1154 – 1189) created a system of royal sheriffs to enforce his will, created circuit courts that traveled around the land hearing cases, and created a grand jury system that allowed people to be tried by their peers.

In 1215, a much less competent king named John signed the Magna Carta (“great charter”) with the English nobility that formally acknowledged the feudal privileges of the nobility, towns and clergy. The important effect of the Magna Carta was its principle: even the king had to respect the law. Thereafter English kings began to call the Parliament, a meeting of the Church, nobles, and well-off commoners, in order to get authorization and money for their wars.

Women and Gender

Gender standards in medieval Europe were based on a combination of centuries-old social traditions, ancient

medical theories, and biblical standards. Greek and Roman medical ideas, very much the basis of the medieval understanding of human biology, held that women were essentially inferior versions of men: weaker, less intelligent, and suffering from an excess of moist “humors” (the bodily fluids that supposedly formed the foundation of health). Biblical stories taught that women were inherently more credulous and sinful, with Eve’s temptation in the Garden of Eden both the origin and the model of female wickedness. When male writers bothered to write about women, they generally did so with predictable misogyny. A handful of women writers emerged over the course of the Middle Ages, but since there were almost no opportunities for women to learn Latin (the great exception being the education afforded to some nuns) they were cut off from the world of medieval scholarship.

That being noted, on a practical level medieval women exercised at least some forms of genuine agency (meaning the ability to make meaningful choices about their own lives). Legally, women could inherit and own property independently, and in most cases they retained control of the dowry brought to marriage. Women almost always married younger than men did, meaning there were large numbers of widows in medieval society who generally retained control of their property. Marriage itself was regarded as a sacred duty: it was one of the seven sacraments that the Church held were essential to spiritual salvation. Marriages were only valid if both parties entered into the marriage willingly, and it is clear that many medieval marriages were genuinely affectionate partnerships despite the fact that medieval society was explicitly patriarchal and despite the prevalence of misogynistic theories about women’s supposed weakness and sinfulness. Likewise, at least some male authors were clearly aware that women were more than capable of wit, independence, and competence.

In daily life women performed a host of crucial economic and social functions. Medieval society was, after all, completely dependent on agriculture and the vast majority of the population were peasants, with men and women both obliged to work from childhood to old age (which for most people was their late 30s – life expectancy was the early 40s for both men and women). Farm work was divided between men’s and women’s labor. Men plowed fields, tended the large farm animals, and performed maintenance and construction. Women gardened, tended the small animals (e.g. poultry), made cheese and ale, and were almost completely responsible for cooking, cleaning, and childcare. This gendered division of labor was never absolute, of course, especially since women did “men’s work” out of necessity whenever men were away in war, were injured or sick, or were otherwise unavailable. One area that had an obvious negative impact on medieval women was that their work was never done – a man’s workday ended when he returned from the fields, but a woman *always* had work that needed to be done around the house.

Women in more elite social categories also performed important economic tasks, but they were increasingly excluded from the formal institutions of organization and power like craft guilds (i.e. more women worked as skilled artisans *before* craft guilds cemented their control of production). The wives of artisans were often artisans themselves, but their work was simply regarded as part of their husbands’ output. Married noblewomen managed their estates, a necessity considering how closely noblemen’s social identity revolved around warfare, while noble widows sometimes served as formal feudal vassals to more powerful lords, even occasionally leading troops when called into service. Still, the expectation was that women in general were to defer to men in almost every case, and even widows often found themselves pressured to remarry (and in the process hand over much of their former independence). Even queens were usually limited in their access to genuine political power, serving as “queens consort,” wives of kings, with the latter possessing complete political control, far more often than “queens regnant,” rulers in their own right who were able to share power with their royal spouse.

Monasticism

One special social category within medieval society deserves added attention: the monks and nuns. Monks and nuns took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience when they left their normal lives and joined (respectively) monasteries and convents. They did not, however, have to spend their time attending to the spiritual needs of laypeople (i.e. people outside of the Church), which was the primary function of priests. Instead, they were to devote themselves to prayer and to useful works, activities that were thought to encourage piety and devotion among the monks and nuns, and which often proved to be extremely profitable to the monasteries and convents themselves.

Monasteries and convents grew to become some of the most important economic institutions in medieval Europe, despite their stated intention of housing people whose full-time job was to pray for the souls of Christians everywhere. Monasteries and convents had to be economically self-sustaining, overseeing both agriculture and crafts on their lands. Over time, activities like overseeing agriculture on monastery lands, brewing beer or making wine, or painstakingly copying the manuscripts of books often became a major focus of life in monasteries and convents. In essence, many monasteries and convents became the most dynamic and commercially successful institutions in their home regions. Monks and nuns encouraged innovative new forms of agriculture on their lands, sold products (including textiles and the above-mentioned beer and wine) at a healthy profit, and despite their vows of poverty, successful monasteries and convents became lavishly decorated and luxurious for their inhabitants.

Simultaneously, one way that medieval elites tried to shore up their chances of avoiding eternal damnation was leaving land and wealth in their wills to monasteries and convents. Generations of European elites granted land, in particular, to monasteries and convents during life or as part of their posthumous legacy. The result was the astonishing statistic that monasteries owned a full 20% of the arable land of Western Europe by the late Middle Ages.

Corruption

Monasteries and convents were not alone in their wealth. The upper ranks of the Church – bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the popes themselves – were almost exclusively drawn from the European nobility. Lower-ranking churchmen were, in turn, commoners, often drawn from the ranks of the same peasants that they ministered to from one of the small parish churches that dotted the landscape. All of the wealth that went into the Church, from an obligatory tax called the tithe, was siphoned up to the upper reaches of the institutional Church, and many of the high-level priests lived like princes as a result.

Morality in this setting was, predictably, lax. Despite the nominal requirement not to marry, many high-level priests lived openly with concubines and equally openly supported their children, seeing their sons set up as landowners or members of the Church in their own right and marrying off daughters to noble families. Despite the injunction to live simply and avoid luxury, many priests (and monks, and nuns) were greedy and ostentatious; one notorious practice was of bishops or archbishops who controlled and received incomes from many different territories (called “bishoprics”) at once but never actually visited them. Another practice was of noblemen literally buying positions in the Church for their sons – teenage boys might find themselves appointed bishops thanks to the financial intervention of their fathers, with Church officials pocketing the bribe. Medieval depictions of hell were full of the image of priests, monks, and nuns all plummeting into the fire to face eternal torment for what a profoundly poor job they had done while alive in living up

to the moral demands of their respective vocations. In other words, medieval laypeople were well aware of how corrupt many in the Church actually were.

In addition, while medieval education and literacy was almost entirely confined to the Church as an institution, many rural priests were at best semi-literate. All Church services were conducted in Latin, and yet some priests understood Latin only poorly, if at all (it had long since vanished as a vernacular language in Europe). Thus, some of the very caretakers of Christian belief in medieval society often had a very shallow understanding of what that belief was supposed to consist of theologically.

For all of the Middle Ages, however, the fact that the lay public knew that the Church was corrupt and that many of its members were incompetent was of limited practical importance. There was no alternative. Without the Church, without the sacraments only it could offer, without the prayers issued by monks and nuns for the souls of believers, and without its reassurance of a life to come after death, medieval Christians were certain that their eternal souls were damned to hell.

Medieval Learning

Despite the biases of later Renaissance thinkers that the medieval period was nothing but the “dark ages,” bereft of learning and culture, there were very important intellectual achievements in the period of 1000 – 1400 CE. Most of these had to do with foreign influences that were taken and reshaped by European thinkers, from the ancient Greeks and Romans to innovations originating in the Islamic empires to the south and east of Europe.

Likewise, despite the problems of corruption and ignorance among members of the clergy, scholarship *did* continue and even prosper within the church during the late Middle Ages. Numerous priests were not only literate in Latin and deeply knowledgeable about Christian theology, but made major strides in considering, debating, and explaining the nuances of Christian thought. Thus, it is a mistake to consider the medieval church as nothing more than a kind of “scam” – it did provide meaningful guidance and comfort to medieval Christians, and some of its members were exemplary thinkers and major intellectuals.

Intellectual Life in the Middle Ages

A symptom of the growth of intellectual life in the High Middle Ages was the fact that literacy (which, at the time, meant the ability to read, not necessarily to write) finally revived, at least a bit, following the real nadir of literacy that had lasted from the collapse of the western Roman Empire until about 1050. As of 1050, perhaps 1% of the population could read, most of whom were priests, some of the latter only being able to stumble through the Latin liturgy without fully comprehending it. While it is impossible to calculate anything close to the exact literacy rates at any point before the modern era, it is still clear that literacy started to climb following that eleventh-century low point, with many regular merchants and even a few peasants acquiring at least basic reading knowledge by the fourteenth century. The explanation for this growth in literacy is an expansion of educational institutions that had only existed in a few pockets earlier in the Middle Ages.

The two forms of educational institutions available were tutoring offered within monasteries and schools associated with cathedrals. Both were, obviously, part of the Church, and cathedral schools in particular focused on training future priests. Monasteries offered basic education in literacy (in Latin) to laypeople as well as the monks

themselves, and even some prosperous farmers achieved a basic degree of literacy as a result. Cathedral schools in cities offered the same, and they increasingly trained not only local elites, but even the children of artisans and merchants.

While they did offer basic education to laypeople, the official focus of cathedral schools was in training priests. They began to expand after 1000 CE, offering a more focused and rigorous grounding in sacred texts and, to an extent, ancient texts from Rome, to help educate Church leaders and laypeople. The cathedral schools were supposed to be turning out not just spiritual leaders, but skilled bureaucrats, and that required a rigorous form of education that encouraged the study not just of the Bible, but of classics of Latin literature like the speeches of the great Roman politician Cicero and ancient Rome's great epic poem, Virgil's *Aeneid*. Thus, those priests-in-training who were lucky enough to attend one of the better cathedral schools acquired a strong command of classical Latin and were made aware of the high intellectual standards that had prospered in the glory days of Rome.

Scholasticism

If there was a single event that changed education and scholarship in the late Middle Ages, it was the arrival of the lost works of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle was one of the greatest geniuses of the ancient world, producing learned works on philosophy, astronomy, physics, biology, literary criticism and, most importantly for medieval Europe, logic. Some of Aristotle's works had survived in Europe after the fall of Rome, but most of it had vanished. Over the course of the eleventh century, translations of Aristotle's work on formal philosophical logic re-emerged in Europe. Most had been preserved in the Arab world, where Aristotle was considered the single most important pre-Islamic philosopher and was studied with great rigor by Arab scholars. Enterprising scholars – many of them Jewish philosophers who lived in North Africa and Spain – translated Aristotle's work on logic from Arabic into Latin. Later, Greeks from Byzantium came to Europe with the originals in Greek and they, too, translated it into Latin.

The importance of this rediscovery of Aristotle is that his work on logic offered a formal system for evaluating complicated bodies of work like the Christian Bible itself. The inherent problem facing believers of any religion based on a single major text is figuring out what that text fundamentally *means*. To wit: the Christian Bible is full of parables, stories, and accounts of events that are often terrifically difficult to interpret. Even in the four gospels that describe the life of Christ, not all of Christ's actions or sayings are easy to understand, and the gospels sometimes offer conflicting accounts. What did Christ mean when he said "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24)? What did he mean with "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matthew 10:34)? Not to mention, how was a Christian to make sense of the stern, vengeful God described in the Old Testament and the deity of peace and forgiveness represented by Christ? Most medieval Christians were content to simply accept the sacraments and offer prayers to the saints without worrying about the theological details, but increasingly, educated priests themselves wanted to understand the nuances of their own religion.

Thus, Aristotle's formal approach to logic proved invaluable to the interpreters of the Bible. Armed with his newly-rediscovered system of logical interpretation, key figures within the Church began to analyze the Bible and the works of early Christian thinkers with new energy and focus. The result was scholasticism, which was the major intellectual movement of the High Middle Ages. Scholasticism was the rigorous application of methods of logic, originally developed by Aristotle, to Christian scriptures. And, because the cathedral schools of the late Middle Ages increasingly relied on scholasticism to train and teach new priests, it spread rapidly across all of Europe.

By roughly 1100 CE, a new form of formal education based on scholasticism was the method of instruction

in cathedral schools. The instructor would read a short passage from the Bible or an early Christian intellectual leader, then cite various authorities on the meaning of the passage. This was called the lecture, which simply means the “reading.” Students would then consider the possible meanings of the passage in a period of meditation. Finally, and most importantly, students would be called on to debate their respective interpretations. In debates, students were expected to cite not only the passage itself but any supporting evidence they could come up with from the vast body of sacred and ancient writings. The result was that, at least at the better cathedral schools, large numbers of newly-minted priests emerged with a strong understanding of Christian thought and an equally strong grasp of rhetoric, debate, and logic.

The importance to scholasticism of what was called at the time “disputation” – the debating technique described above – cannot be overstated. Rather than merely presenting an interpretation of Christian thought and expecting students to absorb it verbatim, scholastic teachers used disputation with students to hone their students’ argumentative skills, insight, and logical analysis. One obvious example of a field that benefited from formal disputation was law: disputation as a technique easily transitioned from biblical questions to legal ones, and by the twelfth century new generations of lawyers (starting in Italy) used scholastic techniques both to revive aspects of Roman law and to hone their own skills as lawyers.

Some teachers in the scholastic tradition became minor intellectual celebrities, the most celebrated being Peter Abelard (1079 – 1142), a brilliant teacher and debater in Paris who gave extensive lectures exploring both the pros and cons of various important questions that had been considered by the Church fathers. Abelard’s major focus was the use and application of reason to faith – he was of the belief that ultimate truth could and should sustain reasoned investigation of its precepts, a stance that got him into considerable trouble with some Church leaders. Abelard’s point was that educated Christians *should* challenge their own beliefs and try to understand them; to him, since Christians were safe in the assumption that the Bible would always be the ultimate source of truth, their own attempts to understand its apparent contradictions and ambiguities only strengthened the Christian religion as a whole.

The new rigor of education and the expansion of cathedral schools, helped in part by the popularity of figures like Abelard, led in turn to the emergence of the first true universities. Initially, they were comparable to craft guilds, with organizations of students and teachers negotiating over the cost of classes and preventing unauthorized lecturers from stealing students. A princely charter was granted to the law students of Bologna in northern Italy in 1158, which marks it as the first recognized university. The most significant medieval university was, however, the Sorbonne of Paris in 1257. It grew out of the cathedral school of Notre Dame, at which Abelard had taught, and it is usually considered the oldest large university in the western world (it is still very much in operation today).

Medieval universities created a number of practices that live on to the present in higher education. They drew up a curriculum, established graduation requirements and exams, and conferred degrees. The robes and distinctive hats of graduation ceremonies are directly descended from the medieval models. Teachers were all members of the clergy, “professing” religion, hence the term “professor.” The core disciplines, which date back to Roman times, were divided between the liberal arts of grammar, rhetoric, and logic (called the trivium) and what might now be described as a more “technical” set of disciplines: arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music (the quadrivium) – this division was the earliest version of a curriculum of “arts and sciences.” Finally, the four kinds of doctorates, the PhD (doctor of philosophy), the JD (doctor of jurisprudence, that is to say of law), the ThD (doctor of theology, a priest), and the MD (doctor of medicine), are all derived from medieval degrees.

All students and professors were male, since the assumption was that the whole purpose of studies was to create better church officials; while some women did become important medieval thinkers, they were either exceptional

individuals who had been tutored by men or were nuns who had access to the (often excellent) education of the convents. One outstanding example of a medieval woman who was known in her own lifetime as a major intellectual figure was Hildegard of Bingen (1098 – 1179), abbess of a German convent. While not formally educated in the scholastic tradition, Hildegard was nevertheless the author of several works of theological interpretation and of medicine. She was a musician and composer as well, writing music and musical plays performed by both nuns and laypeople. She carried on a voluminous correspondence with other learned people during her lifetime and was eventually sainted by the Church. While Hildegard was exceptional in her range of intellectual production, many other women within the Church also contributed to medieval learning and scholarship as a whole.

Conclusion

While it is tempting to characterize European intellectual life before about 1000 CE as part of a “dark age,” that was obviously no longer the case by the eleventh century. Educational institutions multiplied, diversified, and expanded, and the quality of education and scholarship increased along with that expansion. While most people – by definition, peasants – remained illiterate and largely ignorant of the world beyond their own villages, there was at least a current of real intellectual curiosity and rigorous scholarship expanding in the cities, monasteries, and convents of the High Middle Ages.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Latin Principalities](#) – MapMaster

[Teutonic Theocracy](#) – S. Bollmann

CHAPTER 2: THE CRISES OF THE MIDDLE AGES

From a very “high level” perspective, the years between about 1000 CE – 1300 CE were relatively good ones for Europe. The medieval agricultural revolution sparked an expansion of population, urbanization, and economics, advances in education and scholarship paid off in higher literacy rates and a more sophisticated intellectual life, and Europe was free of large-scale invasions. Starting in the mid-thirteenth century in Eastern Europe, and spreading to Western Europe in the fourteenth century, however, a series of crises undermined European prosperity, security, and population levels. Historians refer to these events as the “crises of the Middle Ages.”

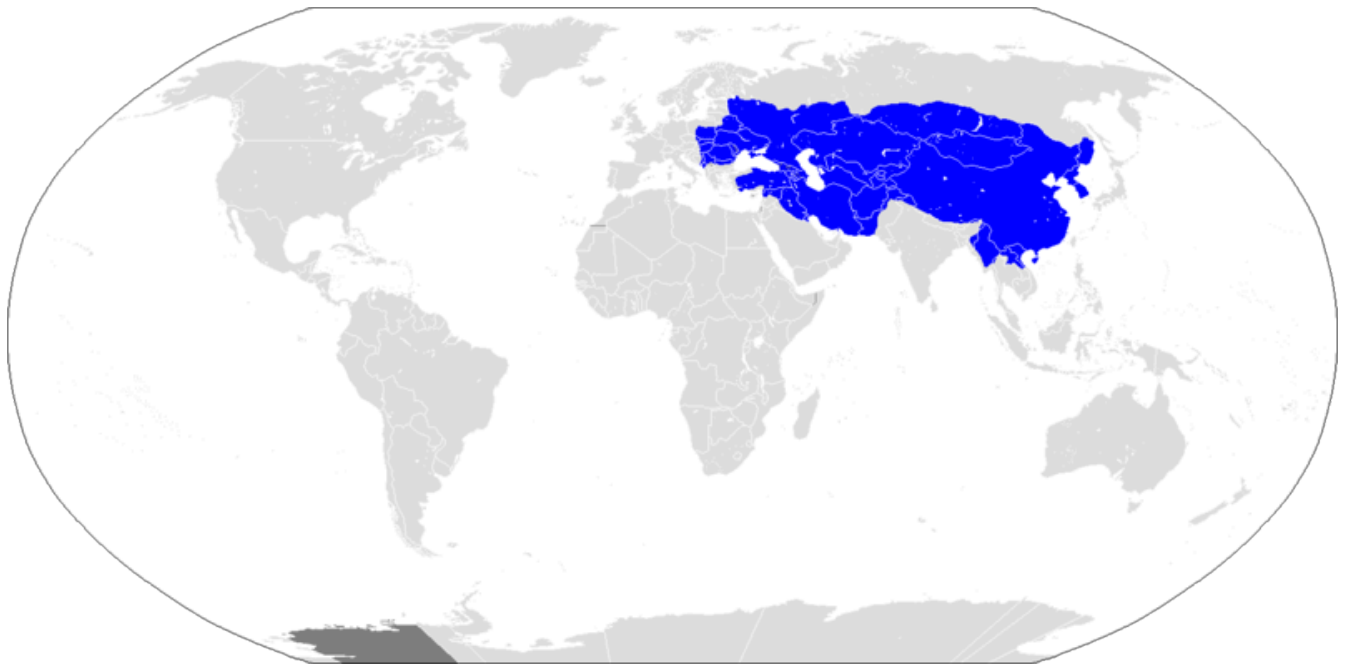
The Mongols

The Mongols are not always incorporated into the narrative of Western Civilization, because despite the enormous breadth of their empire under Chinggis (also Anglicized as Genghis, although the actual pronunciation in Mongolian is indeed Chinggis) Khan and his descendants, most of the territories held by the Mongols were in Asia. The Mongols, however, are entirely relevant to the history of Western Civilization, both because they devastated the kingdoms of the Middle East at the time and because they ultimately set the stage for the history of early-modern Russia.

The Mongols and the Turks are related peoples from Central Asia going back to prehistory. They were nomads and herders with very strong traditions of horse riding, archery, and warfare. In general, the Turks lived in the western steppes (steppe is the term for the enormous grasslands of Central Asia) and the Mongols in the eastern steppes, with the Turks threatening the civilizations of the Middle East and Eastern Europe and the Mongols threatening China. A specific group of Turks, the Seljuks, had already taken over much of the Middle East by the eleventh century, and over the next two hundred years they deprived the Byzantine Empire of its remaining holdings outside of Constantinople and its immediate surroundings.

Meanwhile, in 1206 the Mongols elected a leader named Temujin (b. 1167) “Khan,” which simply means “lord” or “warlord.” The election was the culmination of years of battles and struggles between Temujin and various rival clan leaders. By the time he united the Mongols under his rule, he had already overcome numerous setbacks and betrayals, described years later in a major history commissioned by the Mongol rulers, the *Secret History of the Mongols*. After his election as Khan, he set his sites on the lands beyond Mongolia and eventually became known as Chinngis Khan, meaning “universal lord.” He united both the Mongols and various Turkic clans, then launched the single most successful campaign of empire-building in world history.

Chinngis personally oversaw the beginning of the expansion of the “Mongol Horde” across all of Central Asia as far as the borders of Russia and China. Over the following decades, Mongol armies conquered all of Central Asia itself, Persia (in 1221), northern China (in 1234), Russia (in 1241), the Abbasid Caliphate (in 1258), and southern China (in 1279). Importantly, most of these conquests occurred under Chinngis’s sons and grandsons (he died in 1227), demonstrating that Mongol military prowess was not dependent on his personal genius. Ultimately, the Mongol empires (a series of “Khanates” divided between the sons and grandsons of Chinggis) stretched from Hungary to Anatolia and from Siberia to the South China Sea.



The Mongol Empire at its height, under Temujin's grandson Kublai Khan, was the largest land empire in world history.

Mongol military discipline was extraordinary by pre-modern standards. Starting with Chinngis himself, all Mongols were beholden to a code of conduct and laws called the *Yasa* (historians debate whether or not the *Yasa* was a codified set of laws or just a set of traditions). They were divided into units divisible by ten, from hundred-man companies to ten-thousand-man armies called *Tumen*. Since clan divisions had always undermined Mongol unity in the past, Chinngis deliberately placed members of a given clan in different *Tumen* to water-down clan loyalty and encourage his warriors to think of themselves as part of something greater than their clans.

Mongols had strict regulations for order of march, guard duty, and maintenance of equipment. All men were expected to serve in the armies, and the Mongols quickly and efficiently plundered the areas they conquered to supply their troops. Mongols trained relentlessly; during the brief periods of peace they took part in great hunts of animals which were then critiqued by their commanders. Each warrior had several horses, all trained to respond to voice commands, and in battle Mongol armies were coordinated by signal flags.

The Mongols also made extensive use of spies and intelligence to gather information about areas they planned to attack, interviewing merchants and travelers before they arrived. They were noteworthy for being willing to change their tactics to suit the needs of a campaign, using siege warfare, terror tactics, even biological warfare (flinging plague-ridden corpses over city walls) as necessary. Once the Mongols had conquered a given territory, they would deport and use soldiers and engineers from the conquered peoples against new targets: Persian siege engineers were used to help the conquest of China, and later, Chinese officials were used to help extract taxes from what was left of Persia.

The Mongol horde often devastated the lands it conquered. Some, like the Central Asian kingdom of Khwarizm, were so devastated that the areas it encompassed never fully recovered. Chinngis himself believed that civilization was a threat that might soften his men, so he had whole cities systematically exterminated; in some of their invasions the Mongols practiced a medieval form of what we might justifiably call genocide. Fortunately for the areas conquered by the Mongols, however, under Chinngis's sons and grandsons this policy of destruction gave way to one of (often still vicious) economic exploitation and political dominance.

The Mongols in Eastern Europe

In 1236, after years of careful planning, the Mongols attacked Russia. Russia was not a united kingdom – instead, each major city was ruled by a prince, and the princes often fought one another. When the Mongols arrived, the Russian principalities were divided and refused to fight together, making them easy prey for the unified and highly-organized Mongol army. By 1240, all of the major Russian cities had been either destroyed or captured – the city of Vladimir was burned with its population still inside.

In 1241 the Mongols invaded Poland and Hungary simultaneously. Here, too, they triumphed over tens of thousands of European knights and peasant foot-soldiers. Both kingdoms would have been incorporated into the Mongol empire if not for the simple fact that the Great Khan Ögödei (Chinggis's third son, who had become Great Khan following Chinggis) died, and the European *Tumen* were recalled to the Mongol capital of Karakorum. This event spared what very well could have been a Mongol push into Central Europe itself; the pope at the time called an anti-Mongol crusade and those Europeans who understood the scope of the threat were terrified of the prospect of the Mongols marching further west. As it happens, the Mongols never came back.

The Mongols were finally stopped militarily by the Mamluk Turks, the rulers of Egypt as of the thirteenth century, who held back a Mongol invasion in 1260. By then, the inertia of the Mongol conquests was already slowing down as the great empire was divided between different grandsons of Temüjin; the Mamluk victory did not represent the definitive defeat of the Mongol horde as a whole, just a check on Mongol expansion in one corner of the vast Mongol empire. By then, the Mongol khanates had become truly independent from one another, with Mongol rule eventually collapsing over time (a process that happened in just a few decades in some places, but took centuries in others – Russia was not free of Mongol rule until the second half of the fifteenth century).

Mongol rule had mixed consequences for both Asian and European history. There was a beneficial stabilization in the trade that crossed the west – east axis in Eurasia as a continent, as Silk Road traders enjoyed a relatively peaceful and stable route. It also terrified Europeans, who heard travelers' tales of the non-Christian "Tatars" in the east who had crushed all opposition, and in Russia it created a complex political situation in which the native Slavic peoples were forced to pay tribute to Mongol lords. To this day, the period of Mongol rule is often taught in Russia as the period of the "Tatar Yoke," when any hope of progress for Russia was suspended for centuries while the rest of Europe advanced; while that may be a bit of an exaggeration, it still has a kernel of truth.

The Black Death

Historians have now arrived at a consensus that the deadliest epidemic in medieval and early-modern history began in the Mongol khanates and spread west: the Black Death, or simply "the plague," of the fourteenth century. The plague devastated the areas it affected, none more so than Europe. That devastation was in large part due to the vulnerability of the European population to disease thanks both to poor harvests and the lack of practical medical knowledge.

A series of bad harvests led to periods of famine in Europe starting in the early fourteenth century. Conditions in some regions were so desperate that peasants reportedly resorted to cannibalism on occasion. When harvests were poor, Europeans not only died outright from famine, but those who survived were left even more vulnerable to epidemics

because of weakened immune systems. By the time the plague arrived in 1348, generations of people were malnourished and all the more susceptible to infection as a result.

Medicine was completely ineffective in holding the plague in check. Europeans did not understand contagion – they knew that disease spread, but they had absolutely no idea how to prevent that spread. The prevailing medical theory was that disease was spread by clouds of foul-smelling gases called “miasmas,” like those produced by stagnant water and decay. Thus, people sincerely believed that if one could avoid the miasmas (which of course never actually existed), they could avoid sickness. Over the centuries, doctors advocated various techniques that were meant to dispel the miasmas by introducing other odors, including leaving piles of onions on the streets of plague-stricken neighborhoods and, starting in the seventeenth century, wearing masks that resembled the heads of birds, with the “beaks” stuffed with flower petals.



A later depiction of a doctor in the midst of a plague epidemic.

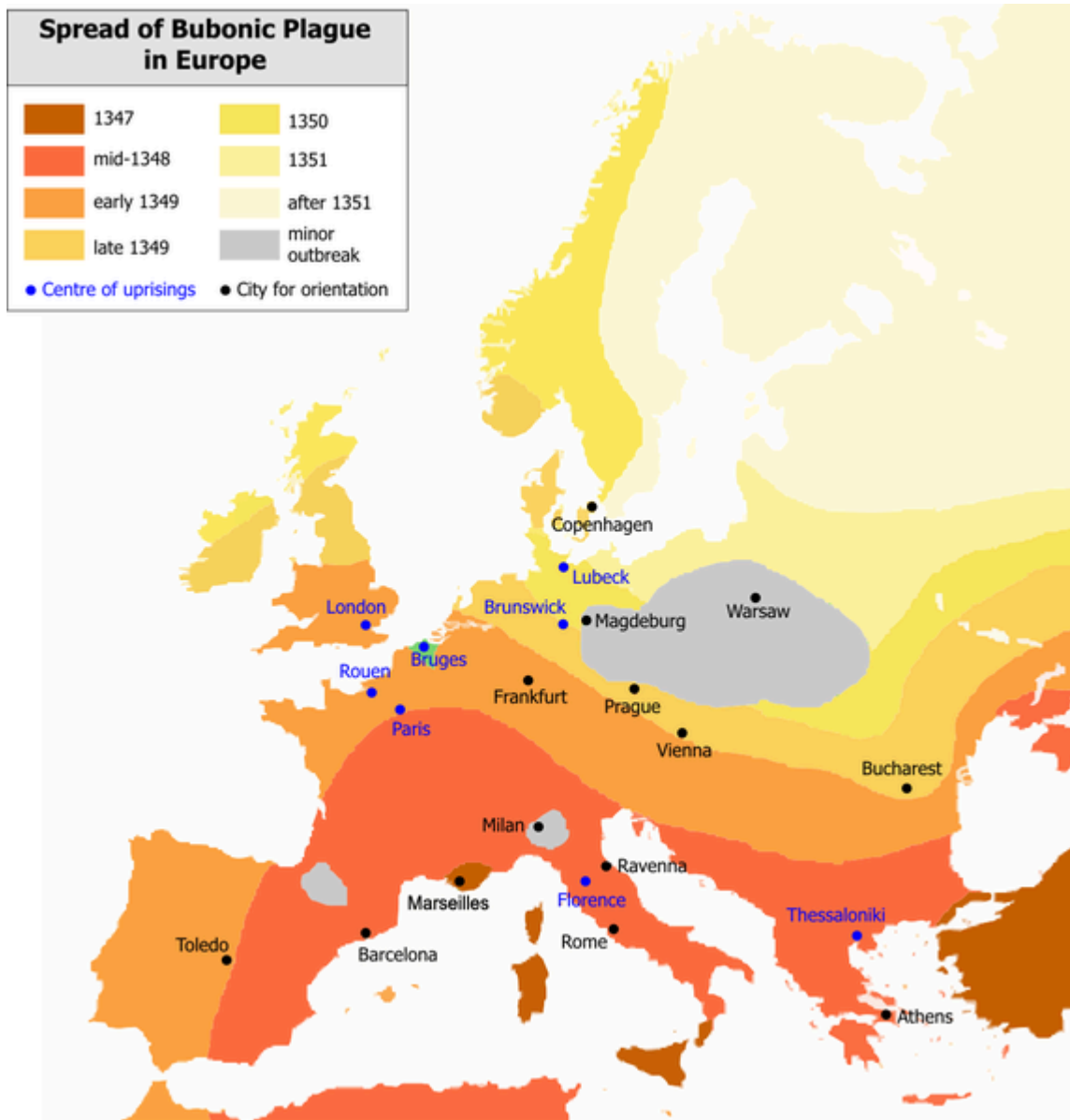
Not surprisingly, given the dearth of medical knowledge, epidemics of all kinds regularly swept across Europe. When harvests failed, the poor often went to the cities in search of some kind of respite, either work or church-based charity. In 1330, for instance, the official population of the northern Italian city of Florence was 100,000, but a full

20,000 were paupers, most of whom had come from the countryside seeking relief. The cities became incubators for epidemics that were even more intense than those that affected the countryside.

Thus, a vulnerable and, in terms of medicine, ignorant population fell victim to the virulence of the Black Death from 1348 to 1351. Historians still debate as to exactly which (identifiable with contemporary medical knowledge) disease or diseases the Black Death consisted of, but the prevailing theory is that it was bubonic plague. Bubonic plague is transmitted by fleas, both those carried by rats and transmitted to humans, and on fleas exclusive to humans. In the unsanitary conditions of medieval Europe, there were both rats and fleas everywhere. In turn, many victims of bubonic plague developed the “pneumonic” form of the disease, spread by coughing, which made it both incredibly virulent and lethal (about 90% of those who developed pneumonic plague died).

The theory the Black Death was the bubonic plague runs into the problem that modern outbreaks of bubonic plague do not seem to travel as quickly as did the Black Death, although that almost certainly has much to do with the vastly more effective sanitation and treatment available in the modern era as compared to the medieval setting of the Black Death. One hypothesis is that those with bubonic plague may have caught pneumonia as a secondary infection, and that pneumonia was thus another lethal component of the Black Death. Regardless of whatever disease or combination of diseases the Black Death really was, the effects were devastating.

The plague exploded across Europe starting at the end of the 1340s. All of Southern Europe was affected in 1348; it spread to Central Europe and England by 1349 and Eastern Europe and Scandinavia by 1350. It went on to spread even further and continued to fester until 1351, when it had killed so many people that the survivors had developed a resistance to it. The death toll was astonishing: in the end, the Black Death killed about one-third of the population of Europe in just three years (that is a conservative estimate – some present-day historians have calculated that it was closer to half!). Some cities lost over half of their population; there are even cases of villages where there was only a single survivor. This was an enormous demographic shift in a very short amount of time that had lasting consequences for European society, thanks mostly to the labor shortage that it introduced.



The plague's spread, from south to north, over the course of just a few years. The section marked in grey is incorrectly labeled "minor outbreak": in fact, while data is difficult to come by for that region, it seems clear that the plague hit just as hard there as elsewhere in Europe.

The only somewhat effective response to the Black Death was the implementation of quarantines. The more fast-acting city governments of Europe locked those who had plague symptoms in their homes, often for more than a month, and sometimes whole neighborhoods or districts were placed under quarantine. In the countryside, people refused to travel to larger cities and towns out of fear of infection. Even though quarantines slowed the spread of the plague in some cases, overall they did little but delay it.

More common than practical measures like quarantines, however, was prayer and the search for scapegoats to blame for the devastation. The spiritual reaction to the plague was, among Christian Europeans, to implore God for relief, beg for forgiveness, and to look to outsiders to blame. Building on the murderous anti-Semitism that had begun in earnest during the period of the crusades, Jews were often the victims of this phenomenon. There was a huge spike in

anti-Semitic riots during plague outbreaks, as Jews were blamed for somehow bringing the plague (a frequent accusation was that Jews had poisoned wells), and thousands of Jews were massacred as a result.

Religious movements emerged in response to the plague as well, like the Flagellants: groups of penitents who roamed the countryside, villages, and towns whipping themselves and begging God for forgiveness. Many people sincerely believed that the Black Death was the opening salvo of the End Times, since the history of Europe in the fourteenth century so clearly involved both famine and pestilence – two of the four “horsemen” that were to accompany the end times according to the Bible (the others, war and death, were ever-present as well).

The Black Death ended in 1351, but the plague returned roughly every twenty years in some form. Some cases were as devastating, at least in limited areas, as the Black Death had been. The plague did not stop entirely until the early eighteenth century – to this day it is not clear what brought an end to large-scale plague outbreaks, although one theory is that a species of brown rat that was not as vulnerable to the plague overwhelmed the older black rats that had infested Europe.

Effects of the Plague's Aftermath

Ironically, the immediate economic effects of the plague after it ended were largely positive for many people. The demographic consequences of the Black Death, namely its enormous death toll, resulted in a labor shortage across all of Europe. The immediate effect was that lords tried to keep their peasants from fleeing the land and to keep wages at the low levels they had been at before the plague hit, sparking various peasant uprisings. Even though those uprisings were generally bloodily put down in the end, the overall trend was that laborers *had* to be paid more; their labor was simply more valuable. In the decades that followed, then, many peasants benefited from higher prices for their labor and their crops.

Another group that benefited was women. For roughly a century after the plague, women had more legal rights in terms of property ownership, the right to participate in commerce, and land ownership, than they had enjoyed before the plague's outbreak. Women were even able to join certain craft guilds for a time, something that was almost unheard of earlier. The reason for this temporary improvement in the legal and economic status of women was precisely the same as that of peasants: the labor shortage.

The plague also ushered in a cultural change that came about because of the prevalence of death in the fourteenth century. Europeans became so used to death that they often depicted it graphically and quite terribly in art. Paintings, stories, and theatrical performances emerged having to do with the “dance of death,” a depiction of the futility of worldly possessions and status vis-à-vis the inevitability of death. Likewise, graves and mausoleums came to be decorated with statues of grotesque skeletons and writhing bodies. When people were dying, their families and friends were supposed to come and view them, inoculating everyone present against the temptation to enjoy life too much and encouraging them to greater focus on preparing their souls for the afterlife.



The dance of death, with this image produced decades after the Black Death had already run its course.

The 100 Years' War

The plague happened near the beginning of the conflict between England and France remembered as the Hundred Years' War, which lasted from 1337 – 1453. That conflict was not really one war, but instead consisted of a series of battles and shorter wars between the crowns of England and France interrupted by (sometimes fairly long) periods of peace.

The war began because of simmering resentments and dynastic politics. The root of the problem was that the English kings were descendants of William the Conqueror, the Norman king who had sailed across the English Channel in 1066 and defeated the Anglo-Saxon king who then ruled England. From that point on, the royal and noble lines of England and France were intertwined, and as marriage between both nobles and royalty often took place across French – English lines, the inheritance of lands and titles in both countries was often a point of contention. The culture of nobility in both countries was so similar that the “English” nobles generally spoke French instead of English in day-to-day life.

This confusion very much extended to the kings themselves. The English royal line (the Plantagenets) often enjoyed pledges of fealty from numerous “French” nobles, and “English” kings often thought of themselves as being as much French as English – the English King Richard the Lion-Hearted, for instance, spent most of his career in France battling for control of more French territory. Likewise, a large region in southwestern France, Aquitaine, was formally the property of the English royal line, with the awkward caveat that, while a given English king might be sovereign in England, his lordship of Aquitaine technically made him the vassal of whoever the French king happened to be. Thus, hundreds of years after William’s conquest, the royal and noble lines of England and France were often hard to distinguish from one another.

The war began in the aftermath of the death of the French King Charles IV in 1328. The king of England, Edward III, was next in line for succession, but powerful members of the French nobility rejected his claim and instead pledged to give the crown to a French noble of the royal line named Philip VI. When Philip began passing judgments to do with the English-controlled territory of Aquitaine, Edward went to war, sparking the Hundred Years’ War itself.

The war itself consisted of a series of raids and invasions by English forces punctuated by the occasional large battle. English kings and knights kept the war going because it was a way to enrich themselves – they would arrive in France with a moderately-sized force of armed men to loot and pillage. English forces tended to be better organized than were their French counterparts, so even France’s much greater wealth and size did prevent major English victories. The most famous of those victories was the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, in which a smaller English force decimated the elite French cavalry through effective use of longbows, a weapon that could transform an English peasant into more than the equal of a mounted French knight. The aftermath of Agincourt saw most of the French nobility accept the English king, Henry V, as the king of France. Henry V promptly died, however, and the conflict exploded into a series of alliances and counter-alliances between rival factions of English and French nobles (one French territory, Burgundy, even declared its independence from France and became a staunch English ally for a time).

Decades into the war, the French received an unexpected boost in their fortunes thanks to the intervention of one of the future patron saints of France itself: Joan of Arc. Joan was a peasant girl who walked into the middle of the conflict in 1429, supporting the French Dauphin (heir) Charles VII. Joan reported that she had received a vision from God commanding her to help the French achieve victory against the invading English. French forces rallied around Joan, with Joan herself leading the French forces in several battles. Remarkably, despite being a teenage peasant with no military background, she proved capable at aiming catapults, making tactical decisions, and rallying the French troops to victory. Buoyed by the sense that God was on their side, French forces prevailed. Even though she was soon captured and handed over to the English for trial and execution as a witch by the Burgundians, Joan became a martyr to the French cause and, eventually, one of the most significant French nationalist symbols. By 1453, the French forces finally ended the English threat.



An illustration of Joan of Arc from 1505, just under 60 years after the end of the war.

The war had a devastating effect on France. Between the fighting and the plague, its population declined by

half. Many French regions suffered economically as luxury trades shut down and whole regions were devastated by the fighting. The French crown introduced new taxes, such as the *Gabelle* (a tax on salt) and the *Taille* (a household tax) that further burdened commoners. On the cultural front, the English monarchy and nobility severed their ties with France and high English culture began to self-consciously reshape itself as distinctly *English* rather than French, leading among other things to the use of the English language as the language of state and the law for the first time.

The Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism

Even as the French and English were at each other's throats, the Catholic Church fell into a state of disunity, sometimes even chaos. The cause was one of the most peculiar episodes in late medieval European history: the "Babylonian Captivity" of the popes in the fourteenth century. The term originally referred to the Biblical story of the Jews' enslavement by the Babylonian Empire in the sixth century BCE, but the late-medieval Babylonian Captivity refers instead to the period during which the popes no longer lived in their traditional residence in Rome.

The context for this strange event was the state of the Catholic Church as of the early fourteenth century. The Church was a very diverse, and somewhat diffuse, institution. Due to the simple geographical distance between Rome and the kingdoms of Europe, the popes did not exercise much practical authority over the various national churches, and high-level churchmen in European kingdoms were often more closely associated with their respective kings than with Rome. Likewise, there were many times during the Middle Ages when individual popes were weak and ineffectual and could not even command obedience within the church hierarchy itself.

Over the centuries the papacy struggled, and often failed, to assert its control over the Church as an institution and to hold the pretensions of kings in check. Those weaknesses were reflected in a simple fact: there had been a number of times over the centuries in which there were rival popes, generally appointed by compliant church officials who answered to kings. Obviously, having rival popes undermined the central claim of the papacy to complete authority over the Church itself and over Christian doctrine in the process (let alone the occasional insistence by popes that their authority superseded that of kings – see below).

The Babylonian Captivity began when Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull (formal commandment) in 1303 to the effect that all kings had to acknowledge his authority over even their own kingdoms, a challenge he issued in response to the taxes kings levied on church property. Unfortunately for Boniface, he lacked both influence with the monarchs of Europe and the ability to defend himself. Infuriated, the French king, Philip IV, promptly had the pope arrested and thrown in prison; he was released months later but promptly died.

Philip supported the election of a new pope, Clement V, in 1305. Clement was a Frenchman with strong ties to the French nobility. At the time, Rome was a very dangerous city, with rival noble families literally fighting in the streets over various feuds, so Clement moved himself and the papal office to the French city of Avignon, which was much more peaceful. This created enormous concern among non-French church officials (most of them Italian), who feared that the French king, then the most powerful ruler in Europe, would have undue influence over the papacy. Their fears seemed confirmed when Clement started appointing new cardinals, a pattern that ultimately saw 113 French cardinals out of the 134 who were appointed in the following decades.

From 1305 to 1378, the popes continued to live and work in Avignon (despite the English invasions of the 100 Years' War). They were not directly controlled by the French king, as their opponents had feared, but they were definitely influenced by French politics. They also came to accept bribes and kickbacks for the appointment of priests and bishops,

along with shady schemes with Church lands. This situation was soon described as a new Babylonian Captivity by clerics and laypeople alike (especially in Italy), comparing the presence of the papacy in France to the enslavement of the ancient Jews in Babylon.

In 1378, the new pope, Urban VI, announced his intention to move the papacy back to Rome. As rival factions developed within the upper levels of the Church hierarchy, a group of French cardinals elected another, French, pope (Clement VII), and Europe thus was split between two rival popes, both of whom excommunicated each other as a heretic and impostor (the term used at the time was “antipope.”) This led to the Great Western Schism, a period from 1378 to 1417 during which there were as many as *three* rival popes vying for power. For almost forty years, the church was a battlefield between both rival popes and their respective followers, and laypeople and monarchs alike were generally able to go about their business with little fear of papal intervention.

The Great Western Schism finally ended after a series of church councils, the Conciliar Movement, succeeded in establishing the authority of a single pope in 1417. The movement elected a new pope, Martin V, and made the claim that church councils could and should hold the ultimate authority over papal appointments – this concept was known as the *via consilii*, the existence of a great council with binding powers over the church’s leadership. This, however, undermined the very concept of what the papacy *was*: the “Doctrine of the Keys” held that the pope’s authority was passed down directly from Christ, and that even if councils could play a role in the practical maintenance of the church, the pope’s authority was not based on their approval. Ultimately, a powerful pope, Eugene IV, reconfirmed the absolute power of the papacy in 1431. Thus, this attempt at reform failed in the end, inadvertently setting the stage for more radical criticisms of papal power in the future.

The most important consequence of the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism was simple: the moral and spiritual authority of the church hierarchy was seriously undermined. While no one (yet) envisioned rejecting the authority of the Church altogether, many people regarded the Church’s leadership as just another political institution.

Conclusion

Some of the trends, patterns, and phenomena that were to take shape during the Renaissance era which began around 1300 began in the midst of the crises of the Middle Ages. France and England emerged from the 100 Years War to become stronger, more centralized states (although it took a civil war in England to get there, described in a subsequent chapter). The labor shortage in the aftermath of the Black Death spurred a period of modest economic growth. And, while European culture may have become more pessimistic and xenophobic as a whole, one region was rising to wealth and prominence precisely because of its long-distance trade and cultural connections: Northern Italy. It was there that the Renaissance began.

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CHAPTER 3: THE RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance, meaning “rebirth,” was a period of innovation in culture, art, and learning that took place between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, starting in Italy and then spreading to various other parts of Europe. It produced a number of artists, scientists, and thinkers who are still household names today: Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Donatello, Botticelli, and others. The Renaissance is justly famous for its achievements in art and learning, and even though some of its thinkers were somewhat conceited and off-base in dismissing the prior thousand years or so as being nothing but the “Dark Ages,” it is still the case that the Renaissance was enormously fruitful in terms of intellectual production and creation.

“The” Renaissance lasted from about 1300 – 1500. It ended in the early sixteenth century in that its northern Italian heartland declined in economic importance and the pace of change and progress in the arts and learning slowed, but in a very real sense the Renaissance never truly ended – its innovations and advances had already spread across much of Europe, and even though Italy itself lost its prominence, the patterns that began in Italy continued elsewhere. That was true not only of art, but of education, architecture, scholarship, and commercial practices.

The timing of the Renaissance coincided with some of the crises of the Middle Ages described in the last chapter. The overlap in dates is explained by the fact that most of Europe remained resolutely “medieval” during the Renaissance’s heyday in Italy: the ways of life, forms of technology, and political structure of the Middle Ages did not suddenly change with the flowering of the Renaissance, not least because it took so long for the innovations of the Renaissance to spread beyond Italy. Likewise, in Italy itself, the lives of most people (especially outside of the major cities) were all but identical in 1500 to what they would have been centuries earlier.

Background

Simply put, the background of the Renaissance was the prosperity of northern Italy. Italy did not face a major, ongoing series of wars like the Hundred Years’ War in France. It was hit hard by the plague, but no more so than most of the other regions of Europe. One unexpected “benefit” to Italy was actually the Babylonian Captivity and Great Western Schism: because the popes’ authority was so limited, the Italian cities found it easy to operate with little papal interference, and powerful Italian families often intervened directly in the election of popes when it suited their interests. Likewise, the other powers of Europe either could not or had no interest in troubling Italy: England and France were at war, the Holy Roman Empire was weak and fragmented, and Spain was not united until the late Renaissance period. In short, the crises of the Middle Ages actually *benefited* Italy, because they were centered elsewhere.

In this relatively stable social and political environment, Italy also enjoyed an advantage over much of the rest of Europe: it was far more urbanized. Because of its location as a crossroads between east and west, Italian cities were larger and there were simply more of them as compared to other kingdoms and regions of Europe, with the concomitant economic prosperity and sophistication associated with urban life. By 1300, northern Italy boasted twenty-three city-states with populations of 20,000 or more, each of which would have constituted an enormous metropolis by medieval standards.

Italian cities, clustered in the north, represented about 10% of Italy’s overall population. While that means that

90% of the population was either rural or lived in small towns, there was still a far greater concentration of urban dwellers in Italy than anywhere else in Europe. Among those cities were also several that boasted populations of over 100,000 by the fifteenth century, including Florence and Milan, which served as centers of banking, trade, and craftsmanship. Italian cities had large numbers of very productive craft guilds and workshops producing luxury goods that were highly desirable all over Europe.

Economics

Italy lay at the center of the lucrative trade between Europe and the Middle East, a status determined both by its geography and the role Italians had played in transporting goods and people during the crusading period. Along with the trade itself, it was in Italy that key mercantile practices emerged for the first time in Europe. From the Arab world, Italian merchants learned about and ultimately adopted a number of commercial practices and techniques that helped them (Italians) stay at the forefront of the European economy as a whole. For example, Italian accountants adopted double-entry bookkeeping (accounts payable and accounts receivable) and Italian merchants invented the *commenda*, a way of spreading out the risk associated with business ventures among several partners – an early form of insurance for expensive and risky commercial projects. Italian banks had agents all over Europe and provided reliable credit and bills of exchange, allowing merchants to travel around the entire Mediterranean region to trade without having to literally cart chests full of coins to pay for new wares.

One other noteworthy innovation first employed in Europe by Italians was the use of Arabic numerals instead of Roman numerals, since the former are so much easier to work with (e.g. imagine trying to do complicated multiplication or division using Roman numerals like “CLXVIII multiplied by XXXVIII,” meaning “168 multiplied by 38” in Arabic numerals...it was simply far easier to introduce errors in calculation using the former). Overall, Italian merchants, borrowing from their Arab and Turkic trading partners, pioneered efforts to rationalize and systematize business itself in order to make it more predictable and reliable.

Benefiting from the fragmentation of the Church during the era of the Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism, Italian bankers also came to charge interest on loans, becoming the first Christians to defy the church’s ban on “usury” in an ongoing, regular fashion. The stigma associated with usury remained, but bankers (including the Medici family that came to completely dominate Florentine politics in the fifteenth century) became so wealthy that social and religious stigma alone was not enough to prevent the spread of the practice. This actually led to *more* anti-Semitism in Europe, since the one social role played by Jews that Christians had grudgingly tolerated – money-lending – was increasingly usurped by Christians.

Much of the prosperity of northern Italy was based on the trade ties (not just mercantile practices) Italy maintained with the Middle East, which by the fourteenth century meant both the remains of the Byzantine Empire in Constantinople as well as the Ottoman Turkish empire, the rising power in the east. From the Turks, Italians (especially the great mercantile empire controlled by Venice) bought precious cargo like spices, silks, porcelain, and coffee, in return for European woolens, crafts, and bullion. The Italians were also the go-betweens linking Asia and Europe by way of the Middle East: Italy was the European terminus of the Silk Road.

The Italian city-states were sites of manufacturing as well. Raw wool from England and Spain made its way to Italy to be processed into cloth, and Italian workshops produced luxury goods sought after everywhere else in Europe. Italian luxury goods were superior to those produced in the rest of Europe, and soon even Italian weapons were better-

made. Italian farms were prosperous and, by the Renaissance period, produced a significant and ongoing surplus, feeding the growing cities.

One result of the prosperity generated by Italian mercantile success was the rise of a culture of conspicuous consumption. Both members of the nobility and rich non-nobles spent lavishly to display their wealth as well as their culture and learning. All of the famous Renaissance thinkers and artists were patronized by the rich, which was how the artists and scholars were able to concentrate on their work. In turn, patrons expected “their” artists to serve as symbols of cultural achievement that reflected well on the patron. The fluorescence of Renaissance art and learning was a consequence of that very specific use of wealth: mercantile and banking riches translated into social and political status through art, architecture, and scholarship.

Political Setting

Even though the western Roman Empire had fallen apart by 476 CE, the great cities of Italy survived in better shape than Roman cities elsewhere in the empire. Likewise, the feudal system had never taken as hold as strongly in Italy – there were lords and vassals, but especially in the cities there was a large and strong independent class of artisans and merchants who balked at subservience before lords, especially lords who did not live in the cities. Thus, by 1200, most Italian cities were politically independent of lords and came to dominate their respective hinterlands, serving as lords to “vassal” towns and villages for miles around.

Instead of kings and vassals, power was in the hands of the *popoli grossi*, literally meaning the “fat people,” but here meaning simply the rich, noble and non-noble alike. About 5% of the population in the richest cities was among them. The culture of the *popoli grossi* was rife with flattery, backstabbing, and politicking, since so much depended on personal connections. Since noble titles meant less, more depended on one’s family reputation, and the most important thing to the social elite was honor. Any perceived insult had to be met with retaliation, meaning there was a great deal of bloodshed between powerful families – Shakespeare’s famous play *Romeo and Juliet* is set in Renaissance Italy, featuring rival elite families locked in a blood feud over honor. There was no such thing as a police force, after all, just the guards of the rich and powerful and, usually, a city guard that answered to the city council. The latter was often controlled by powerful families on those councils, however, so both law enforcement and personal vendettas were generally carried out by private mercenaries.

Another aspect of the identity of the *popoli grossi* was that, despite their penchant for feuds, they required a peaceful political setting on a large scale in order for their commercial interests to prosper. Thus, they were often hesitant to embark on large-scale war in Italy itself.

Likewise, the focus on education and culture that translated directly into the creation of Renaissance art and scholarship was tied to the identity of the *popoli grossi* as people of peace: elsewhere in Europe noble identity was still very much associated with war, whereas the *popoli grossi* of Italy wanted to show off both their mastery of arms *and* their mastery of thought (along with their good taste).



Portrait of a young Cosimo de Medici, who would become the de facto ruler of Florence in the fifteenth century. He is depicted holding a book and wearing a sword: symbols of his learning and his authority.

The central irony of the prosperity of the Renaissance was that even in northern Italy, the vast majority of the population benefited only indirectly or not at all. While the lot of Italian peasants was not significantly worse than that of peasants elsewhere, poor townsfolk had to endure heavy taxes on basic foodstuffs that made it especially miserable to be poor in one of the richest places in Europe at the time. A significant percentage of the population of cities were “paupers,” the indigent and homeless who tried to scrape by as laborers or sought charity from the Church. Cities were especially vulnerable to epidemics as well, adding to the misery of urban life for the poor.

The Great City-States of the Renaissance

In the fourteenth and the first half of the fifteenth centuries, the city-states of northern Italy were aggressive rivals; most of the formerly-independent cities were swallowed up by the most powerful among them. However, as the power of the French monarchy grew in the west and the Ottoman Turks became an active threat in the east, the most powerful cities signed a treaty, the Peace of Lodi, in 1454 which committed each city to the defense of the existing political order. For the next forty years, Italy avoided major conflicts, a period that coincided with the height of the Renaissance.

The great city-states of this period were Milan, Venice, and Florence. Milan was the archetypal despot-controlled city-state, reaching its height under the Visconti family from 1277 – 1447. Milan controlled considerable trade from Italy to the north. Its wealth was dwarfed, however, by that of Venice.

Venice

Venice was ruled by a merchant council headed by an elected official, the Doge. Its Mediterranean empire generated so much wealth that Venice minted more gold currency than did England and France combined, and its gold coins (ducats) were always exactly the same weight and purity and were accepted across the Mediterranean as a result. Its government had representation for all of the moneyed classes, but no one represented the majority of the city’s population that consisted of the urban poor.

The main source of Venice’s prosperity was its control of the spice trade. It is difficult to overstate the value of spices during the Middle Ages and Renaissance – Europeans had a limitless hunger for spices (as an aside, note that the theory that spices were desirable because they masked the taste of rotten meat is patently false; medieval and Renaissance-era Europeans did not eat spoiled food). Unlike other luxury goods that could be produced in Europe itself, spices could only be grown in the tropical and subtropical regions of Asia, meaning their transportation to European markets required voyages of many thousands of miles, vastly driving up costs.

The European terminus of much of that trade was Venice. In about 1300 40% of all ships bearing spices offloaded in Venice, and by 1500 it was up to 60%. The prices commanded by spices ensured that Venetian merchants could achieve incredible wealth. For example, nutmeg (grown in Indonesia, halfway around the world from Italy) was worth a full 60,000% of its original price once it reached Europe. Likewise, spices like pepper, cloves, and cinnamon could only be imported rather than grown in Europe, and Venice controlled the majority of that hugely lucrative trade. Spices were, in so many words, worth far more than their weight in gold.

Based on that wealth, Venice was the first place to create true banks (named after the desks, *banchi*, where people met to exchange or borrow money in Venice). Furthermore, innovations like the letter of credit were necessitated by Venice's remoteness from many of its trade partners; it was too risky to travel with chests full of gold, so Venetian banks were the first to work with letters of credit between branches. A letter of credit could be issued from one bank branch at a certain amount, redeemable only by the account owner. That individual could then travel to any city with a Venetian bank branch and redeem the letter of credit, which could then be spent on trade goods.

In addition, because Venice needed a peaceful trade network for its continuing prosperity, it was the first power in Europe to rely heavily on formal diplomacy in its relations with neighboring states. By the late 1400s practically every royal court in Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa had a Venetian ambassador in residence. The overall result was that Venice spearheaded many of the practices and patterns that later spread across northern Italy and, ultimately, to the rest of Europe: the political power of merchants, advanced banking and mercantile practices, and a sophisticated international diplomatic network.

Florence and Rome

Florence was a republic with longstanding traditions of civic governance. Citizens voted on laws and served in official posts for set terms, with powerful families dominating the system. By 1434 the real power was in the hands of the Medici family, who controlled the city government (the *Signoria*) and patronized the arts. Rising from obscurity from a resolutely non-noble background, the Medici eventually became the official bankers to the papacy, acquiring vast wealth as a result. The Medici spent huge sums on the city itself, funding the creation of churches, orphanages, municipal buildings, and the completion of the great dome of the city's cathedral, at the time the largest freestanding dome in Europe. They also patronized most of the most famous Renaissance artists (at the time as well as in the present), including Donatello, Leonardo da Vinci, and Michelangelo.

Florence benefited from a strong culture of education, with Florentines priding themselves not just on wealth, but knowledge and refinement. By the fifteenth century there were 8,000 children in both religious and civic schools out of a population of 100,000. Florentines boasted that even their laborers could quote the great poet, and native of Florence, Dante Alighieri (author of *The Divine Comedy*). At the height of Medici, and Florentine, power in the second half of the fifteenth century, Florence was unquestionably the leading city in all of Italy in terms of art and scholarship. That central position diminished by about 1500 as foreign invasions undermined Florentine independence.

The city of Rome, however, remained firmly in papal control despite the decline in independence of the other major Italian cities, having become a major Renaissance city after the end of the Great Western Schism. The popes reasserted their control of the Papal States in central Italy, in some cases (like those of Julius II, r. 1503 – 1513) personally taking to the battlefield to lead troops against the armies of both foreign invaders and rival Italians. The popes usually proved effective at secular rule, but their spiritual leadership was undermined by their tendency to live like kings rather than priests; the most notorious, Alexander VI (r. 1492 – 1503), sponsored his children (the infamous Borgia family) in their attempts to seize territory all across northern Italy. Thus, even when “good popes” came along occasionally, the overall pattern was that the popes did fairly little to reinforce the spiritual authority they had already lost because of the Great Western Schism.

Regardless of their moral failings, the popes restored Rome to importance as a city after it had fallen to a population of fewer than 25,000 during the Babylonian Captivity. Under the so-called “Renaissance popes,” the Vatican itself became the gloriously decorated spectacle that it is today. Julius II paid Michelangelo to paint the ceiling of the

Sistine Chapel in Rome, and many of the other famous works of Renaissance artists stud the walls and facades of Vatican buildings. In short, popes after the end of the Great Western Schism were often much more focused on behaving like members of the *popoli grossi*, fighting for power and honor and patronizing great works of art and architecture, rather than worrying about the spiritual authority of the Church to laypeople.

Print

In general, the Renaissance did not coincide with a great period of technological advances. As with all of pre-modern history, the pace of technological change during the Renaissance period was glacially slow by contemporary standards. There was one momentous exception, however: the proliferation of the movable-type printing press. Not until the invention of the typewriter in the late nineteenth century and the Internet in the late twentieth century would comparable changes to the diffusion of information come about. Print vastly increased the rate at which information could be shared, and in turn, it underwrote the rise in literacy of the early modern period. It moved the production of text in Europe away from a “scribal” tradition in which educated people hand-copied important texts toward a system of mass-production.

In the centuries leading up to the Renaissance, of course, there had been *some* major technological advances. The agricultural revolution of the high Middle Ages had been brought about by technology (heavier plows, new harnesses, crop rotation, etc.). Likewise, changes in warfare were increasingly tied to military technology: first the introduction of the stirrup, then everything associated with a “gunpowder revolution” that began in earnest in the fifteenth century (described in a subsequent chapter). Print, however, introduced a revolution in *ideas*. By making the distribution of information fast and comparatively cheap, more people had access to that information than ever before. Print was also an enormous leap forward in the long-term view of human technology as a whole, since the scribal tradition had been in place since the creation of writing itself.

The printing press works by coating a three-dimensional impression of an image or text with ink, then pressing that ink onto paper. The concept had existed for centuries, first invented in China and used also in Korea and parts of Central Asia, but there is no evidence that the concept was transmitted from Asia to Europe (it might have, but there is simply no proof either way). In the late 1440s, a German goldsmith named Johannes Gutenberg from the city of Mainz struck on the idea of carving individual letters into small, movable blocks of wood (or casting them in metal) that could be rearranged as necessary to create words. That innovation, known as movable type, made it viable to print not just a single page of text, but to simply rearrange the letters to print subsequent pages. With movable type, an entire book could be printed with clear, readable letters, and at a fraction of the cost of hand-copying.



A modern replica of a printing press of Gutenberg's era.

Gutenberg himself pioneered the European version of the printing process. After developing a working prototype, he created the first true printed book to reach a mass market, namely a copy of the Latin Vulgate (the official version of the Bible used by the Church). Later dubbed the “Gutenberg Bible,” it became available for purchase in 1455 and in turn became the world’s first “best-seller.” One advantage it possessed over hand-written copies of the Bible that quickly became apparent to church officials was that errors in the text were far less likely to be introduced as compared to hand-copying. Likewise, once new presses were built in cities and towns outside of Mainz, it became cheaper to purchase a printed Bible than one written in the scribal tradition.

Print spread quickly. Within about twenty years there were printing presses in all of the major cities in Western and Southern Europe. Gutenberg personally trained apprentice printers, who became highly sought-after in cities everywhere once the benefits of print became apparent. By 1500, about fifty years after its invention, the printing press had already largely replaced the scribal tradition in book production (there was a notable lengthy delay in its diffusion to Eastern Europe, especially Russia, however – it took until 1552 for a press to come to Russia). Presses tended to operate

in large cities and smaller independent cities, especially in the Holy Roman Empire. The free cities of the German lands and Italy were thus as likely to host a press as were larger capital cities like Paris and Rome.

Gutenberg would go on to invent printed illustration in 1461, using carved blocks that were sized to fit alongside movable type. Printed illustration became crucial to the diffusion of information because literacy rates remained low overall; even when people could not read, however, they could look at pamphlets and posters (called “broadside”) with illustrations. Mere decades after the invention of the press, cheap printed posters and pamphlets were commonplace in the major cities and towns, often shared and read aloud in public gatherings and taverns. Thus, even the illiterate enjoyed an increased access to information with print.

Printing had various, and enormous, consequences. Information could be disseminated far more quickly than ever before. Whereas with the scribal tradition, readers tended to hold books in reverence, with the reader having to seek out the book, now books could go to readers. In turn, there was a real incentive for all reasonably prosperous people to learn to read because they now had access to meaningful texts at a relatively affordable price. While religious texts dominated early print, both literary works and political commentaries followed. Overall, print led to a revolutionary increase in the sheer volume of all kinds of written material: in the first fifty years after the invention of the press, more books were printed than had been copied in Europe by hand since the fall of Rome.

Not all writing shifted to print, however. A scribal tradition continued in the production of official documents and luxury items. Likewise, personal correspondence and business transactions remained hand-written, with the legacy of good penmanship surviving well into the twentieth century (in part because it was not until the typewriter was invented in the nineteenth century that printed documents could be produced *ad hoc*). Nevertheless, by the late fifteenth century, whenever a text could be printed to serve a political purpose or to generate a profit, it almost certainly would be.

There were other, unanticipated, issues that arose because of print. In the past, while the Church did its best to crack down on heresies, it was not necessary to impose any kind of formal censorship. No written material could be mass-produced, so the only ideas that spread quickly did so through word of mouth. Print made censorship both much more difficult and much more *important*, since now anyone could print just about anything. As early as the 1460s, print introduced disruptive ideas in the form of the next best-seller to follow the Bible itself, a work that advocated the pursuit of salvation without reference to the Church entitled *The Imitation of Christ*. The Church would eventually (in 1571) introduce an official Index of Prohibited Books, but several works were already banned by the time the Index was created.

While there were other effects of print, one bears particular note: it began the process of standardizing language itself. The long, slow shift from a vast panoply of vernacular dialects across Europe to a set of accepted and official languages was impossible without print. Print necessitated that standardization, so that people in different parts of “France” or “England” were able to read the same works and understand their grammar and their meaning. For the first time, the very concept of proper spelling emerged, and existing ideas about grammar began the process of standardization as well.

Patronage

The most memorable, or at least iconic, effects of the Renaissance were artistic. To understand why the Renaissance brought about such a remarkable explosion of art, it is crucial to grasp the nature of *patronage*. In patronage, a member of the *popoli grossi* would pay an artist in advance for a work of art. That work of art would be displayed publicly – most obviously in the case of architecture with the beautiful churches, orphanages, and municipal buildings

that spread across Italy during the Renaissance. In turn, that art would attract political power and influence to the person or family who had paid for it because of the honor associated with funding the best artists and being associated with their work. While there was plenty of bloodshed between powerful Renaissance families, their political competition as often took the form of an ongoing battle over who could commission the best art and then “give” that art to their home city, rather than actual fighting in the streets.

Perhaps the most spectacular example of patronage in action was when Cosimo de Medici, then the leader of the Medici family and its vast banking empire, threw a city-wide party called the Council of Florence in 1439. The Council featured public lectures on Greek philosophy, displays of art, and a huge church council that brought together representatives of both the Latin Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church in a (doomed) attempt to heal the schism that divided Christianity. The Catholic hierarchy also used the occasion to establish the canonical and in a sense “final” version of the Christian Bible itself (in question were which books ought to be included in the Old Testament). The entire affair was paid by Cosimo out of his personal fortune – he even paid for the travel expenses of visiting dignitaries from places as far away as India and Ethiopia. The Council clinched the Medici as *the* family of Florence for the next generation, with Cosimo being described by a contemporary as a “king in all but name.”

Art and learning benefited enormously from the wealth of northern Italy precisely because the wealthy and powerful of northern Italy competed to pay for the best art and the most innovative scholarship – without that form of cultural and political competition, it is doubtful that many of the masterpieces of Renaissance art would have ever been created.

Humanism

The starting point with studying the intellectual and artistic achievements of the Renaissance is recognizing what the word means: rebirth. But what was being reborn? The answer is the culture and ideas of classical Europe, namely ancient Greece and Rome. Renaissance thinkers and artists very consciously made the claim that they were reviving long-lost traditions from the classical world in areas as diverse as scholarship, poetry, architecture, and sculpture. The feeling among most Renaissance thinkers and artists was that the ancient Greeks and Romans had achieved truly incredible things, things that had not been, and possibly could never be, surpassed. Much of the Renaissance began as an attempt to mimic or copy Greek and Roman art and scholarship (correspondence in classical Latin, for example), but over the decades the more outstanding Renaissance thinkers struck out on new paths of their own – still inspired by the classics, but seeking to be creators in their own right as well.

Of the various themes of Renaissance thought, perhaps the most important was humanism, an ancient intellectual paradigm that emphasized both the beauty and the centrality of humankind in the universe. Humanists held that humankind was inherently rational, beautiful, and noble, rather than debased, wicked, or weak. They sought to celebrate the beauty of the human body in their art, of the human mind and human achievements in their scholarship, and of human society in the elegance of their architectural design. Humanism was, among other things, an optimistic attitude toward artistic and intellectual possibility that cited the achievements of the ancient world as proof that humankind was the crowning achievement of God’s creation.

Renaissance humanism was the root of some very modern notions of individuality, along with the idea that education ought to arrive at a well-rounded individual. The goal of education in the Renaissance was to realize as much of the human potential as possible with a robust education in diverse disciplines. This was a true, meaningful change over

medieval forms of learning in that education's major purpose was no longer believed to be the clarification of religious questions or better intellectual support for religious orthodoxy; the point of education was to create a more competent and well-rounded person instead.

Along with the idea of a well-rounded individual, Renaissance thinkers championed the idea of civic humanism: one's moral and ethical standing was tied to devotion to one's city. This was a Greek and Roman concept that the great Renaissance thinker Petrarch championed in particular. Here, the Medici of Florence are the ultimate example: there was a tremendous effort on the part of the rich and powerful to invest in the city in the form of building projects and art. This was tied to the prestige of the family, of course, but it was also a heartfelt dedication to one's home, analogous to the present-day concept of patriotism.

Practically speaking, there was a shift in the practical business of education from medieval scholasticism, which focused on law, medicine, and theology, to disciplines related to business and politics. Princes and other elites wanted skilled bureaucrats to staff their merchant empires; they needed literate men with a knowledge of law and mathematics, even if they themselves were not merchants. City governments began educating children (girls and boys alike, at least in certain cities like Florence) directly, along with the role played by private tutors. These schools and tutors emphasized practical education: rhetoric, math, and history. Thus, one of the major effects of the Italian Renaissance was that this new form of education, usually referred to as "humanistic education" spread from Italy to the rest of Europe by the late fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, a broad cross-section of European elites, including nobles, merchants, and priests, were educated in the humanistic tradition.

A "Renaissance man" (note that there *were* important women thinkers as well, but the term "Renaissance man" was used exclusively for men) was a man who cultivated classical virtues, which were not quite the same as Christian ones: understanding, benevolence, compassion, fortitude, judgment, eloquence, and honor, among others. Drawing from the work of thinkers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and Virgil, Renaissance thinkers came to support the idea of a virtuous life that was not the same thing as a specifically *Christian* virtuous life. And, importantly, it was possible to become a good person simply through studying the classics – all of the major figures of the Renaissance were Christians, but they insisted that one's moral status could and should be shaped by emulation of the ancient virtues, combined with Christian piety. While the Renaissance case for the debasement of medieval culture was overstated (medieval intellectual life prospered during the late Middle Ages) there was definitely a distinct kind of intellectual courage and optimism that came out of the return to classical models over medieval ones during the Renaissance.

One important caveat must be included in discussing humanistic education, however. While most male humanists supported education for girls, they insisted that it was to be very different than that offered to boys. Girls were to read specific texts drawn from the Bible, the "Church Fathers" (important theologians in the early history of the Church), and from classical Greek and Roman writers that emphasized morality, modesty, and obedience. An educated girl was trained to be an obedient, companionable wife, not an independent thinker in her own right. That theme would remain in place in the male-dominated realm of education in Europe for centuries to come, although it is clear from the number of independent, intellectually courageous women writers throughout the early modern period that girls' education did *not* always succeed in creating compliant, deferential women in the end.

Likewise, humanism contributed to an important, ongoing public debate that lasted for centuries: the *querelles des femmes* ("debates about women"). Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries various intellectuals in universities, churches, and aristocratic courts and salons wrote numerous essays and books contesting whether or not women were naturally immoral, weak, and foolish, or if instead education and environment could lead to intelligence and morality comparable with those of men. While men had dominated these debates early on, women educated in

the humanist tradition joined in the *querelles* in earnest during the Renaissance, arguing both that education was key to elevating women's competence and that women shared precisely the same spiritual and moral nature as did men. Unfortunately, while a significant minority of male thinkers came to agree, most remained adamant that women were biologically and spiritually inferior, destined for their traditional roles and ill-served by advanced education.

Important Thinkers

The Renaissance is remembered primarily for its great thinkers and artists, with some exceptional individuals (like Leonardo da Vinci) being renowned as both. What Renaissance thinkers had in common was that they embraced the ideals of humanism and used humanism as their inspiration for creating innovative new approaches to philosophy, philology (the study of language), theology, history, and political theory. In other words, reading the classics inspired Renaissance thinkers to emulate the great writers and philosophers of ancient Greece and Rome, creating poetry, philosophy, and theory on par with that of an Aristotle or a Cicero. Some of the most noteworthy included the following.

Dante (1265 – 1321)

Durante degli Alighieri, better remembered simply as Dante, was a major figure who anticipated the Renaissance rather than being alive during most of it (while there is no “official” start to the Renaissance, the life of Petrarch, described below, lends itself to using 1300 as a convenient date). Experiencing what would later be called a mid-life crisis, Dante turned to poetry to console himself, ultimately producing the greatest written work of the late Middle Ages: *The Divine Comedy*. Written in his own native dialect, the Tuscan of the city of Florence, *The Divine Comedy* describes Dante's descent into hell, guided by the spirit of the classical Roman poet Virgil. Dante and Virgil emerge on the other side of the earth, with Dante ascending the mountain of purgatory and ultimately entering heaven, where he enters into the divine presence.

Dante's work, which soon became justly famous in Italy and then elsewhere in Europe, presaged some of the essential themes of Renaissance thought. Dante's travels through hell, purgatory, and heaven in the poem are replete with encounters with two categories of people: Italians of Dante's lifetime or the recent past, and both real and mythical figures from ancient Greece and Rome. In other words, Dante was indifferent to the entire period of the Middle Ages, concentrating instead on what he imagined the spiritual fate of the great thinkers and heroes of the classical age would have been (and gleefully relegating Italians he hated to infernal torments). Ultimately, his work became so famous that it established Tuscan as the basis of what would eventually become the language of “Italian” – all educated people in Italy would eventually come to read the *Comedy* as a matter of course and it came to serve as the founding document of the modern Italian language in the process.

Petrarch (1304 – 1374)

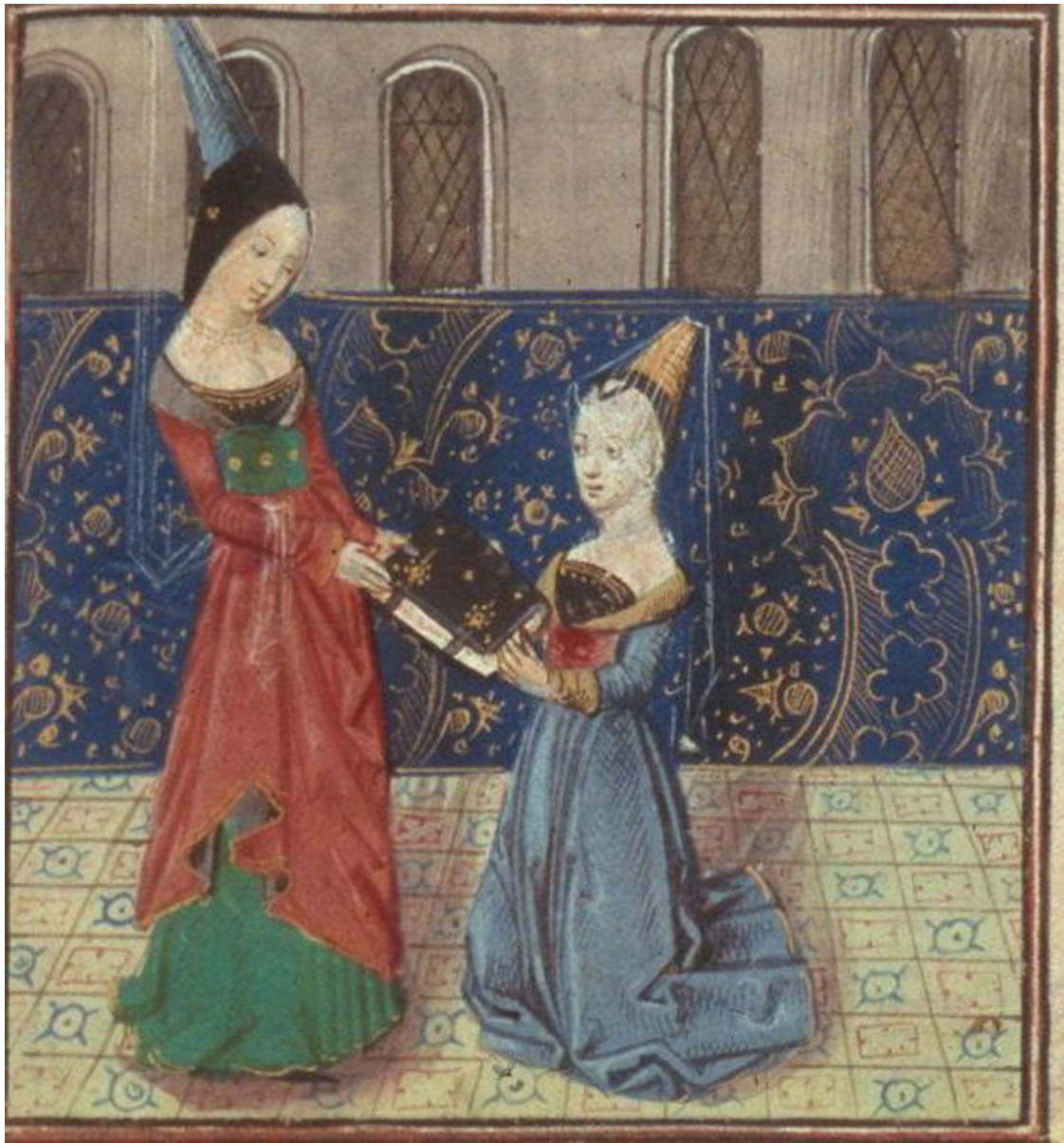
Francesco Petrarca, known as Petrarch in English, was in many ways the founding father of the Renaissance. Like Dante, he was a Florentine (native of the city of Florence) and single-handedly spearheaded the practice of studying and imitating the great writers and thinkers of the past. Petrarch personally rediscovered long-lost works by Cicero, widely considered the greatest writer of ancient Rome during the republican period, and set about training himself to emulate Cicero's rhetorical style. Petrarch wrote to friends and associates in a classical, grammatically spotless Latin (as opposed

to the often sloppy and error-ridden Latin of the Middle Ages) and encouraged them to learn to emulate the classics in their writing, thought, and values. He went on to write many works of poetry and prose that were based on the model provided by Cicero and other ancient writers.

Petrarch was responsible for coming up with the very idea of the “Dark Ages” that had separated his own era from the greatness of the classical past. His own poetry and writings became so popular among other educated people that he deserves a great deal of personal credit for sparking the Renaissance itself; following Petrarch, the idea that the classical world might be “reborn” in northern Italy acquired a great deal of popularity and cultural force.

Christine de Pizan (1364 – 1430)

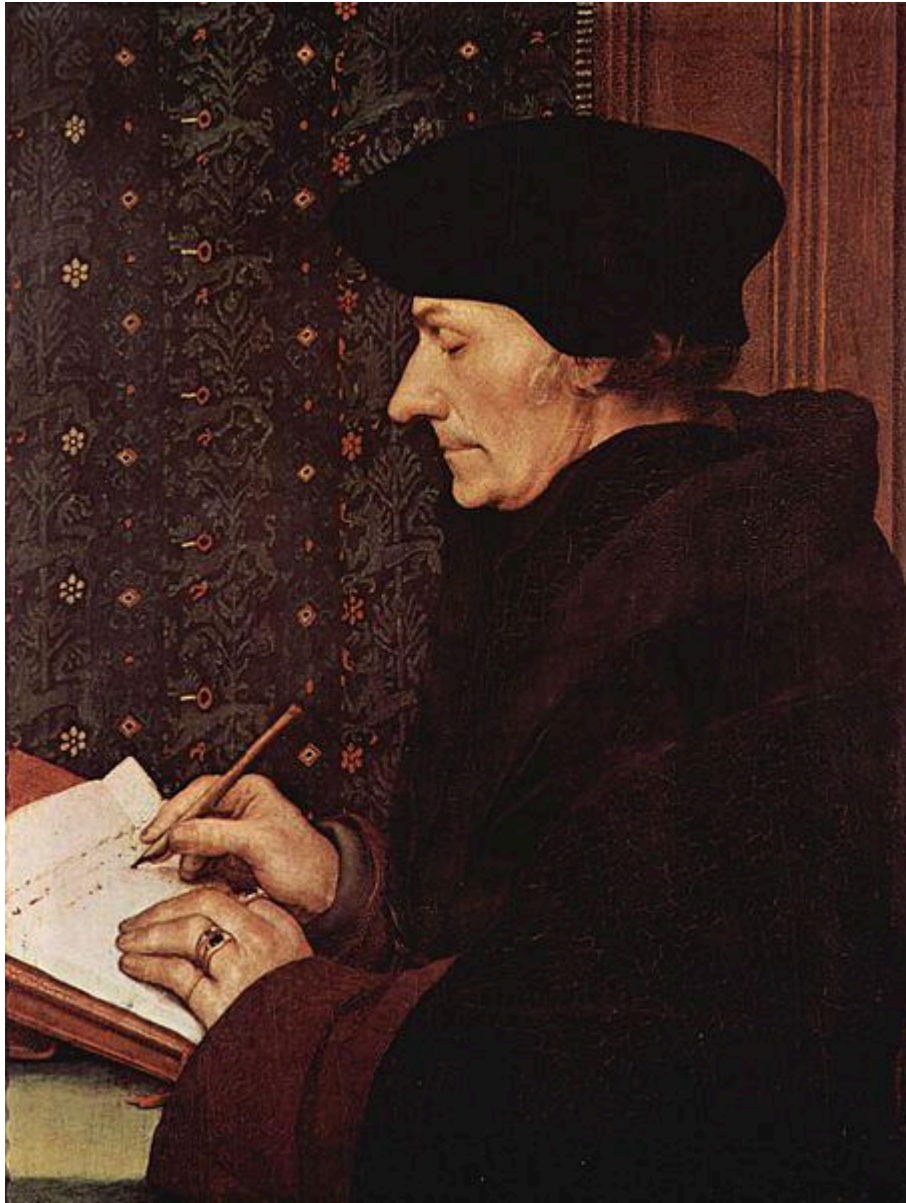
Christine de Pizan was the most famous and important woman thinker and writer of the Renaissance era. Her father, the court astrologer of the French king Charles V, was exceptional in that he felt it important that his daughter receive the same quality of education afforded to elite men at the time. She went on to become a famous poet and writer in her own right, being patronized (i.e. receiving commissions for her writing) by a wide variety of French and Italian nobles. Her best-known work was *The Book of the City of Ladies*, in which she attacked the then-universal idea that women were naturally unintelligent, sinful, and irrational; it was a key text in the *querelles des femmes* noted above. Instead, she argued, history provided a vast catalog of women who had been moral, pious, intelligent, and competent, and that it was men’s pride and the refusal of men to allow women to be properly educated that held women back. In many ways, the *City of Ladies* was the first truly feminist work in European history, and it is striking that she was supported by, and listened to by, elite men due to her obvious intellectual gifts despite their own deep-seated sexism.



*In the illustration above, Christine de Pizan presents a copy of *The City of Ladies* to a French noblewoman, Margaret of Burgundy. The illustration itself is in the pre-Renaissance “Gothic” style, without linear perspective, despite its approximate date of 1475. This is one example of the relatively slow spread of Renaissance-inspired artistic innovations.*

Desiderius Erasmus (1466 – 1536)

Erasmus was an astonishingly erudite priest who benefited from both the traditional scholastic education of the late-medieval church and the new humanistic style that emerged from the Renaissance. Of his various talents, one of the most important was his mastery of philology: the history of languages. Erasmus became completely fluent not just in classical and medieval Latin, but in the Greek of the New Testament (i.e. most of the earliest versions of the New Testament of the Bible are written in the vernacular Greek of the first century CE). He also became conversant in Hebrew, which was very uncommon among Christians at the time.



In the above well-known portrait of Erasmus, he is depicted in heavy, fur-lined robes and hat, a necessity even when indoors in Northern Europe for much of the year. Realistic portraiture was another major innovation of the Renaissance period.

Armed with his lingual virtuosity, Erasmus undertook a vast study and re-translation of the New Testament, working from various versions of the Greek originals and correcting the Latin Vulgate that was the most widely used version at the time. In the process, Erasmus corrected the New Testament itself, catching and fixing numerous translation errors (while he did not re-translate the Old Testament from the Hebrew, he did point out errors in it as well).

Erasmus was criticized by some of his superiors within the Church because he was not officially authorized to carry out his studies and translations; nevertheless, he ended up producing an extensively notated re-translation of the New Testament with numerous corrections. Importantly, these corrections were not just a question of grammatical issues, but of *meaning*. The Christian message that emerged from the “correct” version of the New Testament was a deeply personal philosophy of prayer, devotion, and morality that did not correspond to many of the structures and

practices of the Latin Church. He was also an advocate of translations of the Bible into vernacular languages, although he did not produce such a translation himself.

Some of his other works other included *In Praise of Folly*, a satirical attack on corruption within the church, and *Handbook of the Christian Soldier*, which de-emphasized the importance of the sacraments. Erasmus used his abundant wit to ridicule sterile medieval-style scholastic scholars, the corruption of “Christian” rulers who were essentially glorified warlords, and even the very idea of witches, which he demonstrated relied on a faulty translation from the Hebrew of the Old Testament.

Niccolo Machiavelli (1469 – 1527)

Machiavelli was a “courtier,” a professional politician, ambassador, and official who spent his life in the court of a ruler – in his case, as part of the city government of his native Florence. While in Florence, Machiavelli wrote various works on politics, most notably a consideration of the proper functioning of a republic like Florence itself. Unfortunately for him, Machiavelli was caught up in the whirlwind of power politics at court and ended up being exiled by the Medici.

While in exile, Machiavelli undertook a new work of political theory which he titled *The Prince*. Here, Machiavelli detailed how an effective ruler should behave: training constantly in war, forcing his subjects to fear (but not hate) him, studying the ancient past for role models like Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, and never wasting a moment worrying about morality when power was on the line. In the process, Machiavelli created what was arguably the first work of “political science” that abandoned the moralistic approach of how a ruler *should* behave as a good Christian and instead embraced a practical guide to holding power. He dedicated the work to the Medici in hopes that he would be allowed to return from exile (he detested the rural bumpkins he lived among in exile and longed to return to cosmopolitan Florence). Instead, *The Prince* caused a scandal when it came out for completely ignoring the role of God and Christian morality in politics, and Machiavelli died not long after. That being noted, Machiavelli is now remembered as a pioneering political thinker. It is safe to assume that far more rulers have consulted *The Prince* for ideas of how to maintain their power over the years than one of the moralistic tracts that was preferred during Machiavelli’s lifetime.

Baldassarre Castiglione (1478 – 1529)

Castiglione was the author of *The Courtier*, published at the end of his life in 1528. Whereas Machiavelli’s *The Prince* was a practical guide for rulers, *The Courtier* was a guide to the nobles, wealthy merchants, high-ranking members of the Church, and other social elites who served and schemed in the courts of princes: courtiers. The work centered on what was needed to win the prince’s favor and to influence him, not just avoiding embarrassment at court. This was tied to the growing sense of what it was to be “civilized” – Italians at the time were renowned across Europe for their refinement, the quality of their dress and jewelry, their wit in conversation, and their good taste. The relatively crude tastes of the nobility of the Middle Ages were “revised” starting in Italy, with Castiglione serving as both a symptom and cause of this shift.

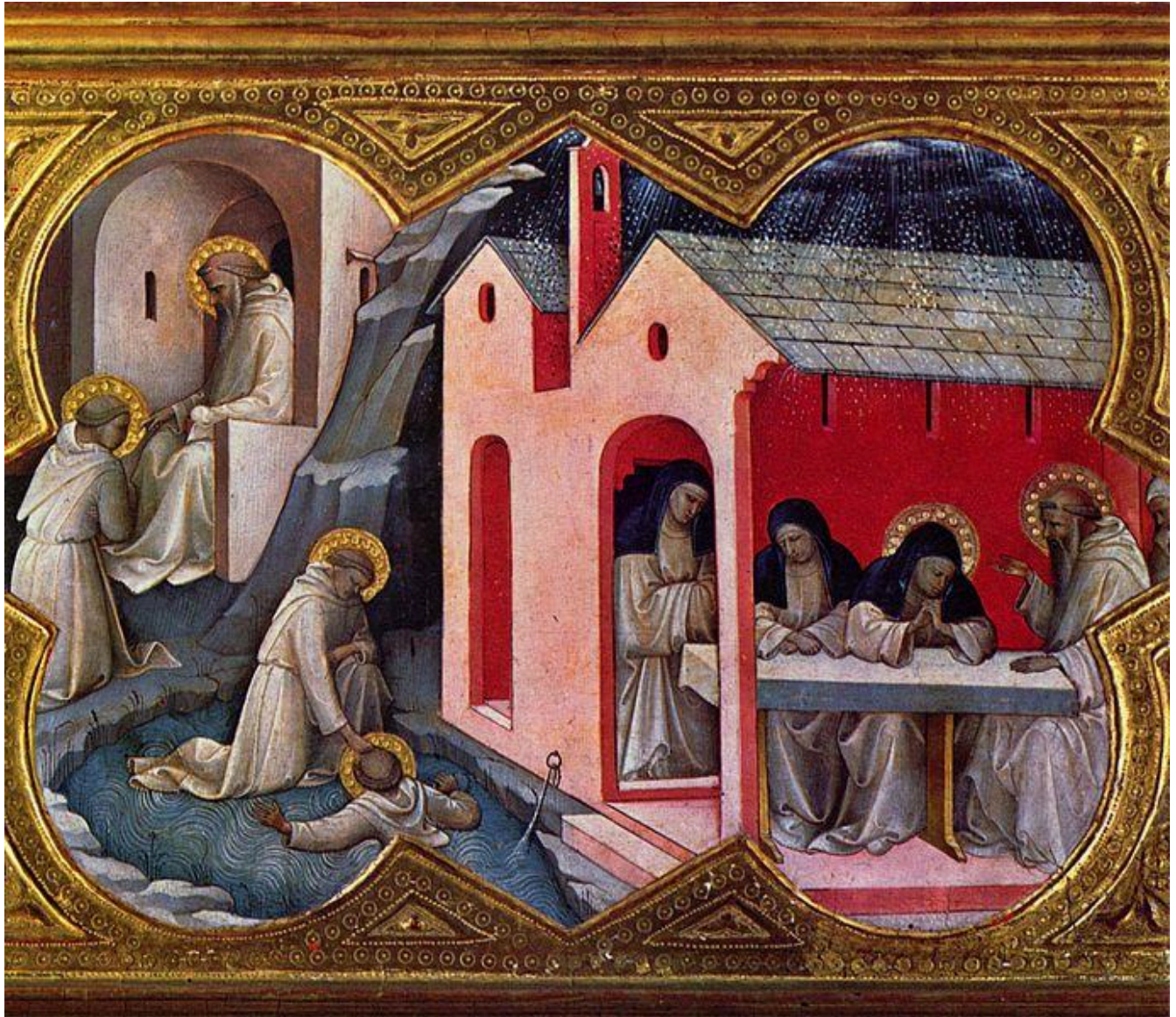
The effective courtier, according to Castiglione, was tasteful, educated, clever, and subtle in his actions and words, a true politician rather than merely a warrior who happened to have inherited some land. Going forward, growing numbers of political elites came to resemble a Castiglione-style courtier instead of a thuggish medieval knight or “man-

at-arms.” When he died, no less a personage than the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V lamented his loss and paid tribute to his memory.

Art and Artists

Perhaps the most iconic aspect of the Renaissance as a whole is its tremendous artistic achievements – figures like Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo Buonarroti are household names in a way that Petrarch is not, despite the fact that Petrarch should be credited for creating the very concept of the Renaissance. The fame of Renaissance art is thanks to the incredible creativity of the great Renaissance artists themselves, who both imitated classical models of art and ultimately forged entirely new artistic paths of their own.

Medieval art (called “Gothic” after one of the Germanic tribes that had conquered the Roman Empire) had been unconcerned with realistic depictions of objects or people. Medieval paintings often presented things from several angles at once to the viewer and had no sense of three-dimensional perspective. Likewise, Gothic architecture tended to be bulky and overwhelming rather than refined and delicate; the great examples of Gothic architecture are undoubtedly the cathedrals built during the Middle Ages, often beautiful and inspiring but a far cry from the symmetrical, airy structures of ancient Greece and Rome.



Another example of Gothic art. The artist, Lorenzo Monaco, painted during the Renaissance period, but the work was created before linear perspective had replaced the “two-dimensional” style of Gothic painting.

In contrast, Renaissance artists studied and copied ancient frescoes and statues in an attempt to learn how to realistically depict people and objects. And, just as Petrarch “invented” the major themes of Renaissance thought by imitating and championing classical humanist thought, a Florentine artist, architect, and engineer named Filippo Brunelleschi “invented” Renaissance art through the imitation of the classical world.

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377 – 1446)

Brunelleschi was an astonishing artistic and engineering genius. He became a prominent client of the Medici, and with their political and financial support he undertook the construction of what would be the largest free-standing domed structure in all of Europe: the dome of the cathedral of Florence. For generations, the cathedral of Florence had stood unfinished, its main tower having been built too large and too tall for any architect to complete. Literally no one knew how to build a freestanding stone dome on top of a tower over 350 feet high. By studying ancient Roman

structures and employing his own incredible intellect, Brunelleschi built the dome in such a way that it held its internal structure together during the construction process. He invented a giant, geared winch to raise huge blocks of sandstone hundreds of feet in the air and was even known to personally ascend the construction to place bricks. The dome was completed in 1413, crowning both his fame as an architect and the Medici's role as the greatest patrons of Renaissance art and architecture at the time.



Contemporary photograph of the Florence Cathedral, with Brunelleschi's dome on the right.

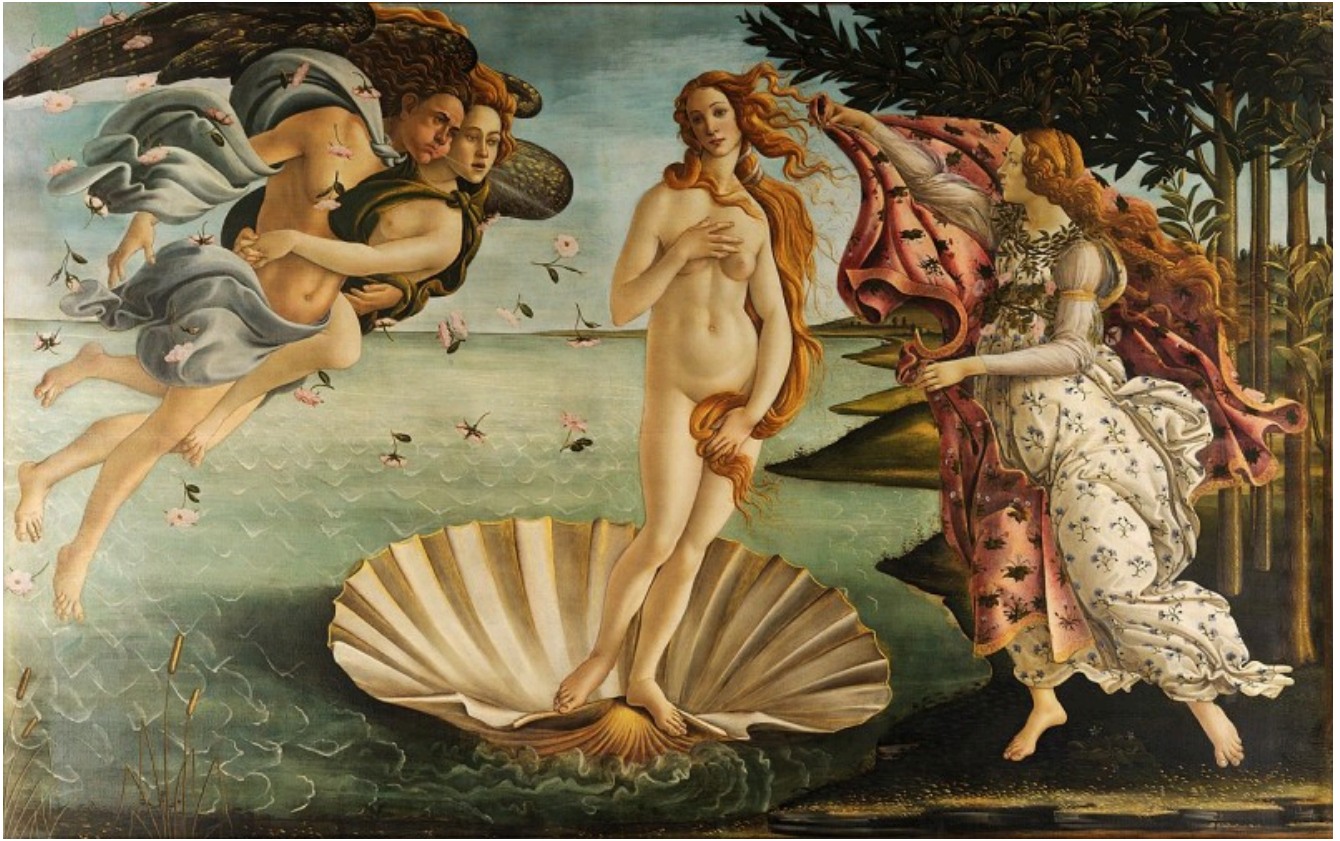
While the dome is usually considered Brunelleschi's greatest achievement, he was also the (re-)inventor of one of the most important artistic concepts in history: linear perspective. He was the first person in the Western world to determine how to draw objects in two dimensions, on a piece of paper or the equivalent, in such a way that they looked realistically three-dimensional (i.e. having depth, as in looking off into the distance and seeing objects that are farther away "look smaller" than those nearby). Here, Brunelleschi was unquestionably influenced by a medieval Arab thinker, Ibn al-Haytham, whose *Book of Optics* laid out theories of light and sight perception that described linear perspective. The *Book of Optics* was available to Brunelleschi in Latin translation, and, crucially, Brunelleschi applied the concept of perspective to actual art (which al-Haytham had not, focusing instead on the scientific basis of optics). In doing so, Brunelleschi introduced the ability for artists to create realistic depictions of their subjects. This innovation spread rapidly and completely revolutionized the visual arts, resulting in far more lifelike drawings and paintings.

Sandro Botticelli (1445 – 1510)

Botticelli exemplified the life of a successful Renaissance painter during the height of the most productive artistic period in Florence and Rome. Likewise, his works focused on themes central to the Renaissance as a whole: the importance of patronage, the celebration of classical figures and ideas, the beauty of the human body and mind, and Christian piety. Botticelli was patronized by various members of the Florentine *popolo grosso*, by the Medici, and by popes, producing numerous frescos (wall paintings done on plaster), portraits, and both biblical and classical scenes. Two of his most famous works capture different aspects of Renaissance art:



The Adoration of the Magi (1475), above, depicts members of the Medici family, Botticelli's patrons, as taking part in one of the key scenes from the birth of Christ. Botticelli even included himself in the painting; his self-portrait is the figure on the far right. Note how all of the figures are dressed as wealthy Italians of the fifteenth century, not Jews, Romans, and Persians of the first century. Despite the abundance of biblical scenes in Renaissance painting, no attempt was made to depict people as they might have appeared at the time. Instead, the paintings projected the world of the *popoli grossi* back in time, sometimes (as with this example) even including portraits of actual important Italians.

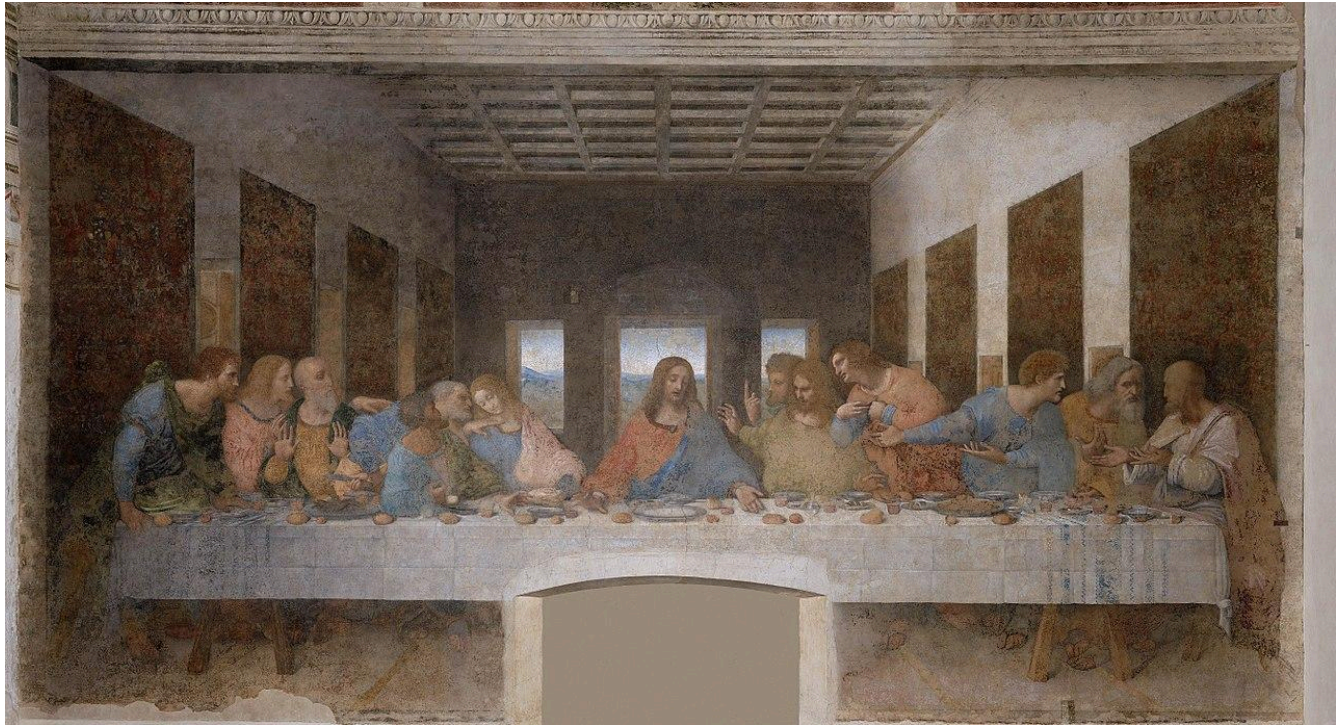


The Birth of Venus (1485) celebrates a key moment in Greek mythology when the goddess of love, sexuality, and beauty is born from the sea. Here Botticelli pushed the boundaries of Renaissance art (and what was culturally acceptable his contemporaries) by glorifying not just the beauty of the human body, but by openly celebrating Venus's sexuality. The painting thus completely rejected the asceticism associated with Christian piety during the Middle Ages, suggesting instead a kind of joyful sensuality.

Despite paintings like *The Birth of Venus*, however, Botticelli remained a pious Christian throughout his life. In 1490 Botticelli fell under the influence of Girolamo Savonarola, a fiery preacher who came to Florence to denounce its "vanities" (art, rich dress, and general worldliness) and call for a strict, even fanatical form of Christian behavior. While there is no tangible evidence to support the claim, some stories had it that Botticelli even destroyed some of his own paintings under Savonarola's influence. While Savonarola was executed in 1493, Botticelli did not go on to produce art at the same pace he had before the 1490s. By then, of course, he had already clinched his place in art history as one of the major figures of Renaissance painting.

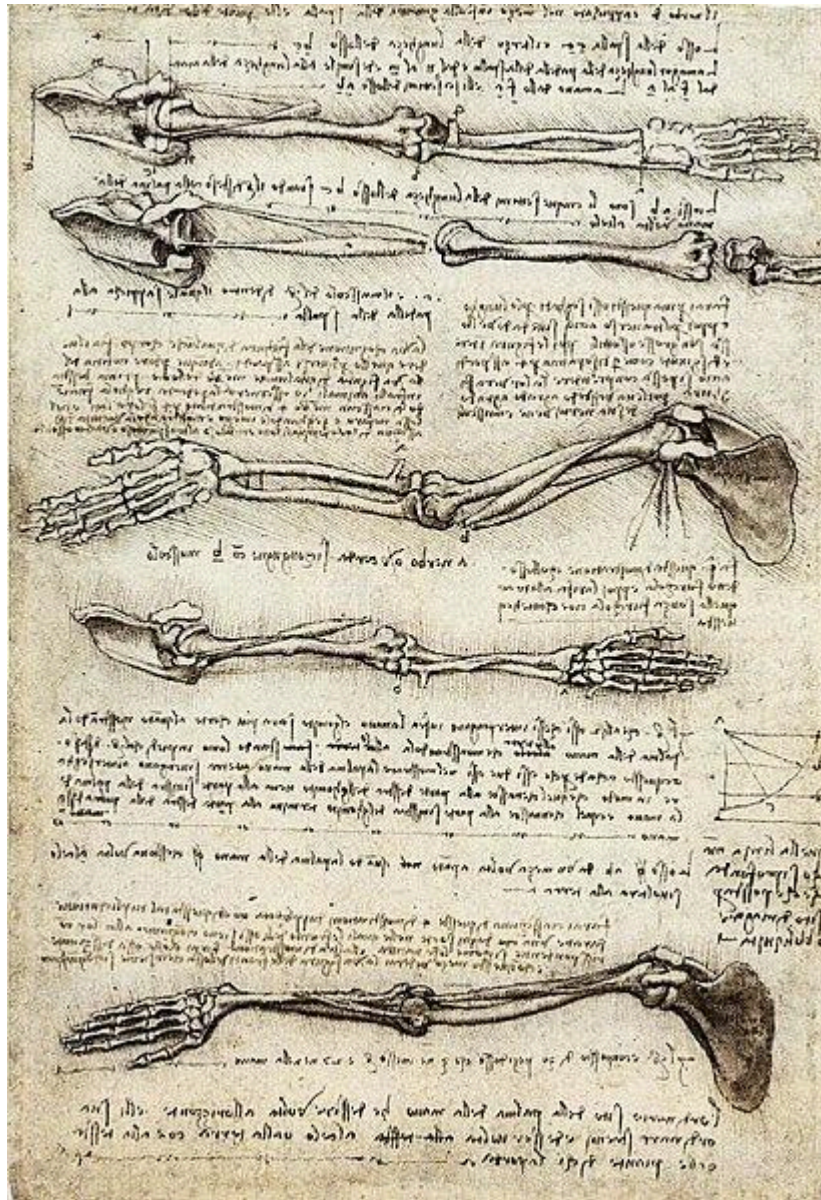
Leonardo da Vinci (1452 – 1519)

Da Vinci was famous in his own time as both one of the greatest painters of his age and as what we would now call a scientist – at the time, he was sought after for his skill at engineering, overseeing the construction of the naval defenses of Venice and swamp drainage projects in Rome at different points. He was hired by a whole swath of the rich and powerful in Italy and France; in his old age he was the official chief painter and engineer of the French king, living in a private chateau provided for him and receiving admiring visits from the king.



Leonardo Da Vinci's The Last Supper. Note how the walls and ceiling tiles appear to slant downwards toward a point at the horizon behind Jesus (in the center). That imaginary point – the “vanishing point” – was one of the major artistic breakthroughs associated with linear perspective pioneered by Brunelleschi.

Leonardo's scientific work was often closely related to his artistic skills. While the practice of autopsy for medical knowledge was nothing new – doctors in the Middle East, North Africa, and Europe alike had used autopsies to further medical knowledge for centuries – Leonardo was able to document his findings in meticulous detail thanks to his artistic virtuosity. He undertook dozens of dissections of bodies (most of them executed criminals) and drew precise diagrams of the parts of the body. He also created speculative diagrams of various machines, from practical designs like hydraulic engines and weapons to fantastical ones like flying machines based on the anatomy of birds.



One of Da Vinci's anatomical sketches, in this case examining the skeletal structure of the arm.

Da Vinci is remembered today thanks as much to his diagrams of things like flying machines as for his art. Ironically, while he was well known as a practical engineer at the time, no one had a clue that he was an inventor in the technological sense: he never built physical models of his ideas, and he never published his concepts, so they remained unknown until well after his death. Likewise, while his anatomical work anticipated important developments in medicine, they were unknown during his own lifetime.

Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475 – 1564)

Michelangelo was the most celebrated artist of the Renaissance during his own lifetime, patronized by the city council of Florence (run by the Medici) and the pope alike. He created numerous works, most famously the statue of the David and the paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. The latter work took him four years of work, during which he argued constantly with the Pope, Julius II, who treated him like an artisan servant rather than the true artistic genius

Michelangelo knew himself to be. Michelangelo was already the most famous artist in Europe thanks to his sculptures. By the time he completed the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, he had to be accepted as one of the greatest painters of his age as well, not just the single most famous sculptor of the time.



Michelangelo's David, completed in 1504 (it took three years to complete). The statue was meant to celebrate an ideal of masculine beauty, inspired by the example of Greek sculpture and by the work of an earlier Renaissance artist, Donatello.

In the end, a biography of Michelangelo written by a friend helped cement the idea that there was an important distinction between mere artisans and true artists, the latter of whom were temperamental and mercurial but possessed of genius. Thus, the whole idea of the artist as an ingenious social outsider derives in part from Michelangelo's life.

Conclusion

Renaissance art and scholarship was enormously influential. While the process took many decades, both humanist scholarship and education on the one hand and classically-inspired art and architecture on the other spread beyond Italy over the course of the fifteenth century. By the sixteenth century, the study of the classics became entrenched as an essential part of elite education itself, joining with (or rendering obsolete) medieval scholastic traditions in schools and universities. The beautiful and realistic styles of sculpture and painting spread as well, completely surpassing Gothic artistic forms, just as Renaissance architecture replaced the Gothic style of building. Along with the political and technological innovations described in the following chapters, Renaissance learning and art helped bring about the definitive end of the Middle Ages.

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CHAPTER 4: POLITICS IN THE RENAISSANCE ERA

The Renaissance was originally an Italian phenomenon, due to the concentration of wealth and the relative power of the city-states of northern Italy. Renaissance thought spread, however, thanks to interactions between the kings and nobility of the rest of Europe and the elites of the Italian city-states, especially after a series of wars at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth century saw the larger monarchies of Europe exert direct political control in Italy.

The End of the Italian Renaissance

Detailed below, a new regional power arose in the Middle East and spread to Europe starting in the fourteenth century: the Ottoman Turks. In 1453, the ancient Roman city of Constantinople fell to the Turks, by which time the Turks had already seized control of the entire Balkan region (i.e. the region north of Greece including present-day Croatia, Bosnia, Serbia, Albania, and Macedonia). The rise in Turkish power in the east spelled trouble for the east-to-west trade routes the Italian cities had benefited from so much since the era of the crusades, and despite deals worked out between Venice and the Ottomans, the profits to be had from the spice and luxury trade diminished (at least for the Italians) over time.

By the mid-fifteenth century, northern manufacturing began to compete with Italian production as well. Particularly in England and the Netherlands, northern European crafts were produced that rivaled Italian products and undermined the demand for the latter. Thus, the relative degree of prosperity in Italy vs. the rest of Europe declined going into the sixteenth century.

The real killing stroke to the Italian Renaissance was the collapse of the balance of power inaugurated by the Peace of Lodi. The threat to Italian independence arose from the growing power of the Kingdom of France and of the Holy Roman Empire, already engaged in intermittent warfare to the north. The French king, Charles VIII, decided to seize control of Milan, citing a dubious claim tied up in the web of dynastic marriage, and a Milanese pretender invited in the French to help him seize control of the despotism in 1494. All of the northern Italian city-states were caught in the crossfire of alliances and counter-alliances that ensued; the Medici were exiled from Florence the same year for offering territory to the French in an attempt to get them to leave Florence alone.

The result was the Italian Wars that ended the Renaissance. The three great powers of the time, France, the Holy Roman Empire, and Spain, jockeyed with one another and with the papacy (which behaved like just another warlike state) to seize Italian territory. Italy became a battleground and, over the next few decades, the independence of the Italian cities was either compromised or completely extinguished. Between 1503 – 1533, one by one, the cities became territories or puppets of one or the other of the great powers, and in the process the Italian countryside was devastated and the financial resources of the cities were drained. In the aftermath of the Italian Wars, only the Papal States of central Italy remained truly politically independent, and the Italian peninsula would not emerge from under the shadow of the greater powers to its north and west until the nineteenth century.

That being noted, the Renaissance did not *really* end. What “ended” with the Italian Wars was Italian financial and commercial dominance and the glory days of scholarship and artistic production that had gone with it. By the time the Italian Wars started, all of the patterns and innovations first developed in Italy had already spread north and west. In other words, “The Renaissance” was already a European phenomenon by the late fifteenth century, so even the end of Italian independence did not jeopardize the intellectual, commercial, and artistic gains that had originally blossomed in Italy.

The greatest achievement of the Italian Renaissance, despite the higher profile given to Renaissance art, was probably humanistic education. The study of the classics, a high level of literary sophistication, and a solid grounding in practical commercial knowledge (most obviously mathematics and accounting) were all combined in humanistic education. Royal governments across Europe sought out men with humanistic education to serve as bureaucrats and officials, even as merchants everywhere adopted Italian mercantile practices for their obvious benefits (e.g. the superiority of Arabic numerals over Roman ones, the crucial importance of accurate bookkeeping, etc.). Thus, while not as glamorous as beautiful paintings or soaring buildings, the practical effects of humanistic education led to its widespread adoption almost everywhere in Europe.

Even the Church, which continued to educate its priests in the older scholastic tradition, welcomed the addition of humanistic forms of education in some ways. Many of the most outstanding scholars in Europe remained members of the Church, benefiting from both their scholastic and their humanistic educational backgrounds. Erasmus, discussed in the last chapter, was one such priest, as was the most important figure in the Protestant Reformation that began in 1517, the German monk Martin Luther.

Likewise, the clear superiority of Italian artists and architects during the heyday of the Renaissance led artists from elsewhere in Europe to flock to Italy. Those artists tended to study under Italian masters, then return to their countries of origin to do their own work. By the middle of the fifteenth century, a “Northern Renaissance” of painters was flourishing in parts of northern Europe, particularly the Low Countries (i.e. the areas that would later become Belgium and the Netherlands). By the sixteenth century, “Renaissance art” was universal in Western Europe, with artists everywhere benefiting from the use of linear perspective, evocative and realistic portraiture, and the other artistic techniques first developed in Italy.

Politics: The Emergence of Strong States

While the city-states of northern Italy were enjoying the height of their prosperity in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, northern and western Europe was divided between a large number of fairly small principalities, church lands, free cities, and weak kingdoms. As described in previous chapters, the medieval system of monarchy was one in which kings were really just the first among nobles; their power was based primarily on the lands they owned through their family dynasty, *not* on the taxes or deference they extracted from other nobles or commoners. In many cases, powerful nobles could field personal armies that were as large as those of the king, especially since armies were almost always a combination of loyal knights (by definition members of the nobility) on horseback, supplemented by peasant levies and mercenaries. Standing armies were almost nonexistent and wars tended to be fairly limited in scale as a result.

During the late medieval and Renaissance periods, however, monarchs began to wield more power and influence. The long-term pattern from about 1350 – 1500 was for the largest monarchies to expand their territory and

wealth, which allowed them to fund better armies, which led to more expansion. In the process, smaller states were often absorbed or at least forced to do the bidding of larger ones; this is true of the Italian city-states and formerly independent kingdoms like Burgundy in eastern France.

War and the Gunpowder Revolution

Monarchs had always tied their identity to war. The European monarchies were originally the product of the Germanic conquests at the end of the Roman period, and it was a point of great pride among noble families to be able to trace their family lines back to the warlords of old. Political loyalty was to the king one served, *not* the territory in which one lived. Likewise, territories were won through war or marriage, so they did not necessarily make sense on a map; many kings ruled over a patchwork of different regions that were not necessarily adjacent (i.e. they did not physically abut one another; a present-day example is the fact that Alaska is part of the United States but is not contiguous with the “lower 48” states). Kings not only fought wars to glorify their line and to seize territory, but they had nobles who egged them on since war was also fought for booty. Kings and nobles alike trained in war constantly, organized and fought in tournaments, and were absolute fanatics about hunting. Henry VIII of England spent about two-thirds of his “free” time hunting, for instance.

By about 1450, military technology had changed significantly. The basis of this change can be summed up in a single word: gunpowder. First developed in China, but first used militarily in the Middle East, gunpowder arrived in Europe in the fourteenth century. By the fifteenth century it was increasingly widespread in war. Early gunpowder weapons were ridiculously inaccurate and dangerous (to the user) by later standards – they frequently exploded, they were grossly inaccurate, and they took a long time to reload. They were also, however, both lethal and relatively easy to use. It was easy to train men to use gunpowder weapons, and those weapons could easily kill a knight who had spent his entire life training to fight.

Thus, by the later part of the fifteenth century, wars were simply fought differently than they had been in the Middle Ages. There was still the symbolic core of the king and his elite noble knights on horseback, but the actual tactical utility of cavalry charges started to fade. Instead, squares of pikemen (i.e. soldiers who fought with long spears called pikes) supplemented by soldiers using primitive muskets neutralized the effectiveness of knights. In turn, these new units tended to be made up of professional soldiers for hire, mercenaries, who fought for pay instead of honor or territory.

Another change in military technology was the emergence of cannons, which completely undermined the efficacy of castles. The ability to build, maintain, and operate cannons required advanced metallurgy and engineering, which in turn required highly skilled technicians (either royal ones or mercenaries for hire). The most famous case of the superiority of cannons to walls was the Turkish siege of Constantinople in 1453, which finally spelled the end of the Byzantine Empire. The result of the artillery revolution was that fortresses and walls had to be redesigned and rebuilt quite literally from the ground up, a hugely expensive undertaking that forced monarchs and nobles to seek new sources of revenue.



Illustration of a siege during the 100 Years' War. Cannons were introduced by the second half of the war, but note the fact that most of the soldiers remain armed with bows and pikes – the gunpowder “revolution” took the better part of a century.

The Resulting Financial Revolution

To sum up, gunpowder inaugurated a long-term change in how wars were fought. In the process, states found themselves forced to come up with enormous amounts of revenue to cover the costs of guns, mercenaries, and new fortifications. This undertaking was extremely expensive. Even the larger kingdoms like France were constantly in need of additional sources of wealth, leading to new taxes to keep revenue flowing in. Royal governments also turned to officials drawn from the towns and cities, men whose education came to resemble that of the humanist schools and tutors of Italy. Humanism thus arrived from Italy via the staffing of royal offices, ultimately in service of war. It is also worth noting that most of these new royal officials were not of noble birth; they were often from mercantile families.

The practical nature of humanistic education ensured that this new generation of bureaucrats was more efficient and effective than ever before. Likewise, whereas members of the nobility believed that they *owned* their titles and authority, royal officials did not – they were dependent on their respective kings. Kings could not fire their nobles, but they could fire their officials. Thus, this new breed of educated bureaucrat had to be good at their jobs, as they had no titles to fall back on.

The major effort of the new royal officials (despised by the old nobility as “new men”) was expanding the crown’s reach. They targeted both the nobles and, especially, the Church, which was the largest and richest institution in Europe.

One iconic example was the fact that the French crown almost completely controlled the French Church (despite battles with the papacy over this control), and directly appointed French bishops. In turn, those bishops often served the state as much as they did the church.

The very idea of the right of a government, in this case that of the king, to levy taxes that were applicable to the entire territory under its control dates from this period. Starting in the fourteenth century, the kingdoms of Europe started levying taxes on both commodities, like salt, that were needed by everyone, and on people just for being there (a head tax or a hearth tax). The medieval idea had been that the king was supposed to live on the revenues from his own estates; it was the new monarchies of the Renaissance period that successfully promoted the view that kings had the right to levy taxes across the board.

That being noted, nowhere did kings succeed in simply levying taxes without having to make concessions to their subjects. Different forms of representative bodies from the nobility, the church, and (typically) the cities had the right to approve new taxes; kings were able to secure approval by rewarding loyalty with additional titles, gifts, land, and promises of no future changes to taxation. An institution of this type was the English parliament, which strongly asserted its control over taxation, a role played in France by several different *parlements* distributed across the kingdom.

The New Kingdoms: Spain, England, France, and the Holy Roman Empire

Spain

In the Middle Ages, Spain had been divided between small Christian kingdoms in the north and larger Muslim ones in the south. The Crusades were part of a centuries-long series of wars the Christian Spaniards called the Reconquest, which reached its culmination in the late fifteenth century. Spain became a powerful and united kingdom for the first time when the monarchs of two of the Christian kingdoms were married in 1479: Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand of Aragon. During their own lifetimes Aragon and Castile remained independent of one another, though obviously closely allied, but the marriage ensured that Isabella and Ferdinand's daughter Joanna and her son Charles V would go on to rule over Spain as a single, unified kingdom.

The “Catholic monarchs” as they were called were determined to complete the Reconquest of the Iberian peninsula, and in 1492 they succeeded in doing so, capturing Grenada, the last Muslim kingdom. Full of crusading zeal, they immediately set about rooting out “heretics” like the kingdom's large Jewish population, forcing Jews to either convert to Catholicism or leave the kingdom that same year. In 1502 they gave the same ultimatum to the hundreds of thousands of Muslims as well. Most Jews and Muslims chose to go into exile, most to the relatively tolerant and economically prosperous kingdoms of North Africa or the (highly tolerant by the standards of European kingdoms at the time) Ottoman Empire.

The Spanish monarchs also attacked the privileges of their own nobility, in some cases literally destroying the castles of defiant nobles and forcing nobles to come and pay homage at court (in the process neutralizing them as a threat to their authority). After Christopher Columbus's “discovery” of the New World in 1492, recalcitrant nobles were often shipped off as governors of islands thousands of miles away. They also succeeded in reforming the tax system to get access to more revenue, especially by taxing trade, and so by 1500 the Spanish army was the largest and most feared in Europe.

Queen Isabella deserves special attention. She was unquestionably one of the most significant “queens regnant”

(a queen with genuine political power, not merely the royal wife of a king) of the entire Renaissance era. She tended to rule with more boldness and vision than did Ferdinand, personally leading Castilian troops during the last years of the Reconquest, sponsoring Columbus's voyage, and presiding over the larger and richer of the two major Spanish kingdoms. Simply put, Isabella exemplified the trend of Renaissance rulers asserting greater power over their respective kingdoms than had the monarchs of earlier eras.

In many ways, the sixteenth century was “the Spanish century,” when Spain was the most prosperous and powerful kingdom in Europe, especially after the flow of silver from the Americas began. Spain went from a disunited, war-torn region to a powerful and relatively centralized state in just a few decades.

England

It initially seemed like England would follow a very different path than did Spain; while Spain was becoming stronger and more unified, England plunged into decades of civil war before a strong monarchy emerged. After the end of the Hundred Years' War, English soldiers and knights returned with few prospects at home. They enlisted in the service of rival nobles houses, ultimately fueling a conflict within the royal family between two different branches, the Lancasters and the Yorks. The result was a violent conflict over the crown called the War of the Roses, lasting from 1455 – 1485. Ultimately, a Welsh prince named Henry Tudor who was part of the extended family of Lancasters defeated Richard III of York and claimed the throne as King Henry VII.

Henry VII proved extremely adept at controlling the nobility, in large part through the Star Court, a royal court used to try nobles suspected of betraying him or undermining the king's authority. The Star Court's judges were royal officials appointed by Henry, and it regularly used torture to obtain confessions from the accused. Henry also seized the lands of rebellious lords and banned private armies that did not ultimately report to him. The result was a streamlined political system under his control and a nobility that remained loyal to him as much out of fear as genuine allegiance. The sixteenth century saw Henry's line, the Tudors, establish an increasingly powerful English state, largely based on a pragmatic alliance between the royal government and the gentry, the landowning class who exercised the lion's share of political power at the local level.

That alliance was shored up by staggering levels of official violence through law enforcement and the brutal suppression of popular uprisings. For example, roughly 20,000 people were executed in England in the 30 years between 1580 and 1610, a rate which if applied to the present-day United States would amount to 46,000 executions a year. Criminals who were not hanged or beheaded were routinely whipped, branded, or mutilated in order to inspire (in so many words from magistrates at the time) terror among other potential law-breakers or rebels. Nevertheless, despite that violence and its relatively small population, England did emerge as a powerful and centralized kingdom by the middle of the sixteenth century.

France

France emerged at the same time as the only serious rival to Spain. The French king Charles VII (r. 1422 – 1461), the same king who finally won the 100 Years' War for France and expelled the English, created the first French professional army that was directly loyal to the crown. He funded it with the *taille*, the direct tax on both peasants and nobles that had originally been authorized by the nobility and rich merchants of France during the latter part of the

Hundred Years' War, and the *gabelle*, the salt tax. Each of these taxes were supposed to be temporary sources of revenue to support the war effort.

Charles's successor Louis XI (r. 1431 – 1483), however, managed to make the new taxes permanent. In other words, he converted what had been an emergency wartime revenue stream into a permanent source of money for the monarchy. He was called “The Spider” for his ability to trap weak nobles and seize their lands under various legal pretenses. He also expelled the Jews of France as heretics, seizing the wealth of Jewish money-lenders in the process, and he even liquidated the old crusading order of the Knights Templar headquartered in France, seizing *their* funds as well. By the time of his death, the French monarchy was well funded and exercised increasing power over the nobility and towns.

The Holy Roman Empire

In contrast to the growth of relatively centralized states in Spain, England, and France, the German lands of central Europe remained fragmented. The very concept of “Germany” was an abstraction during the Renaissance era. Germany was simply a region, a large part of central Europe in which most, but not all, people spoke various dialects of the German language. It was politically divided between hundreds of independent kingdoms, city-states, church lands, and territories. Its only overarching political identity took the form of that most peculiar of early-modern European states: the Holy Roman Empire.

The Holy Roman Empire dated back to the year 800 CE, when the Frankish king Charlemagne was crowned “Holy Roman Emperor” by the pope. The point of the title was to convey on Charlemagne, and the vast territory he had conquered by the year 800, the historical legacy of the Roman Empire. In doing so, the imperial position was an attempt to legitimize the greatest king of the time by association with the legacy of the ancient world. Likewise, an explicit link was made between the pope and the emperor as the two most powerful figures in Christendom.

The Empire itself only stayed united for a short time after Charlemagne's life; his three grandsons divided it, and it would never again see genuine political unity. Instead, the title and the concept survived, but the position of emperor became nothing more than a kind of exclamation mark at the end of a longer list of titles carried by whoever the emperor happened to be at a given time. The “real” power of any given emperor was determined not by the imperial title, but by the other lands and titles he had inherited through normal dynastic succession.

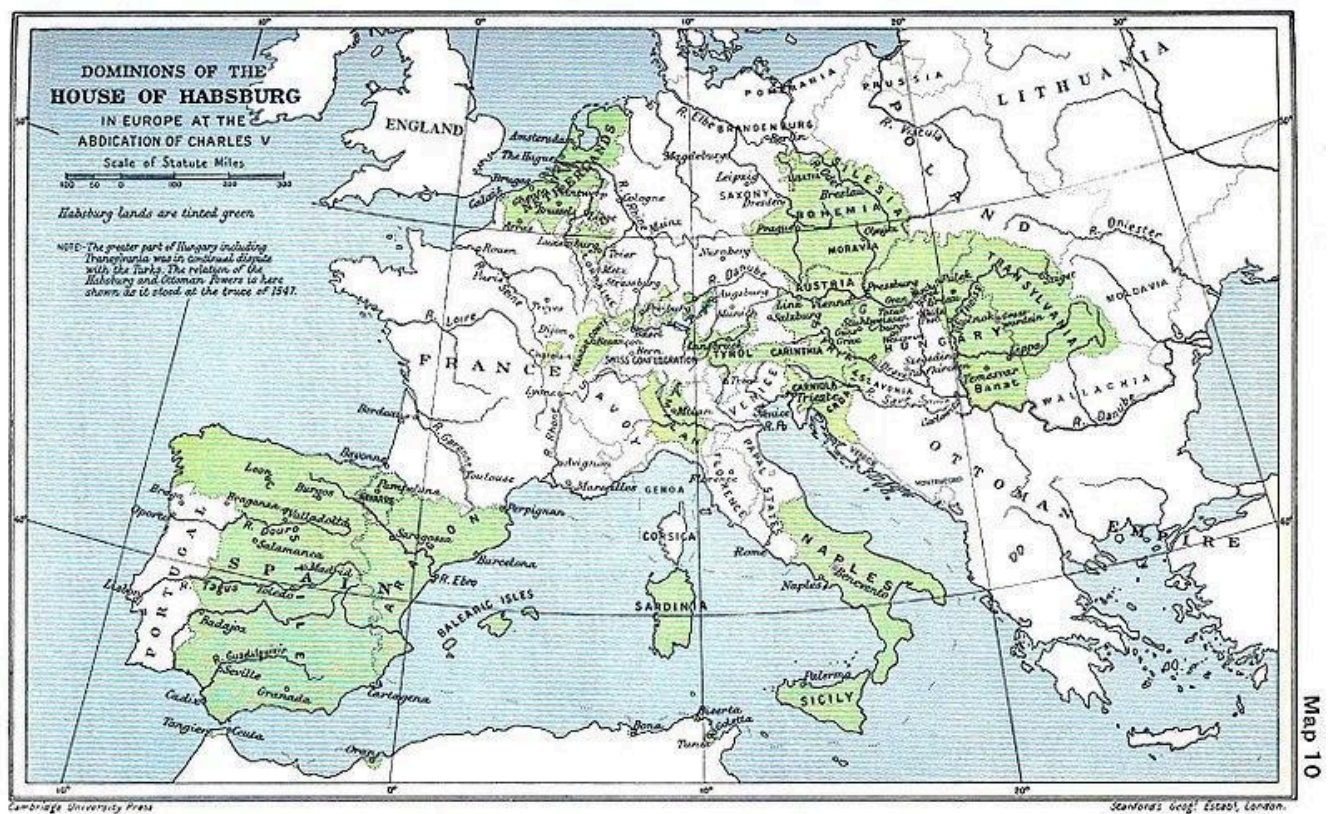
In fact, by the early modern period, emperorship was an elected position. That phenomenon began in 1356 when a pragmatic emperor, Charles IV, issued the Golden Bull, which created a system by which future emperors would be chosen by their most powerful subjects. Seven great rulers scattered across the empire (four princes and three archbishops) had the right to vote on imperial succession. Starting in 1438, the rich and powerful princely Austrian family of Habsburg was able to secure the title and convert it to a virtually-hereditary one by virtue of the fact that they were consistently able to offer the largest bribes to the electors. The Habsburgs were also favored for leadership by the electors because their kingdoms bordered the growing Ottoman Turkish empire, and thus they played a vital role in holding the Turks in check. From 1438 to 1806, when the empire finally dissolved when it was conquered by Napoleon Bonaparte, there was only ever one non-Habsburg emperor.

The Holy Roman Empire featured a parliament, the Imperial Diet, in which representatives of the member states, free cities, kingdoms, duchies, and church lands met to petition the emperor and to debate political issues of the day. Practically speaking, the Diet had little impact on the laws of the constituent states of the empire. The emperor had

the right to issue decrees, but any member state in the empire could safely ignore those decrees unless the emperor was willing to back them with his own force (meaning, after 1438, the Habsburgs were willing to mobilize their own armies).

While the Holy Roman Empire was thus a far cry from the increasingly centralized states of Western Europe, the Habsburgs were unquestionably one of the most powerful royal lines, and their own territories stretched from Hungary to the New World by the sixteenth century. The greatest emperor (in terms of the sheer amount of territory he ruled) was Charles V, who ruled from 1519 – 1558. A grandson of Isabella and Ferdinand of Spain, Charles inherited a gargantuan amount of territory.

The sheer number and variety of Charles V's territorial possessions and related titles strikes almost comical levels from a contemporary perspective. He was emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and king of Spain, Grand Duke of various territories in Poland and Romania, princely count of southern German lands, duke of others, and even claimed sovereignty over Jerusalem (although of course he did not actually control the Holy Land). Most of these titles were not the result of military conquests – they were places he had inherited from his ancestors. The unofficial Habsburg motto was “Let others wage war. You, happy Austria, marry to prosper.” Charles ruled not only the Habsburg possessions in Europe, but the enormous new (Spanish) empire that had emerged in the New World since the late fifteenth century.



The European possessions of Charles V. Note how his territories were non-contiguous (i.e. they were not geographically united) because they were primarily the results of lands he inherited from various ancestors.

Ironically, Charles himself had a terrible time managing anything, despite his personal intelligence and competence. He proved unable to contain the explosion of the Protestant Reformation, he was engaged in ongoing defensive wars against both France and the Turks, and his territories were so far-flung that he spent most of his life traveling between them. He eventually abdicated in 1558, and recognizing that the Habsburg lands were almost ungovernable, he handed power over to his brother Ferdinand I in Austria (Ferdinand also became Holy Roman

Emperor) and his son Philip II in Spain and its possessions. Henceforth, the two branches of the Habsburgs were united in their Catholicism and their enmity with France, but little else.

The Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia

The single most powerful state of the early modern period in the region of Western Civilization was not based in Europe, but the Middle East: the Ottoman Empire. As an aside, In many Western Civilization texts, the Ottomans are given a cursory treatment, treated as a kind of faceless threat to European states rather than being described in adequate detail. That is both ironic and unfortunate, since the Ottoman Empire was the very model of a successful early-modern state, politically centralized, economically prosperous, and engaged in not just warfare but an enormous amount of commerce with other states, very much including the states of Europe.

The Ottoman Empire originated in various small Turkic kingdoms that were left in the wake of the devastating Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century. The Turks are an interrelated group of peoples originating in Central Asia; they spoke various related dialects and share a common ethnic origin. Traditionally, along with the Mongol people further to their east, the Turks were among the most fierce steppe nomads, living by herding animals and raiding the “civilized” lands to their south and west.

The Turks began the transition from steppe nomads to the rulers of settled kingdoms by the tenth century, culminating with the Seljuk invasion of the eleventh century. The Turks were driven by two motivations: the tradition of warfare against non-Muslims, and the straightforward interest in looting defeated enemies. They made frequent war against Byzantium, the Arab Muslim states, and, as often, against each other. While organized initially along tribal and clan lines, they took pains to imitate the more settled Islamic empires that had come before them by practicing Islamic (*shariah*) law and sponsoring Islamic scholarship. In the early fourteenth century, a Seljuk lord named Osman captured a significant chunk of territory from the Byzantines in Anatolia, and he founded a dynasty named after his clan, anglicized to “Ottoman.”

The Ottomans went on to conquer vast territories, including both the lands of the earlier Caliphates and, for the first time, parts of Europe that had never before been held by Islamic rulers, including the islands of the eastern Mediterranean, Greece, and the Balkans. In 1453, the Ottoman Sultan (king) Mehmet II succeeded in conquering Constantinople and, with it, the remnants of Byzantium itself. He moved the capital of his empire to Constantinople and restored it to its former glory. By his death in 1481, it was once again one of the great cities of Europe, and by 1600 its population had reached 700,000, making it the largest city in Europe or the Middle East. The capture of Constantinople inaugurated a new phase of Ottoman history, one in which the Ottomans saw themselves as the inheritors not only of the earlier Islamic states, but of the Roman Empire as well.

The sixteenth century was the high point of Ottoman power, influence, prosperity, and prestige. Under Sultan Selim I (“The Grim,” r. 1512 – 1520), Ottoman forces conquered Egypt from the Mameluke Turks and took over rulership and oversight of the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina, hitherto under Mameluke control. Selim was equal parts ambitious and pragmatic and proved himself a skilled politician and effective military commander. He also continued the traditional Ottoman practice of raising his sons away from the capital, having each trained in politics and war to ensure that each was well prepared to take the throne. The ruthless corollary expectation was that, when the sultan died, his sons would compete to win over the court and military command, the winner then having his brothers murdered to eliminate his rivals and to consolidate power. Selim set the stage for his son, Suleiman the Magnificent (r.

1520 – 1566) to preside over the golden age of Ottoman power in precisely this manner – Suleiman outmaneuvered his brothers when Selim died and promptly had his brothers killed.

Suleiman supervised a deliberate, focused campaign to enrich, extend, and glorify the empire. He conquered territories in southeastern Europe including all of Hungary, and ultimately besieged the Habsburg capital of Vienna in 1529. Although the siege failed, the empire now occupied an enormous stretch of Europe. Ottoman forces also conquered Mesopotamia from the Safavids of Persia (dealing the nascent dynasty a serious blow in the process). Next to China under the Ming dynasty, the Ottoman Empire was now the largest in the world.

Suleiman was not just a conqueror, however. He oversaw vast building campaigns, funding the construction of mosques, madrasas (schools of Islamic scholarship), caravanserais (waystations for trade), and other public buildings that served both practical purposes and amplified the sultan's power and influence. He strongly supported the orthodox Sunni ulama (clergy), insisting on strict religious observance, but he also insisted on the sultan's prerogative to rule without interference from the religious authorities. He increasingly staffed the highest ranks of both the military and the state bureaucracy with *Janissaries*, boys taken from Christian lands who were raised to be elite soldiers and officials. The Janissaries, while technically slaves, actually enjoyed more power and influence than any free Ottoman elite besides the sultan himself. During his lifetime, the Janissaries were loyal and effective in both war and governance.

Although he had no way of realizing it, however, some of Suleiman's policies would prove destructive in the long run. First, the Janissaries slowly devolved from elite soldiers and bureaucrats to parasites, living in lavish "barracks" in Constantinople, manipulating weak sultans, and spending more time enriching themselves in commerce than serving the state. Also, late in life Suleiman retired to the inner chambers of the palace to live out his days as a reclusive mystic, setting a disastrous precedent that left governance in the hands of advisers. Rather than having his sons raised far from the capital, trained as future rulers (albeit rivals who would attempt to murder one another when they came of age), Suleiman had his children raised in the inner palace. From then on, rivalry and murder remained an essential part of royal intrigue, but now it was carried out by assassins and the royal pretenders being killed were unlikely to be effective even if they survived.

Of course, at the time, few would have realized that the empire faced long-term decline. The seventeenth century did not see territorial expansion to speak of, but neither did it succumb to invasion. Even decades-long periods of infighting and incompetence at the top levels of Ottoman governance did not seriously disrupt the prosperity and power of the empire as a whole. Instead, what is clear in historical hindsight is that the early centuries of Ottoman rule had been so successful in creating a political culture centered on Constantinople that the empire remained intact regardless of what was happening *in* Constantinople – trade flowed, local elites prospered, and there were few signs of dissent across the vast breadth of Ottoman territory. It was not until European powers began to chip away at Ottoman sovereignty (a process that began in earnest with an enormous Habsburg victory in 1699) that the true decline of the empire became visible.



The Ottoman Empire at the start of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent.

Even though there was unquestionably a religious component to Ottoman conquests, the empire itself was comparatively tolerant, something that helps to explain its longevity. Regional governors were dismissed if they were so heavy-handed or intolerant that their subjects rose up in rebellion. Non-Muslims were officially tolerated as *dhimmis*, protected peoples, who had to pay a special tax but were not compelled to convert to Islam. Both the Christian patriarch of the Orthodox Church and the head of the Jewish congregation of Constantinople (as well as the Armenian Christian patriarch) were official members of the Sultan's court, with each religious leader carrying both the privilege and the responsibility of representing their respective religious communities to the Ottoman government. They ran their own distinct educational systems and were responsible for tax collection among their communities, referred to as *millets*. To be clear, non-Muslims were held in a socially and legally secondary position within Ottoman society, but they still enjoyed vastly better status and treatment than did religious minorities in Christian kingdoms in Europe at the time.

Safavid Persia

One other Renaissance-era society deserves consideration: that of Persia. Persian (Iranian) political and intellectual traditions were, by the time of the Turkic migrations, the better part of two thousand years old, tracing their origins all the way back to the Achaemenid Empire founded by Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE. As noted in a previous chapter, when

Persia came under Turkic rule starting in the tenth century it was only through Persian administration that a modicum of stability was ever realized by various dynasties. Even then, the Mongol invasions, the subsequent invasion by the Central Asian warlord Temur, and the constant infighting among Turkic tribes meant that Persia was rarely united as a state for more than a few decades at a time (although, importantly, both Islamic and secular scholarship prospered despite the political instability). The Mongol invasions had been devastating, Mongol rule cruel and extractive, and the Timurid period that followed was no better, collectively leading to a marked decline in the prosperity of Persia as a whole. Tribal confederations revolved around the military prowess and charismatic qualities of individual leaders, so even with Persian bureaucracy they rarely held together for long.

An outstanding exception to the state of semi-anarchy came about because of an individual whose personal qualities appealed to the Qizilbash Turks who dominated Persia at the time: Shah Ismail, the founder of the Safavid dynasty. The Safavids were a clan of Sufi (Islamic mystics) *pirs*, masters or spiritual leaders, who also happened to be capable military and political organizers. In 1501 Ismail conquered the city of Tabriz in northwestern Persia, proclaiming his own identity as the bearer of religious truth in the period leading up to the end of the world. Importantly, Ismail and his followers were Shia Muslims, the branch of Islam that had long held a strong presence in Persia, and Ismail could claim that he represented the true interpretation of Islam against the corruption of the (Sunni) rulers in neighboring lands. The appeal to a mystical, millenarian identity helped unite the fractious Turkic tribes and Ismail was able to bring all of Persia under his rule in a short amount of time. He named his kingdom Iran, following the precedent established by the last pre-Islamic Persian dynasty, the Sasanians.

Ismail fused three distinct identities in promoting his rule: he was a Turkic warlord, a Shia Sufi *pir*, and (he claimed) the inheritor of the pre-Islamic political tradition of Persia. Among his other titles he claimed to be the rightful shah (king) *and* to be a latter-day Alexander the Great (known as Iskandar in Persian). His meteoric rise to power was cut short, however, when he led his forces against the Ottomans in 1514 and suffered a crushing defeat, shattering his carefully-cultivated aura of divine power. In the aftermath the Ottomans seized Safavid territory and forced Ismail to retreat to the Iranian plateau. For the next seventy years Ismail and his descendents lost control of the Turkic tribal confederacy he had briefly united, to the point that the Safavid shahs were nothing but figureheads controlled by Turkic warlords until late in the century.

Despite the return to the nearly anarchic conditions of tribal rule, the one area in which the Safavids proved successful was in supporting the growth of the Shia *ulama*, or Muslim clergy, supporting pilgrimages to Shia holy sites, funding madarasas and mosques, and encouraging the expansion of Shia Islam at the expense of the remaining Sunnis. This was perhaps the most significant historical legacy of the Safavids: their dynasty cemented the identity of Iran as a Shia state, something with significant political consequences down to the present.

Safavid rule was revived by Shah Abbas I (r. 1587 – 1629). Placed on the throne as a puppet by his Turkic warlord “protector” in 1587, Abbas went on to seize real power and use it to restore Iranian military, commercial, and political strength. He built up an imperial monopoly on silk production that served as a vital source of revenue for the state and did everything in his power to protect the interests of merchants (including non-Muslims: both Christians from Georgia and Armenia and Hindus from India were welcome as long as they contributed to Iran’s economy). He moved away from the reliance on tribal warriors in war to the use of slave soldiers armed with firearms, a practice that the Ottomans had already used to great effect in their conquests to the west. He patronized the Shia *ulama* but based his own authority on pre-Islamic kingship traditions, just as Ismail had. By the end of his rule Iran’s borders coincided with the heartland of the ancient Persian dynasties (which nearly match those of the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran).

Abbas presided over what is remembered in Iranian history as a true golden age, one that flourished

simultaneously with golden ages in the Ottoman Empire and, to the east, the Muslim-ruled Mughal Empire of India. In 1600 these three empires were among the largest and wealthiest in the world, exceeded only by China under the Ming dynasty. It was a period in which trade and scholarship flowed from India to Europe via Iranian and Ottoman trade routes, enriching all three empires enormously. Iran under Abbas enjoyed its greatest period of political coherence and military might until the twentieth century, and it established the precedent of an Iranian state that traced its lineage back to Shia Islam and pre-Islamic monarchy in equal measure.

Unfortunately for the regime (and for the Iranian economy), the shahs that followed Abbas I were a litany of incompetence. Between Abbas' death in 1629 until the dynasty itself came to an end in 1722 Iran suffered from ineffective leadership and a reversion to the semi-anarchy of tribal rule. The imperial silk monopoly collapsed and, in contrast to Abbas' pragmatic tolerance of religious minorities, the state (encouraged by conservative Shia clerics) launched waves of persecution against Sunnis, Christians, Jews, and Hindus. Those groups had been at the heart of Iranian commerce, and thus the brief golden age brought about by Abbas came to an end almost as soon as it had begun.

The significance of the Safavids, despite the fact that only Ismail and Abbas I were especially effective rulers, is that they presided over a period in which Persian identity fused together its most important constituent elements: a ruling dynasty that saw itself as the inheritors of all of the dynasties of the past (be they Persian, Macedonian, or Turkic) and, even more critically, the establishment of the Shia ulama as the official religious authorities of the empire. Simply put, from the Safavid period on, Persia was the heart of Shia Islam.

Middle Eastern Economics

Like settled societies everywhere in the pre-modern era, the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Persia were dependent on agriculture. Most people were farmers and most wealth was derived from taxes and fees associated with farming. That being noted, what set the economic systems of the Middle East apart from many other societies (such as Europe at the time, with the exception of Renaissance Italy) was the care taken by rulers to cultivate trade. Empires like those of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals all saw focused campaigns to build and protect roads, caravanserais, and markets. Unlike in most European societies, merchants were treated with respect and honor.

Special political and economic status was given to merchants, something that was most evident in the legal protections extended to non-Muslims who were economically useful. As noted above, Hindus and Christians played key economic roles in Safavid Persia, just as Jews and Christians were a major part of the Ottoman economy. Until the eighteenth century, the Ottoman state benefited from treating Jews and Christians as distinct legal entities, allowing them a high degree of legal autonomy and self-rule (while still answering to the central government). Those arrangements were the origin of the "capitulation agreements" that would prove a major weakness to the Ottoman state in the long run, but originally they were in place to encourage economic dynamism among the religious minority communities.

The Middle Eastern economy during the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries was part of a genuinely global trade network. As they always had, Europeans desperately wanted luxury goods from the east, including spices, silks, and porcelain. Once the Spanish discovered the vast silver deposits of South and Central America in the early sixteenth century, gigantic quantities of silver bullion flowed from Europe into the Ottoman and Safavid economies, most of it en route to India and points farther east. The one Persian industry that generated wealth independently from the east-west trade was silk: under Shah Abbas I the state established a royal silk monopoly that produced the lion's share of tax revenue for the state, and when that monopoly fell apart because of the incompetence of his descendents the state struggled to stay afloat financially.

The Ottoman state was not nearly as dependent on a single source of revenue. It enjoyed highly productive agricultural lands in various parts of the vast breadth of the empire and it also generated significant tax revenue from the *jizya*, the tax on non-Muslims (who represented a sizable part of the population). As the gatekeepers of the east-west trade, the Ottomans were able to tax both exports and imports to Europe, and during the major period of Ottoman imperialism conquered territories provided lucrative plunder as well. Unfortunately for the Ottomans, the conquest of both Safavid and Habsburg territories in the first decades of the sixteenth century cost more to defend and maintain than they brought in with tax revenue, bringing about a brake on Ottoman imperialism itself.

Conclusion

All of the large-scale patterns described above took a long time to develop; it was not as if there were small medieval kingdoms one year and major, centralized states the next. Likewise, many historians totally reject the idea of the gunpowder “revolution” because it took well over a century from the fifteenth well into the sixteenth centuries to really come to fruition. Instead, what is evident in hindsight is that centralized states with legal control and the right to raise taxes over their entire territories began in earnest during this period, introducing new legal and political patterns that would only expand in the centuries that followed. Likewise, while gunpowder may have taken a long time to fully transform warfare and state finances, there can be no question that it did so in the long run.

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CHAPTER 5: EUROPEAN EXPLORATION AND CONQUEST

Europe was not a particularly important place, in the context of global empires, economies, or cultural influence during the medieval period. While it invaded the Middle East during the crusades and the European states themselves warred against one another almost constantly, on balance Europe was quite weak and poor compared to other regions farther east. China and India are both outstanding examples of regions that produced far greater wealth, had far larger populations, and were far more militarily powerful than any European kingdom was; in the case of China under the Ming dynasty of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, China was probably more powerful than all of Europe put together. Likewise, China's cultural influence on its neighbors was profound.

Nevertheless, the long expansion of European power to the rest of the world began in the fifteenth century. One of the great world-historical conundrums is why European states expanded so rapidly and aggressively, in the long run, while other powers like that of China, the Ottoman Empire, or the Indian kingdoms did not. Why was it *Europe* that took over the Americas (and, much later, much of the rest of the world) rather than Persia, the Ottoman Empire, India, or China?

Ironically, one of the most likely answers to that question is that it was Europe's relative poverty as compared to the states of the Middle East and Asia that led Europeans to seek out new sources of wealth. Whereas the intra-Asian trade routes linking China, Korea, Japan, the islands of the western Pacific, Southeast Asia, and India ensured that Asian states enjoyed access to wealth and luxury goods, Europeans had to rely on the hugely expensive long-distance trade between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe to access goods like spices and porcelain that Europeans desperately wanted (so we can conclude based on the prices elite Europeans were willing to pay for them) but could not produce themselves. One of the major motivations for European explorers was the pursuit of direct access to luxury goods that bypassed the eastern mercantile networks that had traditionally profited off of the long-distance East – West trade routes.

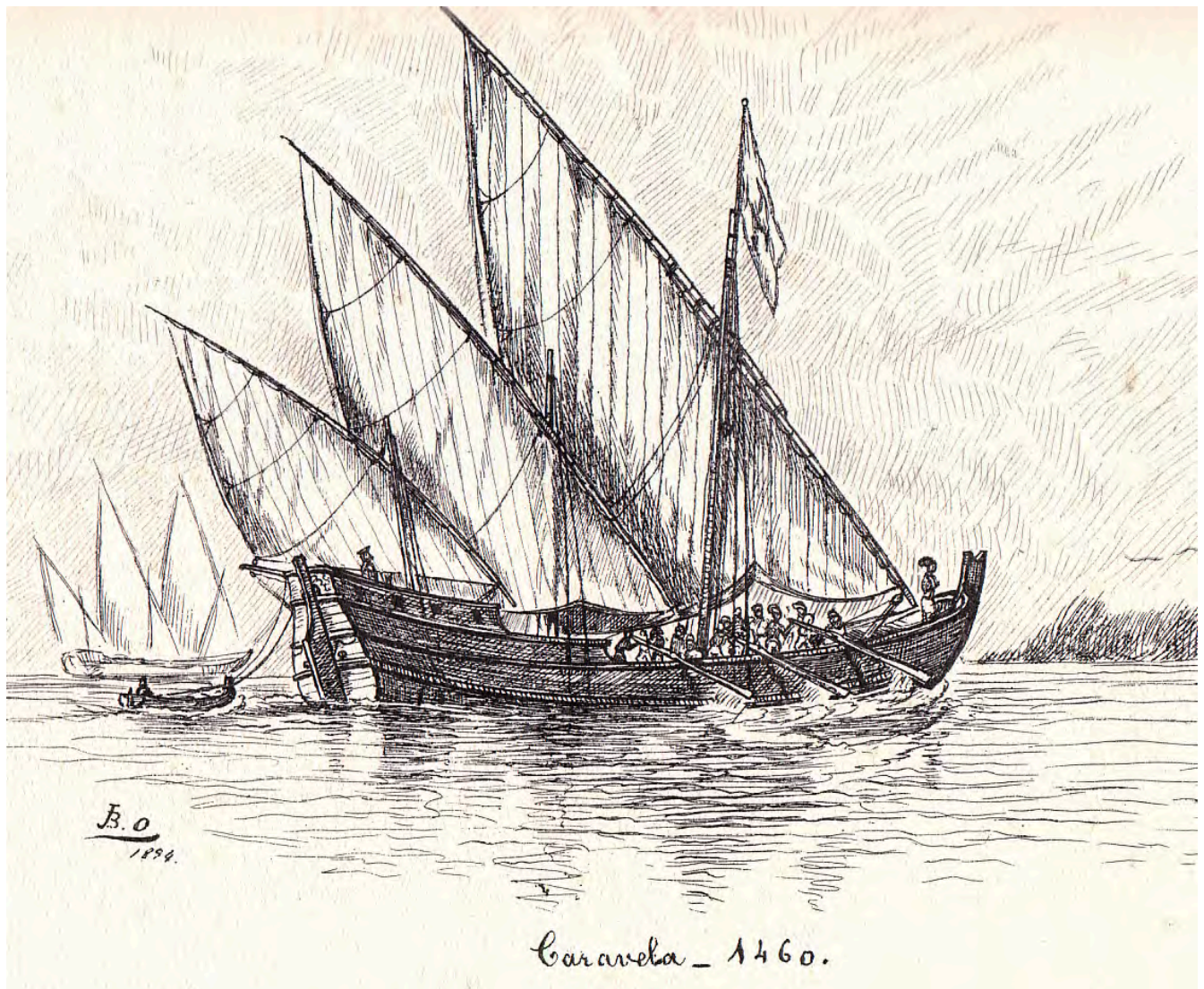
The demand for trade with the east was limitless in European society. Luxury goods from South and East Asia were always among the most sought-after commodities in Europe, stretching all the way back to Roman times. Spices were worth far more than their weight in gold, and Chinese goods like porcelain were also highly prized. Enterprising merchants who were able to position themselves somewhere along the Indian Ocean trade routes or the famous Silk Road between Europe and China stood to make a fortune, but the distances covered were so vast that it was very difficult and perilous to take part in mercantile ventures. Thus, Isabella of Spain was not alone in funding explorers who sought to reach the east via easier routes when she supplied Columbus with his ships and sailors.

The situation became even more difficult for Europeans thanks to the rise of the Ottoman Empire. When Constantinople fell to the Ottomans in 1453, the traditional trade routes to Asia were disrupted, particularly as the Turks started taking over the Venetian maritime empire. Likewise, Europeans had long traded with Muslim merchants in North Africa for gold, ivory, and spices, and they longed to cut out the middlemen and get to the sources farther south. Some of this was doubtless born of anti-Muslim prejudice, but there was also the simple fact that the Ottomans now directly controlled a major link in the East – West trade axis, deriving profits that Europeans desired for their own.

In addition, the crusading tradition, especially that inspired by the Reconquest of Spain and Portugal, served as

an inspiration for European explorers. The Reconquest was only completed in 1492, the same year that Columbus sailed in search of a western route to Asia, and many of the Spanish *conquistadors* (conquerors) who invaded South and Central America afterwards had acquired their military experience from what they considered to be the holy wars against the Muslim inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula. That crusading ideology was easily adapted for the purposes of conquering vast American territories and forcibly converting the Native American inhabitants to Christianity.

There were thus economic and cultural reasons that Europeans *wanted* to reach African and Asian commodities and wealth. They were *able* to access that wealth thanks to technological advances. Until about 1400, Europeans had no ships capable of sailing across an entire ocean (the Viking longboats of the Middle Ages were an exception, but they were no longer in use by the Renaissance era), and the European understanding of geography and navigation was extremely primitive. From about 1420 on, however, maritime technology improved dramatically and it became feasible to launch voyages that could cross the entire Atlantic Ocean with a reasonable degree of certainty that they would succeed. The key here was the invention of the caravel, a new kind of ship that was able to sail both with the wind and against lateral winds; as long as the wind was not blowing in the opposite direction one wanted to travel in, it was possible to keep moving in the right direction. Reasonably effective compasses and a device to measure latitude called the astrolabe came into European hands from the Middle East around 1400 as well. Thus, by 1400 Europeans had both a number of reasons to want to explore and for the first time had the technological means to do so.



Nineteenth-century drawing of a Portuguese caravel, based on the designs used during the early Portuguese expeditions of the fifteenth century.

Despite those advances, the European grasp of geography remained very shaky. As of 1400, Europeans had terribly imprecise knowledge about the rest of the world. They did not, of course, know anything about the Americas. They tended to confuse “India,” “Cathay,” and “Japan” with Asia itself. They had a vague notion that all of Asia was ruled by khans, in part because of the popularity of the Venetian merchant Marco Polo’s famous account of his travels undertaken in the latter part of the thirteenth century. Polo was a Venetian merchant who had traveled to the court of the Mongol Khan Kublai and eventually returned to Europe, but his account merely reinforced just how far away, and difficult to reach, Asia was taking the usual eastern routes. Many sincerely believed that monsters occupied the interiors of Africa and Asia, and besides Polo, no Europeans had ever made the trek to the far east and returned to tell the tale.

Africa and India

Europeans did, of course, know about North Africa. The Mediterranean had served as the crossroads of the civilized Western World since ancient times, and despite North Africa being ruled by Muslim kingdoms, Europeans

regularly traded with Muslim merchants. As noted above, there were many lucrative commodities (like gold and ivory) that Europeans coveted and were only available from North African merchants. Europeans knew that these commodities originated somewhere across the Sahara desert, but were unable to access their sources directly.

During the European Middle Ages, Sub-Saharan Africa was dominated by various medium-sized kingdoms, most of which had converted to Islam. The largest was that of Mali, which oversaw a lucrative trade in gold and various luxury goods north via caravan to North Africa and the rest of the Mediterranean. Likewise, other kingdoms traded with one another and, via caravans, the Middle East and Europe. These kingdoms also engaged in frequent warfare against one another (just as the states of Europe did).

Drawn by the gold they were able to acquire via merchants in North Africa, Europeans had tried in the late Middle Ages to sail down the west coast of the continent, but their naval technology was insufficient. In the fifteenth century that changed with the introduction of the caravel; the same thing that made it possible for Europeans to reach the Americas allowed them to make reliable journeys along the African coast. Along with new compasses and the astrolabe, Europeans were able to make long-distance trips by the mid-fifteenth century that far exceeded their earlier maximum ranges.

The beginning of the ongoing contact between sub-Saharan Africa and Europe happened under the auspices of Prince Henry the Navigator (1394 – 1460), the governor of the southernmost province of Portugal. He sponsored numerous Portuguese expeditions along the west coast of Africa, hoping to somehow seize lands or at least find routes to lucrative sources of gold and spices. In 1497, Vasco Da Gama, a Portuguese nobleman, was sponsored by the Portuguese crown and sailed around Africa and as far as India, in the process claiming various territories for Portugal. Following Da Gama, Portuguese fleets established a lucrative monopoly on trade between Europe and West African kingdoms, East African kingdoms, and Indian merchants. This amounted to a royally-controlled, militarily-enforced monopoly of waterborne trade between Europe and India and Africa that lasted well into the sixteenth century. Thus, tiny Portugal was, for a time, one of the wealthiest states in Europe.

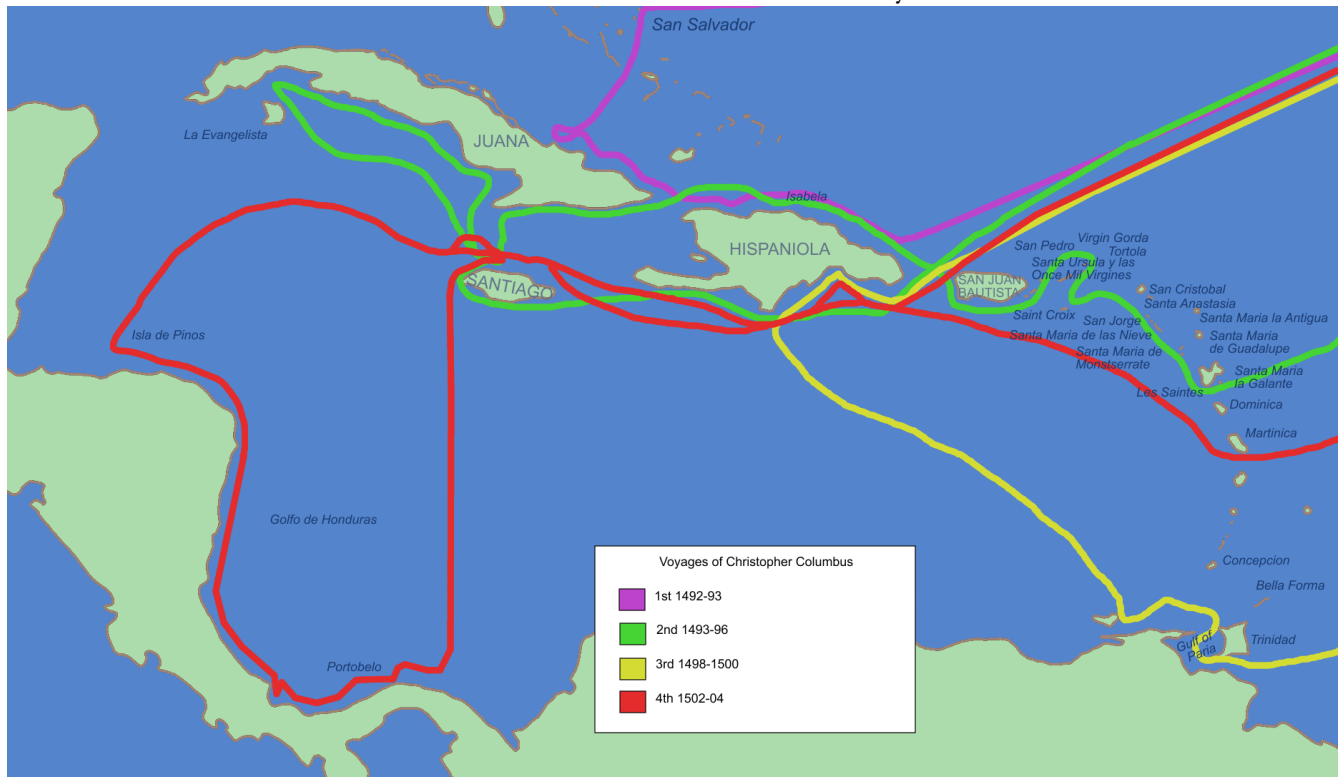
It should be emphasized that this Portuguese “monopoly” was first and foremost a monopoly between the Indian Ocean trade and Europe, *not* a monopoly of trade within the Indian Ocean itself (despite the best efforts of the Portuguese, who desperately tried to impose control through force of arms). Indian, African, and Middle Eastern merchants continued to exchange goods and wealth whose value greatly exceeded that of the trade between Europe and the Indian Ocean region. What changed, however, was that Europeans were for the first time able to directly access the sources of luxury commodities like spices, indigo, ivory, and gold, and Portugal was in the forefront of the European states that sought to reach those sources. Other states were quick to follow once the sheer extent of African and Indian wealth was revealed through Portuguese trade, and soon the Dutch and then the English started taking over the oceanic trade routes from the Portuguese.

Spain, Columbus, the Great Dying, and the Columbian Exchange

The most important voyages of discovery of the early modern period were undertaken by agents of the Spanish monarchy, starting with that of Christopher Columbus in 1492. They were inspired by religious fervor as much as a practical desire for riches – fresh off the successful Reconquest, Queen Isabella agreed with Columbus’s vision of flanking the Muslim forces of the Middle East and recapturing the Holy Land as much as she also wanted new trade routes to Asia. The voyage was thought to be feasible both because all educated people already accepted that the world

was round (common knowledge since the days of ancient Greece) and because the circumference of the globe was not really clear to them: it simply was not known how long one would have to sail west to reach the far east.

Columbus himself had totally inaccurate beliefs about the distance between Europe and Asia – he based his geography on an ancient (and completely inaccurate) account by the Greek philosopher Ptolemy and he thought that Asia was not far west of Europe. Despite being disliked and distrusted by most of the rulers he had approached in the past, Columbus succeeded in winning Isabella over to his vision, and she paid to outfit him with a tiny fleet (she sent him with letters of introduction to the Great Khan, who she presumed still ruled in Asia). Columbus departed in August of 1492 with three small boats – the Niña, Pinta, and Santa Maria – and 90 men. They arrived in the Bahamas in October.



The four voyages of Columbus between 1492 and 1504. 'Juana' is present-day Cuba, and 'Hispaniola' is present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic.

Columbus ended up spearheading everything the Spanish empire was to represent in the Americas: brutality against the native “Indians,” attempts to convert Indians by force, intense greed for precious metals, and the introduction of pathogens against which the native people had no resistance. With Columbus, the traffic in goods and commodities between the two hemispheres began. While Europeans at the time were obsessed with the vast mineral wealth found in the Americas, it is clear in historical hindsight that far more important than precious metals were the living things exchanged between the western and eastern hemispheres of the globe starting in 1492. Historians now refer to that enormous distribution of plant and animal species, as well as bacteria and viruses, as the Columbian Exchange.

From the New World, Europeans brought back corn, potatoes, tobacco, chocolate, and tomatoes, just to name the most important of the crops that soon flourished across Africa and Eurasia. From the Old World, Europeans imported all of the large domesticated animals – horses, cows, sheep, goats, pigs, and sheep – as well as numerous crops like rice, wheat, sugarcane, and coffee. Potatoes alone would go on to reshape the demographics of all of northern Europe and various other regions in the world because they provide a great deal of nutrition and calories and can grow in poor,

rocky soils. The poor of many European regions (Ireland, most famously) became largely dependent on potatoes for nourishment by the eighteenth century.

That noted, the single most significant biological entity to be exchanged between the hemispheres was the smallpox virus, which was at the heart of the worst epidemic in world history. Isolated from the western hemisphere for thousands of years, Native Americans had no resistance to Eurasian diseases. Because almost all diseases that affect humans are mutated strains of diseases affecting domestic animals, referred to as zoonotic diseases, and all of the large animal species that can be domesticated were Eurasian in origin except llamas, Eurasians and Africans had spent thousands of years both suffering from and building up resistance to epidemics while Native Americans had not. Those epidemic pathogens arrived all at once with the European invasion of the New World that began with Columbus.

Historians refer to the demographic catastrophe that accompanied the European encounter with the Americas as the Great Dying. As much as 90% of the native people of the Americas died within a few generations of Columbus's arrival. While the Spanish and Portuguese did win some noteworthy military engagements, due largely to their use of horses, gunpowder, and steel, their true military advantage lay in germ warfare, something they certainly did not anticipate unleashing on their arrival. Spanish explorers in the early sixteenth century encountered whole regions with abundant evidence of sophisticated cultures that were already abandoned, their former inhabitants wiped out by disease. Put simply, the conquest of the Americas by Europeans was shockingly swift not because Europeans were significantly more militarily powerful than were Native Americans, but because most of the latter were already dead thanks to disease.

The Columbian Exchange, and the Great Dying that was part of it, began with Columbus's initial voyage. Almost immediately after Columbus's return to Spain after his expedition, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain grasped the significance of his discovery and actively funded more expeditions and, soon, colonists. The Spanish crown also quickly tried to cement its hold on the New World, petitioning the pope to grant them everything across the Atlantic. After papal intervention and negotiations between the Spanish and Portuguese, the Spanish were to receive everything west of an arbitrary line on the map 1,100 miles west of the Cape Verde Islands, with everything to the east granted to the Portuguese. Practically speaking, this meant that the Portuguese concentrated their colonization efforts on Brazil, Africa, and India, while the Spanish concentrated on the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. Needless to say, the other European powers were not about to honor this agreement, called the Treaty of Tordesillas and dating to 1494, but it gave the Spanish and Portuguese a considerable head start.

By the 1520s, Europeans recognized that Columbus had been completely wrong about the New World being part of Asia. The term "America" was invented by another Italian, Amerigo Vespucci, who was another early explorer (he led two expeditions between 1497 and 1503) and was the first to grasp the immensity of the western hemisphere. Vespucci coined the phrase "New World" in the first place, hence "America" rather than "Columbia" – Vespucci's accounts were printed first. He was also a relentless self-promoter, whereas Columbus did not attempt to publicize his discoveries with the same focus.

Even though Europeans quickly realized that the Americas were whole new continents, they persisted in their quest to find a western route to Asia. The Spanish dispatched explorers and sailors who sought Asia by going around the Americas, even as they were also busy conquering the great empires of the Aztecs and Incas. This led to the voyage of Ferdinand Magellan (1480 – 1521), who commanded a small fleet of five ships funded by the Spanish crown and who tried to find a western route to Asia in 1519. He succeeded in rounding South America and crossing the Pacific, but was then killed by natives of the Philippines in 1521. There, his Basque navigator Juan Sebastián Elcano took over and managed to guide one ship all the way back to Spain, arriving in 1522 (Magellan is much better remembered than Elcano, but it was Elcano who actually made it back). The voyage proved definitively that it was possible to sail around

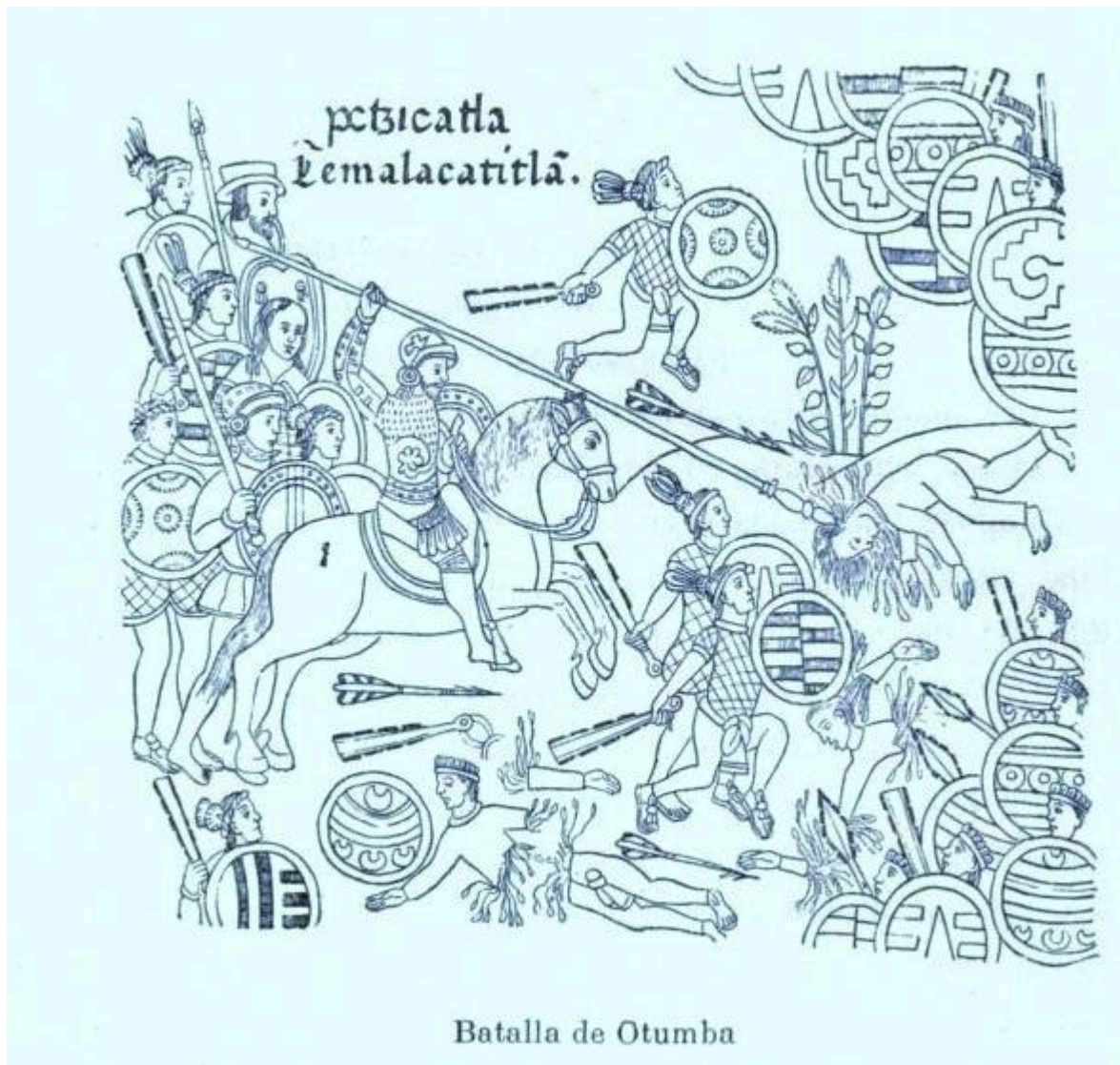
the world. The Spanish would subsequently use the Philippines as the basis of their Pacific trade network, ultimately linking together Europe, the Americas, and Asia and fulfilling the original vision of a western route to Asia that had inspired Columbus's expedition in the first place.

The Conquistadors

The Conquistadors were the military explorers sent by the Spanish crown to the Americas to claim land, convert "heathens," and enrich both themselves and the crown. They were usually poor noblemen with few prospects back in Spain; in the first generation of explorers many were essentially unemployed knights. Some conquistadors simply launched expeditions to the New World without royal authorization, hoping to seize enough plunder to receive retroactive royal approval. Officially, all conquistadors were obliged to turn over the "royal fifth" – 20% of all precious metals discovered or mined – of all loot to the crown.

The most significant conquistador was Hernan Cortes (1485 – 1547). A poor knight who had fought in the aftermath of the Reconquest as a young man, he jumped at the chance to travel to the New World. Cortes proved brilliant at manipulating the native groups he encountered in Mexico, where he arrived in 1519 with 450 Spanish troops and 15 horses. There, a powerful empire under the Aztecs had recently seized control of a large swath of territory. The Aztecs did not directly rule their subjects but instead demanded a constant flow of tribute, including captives who were destined for human sacrifice. Needless to say, the Aztecs were not popular with their subjects.

Working through a native translator, Malinche, who had already learned Spanish, Cortes was able to convince native groups resentful of the Aztecs to fight alongside the Spanish. Practically speaking, this meant that the native groups suffered most of the casualties. He fought his way to the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan, where he was initially welcomed by the emperor Montezuma II. Once the Aztecs realized the extent of the rapacious designs of the Spanish they chased them from the city, but then an epidemic of smallpox undermined their ability to fight. Cortes was able to achieve the surrender of the surviving Aztec forces by 1522 and founded the Spanish colony of New Spain in the center of Mexico.



A later Spanish illustration of the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. Note the allied Native Mexican troops both behind and in front of the charging Spanish soldier.

The other noteworthy conquistador of the first generation following Columbus was Francisco Pizarro (1478 – 1541). Inspired by Cortes' success in Mexico, Pizarro set off (with 180 Spanish troops and 30 horses) for an empire the Spanish had learned of in the Andes of western South America in 1531. This was the Incan empire, also a relatively young state that encompassed territory along the Andes through present-day Chile, Ecuador and Peru. Pizarro ambushed the Inca emperor Atahualpa and captured him, demanding a building full of gold for his release. Instead, once the ransom was paid, Pizarro had the emperor killed and then marched on the Inca capital of Cuzco. By 1533, Spanish forces were in control of the empire and began sending enormous quantities of bullion back to Spain.

Thus, less than fifty years after Columbus's initial landing, the two greatest empires of Central and South America had already fallen to the Spanish. By 1600, practically every part of Central and South America was at least nominally under Spanish (or, in the case of Brazil, Portuguese), control. Spain and Portugal would go on to retain their respective American colonies until the early nineteenth century.

New World Wealth

The Spanish discovered huge sources of wealth in South and Central America. The most important source of wealth in all of the Americas for the Spanish crown was discovered in 1545: the mountain of Potosi in present-day Bolivia. Potosi had the most enormous silver deposits in the world at the time, producing thousands of tons of silver for the crown. It also represented a horrific site of slave labor for the native people of the entire extended area. Imposing a system of forced labor known as the *mita*, Spanish officials forced thousands of the native inhabitants of the region to toil in atrocious conditions, often until they died from exhaustion. Whereas the Great Dying might be the most iconic aspect of the Columbian Exchange, Potosi is probably the greatest symbol of the humongous influx of mineral wealth that flooded into Spanish coffers for over a century, as well as the site of the greatest human misery caused by that lust for bullion.

The irony of the wealth generated by American mines is that it undermined the vitality of the Spanish state itself in the long run – Spain did not have to cultivate trade or pursue technological or bureaucratic innovation in the same manner as the rest of the European powers because it had such an enormous surplus of precious metals. Thus, even though Spain was the most powerful state in Europe in the sixteenth century, its longer-term trajectory was one of decline, in large part because of its commercial stagnation. In addition, so much bullion was shipped back to Europe that inflation undermined its value, another factor that weakened Spanish power over time.

Much of the story of Spanish conquest is one of the abuse of the native peoples of the Americas. Part of that abuse grew out of the crusading tradition, but part of it also came out of the discomfort many of the Spanish felt in discovering people who had quite obviously never been in contact with the Christian world. The Bible did not explain their origins, so the Spanish invented various hypotheses: Native Americans were descended from the Lost Tribes of Israel described in the Old Testament of the Bible, they were somehow created and ruled by the Devil, they simply were not human beings but strange, human-like animals, and so on. The consensus by the 1530s was that, wherever they were from, Native Americans were blank slates who had to be conquered for their own good. The pope recognized the humanity of the Native Americans in 1537, but the Church continued to support forcible conversion. Native Americans were referred to as the “justly conquered” and either enslaved outright or conscripted as serfs in service to Spanish colonial masters.

Back in Europe, funded by the incredible wealth of the New World, the still recently-united Spain became the greatest European power in the sixteenth century. In the New World, royal authority was enforced by two viceroys, royal officials who ruled over the northern and southern parts of the territory. Under them, rich nobles (often originally successful conquistadors) ran *encomiendas*, feudal estates with the legal right to exploit native labor. Those often evolved into the even larger *haciendas*, the size of whole states back in Europe.

Because the vast majority of Spanish immigrants were men, even a formal ban of marriage between Spanish men and native women did not prevent the growth of a large “mixed” class of *mestizos*, the children of Spanish – American unions who were often recognized as the legitimate children of the former. There was still a racialized hierarchy in New World society, but more ethnic mixing occurred in Central and South America than in North America.

Conclusion

The Spanish and Portuguese invasions of the Americas were nothing less than a catastrophe for the native peoples of the Western Hemisphere. Whole cultures were obliterated, empires fell, and the survivors found themselves at the mercy of conquerors whose major priorities were the extraction of mineral wealth and the exploitation of labor. To those ends, the native peoples were frequently enslaved outright to work on plantations or mines. The use of slave labor

only grew over time, although by the middle of the sixteenth century Europeans were increasingly turning to African slaves, spawning one of the most horrendous injustices in history: the Transatlantic Slave Trade (considered in a following chapter). European states in the Americas were thus built on the backs and with the blood of both the native inhabitants and enslaved Africans.

The impact of the conquests on Europe took longer to become entirely evident, but in the long run the conquest of the Americas sparked the beginning of the process by which Europe became one of the dominant global regions. Europeans now had access to not only enormous quantities of precious metal, but vast new natural resources (from huge stocks of fish to millions of acres of fertile land) that were to bolster European power for centuries to come. It is no coincidence that the year 1492 is often used as the starting point of what historians refer to as the early modern period: when both global hemispheres came into sustained contact for the first time, it was the starting point of massive change for the human species as a whole.

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CHAPTER 6: REFORMATIONS

The Protestant Reformation was the permanent split within the Catholic church that resulted in multiple competing denominations (versions, essentially) of Christian practice and belief. From the perspective of the Catholic hierarchy, these new denominations – lumped together under the category of “Protestant” – were nothing more or less than new heresies, sinful breaks with the correct, orthodox beliefs and practices of the Church. The difference between Protestant churches and earlier heretical movements was that the Church proved unable to stamp them out or re-assimilate them into mainstream Catholic practice. Thus, what began as a protest movement against corruption within the Church very quickly evolved into a number of widespread and increasingly militant branches of Christianity itself.

Ironically, “the” Reformation as the sundering of Christian unity was at least in part the product of prosaic reformations already occurring within the Church. The founding figure of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, used the humanistic education that had become increasingly common for members of the Church in formulating his arguments. Many early adopters of Protestantism were drawn to the new movement because they were already enthusiastic supporters of church reform. In part as a reaction to Protestantism but also in part as an extension of pre-existing reform movements, the Catholic hierarchy would go on to introduce important changes to both practice (e.g. colleges that trained priests) and culture (e.g. a new focus on the spiritual life of the common person) that did amount to meaningful reforms. These changes were long referred to as the “Counter-Reformation,” but are now recognized by historians as constituting a Catholic Reformation that was more than just an anti-Protestant reaction.

The Context of the Reformation

The context of the Reformation was the strange state of the Catholic Church as of the late fifteenth century. The Church was omnipresent in early-modern European society. About one person in seventy-five was part of the Church, as a priest, monk, nun, or member of a lay order. Practically every work of art depicted biblical themes. The Church supervised births, marriages, contracts, wills, and deaths – all law was, by implication, the law of God Himself. Furthermore, in Catholic doctrine, spiritual salvation was only accessible through the intervention of the Church; without the rituals (sacraments) performed by priests, the soul was doomed to go to hell. Finally, popes fought to claim the right to intervene in secular affairs as they saw fit, although this was a fight they rarely won, losing even more ground as the new more powerful and centralized monarchies rose to power in the fifteenth century.

Simply put, as of the Renaissance era, all was not well with the Church. The Babylonian Captivity and the Great Western Schism both undermined the Church’s authority. The stronger states of the period claimed the right to appoint bishops and priests within their kingdoms, something that the monarchs of England and France were very successful in doing. This led both laypeople and some priests themselves to look to monarchs, rather than the pope, for patronage and authority.

At the same time, elite churchmen (including the popes themselves) continued to live like princes. The papacy not only set a bad example, but attempts to reform the lifestyles and relative piety of priests generally failed; the papacy was simply too remote from the everyday life of the priesthood across Europe, and since elite churchmen were all nobles,

they usually continued to live like nobles. In many cases, they openly lived with concubines, had children, and worked to ensure that their children receive lucrative positions in the Church. Laypeople were well aware of the slack morality that pervaded the Church. Medieval and early-modern literature is absolutely shot through with satirical tracts mocking immoral priests, and depictions of hell almost always featured priests, monks, and nuns burning alongside nobles and merchants.

These patterns affected monasticism as well. The idea behind monastic orders had been imitating the life of Christ, yet by the early modern period, many monasteries (especially urban ones) ran successful industries, and monks often lived in relative luxury compared to townspeople. Furthermore, the monasteries had been very successful in buying up or receiving land as gifts; by the late fifteenth century a full 20% of the land of the western kingdoms was owned by monasteries. The contrast between the required vow of poverty taken by monks and nuns and the wealth and luxury many monks and nuns enjoyed was obvious to laypeople.

The result of this widespread concern with corruption was a new focus on the inner spiritual life of the individual, not the focus on and respect for the priest, monk, or nun. New movements sprung up around Europe, including one called Modern Devotion in the Netherlands, that focused on moral and spiritual life of laypeople outside of the auspices of the Church. The handbook of the Modern Devotion was called *The Imitation of Christ*, written in the mid-fifteenth century and published in various editions after that, which was so popular that its sales matched those of the Bible at the time. It promoted the idea of salvation without needing the Church as an intermediary at all.

Within the Church, there were widespread and persistent calls for reform to better address the needs of the laity and to better live up to the Church's own moral standards. Numerous devout priests, monks, and nuns abhorred the corruption of their peers and superiors in the Church and called for change – the Spanish branch of the Church enjoyed a strong period of reform during the fifteenth century, for example. Despite this reforming zeal within the Church and the growing popularity of lay movements outside of it, however, almost no one anticipated a permanent break from the Church's hierarchy itself.

Indulgences

The specific phenomenon that brought about the Protestant Reformation was the selling of indulgences by the Church. Catholic doctrine held that even the souls of those who avoided hell did not go straight to heaven on death. Instead, they would spend years (centuries, usually) in a spiritual plane between earth and heaven called purgatory – there, their sins would be purged (note the overlap between the words “purge” and “purgatory”) through fire until they were purified. Only then could they ascend to heaven. In turn, an indulgence was a certificate offered by the Church that offered the same spiritual power as the sacrament of confession and penance: to have one's sins absolved. Each indulgence promised a certain amount of time that the individual would not have to spend in purgatory after death. Naturally, most people would much rather proceed directly to heaven if possible, and so the Church found that the sale of indulgences to avoid time in purgatory was enormously popular.

At first, indulgences were granted by the pope for good acts that were supported by the Church; they were heavily associated with the crusades, both in terms of mitigating the normal spiritual consequences of the atrocities committed by the crusaders and in rewarding the crusaders for trying to recapture the Holy Land for the Church. Later, popes came to succumb to the temptation to sell them in order to raise revenue, especially as the Renaissance-era popes built up both their own secular power and patronized the art and architecture associated with the Vatican. By the early sixteenth century the practice was completely out of control. Roaming salesmen, contracted by the Church, sold

indulgences without the slightest concern for the moral or spiritual status of the buyer, and even invented little jingles like “when the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs” – that was the sales pitch of John Tetzel, the specific indulgence salesman who infuriated the key figure in the Reformation, Martin Luther.

The concept of indulgences relied on the notion of a “treasury of merit” – a kind of spiritual bank – whose savings had been deposited by the sacrifices made by Christ and the saints. When someone bought an indulgence, she drew against that treasury in order to avoid time in purgatory. Another way to gain access to the treasury of merit was to possess, or even come into contact with, holy relics (typically the bones of saints). Thus, many rulers did everything in their power to create large collections. One German prince had his court preacher calculate the total number of years that his (the ruler’s) large collection of relics would eliminate from his and his subjects’ time in Purgatory; the total was 1,902,202 years and 270 days. There was another prince whose total was 39,245,120 years of get-out-of-Purgatory-free time. From this context, of widespread corruption and the fairly blatant abuse of the notion of spiritual salvation through the Church, Martin Luther emerged.

Lutheranism

Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) was a German monk who endured a difficult childhood and a fraught relationship with his father. He suffered from bouts of depression and anxiety that led him to become a monk, the traditional solution to an identity crisis as of the early modern period. Luther received both a scholastic and a humanistic education, eventually becoming a professor at the small university in the city of Wittenberg in the Holy Roman Empire. There, far from the centers of both spiritual and secular power, he contemplated the Bible, the Church, and his own spiritual salvation.

Luther struggled with his spiritual identity. He was obsessively afraid of being damned to hell, feeling totally unworthy of divine forgiveness and plagued with doubt as to his ability to achieve salvation. The key issue for Luther was the concept of good works, an essential element of salvation in the early-modern church. In Catholic doctrine, salvation is achieved through a combination of the sacraments, faith in God, and good works, which are good deeds that merit a person’s admission into heaven. Those good works could be acts of kindness and charity, or they could be gifts of money to the Church – a common “good work” at the time was leaving money or land to the Church in one’s will. Luther felt that the very idea of good works was ambiguous, especially because works seemed so inadequate when compared to the wretched spiritual state of humankind. He could not understand how *anyone* merited admittance to heaven no matter how many good works they carried out while alive – the very idea seemed petty and base compared to the awesome responsibility of living up to Christianity’s moral standards.



A 1528 portrait of Luther.

In about 1510 Luther began to explore a possible answer to this quandary: the idea that salvation did not come from works, but from grace, the limitless love and forgiveness of God, which is achievable through faith alone. Over time, Luther developed the idea that it takes an act of God to merit a person's salvation, and the reflection of that act is in the heartfelt faith of the individual. A person's willed attempts to do good things to get into heaven were always inadequate; what mattered was that the heartfelt faith of a believer might inspire an infinite act of mercy on the part of God. This idea – salvation through faith alone – was a major break with Catholic belief.

This concept was potentially revolutionary because in one stroke it did away with the entire edifice of church ritual. If salvation could be earned through faith alone, the sacraments were at best symbolic rituals and at worst distractions – over time, Luther argued that only baptism and communion were relevant since they were very clearly inspired by Christ's actions as described in the New Testament. In Luther's vision, the priest was nothing more than a guide rather than a gatekeeper who could grant or withhold the essential rituals, and a believer should be able to read the Bible directly rather than be forced to defer to the priesthood.

Having developed the essential points of his theology, Luther then confronted what he regarded as the most blatant abuse of the Church's authority: indulgences. In 1517, Pope Leo X issued a new indulgence to fund the building of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Luther was incensed at how crass the sale of indulgences was (it was as bad as a carnival barker's act in nearby Wittenberg) and at the fact that this new indulgence promised to absolve the purchaser of all sins, all at once. Furthermore, the indulgence could be purchased on behalf of those who were already dead and "spring" them from purgatory in one fell swoop. Luther responded by posting a list of ninety-five attacks against indulgences to the door of the Wittenberg cathedral. These "95 Theses" are considered by historians to be the first official act of the Protestant Reformation.

The 95 Theses were relatively moderate in tone. They attacked indulgences for leading to greed instead of piety, for leading the laity to distrust the Church, and for simply not working – they did not, Luther argued, absolve the sins of those who purchased them. Written in Latin, the 95 Theses were intended to spark debate and discussion within the Church. And, while he criticized the pope's wealth and (implied) greed, Luther did not attack the office of the papacy itself. It should be emphasized that calls for reform within the Church were nothing new, and Luther certainly saw himself as a would-be reformer at this stage, not a revolutionary. Soon, however, the 95 Theses were translated into German and reprinted, which led to an unexpected and, at least initially, unwanted celebrity.

Within two years, Luther was forced to publicly defend his views and, in the process, to radicalize them. A fellow professor and member of the Church, Johann Eck, publicly debated Luther and forced him to admit that the pope had the authority issue indulgences. This, however, led Luther to argue that the pope could be wrong if his position was not authorized by the Bible itself. In the end, Luther argued that the pope, and by extension the entire Church, were irrelevant to spiritual salvation. He argued that true Christians were part of the priesthood of believers, united by their faith and without need for the Catholic Church.

By 1520 Luther was actively engaged in writing and publishing inflammatory pamphlets that attacked the pope's authority and the corruption of the Church. He was summoned to Rome to recant, but refused to go. In turn, the secular authorities stepped in. In 1521 Luther was tried at the Diet of Worms, the Holy Roman Empire's official meeting of princes, where the emperor Charles V ordered him to recant. Luther refused and was declared an "outlaw" by the emperor, stipulating that no subject of the Empire was to offer Luther food or water, and suffer no legal penalty should Luther be murdered. Luther was swiftly taken into the custody of a sympathetic German prince, Frederick the Wise of Saxony, who spirited Luther away and allowed him to continue his work writing anti-papal propaganda.



A (highly dramatized) portrayal of Luther at the Diet of Worms painted in the nineteenth century.

Much of Luther's, and Protestantism's, survival owes to the simple fact that both the pope and Charles V were reluctant to threaten Frederick the Wise, who was one of the electors of the empire and one of its most powerful nobles, essentially a king in his own right. Frederick both genuinely supported and agreed with Luther's views and also realized that he could benefit from rejecting the authority of the pope and, to a lesser extent, the emperor. Charles V had enormous prestige and some ability to influence his subjects, but practically speaking each prince was sovereign in his own domain. This loose overall control was disastrous for Catholic uniformity in the empire, as Luther's doctrines, soon referred to as Lutheranism, rapidly spread. To make matters worse, Charles V was too preoccupied with wars against France to spearhead a genuine effort to crush Lutheranism. In turn, the French King Francis I extended royal protection to Lutherans in France, since doing so undermined the authority of Charles.

Luther's position continued to radicalize after 1521. He claimed that the pope was, in fact, the Anti-Christ foretold in the Book of Revelations, and he came to believe that he was living in the End Times. He also personally translated the Bible into German and he happily met with his ever-growing group of followers. Initially a slur against heretics, the term "Protestant" was soon embraced by those followers, who used it as a defiant badge of honor.

Very quickly, Protestantism caught on across the empire, especially among elites, churchmen, and the educated urban classes. In the 1520s most Lutherans were reform-minded clerics, regarding Luther's movement as an effective and radical protest against all of the problems that had plagued the Church for centuries. Part of the appeal of Lutheranism to priests was that it legitimized the lifestyle many of them were already living; they could get married to their concubines and acknowledge their children if they left the Church, which drove of them did starting in the 1520s. Thanks both to the perceived purity of its doctrine and the support of rulers, nobles, and converted priests, Lutheranism started spreading in earnest among the general population starting in the 1530s.

Charles V was in an unenviable position. As Holy Roman Emperor, he felt bound to defend the Church, but he could not do so through force of arms. He spent most of his reign fighting against both France and the Ottoman Empire, which were among the greatest powers of the era. Thus, in 1526 he allowed the German princes to choose whether or not

to enforce his ban on Lutheranism as they saw fit, in hopes that they would continue to offer him their military assistance – he tried unsuccessfully to repeal this reluctant tolerance in 1529, but it was too late. Practically speaking, the German states ended up being divided roughly evenly, with a concentration of Lutheranism in the north and Catholicism in the south.

Luther was elated by the success of his message; he happily accepted the use of the term “Lutheranism” to describe the new religious movement he had started, and he felt certain that the correctness of his position was so appealing that even the Jews would abandon their traditional beliefs and convert (they did not, and Luther swiftly launched a vituperative anti-Semitic attack entitled *Against the Jews and their Lies*). Much to his chagrin, however, Luther watched as some groups who considered themselves to be Lutherans took his message in directions of which he completely disapproved.

Luther himself was a deeply conservative man. His attack on Catholic doctrine was fundamentally based on what he saw as a “return” to the original message of the Bible. Many Protestants interpreted his message as indicating that true Christians were only accountable to the Bible and could therefore reject the existing social hierarchy as well. In 1524, an enormous peasant uprising occurred across Germany, inspired by this interpretation of Lutheranism and demanding a reduction in feudal dues and duties, the end of serfdom, and greater justice from feudal lords. In 1525, Luther penned a venomous attack against the rebels entitled *Against the Thieving, Murderous Hordes of Peasants* which encouraged the lords to slaughter the peasants like dogs. The revolt was put down brutally, with over 100,000 killed, and Lutheranism was able to keep the support of the elites like Frederick the Wise who sheltered it.

Still, the uprising indicated that the movement Luther had begun was not something he could control, despite his best efforts. The very nature of breaking with a single authoritarian institution brought about a number of competing movements, some of which were directly inspired by and connected to Luther, but many of which, soon, were not.

Calvinism

The most important Protestant denomination to emerge after the establishment of Lutheranism was Calvinism. Jean Calvin, a French lawyer exiled for his sympathy with Protestantism, settled in Geneva, Switzerland in 1536. Calvin was a generation younger than Luther, and hence was born into a world in which religious unity had already been fragmented; in that sense, the fact that he had Protestant views is not as surprising as Luther’s break with the Church had been. In Geneva, Calvin began work on Christian theology and soon formed close ties with the city council. The result of his work was Calvinism, a distinct Protestant denomination that differed in many ways from Lutheranism.

Calvin accepted Luther’s insistence on the role of faith in salvation, but he went further. If God was all-powerful and all-knowing, and he chose to extend his grace to some people but not to others, Calvin reasoned, it was folly to imagine that humans could somehow influence Him. Not only was the Catholic insistence on good works wrong, the very idea of free will in the face of the divine intelligence could not be correct. Calvin noted that only some parishioners in church services seemed to be able to grasp the importance and complexities of scripture, whereas most were indifferent or ignorant. He concluded that God, who transcended both time and space, chose some people as the “elect,” those who will be saved, before they are even born. Free will is merely an illusion born of human ignorance, since the fate of a person’s soul was determined before time itself began. This doctrine is called “predestination,” and while the idea of the absence of free will and predetermined salvation may seem absurd at first sight, in fact it was simply the logical extension of the very concept of divine omnipotence according to Calvin.



Sixteenth-century portrait of Calvin. Austere black clothing became associated with Calvinists, who rejected ostentatious dress and decoration.

Practically speaking, however, Calvinism involved a kind of circular argument about salvation. Those who were among the elect acted in certain ways: they lived according to the standards of behavior defined in the Bible, they refrained from worldly pleasures, and they strove to conduct themselves within the legal and social framework of their societies. Thus, good Calvinists were supposed to devote themselves to the study of scripture, temperate living, and hard work. Counterintuitively, it was not that these behaviors would lead to salvation, it is that the already-saved acted morally according to God's will. Furthermore, one sign of being a member of the elect was financial success, because success was a side-effect of the focus and hard work that the elect naturally, again through God's will, exhibited.

After developing his theology and winning many converts, Calvin colluded with the city council of Geneva to enforce a whole set of moralistic laws that regulated almost every aspect of behavior. He was originally asked to reform the local church by the city fathers, then in 1555 he worked with a group of fellow French exiles to stage a coup d'état. He created the Consistory, a group of Calvinist ministers who scrutinized the behavior of Geneva's citizens, fining or

imprisoning people for intemperate or ungodly behavior. The idea was that, predestination or not, Geneva would be the model Christian community.

While Lutheranism spread to northern Germany and the Scandinavian countries, Calvinism caught on not just in Switzerland, but in France (where Calvinists were known as Huguenots) and Scotland, where the Scottish Calvinists became known as Presbyterians. Everywhere, Calvinists set themselves apart by their plain dress and their dour outlook on merriment, celebrations, and the pleasures of the flesh. The best known Calvinists in the American context were the Puritans, English Calvinists who left Europe (initially fleeing persecution) to try to create a perfect Christian community in the New World.

It should be emphasized that Lutherans and Calvinists quickly came to regard one another as rivals, even enemies, rather than as “fellow” Protestants. Luther and Calvin came to detest one another, finding each other’s respective theology as flawed and misleading as that of Catholicism. While some pragmatic alliances between Protestant groups would eventually emerge because of persecution or war, for the most part each Protestant denomination claimed to have exclusive access to religious truth, regarding all others as hopelessly ignorant and, in fact, damned to hell.

The English Reformation

Whereas Lutheranism and Calvinism had both come about as protests against the perceived moral and doctrinal failings of the Catholic Church, the English Reformation happened because of the selfish desires of a king. Henry VIII (r. 1509 – 1547) had received a special dispensation from the papacy to marry his brother’s widow (a practice banned in the Old Testament of the Bible), Catherine of Aragon, aunt of Charles V and hence a member of the most powerful royal line in Europe. Catherine, however, was only able to bear Henry a daughter, Mary, and failed to produce a son. Henry decided he needed a new wife and another chance at a male heir, so he started an affair with Anne Boleyn, a young noblewoman in his court. Simultaneously, Henry petitioned the pope for a divorce – a practice that was strictly forbidden. The pope refused, and in defiance in 1531 Henry, under the auspices of a compliant local Catholic leader, divorced Catherine and married Anne.

When Anne did not produce a male heir in a timely manner, Henry trumped up charges of adultery and had her beheaded. In 1534, as papal threats escalated over his impiety, Henry issued the Acts of Supremacy and Succession, effectively separating England from the Catholic Church and founding in its stead the Church of England. the Church of England was almost identical to the Catholic Church in its doctrine and rituals, it simply substituted the king at its apex and discarded allegiance to the Roman pope. It also gave Henry an excuse to seize Catholic lands and wealth, especially those of England’s rich monasteries, which funded the crown and its subsequent military and naval buildup into the reign of his daughter Elizabeth.



Easily the best-known portrait of Henry VIII in the prime of life.

Henry went on to marry an astonishing total of six wives over the course of his life, with two divorced, two executed, one dying of natural causes, and the last, Katherine Parr, surviving him. In the end, Henry had three children: a young son, Edward, and two older half-sisters, Mary and Elizabeth. They each took the throne in fairly rapid succession after his death in 1547; under Edward and Mary (both of whom died of natural causes after only a few years), the kingdom oscillated between a more extreme form of Protestantism and then an attempted Catholic resurgence. Elizabeth I went on to rule for decades (r. 1558 – 1603) as one of Europe’s most effective monarchs. Part of her success was in stabilizing the religious issue in England: she insisted that her subjects be part of the Church of England, but she did not actively persecute Catholics.

The end result of the English Reformation was that England and Scotland were divided between competing Christian factions, but ones very distinct to the British Isles in comparison to the more straightforward Catholic versus Protestant conflicts on the continent of Europe. The Church of England, whose adherents are known as Anglicans, had an official “high church” branch supported by the nobility and the monarchy itself. A growing movement within the Church of England, however, openly embraced Calvinism, and that movement became known as Puritanism (or “low church”) – still technically Anglican, but rejected by the Church hierarchy. Meanwhile, numerous Catholics continued to worship in secret. Finally, most of Scotland became devoutly Calvinist, under the Presbyterian branch of the Calvinist movement (many Scottish nobles remained Catholic until well into the seventeenth century, however).

The Effects of the Reformation

By the late sixteenth century, the lines of division within western Christianity were permanently drawn. Christianity was (and remains, although the enmity between the different groups is much less pronounced in the modern era) divided as follows:

The Catholic (Roman/Latin) Church

The Catholic Church remained dominant in almost all of southern Europe, including Italy, Spain, Austria, parts of the Balkans, and kingdoms like Poland as well. Catholic minorities existed either openly or in secret depending on the relative hostility of the local rulers throughout much of the rest of Europe.

The Eastern Orthodox Church

The Orthodox Church was the product of medieval divisions within the Church itself, pitting the western papacy against the Byzantine emperors. It was unaffected by the Protestant Reformation, since the Reformation occurred in Western Europe. Thus, the Orthodox church remained in place in Greece, parts of the Balkans, and Russia.

The Protestant Churches

“Protestant” came to mean all of the different groups that broke away from the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century. These denominations included Lutheranism, Calvinism, Anglicanism, and other (generally smaller and less historically significant at the time) denominations like Anabaptism. Protestant churches dominated in northern Europe,

including much of Germany, the Scandinavian countries, Switzerland, England and Scotland. There was also a very significant minority of Huguenots – French Calvinists – in the southern half of France.

The Catholic Reformation

Historians have traditionally referred to the major changes that took place in the Catholic Church in response to the Protestant Reformation as the “Counter-Reformation,” a movement that was essentially reactionary. In the last few decades, however, historians have come to recognize that it is probably more accurate and useful to see this period of church history as a Catholic Reformation unto itself – the culmination of the reformist trends that had been present in the Church for centuries before Martin Luther set off the Protestant break with the Roman Church.

Luther, after all, had not set out to split the Church, but to reform it – hence the very term “reformation.” His position radicalized quite quickly, however, and he did openly defy both the pope and the Church hierarchy within just a few years of the posting of the 95 Theses. That being noted, one of the reasons that Lutheranism caught on so quickly was that there were large numbers of people within the Church who had long fought for, or at least hoped for, significant changes. Thus, while the Catholic Reformation began as a reaction against Protestantism, it culminated in reforming the Church itself.

The Initial Reaction

Initially, most members of the Church hierarchy were overwhelmed and bewildered by the emergence of Protestantism. All of the past heresies had remained limited in scope as compared with the incredible rapidity with which Lutheranism spread. For practical political reasons, the pope and various rulers were either unwilling or unable to use force to crack down on Protestantism at first, as witnessed with Charles V’s failed attempts to curtail Lutheranism’s spread. Lutheranism also spread much more quickly than had earlier heresies, which tended to be limited to certain regions; here, the fact that Luther and his followers readily embraced the printing press to spread their message made a major impact, with word of the new movement spreading across Europe over the course of the 1520s.

In historical hindsight, the shocking aspect of the Catholic Church’s initial reaction to the emergence of Protestantism is that there *was* no reaction. For decades, popes remained focused on the politics of central Italy or simply continued beautifying Rome and enjoying a life of luxury; this was the era of the “Renaissance popes,” men from elite families who regarded the papal office as little more than a political position that happened to be at the head of the Church. Likewise, there was no widespread awareness among most Church officials that anything out of the ordinary was taking place with Luther; despite the radicalism of his position, most of the clergy assumed that Lutheranism was a “flash in the pan,” doomed to fade back into obscurity in the end. By the 1540s, however, church officials began to take the threat posed by Protestantism more seriously.

The initial period of Catholic Reformation, from about 1540 – 1550, was a fairly moderate one that aimed to bring Protestants back into the fold. In a sense, the very notion of a permanent break from Rome was difficult for many people, certainly many priests, to conceive of. After about 1550, however, when it became clear that the split was permanent, the Church itself became much more hardline and intolerant. The subsequent reforms were as much about imposing a new internal discipline as they were in making membership appealing to lay Catholics.

The same factors that had made the Church difficult to reform before the Protestant break made it strong as an

institution that opposed the new Protestant denominations: habit, ritual, organization, discipline, hierarchy, and wealth all worked to preserve the Church's power and influence. Likewise, many princes realized that Protestantism often led to political problems in their territories; even though many of the German princes had originally supported Luther in order to protect their own political independence, many others came to realize that the last thing they wanted were independent-minded denominations in their territories, some of which might reject their worldly authority completely (as had the German peasants who rose up in 1524).

Among Catholics at all levels of social hierarchy, Catholic rituals were comforting, and even though rejecting the excesses in Catholic ritual had been part of the appeal of Protestantism to some, to many others it was precisely those familiar rituals that made Catholicism appealing. The Catholic Reformation is often associated with the “baroque” style of art and music which encouraged an emotional connection with Catholic ritual and, potentially, with the experience of faith itself. The Church continued to fund huge building projects and lavish artwork, much of which was aimed to appeal to laypeople, not just serve as pretty decorations for high-ranking churchmen.

Likewise, there was a wave of Protestant conversions that spread very rapidly by the 1530s, but then as the Protestant denominations splintered off and turned on one another, the “purity” of the appeal of Protestantism faded. In other words, when Protestants began fighting each other with the same vigor as their attacks on Rome, they no longer seemed like a clear and simple alternative to Roman corruption.

The Inquisition and the Council of Trent

The individual who launched the “hardline” movement of Catholic Reformation was Pope Paul III (r. 1534 – 1549). Almost from the beginning of his rule, Paul was on the offensive: he commissioned a report in 1536 to evaluate the possibility and necessity of reform, which concluded that there were numerous abuses within the Church that had to be corrected (e.g. the lack of education of the clergy, the practice of earning incomes from parishes that bishops never visited, etc.), but there was no budging on doctrine. In other words, the essential beliefs and practices of the Church were judged to be entirely correct and Luther (and soon, Calvin) was judged to be entirely wrong.

In 1542 Paul III approved the creation of a permanent branch of the Church devoted to holding Protestantism in check: the Holy Office, better known as the Inquisition. The Inquisition existed to search out signs of heresy, including Protestantism, in areas under Catholic control. It had the right to subject people to interrogation and torture and in extreme cases, to execute them. The (in)famous Spanish branch of the Inquisition was under the control of the Spanish crown, but its methods and goals were essentially the same. Inquisitions had been around since the Middle Ages – the first one was in 1184 and targeted a heretical movement in southern France – but they had always been short-term responses to heresy. Under Paul III, the Inquisition became a permanent part of the Church.

The popes that followed Paul III were similar in their focus on re-emphasizing orthodoxy and creating institutions to combat heresy. Paul IV (r. 1555 – 1559) created the “Index” of forbidden books (in 1549) that would go on to form the basis of royal censorship in all Catholic countries for the next two centuries. He also enforced the stance of the Church that the Bible was not to be translated into vernacular languages but had instead to remain in Latin, an explicit rejection of the Protestant practice of translating the Bible into everyday language for Christians to read and interpret themselves. According to Catholic belief, reiterated under Paul IV, the Bible had to remain in Latin because only trained priests had the knowledge and authority to interpret it for laypeople. Laypeople, left to their own devices, would simply get the Bible's message wrong and endanger their souls in the process.

Paul III, Paul IV, and the subsequent pope, Pius IV, all oversaw an ongoing series of meetings, the Council of Trent, that took place periodically between 1545 – 1563. There, Church officials debated all of the articles and charges that had been leveled against the Church, from the sale of indulgences, to the importance of good works in salvation, to the spiritual necessity of the sacraments. While it was initially organized to try to reconcile, at least in part, with Protestantism, hardliners within the Church won out in the subsequent debates and the Council reaffirmed almost all of the controversial parts of church doctrine and disputed articles of faith; the major exception was that the cardinals and bishops banned the sale of indulgences in the future (the Church still issued them, but they were no longer simply sold for cash). The hard line on doctrine was distressing to Emperor Charles V, who had earnestly hoped that the Church would give ground on some of the doctrinal issues and thereby win back Protestants in his lands; he even tried to prevent Pope Paul IV from taking office because the latter was so intransigent.



A depiction of the Council of Trent (in the background) painted in 1588, when wars between Protestants and Catholics were raging.

While the Council of Trent would not budge on doctrine, it did propose one monumental change to the Church: henceforth, priests would be formally trained for the job. After Trent, the Church organized and funded seminaries, colleges whose express purpose was the training of new priests. There, all priests would acquire a strong scholastic education (and, soon, most seminaries also included a humanistic education as well), fluency in Latin, and a deep understanding of the Bible and the writings of major Christian thinkers. The ad hoc nature of higher education

for priests gave way to a formal and universal requirement: *all* priests would be well educated, not just those who had sought out a university themselves. While abuses of power and moral laxness were not eliminated from the Church, the one definitive change for the better in terms of the experience of lay Catholics was that their priests were now supposed to be experts in Christian theology.

The Jesuits

In addition to the edicts and councils convened by the popes, the Catholic Reformation benefited from a resurgence of Catholic religious orders. The most important new religious order, by far, was the Society of Jesus, better known as the Jesuits. The Jesuits were founded by Ignatius of Loyola (1491 – 1556), a kind of Catholic counterpart to Luther or Calvin, in 1540. A Spanish knight, Loyola was injured in battle. During his recovery, Loyola read books on the life of Christ and the saints, which inspired him to give up his possessions and take a pilgrimage across Spain and Italy. He soon attracted a following and was even briefly imprisoned on suspicion of heresy, since he claimed to offer “spiritual conversion” to those who would follow his teachings.

Loyola wrote a book, the *Spiritual Exercises*, that encouraged a mystic veneration of the Church and a single-minded devotion to its institutions. The Exercises were based on an imaginary recreation of the persecution and death of Christ that, when followed, led many new members of the Jesuits to experience an emotional and spiritual awakening. That awakening was explicitly focused on what he described as the “Church Hierarchical”: not just a worldly institution that offered guidance to Christians, but the sole path to salvation, imbued by God Himself with spiritual authority.

As a former soldier, he founded the Jesuits to be “faithful soldiers of the pope.” The purpose of the Jesuits was to fight Protestantism and heresy, forming a militant arm of scholar-soldiers available to the pope. What made the Jesuits distinct from the other religious orders was that they were responsible to the pope, not to kings. They came to live and work in kingdoms all over Europe, but they bypassed royal authority and took their orders directly from Rome – this did not endear them to many kings in the long run.

By Loyola’s death in 1556, there were about 1,000 Jesuits; that number rapidly increased by the end of the century. Many became influential advisors to kings across Europe, ensuring that Catholic monarchs would actively persecute and root out heresy (including, of course, Protestantism). They also began a missionary campaign that sought to rekindle an emotional connection to the Church through its use of passionate sermons.



Statue of Ignatius of Loyola at the Church of the Gesù in Rome, one of the original Jesuit churches. The statues are in the baroque style noted above, practically dripping with ornamentation and gilding.

Ultimately, the most important undertaking of the Jesuits was the creation of numerous schools. The Jesuits themselves were required to undergo an eleven-year period of training and education before they were full members, and they insisted on the highest quality of rigor and scholarship in their training and in the education they provided others. They raised young men, often nobles or rich members of the non-noble classes, with both an excellent humanist education and a fierce devotion to the Church. By 1600 there were 250,000 students in Jesuit schools across continental Europe. The schools were noteworthy for being free, funded by the Church and private gifts. Students had to apply for admittance, and the Jesuits working at the schools were far closer to their students than were the very aloof professors at traditional universities at the time. The products of Jesuit schools were thus young men who had received both an excellent education and a deep indoctrination in Catholic belief and opposition to Protestantism. Those young men, drawn as they were from families of social elites, often went on to positions of considerable political and commercial power.

Jesuits were also active missionaries, soon traveling all over the known world. Unlike many other orders of missionaries, the Jesuits distinguished themselves by not only learning the native languages of the people they ministered to, but of adopting their customs as well. They were the first successful missionaries in East Asia, founding Christian communities in Japan (in 1549) and China (in 1552). In the Chinese case, the Jesuits failed to make many converts, but they did bring back an enormous amount of information about China itself. The most noteworthy Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, lived in the court of the Chinese emperor, was fluent in Chinese, and served as a court astrologer. It was the Jesuits who brought back the puzzling (to Europeans) reports of a highly sophisticated, rich, ancient culture that had achieved its power without Christianity.

Effects of the Catholic Reformation

The Catholic Reformation was happening in earnest by the 1530s. the Church adopted the use of the printing press and began reaching out to both priests and educated laypeople, often in the vernacular languages rather than Latin (although, as noted above, the Bible itself was to remain untranslated). The new fervor led to a revival of religious orders focused on reaching out to the common people rather than remaining sequestered from the public in monasteries and convents. One significant new order along those lines was the Carmelites, an order of nuns reformed by St. Teresa of Avila starting in 1535. St. Teresa led a major reform that redoubled the nuns' vow of poverty and their focus on prayer and purity (the reforms also abolished separate residences and lifestyles for nuns from rich and poor families). Likewise, many orders started opening hospitals and orphanages in the cities that provided care for both the sick and the poor and indigent. The early decades of the Counter-Reformation thus saw an "opening up" of the Church to its followers and a greater emphasis on the duties of the Church to laypeople.



A famous depiction of St. Teresa at the moment she later claimed to have been overwhelmed by the divine presence. Like the statue of Ignatius of Loyola, the statue above is in the highly dramatized and emotional baroque style.

A major focus of the Church was reconnecting with common people, something that many reformers (including popes) believed was only possible if the Church “put its house in order.” While Catholic monarchs continued to almost completely control the Church in their kingdoms (this was especially true of France), popes had at least moderate success in forcing bishops to stop living like princes, to have priests remain at least nominally celibate, and for church officials to actually live in the places they were supposed to represent. The moral qualities of members of the Church, while not universally exemplary, did come to more closely resemble their purported standards over time as a result.

To better connect with laypeople, the Church began to sponsor a counter-propaganda campaign following, inspired by the success that Protestantism had enjoyed through the use of cheap print. Lives of saints, prayer books, and anti-Protestant propaganda were printed and distributed throughout Europe. The Church began to stage plays not just of Biblical scenes, but of great moments in the Church’s history. The new religious orders, including not just the

Jesuits but the Capuchins, the Ursulines, and the followers of Vincent de Paul (who lived in the late sixteenth century) sponsored major charitable works, reconnecting the poor to the Church. All of these activities amounted to a cultural reaction to the Reformation that took from Protestantism its focus on the individual's spiritual connection to God. In contrast to the austerity and even harshness of Lutheranism and (especially) Calvinism, the Catholic Church came to offer a mystical, emotional form of both worship and religious experience that was very appealing to many who may have originally been alienated from the institution.

One social phenomenon that definitely benefited from both the Protestant and Catholic Reformations was literacy. More schools and universities – both church-supported and private – continued to come into being throughout the sixteenth century. All Protestant denominations emphasized the importance of reading the Bible, and as the Catholic Church waged its counter-propaganda campaign, the Church hierarchy came to regard general literacy as desirable as well. Overall, literacy climbed to between 5 – 10% of the population by 1600 across Central and Western Europe.

Conclusion

The battle lines between Protestantism and Catholicism were firmly set by the 1560s. The Catholic Reformation established Catholic orthodoxy and launched a massive, and largely successful, campaign to re-affirm the loyalty and enthusiasm of Catholic laypeople. Meanwhile, Protestant leaders were equally hardened in their beliefs and actively inculcated devotion and loyalty in their followers. Nowhere was there the slightest notion of “religious tolerance” in the modern sense – both sides were convinced that anyone and everyone who disagreed with their spiritual outlook was damned to an eternity of suffering. The wars of propaganda and evangelism gave way to wars of muskets and pikes soon enough.

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[Henry VIII](#) – Public Domain

[Council of Trent](#) – Public Domain

[Ignatius of Loyola](#) – Roy Sebastian

[The Ecstasy of St. Theresa](#) – Napoleon Vier

CHAPTER 7: RELIGIOUS WARS

By 1560, Europe was divided by religion as it had never been before. Protestantism was now a permanent feature of the landscape of beliefs and even the most optimistic Catholics had to abandon hopes that they could win many Protestants back over to the Roman Church through propaganda and evangelism. A patchwork of peace treaties across most of Europe had established the principle of princes determining the acceptable religion within their respective territories, but those treaties in no way represented something recognizable today as “tolerance” – in fact, all sides believed they had exclusive access to spiritual truth. Simply put, the very notion of tolerance, of “live and let live,” was almost nonexistent in early-modern Europe. Exceptions did exist, especially in the Holy Roman Empire, but beliefs clearly hardened over the course of the sixteenth century: what tolerance had existed in the early decades of the Reformation era tended to fade away.

This was not just about Catholic intolerance. While the Catholic Inquisition is an iconic institution in the history of persecution, most Protestants were equally hostile to Catholics. This was especially true among Huguenots in France, who aggressively proselytized and who imposed harsh social and, if they could, legal controls of behavior in their areas of influence, which included various towns in southern France, not just Switzerland. In addition, while actual wars between Protestant sects were rare (the English Civil War of the sixteenth century being something of an exception), different Protestant groups usually detested one another.

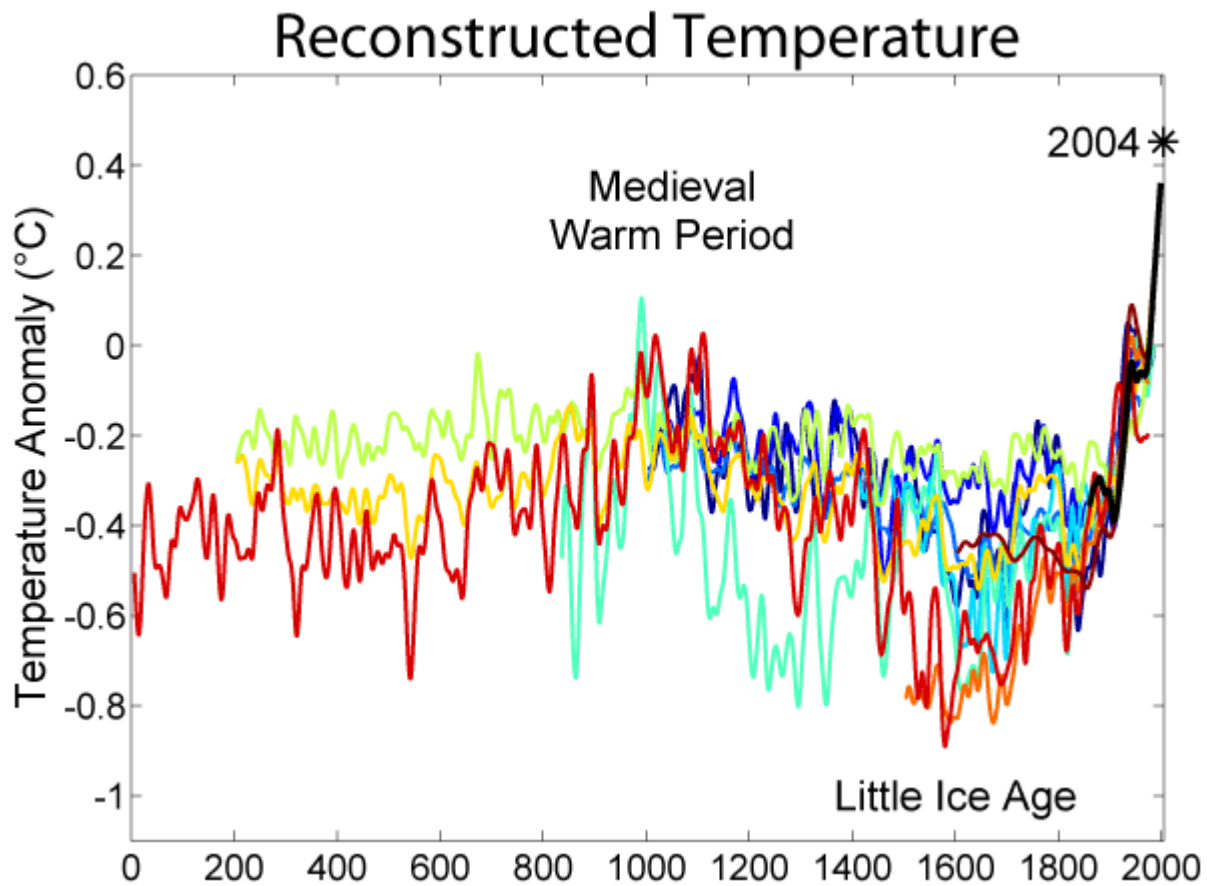
Why was religion so divisive? It was more than just incompatible belief-systems, with some of the reasons being very specific to the early modern period. First, religion was “owned” by princes. A given territory’s religion was deeply connected to the faith of its leader. Princes often held some authority in church lands, and priests had always served as important royal officials. There were also numerous ecclesiastical territories, especially in the Holy Roman Empire, that were wholly controlled by “princes of the church.” Likewise, only states had the resources to reform whole institutions, replacing seminaries, universities, libraries, and so on with new material in the case of Protestant states. This necessitated an even closer relationship between church and state. In turn, an individual’s religious confession was concomitant with loyalty or disloyalty to her prince – someone following a rival branch of Christianity was, from the perspective of a ruler, not just a religious dissenter, but a political rebel.

At the same time, over the course of the sixteenth century, specific, hardened doctrines of belief were nailed down by the competing confessions. The Lutherans published a specific creed defining Lutheran beliefs known as the Augsburg Confession in 1530, and the Catholic Council of Trent in the following decades defined exactly what Catholic doctrine consisted of. There was thus a hardening of beliefs as ambiguities and points of common agreement were eliminated.

The Little Ice Age

Religion was thus more than sufficient as a cause of conflict in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As it happens, however, there was another major cause of conflict, one that lent to the savagery of many of the religious wars of the period: the Little Ice Age. A naturally occurring fluctuation in earth’s climate saw the average temperature drop by a few degrees during the period, enhancing the frequency and severity of bad harvests. In the Northern Hemisphere, that change began in the fourteenth century but became dramatically more pronounced between

1570 and the early 1700s, with the single most severe period lasting from approximately 1600 until 1640, precisely when the most destructive religious war of all raged in Europe, the 'Thirty Years' War that devastated the Holy Roman Empire.



Overlay of different historical reconstructions of average temperatures over the last two thousand years. Temperatures continue to climb rapidly in the present era.

Lower temperatures meant that crop yields were lower, outright crop failures more common, and famines more frequent. In societies that were completely dependent on agriculture for their very survival, these conditions ensured that social and political stability was severely undermined. To cite just one example, the price of grain increased by 630% in England over the course of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, driving peasants on the edge of subsistence to even greater desperation. Indeed, historians have now demonstrated that not just Europe, but major states across the world from Ming China, to the Ottoman Empire, to European colonial regimes in the Americas all suffered civil wars, invasions, or religious conflicts at this time, and that climate was a major causal factor. Historians now refer to a “general crisis of the seventeenth century” in addressing this phenomenon.

Thus, religious conflict overlapped with economic crisis, with the latter making the former even more desperate and bloody. The results are reflected in some simple statistics: from 1500 to 1700, some part of Europe was at war 90% of the time. There were only four years of peace in the entire seventeenth century. The single most powerful dynasty, the Habsburgs, were at war two-thirds of the time during this period.

The French Wars of Religion

Against this backdrop of crisis, the first major religious wars of the period were in France. France was, next

to Spain, one of the most powerful kingdoms in Europe. It was the most populous and had large armies. It had a dynamic economy and significant towns and cities. It also had a very weak monarchy under the ruling Valois dynasty, who were kept in check by the powerful nobility. The Valois kings were often no more powerful than their most powerful noblemen, some of the latter of whom had armies as large as that of the king himself, and many Valois kings had little skill for practical politics. For example, the Valois king Henry II ignored affairs of state in favor of hunting and was killed in a tournament (during a joust, a splinter from a broken lance flew in through the eye-slit of his helmet, impaling his eye – he died two weeks later from the subsequent infection), and other members of the dynasty were little more effective.

France was divided between two major factions, led by the fanatically Catholic Guise family and the Huguenot Bourbon family. The former were advised by the Jesuits and supported by the king of Spain, while the latter represented the growing numbers of economically dynamic Huguenots concentrated in the south (they were especially numerous in Navarre, a small independent kingdom between France and Spain that was soon embroiled in the war). As of 1560 fully 10% of the people of France were Huguenots, many of whom represented its dynamic middle class: merchants, lawyers, and prosperous townsfolk. In addition, between one-third and one-half of the lower nobility were Huguenots, so the Huguenots as a group were more powerful than their numbers might initially indicate. Fearing the power of the Huguenots and detesting their faith, the Guises created the Catholic League, an armed militia of Catholics that included armed monks, townsfolk, and soldiers. In 1562 a Guise nobleman sponsored a massacre of Huguenots that sparked decades of war.

From 1562 to 1572 there was on-again, off-again fighting between the Catholic League and Huguenot forces. The French king, Charles X, was a child when the fighting started and the state was thus run by his mother, Catherine de Medici, who tended to vacillate between supporting her fellow Catholics and supporting Protestants who were the enemies of Spain, France's rival to the south. Despite their own professed Catholicism, neither Charles nor Catherine were fanatical in their religious outlook, much to the frustration of the nobles of the Catholic League.

Hoping to end the conflict, Charles and Catherine invited the Huguenot Prince Henry of Navarre, leader of the Protestant forces, to Paris in 1572 to marry Charles' sister Margaret. Henry arrived in Paris with some 2,000 Huguenot followers, all of whom had agreed to arrive unarmed. The Duke of Guise led a conspiracy, however, to convince the king that only the death of Henry and his followers would truly end the threat of religious division, and with the king's approval Catholic forces launched a massacre on St. Bartholomew's Day, August 24, in which more than 2,000 Protestants were killed. That day, the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre, would live in infamy in French history as a stark example of religiously-fueled hatred.



A gruesome depiction of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre painted by a Huguenot.

The events in Paris, in turn, sparked massacres all over the country with at least 20,000 more deaths (supposedly, the pope was so pleased with the news that he gave 100 gold coins to the messenger who brought it to him). The one important person who survived was the leader of the Huguenot cause, Henry of Navarre, who half-heartedly “converted” to Catholicism to ensure his safety but then escaped to the south and rallied the Huguenot resistance. Charles died in 1574 of an illness, leaving his younger brother Henry as the last male member of his family line available for the throne. After a lull in the fighting, the war resumed in 1576.

In the years that followed, the French Wars of Religion turned into a three-way civil war pitting the Catholic League against the legitimate king of France (both sides were Catholic, but as focused on destroying each other as they were fighting Huguenots) with the Huguenots fighting both in turn. There was almost a macabre humor to the fact that the leaders of the three factions were all named Henry – King Henry III of Valois, Prince Henry IV of Navarre, and the leader of the Catholic League, Henry, Duke of Guise. Further assassinations followed, including those of both the Duke of Guise and the King. The only heir to the throne was Henry of Navarre himself, since he had married into the royal family, so after a climactic battle in 1594 he was declared Henry IV of France. He realized that the country would never accept a Huguenot king, so he famously concluded that “Paris is worth a mass” and converted to Catholicism on the spot.

Henry IV went on to become popular among both Catholics and Protestants for his competence, wit, and pragmatism. In 1598 he issued the Edict of Nantes that officially propagated toleration to the Huguenots, allowing them to build a parallel state within France with walled towns, armies, and an official Huguenots church, but banning them from Paris and participation in the royal government. He was eventually assassinated (after eighteen previous attempts) in 1610 by a Catholic fanatic, but by his death the pragmatic necessity of tolerance was accepted even by most French

Catholics. Ultimately, the “solution” to the French Wars of Religion ended up being political unity instead of religious unity, a conclusion reached out of pure pragmatism rather than any kind of heartfelt toleration of difference.

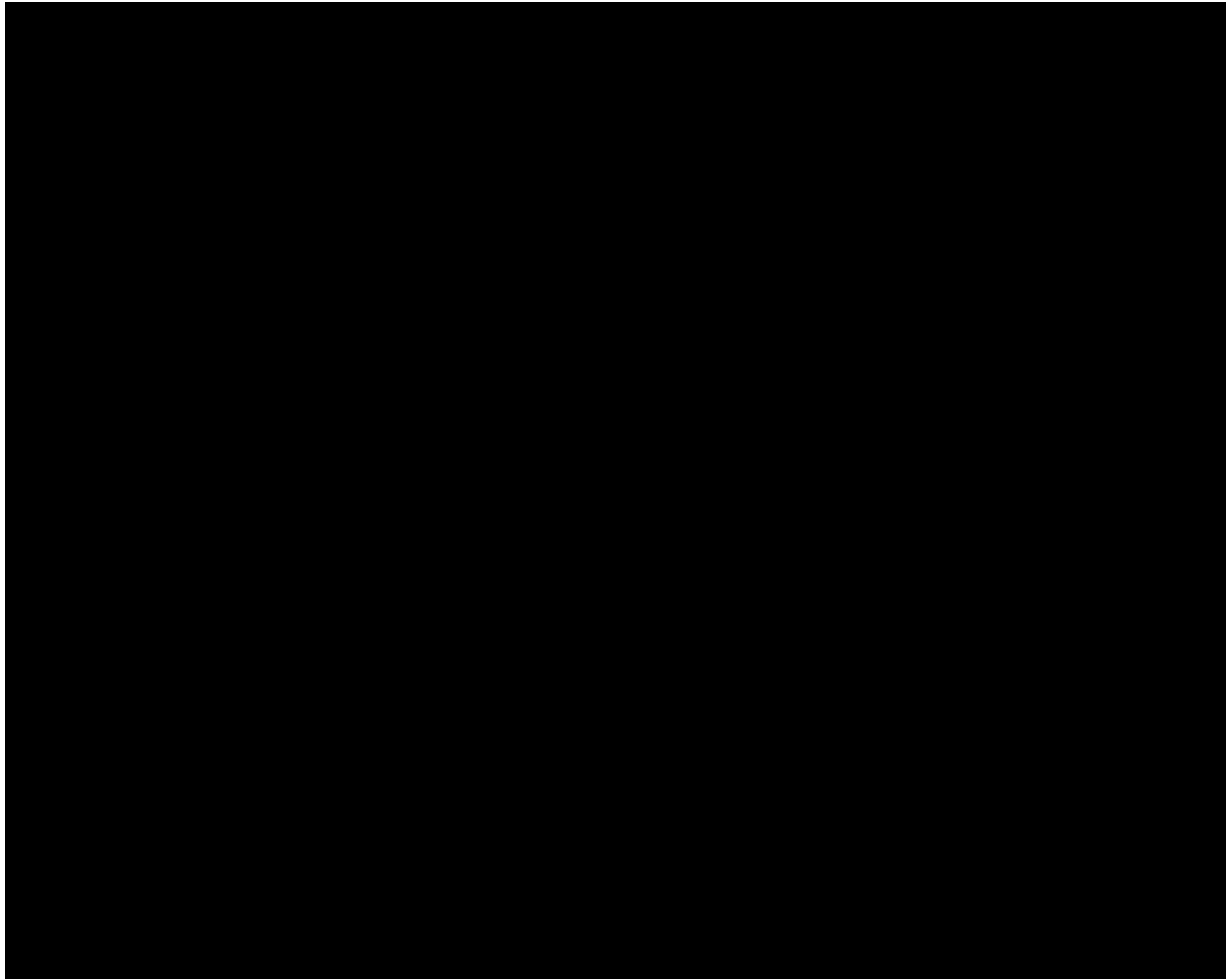
Spain and the Netherlands

Following Henry IV’s victory, the royal line of the Bourbons would rule France until the French Revolution that began in 1789. The Bourbons’ greatest rivals for most of that period were the Habsburg royal line, who possessed the Austrian Empire, were the nominal heads of the Holy Roman Empire, and by the sixteenth century had control of Spain and its enormous colonial empire as well.

The Spanish king in the mid-sixteenth century was Philip II (r. 1556 – 1598), son of the former Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. Philip regarded his place in Europe, and history, as being the most staunch defender of Catholicism possible. This translated to harsh, even tyrannical, suspicion and persecution of not only non-Catholics, but those Catholics suspected of harboring secret non-Catholic beliefs. He viciously persecuted the *Moriscos*, the converted descendants of Spanish Muslims, and forced them to turn their children over to Catholic schools for education. He also held the *Conversos*, converted descendants of Spanish Jews, as suspect of secretly continuing to practice Judaism, with the Spanish Inquisition frequently trying Conversos on suspicion of heresy.

Philip was able to exercise a great deal of control over Spanish society. He had much more trouble, however, in imposing similar control and religious unity in his foreign possessions, most importantly the Netherlands, a collection of territories in northern Europe that he had inherited from his various royal ancestors. The Netherlands was an amalgam of seventeen provinces with a diverse society and religious denominations, all held in a delicate balance. It was also rich, boasting significant overseas and European commercial interests, all led by a dynamic merchant class. In 1566, Spanish interference in Dutch affairs led to Calvinist attacks on Catholic churches, which in turn led Philip to send troops and the Inquisition to impose harsher control. The most notorious person in this effort was the Spanish Duke of Alba, who sat at the head of a military court called the Council of Troubles, but known to the Dutch as the Council of Blood. Alba executed those even suspected of being Protestants, which accomplished little more than rallying Dutch resistance.

A Dutch Prince, William the Silent (1533 – 1584), led counter-attacks against Spanish forces, and the duke was recalled to Spain in 1573. Spanish troops, however, were no longer getting paid regularly by the crown and revolted, sacking several Dutch cities that had been loyal to Spain, including Brussels, Ghent, and especially Antwerp. These attacks were described as the “Spanish fury” by the Dutch, and they not only permanently undermined the economy of the cities that were sacked, they lent enormous fuel to the Dutch Revolt itself.



The Spanish Fury.

In 1581 the northern provinces declared their independence from Spain. In 1588 they organized as a republic led by wealthy merchants and nobles. Flooded with Calvinist refugees from the south, the Dutch Republic became staunchly Protestant and a strong ally of Anglican England. Spain, in turn, maintained an ongoing and enormously costly military campaign against the Republic until 1648. The supply train for Spanish armies, known as the Spanish Road, stretched all the way from Spain across west-central Europe, crossing over both Habsburg territories and those controlled by other princes. It was hugely costly; despite the enormous ongoing shipments of bullion from the New World, the Spanish monarchy was wracked by debts, many of which were due to the Dutch conflict.

England

Even as Spain found itself mired in an ongoing and costly conflict in the Netherlands, hostility developed between Spain and England. Philip married the English queen Mary Tudor in part to try to bring England back to Catholicism after Mary's father Henry VIII had broken with the Roman Church and created the Church of England. Mary and Philip persecuted Anglicans, but Mary died after only five years (r. 1553 – 1558) without an heir. Her sister, Elizabeth, refused Philip's proposal of marriage and rallied to the Anglican cause. As hostility between England and

Spain grew, Elizabeth's government sponsored privateers – pirates working for the English crown – led by a skillful and ruthless captain named Sir Francis Drake. These privateers began a campaign of raids against Spanish possessions in the New World and even against Spanish ports, culminating in the sinking of an anchored Spanish fleet in Cadiz in 1587. Simultaneously, the English supported the Dutch Protestant rebels who were engaged in the growing war against Spain. Infuriated, Philip planned a huge invasion of England.

This conflict reached a head in 1588. Philip spent years building up an enormous fleet known as the Spanish Armada of 132 warships, equipped not only with cannons but designed to carry thousands of soldiers to invade England. It sailed in 1588, but was resoundingly defeated by a smaller English fleet in a sea battle in the English Channel. The English ships were smaller and more maneuverable, their cannons were faster and easier to reload, and English captains knew how to navigate in the fickle winds of the Channel more easily than did their Spanish counterparts, all of which spelled disaster for the Spanish fleet. The Armada was forced to limp around England, Scotland, and Ireland trying to get back to Spain, finally returning having lost half of its ships and thousands of men. The debacle conclusively ended Spain's attempt to invade England and eliminated the threat to the Anglican church.

The end result of the foreign wars that Spain waged in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was simple: bankruptcy. Despite the enormous wealth that flowed in from the Americas, Spain went from being the single greatest power in Europe as of about 1550 to a second-tier power by 1700. Never again would Spain play a dominant role in European politics, although it remained in possession of an enormous overseas empire until the early nineteenth century.

The Thirty Years' War

The most devastating religious conflict in European history happened in the middle of the Holy Roman Empire. It ultimately dragged on for decades and saw the reduction of the population in the German Lands of between 20 – 40%. That conflict, the Thirty Years' War, saw the most horrific acts of violence, the greatest loss of life, and the greatest suffering among both soldiers and civilians of any of the religious wars of the period.

Leading up to the outbreak of war, there was an uneasy truce in the Holy Roman Empire between the Catholic emperor, who had limited power outside of his own ancestral (Habsburg) lands, and the numerous Protestant princes in their respective, mostly northern, territories. As of 1618, that compromise had held since the middle of the sixteenth century and seemed relatively stable, despite the religiously-fueled wars across the borders in France and the Netherlands.

The compromise fell apart because of a specific incident, the attempted murder of two Catholic imperial officials by Protestant nobles in Prague, when the emperor Ferdinand II attempted to crack down on Protestants in Bohemia (corresponding to the present-day Czech Republic). Ferdinand sent officials to Prague to demand that Bohemia as a whole renounce Protestantism and convert to Catholicism. The Bohemian Diet, the local parliament of nobles, refused and threw the two officials out of the window of the building in which they were meeting; that event came to be known as the Defenestration of Prague (“defenestration” literally means “un-windowing”).

The Diet renounced its allegiance to the emperor and pledged to support a Protestant prince instead. A flurry of attacks and counter-attacks ensued, ultimately pitting the Catholic Habsburgs against the German Protestant princes and, soon, their allied Danish king. The Habsburgs led a Catholic League, supported by powerful Catholic princes, while Frederick of the Palatinate, a German Calvinist prince, led the Protestant League against the forces of the emperor.

From 1620 – 1629, Catholic forces won a series of major victories against the Protestants. Bohemia itself was conquered by Catholic forces and over 100,000 Protestants fled; during the course of the war Bohemia lost 50% of

its population. Catholic armies were particularly savage in the conflict, living off the land and slaughtering those who opposed them. The Danish king, Christian IV, entered the war in 1625 to bolster the Protestant cause, but his armies were crushed and Denmark was briefly occupied by the Catholic forces. This period of Catholic triumph saw the Emperor Ferdinand II issue an Edict of Restitution in 1629 that demanded the return of all Church lands seized since the Reformation – this was hugely disruptive, as those lands had been in the hands of different states for over 80 years at that point!

In 1630, the Swedish king, Gustavus Adolphus, received financial backing from the French to oppose the Habsburgs and their forces. Under the leadership of its savvy royal minister, Cardinal Richelieu, France worked to hold its Habsburg rivals in check despite the shared Catholicism of the French and Habsburg states. Adolphus invaded northern Germany in 1630, then won a major victory against the Catholic forces in 1631. He went on to lead a huge Protestant army through the Empire, reversing Catholic gains everywhere and exacting the same kind of brutal treatment against Catholics as had been inflicted on Protestants. In 1632, Adolphus died in battle and the military leader of the Catholics, a nobleman named Wallenstein, was assassinated, leaving the war in an ongoing, bloody stalemate.

In 1635 the French entered the war on the Protestant side. At this point, the war shifted in focus from a religious conflict to a dynastic struggle between the two greatest royal houses of Europe: the Bourbons of France and the Habsburgs of Austria. It also extended well beyond Germany: follow-up wars were fought between France and Spain even after the 30 Years' War itself ended in 1648, and Spain provided both troops and financial support to the Habsburg forces in Germany as well.

For the next thirteen years, from the French intervention in 1635 until the war finally ended in 1648, armies battled their way across the Empire, funded by the various elite states and families of Europe but exacting a terrible toll on the German lands and people. From 1618 – 1648, the population of the Empire dropped by 8,000,000. Whole regions were depopulated and massive tracts of farmland were rendered barren; it took until close to 1700 for the Empire to begin to recover economically. In 1648, exhausted and deeply in debt, both sides finally met to negotiate a peace. The result was the Treaty of Westphalia, which was negotiated by a series of messages sent back and forth between the two sides, since the delegations refused to be in the same town.

The end result was that the already-weak centralized power of the Holy Roman Empire was further reduced, with the constituent states now enjoying almost total autonomy. In terms of the religious map of the Empire, there was one major change, however: despite the fact that the Catholic side had not “won” the war per se, Catholicism itself did benefit from the early success of the Habsburgs. Whereas roughly half of Western and Central Europe was Protestant in 1590, only one-fifth of it was in 1690; that was in large part because few people remained Protestants in Habsburg lands after the war.

The “winners” of the war were really the relatively centralized kingdoms of France and Sweden, with Austria's status as the most powerful individual German state also confirmed. The big loser was Spain: having paid for many of the Catholic armies for thirty years, it was essentially bankrupt, and its monarchy could not reorganize in a more efficient manner as did its French rivals. Likewise, Spain missed out on the subsequent economic expansion of Western Europe; the war had undermined the economy of Central Europe, and the center of economic dynamism thus shifted to the Atlantic seaboard, especially France, England, and the Netherlands. There, a mercantile middle class became more important than ever, while Spain remained tied to its older agricultural and bullion-based economic system.

If the war had a positive effect, it was that it spelled the end of large-scale religious conflict in Europe. There would be harsh, and official, intolerance well into the nineteenth century, but even pious monarchs were now very hesitant to initiate or participate in full-scale war in the name of religious belief. Instead, there was a kind of reluctant,

pragmatic tolerance that took root across all of Europe – the same kind of tolerance that had emerged in France half a century earlier at the conclusion of the French Wars of Religion.



Soldiers robbing, murdering, and raping peasants during the War. The conduct of soldiers was so horrific that many Europe elites came to believe that better-regulated and led armies were essential to prevent chaos in the future.

Perhaps the most important change that took place in the aftermath of the wars was that European elites came to focus as much on the way wars were fought as the reasons for war. The conduct of rapacious soldiers had been so atrocious in the wars, especially in the Holy Roman Empire, that many states went about the long, difficult process of creating professional standing armies that reported to noble officers, rather than simply hiring mercenaries and letting them run amok.

Conclusion

Obviously, neither Catholics nor Protestants “won” the wars of religion that wracked Europe from roughly 1550 – 1650. Instead, millions died, intolerance remained the rule, and the major states of Europe emerged more focused than ever on centralization and military power. If there was a silver lining, it was that rulers did their best to clamp down on explosions of religiously-inspired violence in the future, in the name of maintaining order and control. Those concepts – order and control – would go on to inspire the development of a new kind of political system in which kings would claim almost total authority: absolutism.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Little Ice Age](#) – Robert A. Rohde

[St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre](#) – Public Domain

[The Spanish Fury](#) – Public Domain

[Marauding Soldiers](#) – Public Domain

CHAPTER 8: ABSOLUTISM

“Absolutism” is a concept of political authority created by historians to describe a shift in the governments of the major monarchies of Europe in the early modern period. In other words, while the monarchs of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries certainly knew they were doing something differently than had their predecessors, they did not use the term “absolutism” itself. The central idea behind absolutism was that the king or queen was, first, the holder of (theoretically) absolute political power within the kingdom, and second, that the monarch’s every action should be in the name of preserving and guaranteeing the rights and privileges of his or her subjects, occasionally even including the peasants.

Absolutism was in contrast to medieval and Renaissance-era forms of monarchy in which the king was merely first among equals, holding formal feudal authority over his elite nobles, but often being merely their equal, or even inferior, in terms of real authority and power. As demonstrated in the case of the French Wars of Religion, there were often numerous small states and territories that sometimes rivaled larger ones in power, and even nobles that were part of a given kingdom had the right to raise and maintain their own armies outside of the direct control of the monarch.

That changed starting in the early seventeenth century, primarily in France. What emerged was a stronger, centralized form of monarchy in which the monarch held much more power than even the most powerful nobleman. Royal bureaucracies were strengthened, often at the expense of the decision-making power and influence of the nobility, as non-noble officials were appointed to positions of real power in the government. Armies grew and, with them, the taxation to support them became both greater in sheer volume and more efficient in its collection techniques. In short, more real power and money flowed to the central government of the monarch than ever before, something that underwrote the expansion of military and colonial power in the same period, as well as a dazzling cultural show of that power exemplified by the French “sun king,” Louis XIV.

France

The exemplary case of absolutist government coming to fruition was that of France in the seventeenth century. The transformation of the French state from a conventional Renaissance-era monarchy to an absolute monarchy began under the reign of Louis XIII, the son of Henry IV (the victor of the French Wars of Religion). Louis XIII came to the throne as an eight-year-old when his father was assassinated in 1610. Following conventional practice when a king was too young to rule, his mother Marie de Medici held power as regent, one who rules in the name of the king, enlisting the help of a brilliant French cardinal, Armand de Richelieu. While Marie de Medici eventually stepped down as regent, Richelieu joined the king as his chief minister in 1628 and continued to play the key role in shaping the French state.



Cardinal Richelieu, in many ways the architect of absolute monarchy in France.

Richelieu deserves a great deal of the credit for laying the foundation for absolutism in France. He suppressed various revolts against royal power that were led by nobles, and he created a system of royal officials called *Intendants*, royal governors who were men who were usually not themselves noble but were instead drawn from the mercantile classes. They collected royal taxes and supervised administration and military recruitment in the regions to which they were assigned; they did not have to answer to local lords.

Richelieu's major focus was improving tax collection. To do so, he abolished three out of six regional assemblies that, traditionally, had the right to approve changes in taxation. He made himself superintendent of commerce and navigation, recognizing the growing importance of commerce in providing royal revenue. He managed to increase the revenue from the *taille*, the direct tax on land, almost threefold during his tenure (r. 1628 – 1642). That said, while he did curtail the power of the elite nobles, most of those who bore the brunt of his improved techniques of taxation were the peasants; Richelieu compared the peasants to mules, noting that they were only useful for working.

Richelieu was also a cardinal: one of the highest-ranking “princes of the church,” officially beholden only to

the pope. His real focus, however, was the French crown. It was said that he “worshiped the state” much more than he appeared to concern himself with his duties as a cardinal. He even oversaw French support of the Protestant forces in the Thirty Years’ War as a check against the power of the Habsburgs, and also supported the Ottoman Turks against the Habsburgs for the same reason. Just to underline this point: a Catholic cardinal, Richelieu, supported Protestants and Muslims against a Catholic monarchy in the name of French power.

Louis XIV – the Sun King

Louis XIII died in 1643, and his son became king Louis XIV. The latter was still too young to take the throne, so his mother became regent, ruling along Richelieu’s protégé, Jules Mazarin, who continued Richelieu’s policies and focus on taxation and royal centralization. Almost immediately, however, simmering resentment against the growing power of the king exploded in a series of uprisings against the crown known as The Fronde, essentially a noble-led civil war against the monarchy (the rebels even formed a formal alliance with Spain). They were defeated by loyal forces in 1653, but the uprisings made a profound impression on the young king, who vowed to bring the nobles into line.

When Mazarin died in 1661, Louis ascended to full power (he was 23). Louis went on to a long and dazzling rule, achieving the height of royal power and prestige not just in France, but in all of Europe. He ruled from 1643 – 1715 (including the years in which he ruled under the guidance of a regent) meaning he was king for an astonishing 54 years; consider the fact that the average life expectancy for those surviving infancy was only about 40 years at the time(!). Louis was called the Sun King, a term and an image he actively cultivated, declaring himself “without equal,” and being depicted as the sun god Apollo (he once performed as Apollo in a ballet before his nobles, to rapturous applause – he was an excellent dancer). He was, among other things, a master marketer and propagandist of himself and his own authority. He had teams of artists, playwrights, and architects build statues, paint pictures, write plays and stories, and build buildings all glorifying his image.

Famously, Louis developed what had begun as a hunting lodge (first built by his father) in the village of Versailles, about 15 miles southeast of Paris, into the most glorious palace in Europe, built in the baroque style and lavishly decorated with ostentatious finery. Over the decades of his long rule, the palace and grounds of the Palace of Versailles grew into the largest and most spectacular seat of royal power in Europe, on par with any palace in the world at the time. There were 1,400 fountains in the gardens, 1,200 orange trees, and an ongoing series of operas, plays, balls, and parties. 10,000 people could live in the palace, counting its additional buildings, since Louis ultimately had 2,000 rooms built both in the palace and in apartments in the village, all furnished at the state’s expense. The grounds cover about 2,000 acres, or just over 3 square miles (by comparison, Central Park in New York City is a mere 843 acres in size).



A contemporary photograph of the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, a spectacular example of baroque architecture and interior design.

Louis expected high-ranking nobles to spend part of the year at Versailles, where they were lodged in apartments and spent their days bickering, gossiping, gambling, and taking part in elaborate rituals surrounding the person of the king. Each morning, high-ranking nobles greeted the king as he awoke (the “rising” of the king, in parallel to the rising of the sun), hand-picked favorites carried out such tasks as tying the ribbons on his shoes, and then the procession accompanied him to breakfast. Comparable rituals continued throughout the day, ensuring that only those nobles in the king’s favor ever had the opportunity to speak to him directly. The rituals were carefully staged not only to represent deference to Louis, but to emphasize the hierarchy of ranks among the nobles themselves, undermining their unity and forcing them to squabble over his favor. One of the simplest ways in which Versailles undermined their power was that it cost so much to maintain oneself there – about 50% of the revenue of all but the very richest nobles present in the town or the château was spent on lodging, clothes, gifts, and servants.

Around the king’s person, courtiers had to be very careful to wear the right clothes, make the right gestures, use the correct phrases, and even display the correct facial expressions. Deviation could, and generally did, lead to humiliation and a sometimes permanent loss of the king’s favor, to the delighted mockery of the other nobles. This was not just an elaborate game: anyone wishing to “get” anything from the royal government (e.g. having a son appointed as an officer in the army, joining an elite royal academy of scholars, securing a lucrative royal pension, serving as a diplomat abroad, etc.). had to convince the king and his officials that he was witty, poised, fashionable, and respected within the court. One false move and a career could be ruined. At the same time, the rituals surrounding the king were not invented to humiliate and impoverish his nobles per se; instead, they celebrated each noble’s power in terms of his or her proximity to the king.

Nobles at Versailles were reminded of two things at once: their dependence and deference to the king, but also their own dignity and power as those who had the *right* to be near the king.

Not just nobles participated in the dizzying web of favor-trading, gossip, and bribery at Versailles, however. Perhaps surprisingly, any well-dressed person was welcome to walk through the palace and the grounds and confer with those present (Louis XIV prided himself on the “openness” of his court, contrasting it with the closed-off court of a tyrant). Both men and women from very humble origins sometimes rose to prominence, and made a healthy living, at Versailles by serving as go-betweens for elites seeking royal positions in the bureaucracy. Others took advantage of the state’s desperate need for revenue by proposing new tax schemes; those that were accepted usually came with a payment for the person who submitted the scheme, so it was possible to make a living by “brainstorming” for tax revenue on behalf of the monarchy. Despite the vast social gap between the nobility and commoners, many nobles were perfectly happy to form working relationships with useful social inferiors, and in some cases real friendships emerged in the process.

Some aspects of life at Versailles seem comical today: the palace is so huge that the food was usually cold before it made it from the kitchens to the dining room; on one occasion Louis’ wine froze en route. Some of the nobles who lived in the palace or its grounds would use the hallways to relieve themselves instead of the privies because the latter were so inadequate and far from their rooms. The palace had been designed for display, not comfort.

The costs of building and maintaining such an enormous temple to monarchical power were enormous. During the height of its construction, 60% of the royal revenue went to funding the elaborate court at Versailles itself (this later dropped to 5% under Louis XVI, but the old figure was well-remembered and resented), an enormous ongoing expenditure that nevertheless shored up royal prestige. Louis himself delighted in life at court, refusing to return to Paris (which he hated) and dismissing the financial costs as beneath his dignity to take notice of. At Versailles, life orbited around his person and, by extension, his power, which was never seriously challenged during his lifetime.

Louis did not just preside over the ongoing pageant at Versailles, however. He was dedicated to glorifying French achievements in art, scholarship, and his personal obsession: warfare. He created important theater companies, founded France’s first scientific academy, and supported the *Académie Française*, the body dedicated to preserving the purity of the French language founded earlier by Richelieu (during Louis XIV’s reign, the Academy published the first official French dictionary). French literature, art, and science all prospered under his sponsorship, and French became the language of international diplomacy among European states.



The above martial portrait of Louis XIV depicts him, symbolically, in his role as supreme military commander. He is dressed in full (ceremonial) armor, holding a sword, and presiding over a battle in the background.

To keep up with costs, Louis continued to entrust revenue collection to non-noble bureaucrats. The most important was Jean Baptiste Colbert (1619 – 1683), who doubled royal revenues by reducing the cut taken by tax collectors (only a quarter of revenue used to reach royal coffers; he got it up to 80% in some cases), increasing tariffs on foreign trade going to France, and greatly increasing France's overseas commercial interests. Colbert was the model of a powerful commoner despised by the nobility: not only was he part of the system that held noble power in check, he was a mere shopkeeper's son.

While Louis' primary legacy was the image of monarchy that he created, his practical policies were largely destructive to France itself. First, he relentlessly persecuted religious minorities, going after various small groups of religious dissenters but concentrating most of his attention and ire on the Huguenots. In 1685 he officially revoked the Edict of Nantes that his grandfather had created to grant the Huguenots toleration, and he offered them the choice of conversion to Catholicism or exile. While many did convert, over 200,000 fled to parts of Germany, the Netherlands,

England, and America. In one fell swoop, Louis crippled what had been among the most commercially productive sectors of the French population, ultimately strengthening his various enemies in the process.

Second, he waged constant war. From 1680 – 1715 Louis launched a series of wars, primarily against his Habsburg rivals, which succeeded in seizing small chunks of territory on France's borders from various Habsburg lands and in saddling the monarchy with enormous debts. Colbert, the architect of the vastly more efficient systems of taxation, repeatedly warned Louis that these wars were financially untenable; Louis simply ignored the question of whether he had enough money to wage them. The threat of France was so great that even traditional enemies like England and the Netherlands on one hand and the Habsburgs on the other joined forces against Louis, and after a lengthy war, the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 forced Louis to abandon further territorial ambitions. Furthermore, the costs of the wars were so high that his government desperately sought new sources of revenue, selling noble titles and bureaucratic offices, instituting still new taxes, and further trampling the peasants. When he died in 1715, the state was technically bankrupt.

Elsewhere in Europe

Almost everywhere in Europe, other monarchies tried to imitate both the style and the substance of Louis XIV's court and style of rule. They built palaces based on Versailles even as the early-modern military revolution, not to mention Louis' constant wars, obliged them to seek out new forms of taxation and reliance on royal officials to build up their armies and fortifications. In most cases, from Sweden to Austria, monarchs worked out compromises with their nobles that saw both sides benefit, generally at the expense of the peasantry.

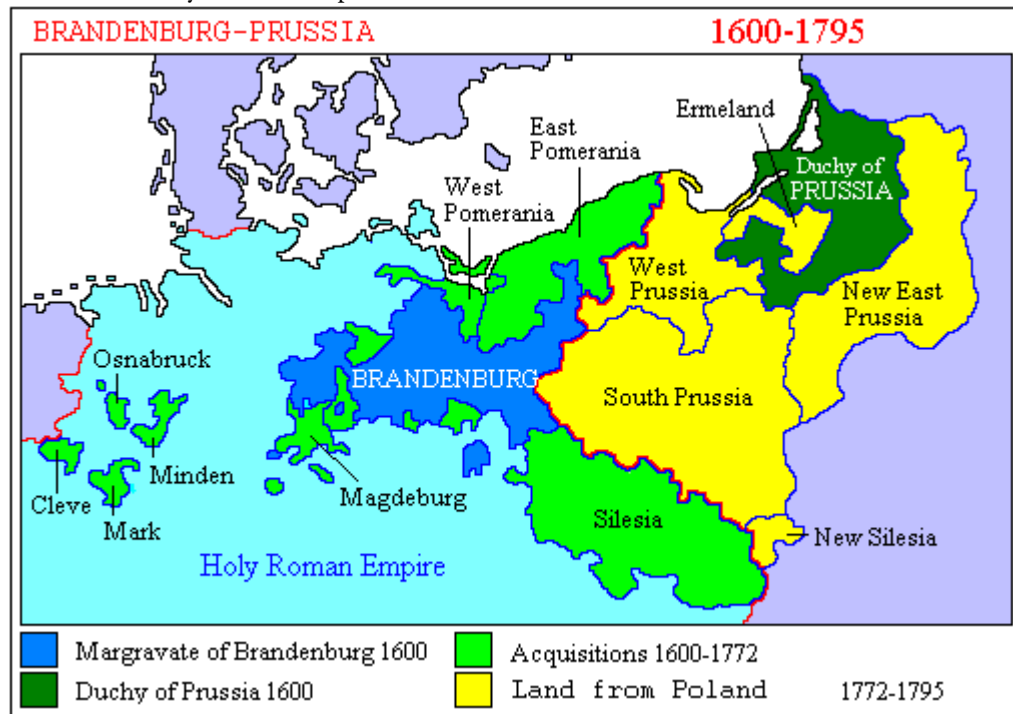
Prussia

Arguably the most successful absolutist state in Europe besides France was the small northern German kingdom of Brandenburg, the forerunner of the later German state of Prussia. In 1618, the king of Brandenburg inherited the kingdom of East Prussia, and in the following years smaller territories in the west on the Rhine River. From this geographically unconnected series of territories was the country now known as Germany to evolve.

In 1653, the Prussian king Friedrich Wilhelm struck the "Great Compromise" with his nobles. He received a military subsidy in the form of taxes, along with the right to make law independent of noble oversight. In return, the nobility received confirmation that only nobles could own land and, further, that they had total control over the peasants on their land. In essence, the already-existing status of serfdom on Prussian lands was made permanent. Serfs could not inherit property or even leave the land they worked without the permission of their lord. One Prussian recalled being taught, presumably in a church-run primary school, that "the king could cut off the noses and ears of all his subjects if he wished to do so, and that we owed it to his goodness and his gentle disposition that he had left us in possession of these necessary organs."

In turn, Friedrich Wilhelm supervised the creation of the first truly efficient state apparatus in Europe, with his tax collection agency (which grew out of the war office) operating at literally twice the efficiency of the French equivalent. The major state office was called General Directory Over Finance, War, and Royal Domains; it was perhaps one of the original sources of the stereotypes of ruthless German efficiency. His son, Frederick I (r. 1688 – 1713) further

consolidated the power of the monarchy, built up the royal capital of Berlin, and received the right to claim the title of “King of Prussia” from the Holy Roman Emperor.



Prussia began as the union of Brandenburg and the Duchy of Prussia, eventually growing to become one of the most powerful German states.

His grandson, confusingly also named Friedrich Wilhelm (“Friedrich Wilhelm I” as opposed to just “Friedrich Wilhelm,” r. 1713 – 1740) built on the work of his grandfather and father primarily by concentrating all state power on the military. He more than doubled the size of the Prussian army (from 30,000 to 83,000, making it the fourth largest in Europe), lived modestly in a few rooms in the palace, wore his officer’s uniform everywhere, and occasionally punched out the teeth of judges whose sentences he disagreed with. It was said during his rule that “what distinguishes the Prussians from other people is that theirs is not a country with an army. They have an army and a country that serves it.” Most importantly, Frederick Wilhelm created formal systems of conscription (i.e. “the draft”), meaning more men in Prussia, per capita, served in the military than did men anywhere else in Europe. He also established the first system of military reserves, with reservists drilling for two months a year during the summers. In short, Prussia became the most militarized society in Europe.

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Prussia was embroiled in a series of wars that confirmed its status as a European “great power.” Its version of absolutism, one centered on the authority of the king, the rights of the nobles, and an overwhelming focus on the military, proved effective in transforming it from backwater to the only serious rival to Austria for dominance in Central Europe. Notably, Prussia joined Austria and Russia in dividing up the entire kingdom of Poland in 1772, extinguishing Polish independence until the twentieth century.

Austria

Prussia’s great rival in the eighteenth century was Austria. Austria, as the ancestral state of the Habsburgs, had always been the single most powerful German state within the Holy Roman Empire. The Habsburgs, however, found

that the diversity of their domains greatly hampered their ability to develop along absolutist lines. In some cases, they were able to reduce the power and independence of some of their nobles by supporting even more onerous control of peasants: for example, in Bohemia, peasants were made to work three days a week for their nobles, for free, and in return the Bohemian nobles allowed the emperor more control of the territory itself. In other territories like Hungary, however, nobles successfully resisted the encroachment of their Habsburg rulers.

The long-term pattern was that, especially after the Treaty of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years' War in 1648 rendered the political structure of the Holy Roman Empire virtually meaningless, "Habsburg" meant "Austrian." The Habsburgs ruled Austria itself and exercised real control over the constituent kingdoms of their empire like Hungary and Bohemia, but had virtually no authority over the other Holy Roman states. With the Spanish branch of the family dying off in 1700 (the last Spanish Habsburg, Charles II, died without an heir in 1700), this identification was even stronger.

Despite being unable to impose absolutism across the vast breadth of their territories, the Habsburg line produced highly effective rulers in the eighteenth century in particular. The empress Maria Theresa (r. 1740 – 1780), the only surviving heir to the Habsburg throne when her father died, proved a skillful administrator who rationalized the offices of the Austrian state, shored up the loyalty of her non-Austrian subjects, and even won the grudging admiration of the Prussians. Her rule represented a nearly impossible balance in the gender expectations of the time. She was on the one hand a devoted wife (to a king "consort" – her husband held no power over the empire) and mother to some sixteen children (not all of whom survived infancy, however). On the other hand, she successfully projected an image of royal power that included her direction of Austrian forces during war and of practical administration during peacetime. Her son Joseph II was obliged to rule alongside his mother until her death in 1780, inheriting the empire at the height of its power and prosperity.

Spain

Practically every kingdom in Europe saw at least an attempt by a king or queen to reorganize the state along the absolutist lines followed by France. From Sweden, to England, to Spain, monarchs tried to consolidate royal power at the expense of their nobles and on the backs of their peasants. Those efforts were at least partly successful in places like Sweden and Denmark, but were disastrous failures in places like Spain and England.

Spain had been the most powerful kingdom in Europe in the sixteenth century. Thanks to its takeover of Central and South America, it had enormous reserves of bullion in the sixteenth century, and thanks to shrewd marriages by the Habsburgs, Spain was part of the largest dynastic system in Europe. However, both the failed invasion of England in 1588 and the ongoing debacle of the Dutch Revolt resulted in enormous losses of both wealth and prestige by the Spanish. By the 1620s and against the backdrop of the Thirty Years' War, the monarchy was bankrupt and Spain itself was divided between numerous small but mostly independent kingdoms and territories. Spain became almost like a smaller version of the Holy Roman Empire, with the Spanish king only directly ruling the central territory of Castile (it was the Castilian dialect, centered on Madrid, that became the official Spanish language).

Spanish nobles came to hold their own kings in contempt and asserted their own sovereignty against the pretensions of the monarchy. Attempts by royal officials to enact reforms similar to those undertaken by Richelieu in France met with failure; even as Spain was losing the Dutch Revolt, it was trying to bankroll the Catholic forces of the Thirty Years' War, thereby undermining its own financial reserves and stretching its military power to the breaking point. The regional parliaments of various Spanish territories revolted against the central monarchy in the mid-seventeenth century, with Portugal achieving complete independence in 1640.

Simultaneously, there was little economic dynamism in Spain. There was a small middle class, and Spain's

conservative nobility succeeded in preventing non-nobles from achieving positions of authority within the Spanish royal bureaucracy. The earlier assaults on Jews and Muslims had already driven out the most dynamic economic elements from Spain, and the attack on the Moriscos and Conversos (descendants of the Muslims and Jews who had converted to Catholicism) drove many of them away as well. Spain's vast empire continued to produce great wealth, but relatively little of that wealth ended up in the coffers of the monarchy, and the sheer scale of the slave-based extraction of precious metals from the New World ran up against simple economics laws: by the seventeenth century this bullion-based system was in dire straits thanks to the inflation silver imports introduced to the European economy.

There was a strong mood of depression and nostalgia among elite Spaniards of the time, most memorably expressed in one of the great works of Spanish literature, Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (published in two parts, 1605 and 1615), portraying a delusional minor nobleman trying to live out a glorious tale of fighting giants and dragons while actually attacking windmills. Especially as its royal line grew moribund in the second half of the seventeenth century, and following the inconclusive end of the Thirty Years' War Spain had largely financed, the power of the Spanish state grew ever weaker.

THE ENGLISH CIVIL WAR AND THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION

England was perhaps the most outstanding example of a state in which the absolutist form of monarchy resolutely failed during the seventeenth century, and yet the state itself emerged all the stronger. Ironically, the two most powerful states in Europe during the following century were absolutist France and its political opposite, the first major *constitutional* monarchy in Europe: the United Kingdom of Great Britain.

Some of the characteristics that historians often associate with modernity are representative governments, capitalist economies, and (relative, in the case of early-modern states) religious toleration. All of those things first converged in England at the end of the seventeenth and start of the eighteenth centuries. Likewise, England would eventually evolve from an important but secondary state in terms of its power and influence to *the* most powerful nation in the world in the nineteenth century. For those reasons it is worthwhile to devote considerable attention to the case of English politics during that period.

The irony of the fact that England was the first state to move toward “modern” patterns and political dominance is that, at the start of the seventeenth century, England was a relative backwater. Its population was only a quarter of that of France and its monarchy was comparatively weak; precisely as France was reorganizing along absolutist lines, England’s monarchy was beset by powerful landowners with traditional privileges they were totally unwilling to relinquish. The English monarchy ran a kingdom with various ethnicities and divided religious loyalties, many of whom were hostile to the monarchy itself. It was an unlikely candidate for what would one day be the most powerful “Great Power” in Europe.

The English King Henry VIII had broken the official English church – renamed the Church of England – away from the Roman Catholic Church in the 1530s. In the process, he had seized an enormous amount of wealth from English Catholic institutions, mostly monasteries, and used it to fund his own military buildup. Subsequently, his daughter Elizabeth I was able to build up an effective navy (based at least initially on converted merchant vessels) that fought off the Spanish Armada in 1588. While Elizabeth’s long reign (r. 1558 – 1603) coincided with a golden age of English culture, most notably with the works of Shakespeare, the money plundered from Catholic coffers had run out by the end of it.

Despite Elizabeth’s relative toleration of religious difference, Great Britain remained profoundly divided. The Church of England was the nominal church of the entire realm, and only Anglicans could hold public office as judges or members of the British parliament, a law-making body dominated by the gentry class of landowners. In turn, the church was itself divided between an “high church” faction that was in favor of all of the trappings of Catholic ritual versus a “Puritan” faction that wanted an austere, moralistic approach to Christianity more similar to Calvinism than to Catholicism. The Puritans were, in fact, Calvinist in their beliefs (concerning the Elect, predestination, and so on), but were still considered to be full members of the church. Meanwhile, Scotland was largely Presbyterian (Scottish Calvinist), and Ireland – which had been colonized by the English starting in the sixteenth century – was overwhelmingly Catholic. Within English society there were numerous Catholics as well, most of whom remained fairly clandestine in their worship out of fear of persecution.

Thus, the monarchy presided over a divided society. It was also relatively poor, with the English crown

overseeing a small bureaucracy and no official standing army. The only way to raise revenue from the rest of the country was to raise royal taxes, which were resisted by the very proud and defensive gentry class (the landowners) as well as the titled nobility. The traditional right of parliament was to approve or reject taxes, but an open question as of the early seventeenth century was whether it had the right to set laws as well. The bottom line is that English kings or queens could not force lawmakers to grant them taxes without having to beg, plead, cajole, and bargain. In turn, the stability of government depended on cooperation between the Crown and the House of Commons, the larger of the two legal bodies in the parliament, which was populated by members of the gentry.

The Stuarts and the English Civil War

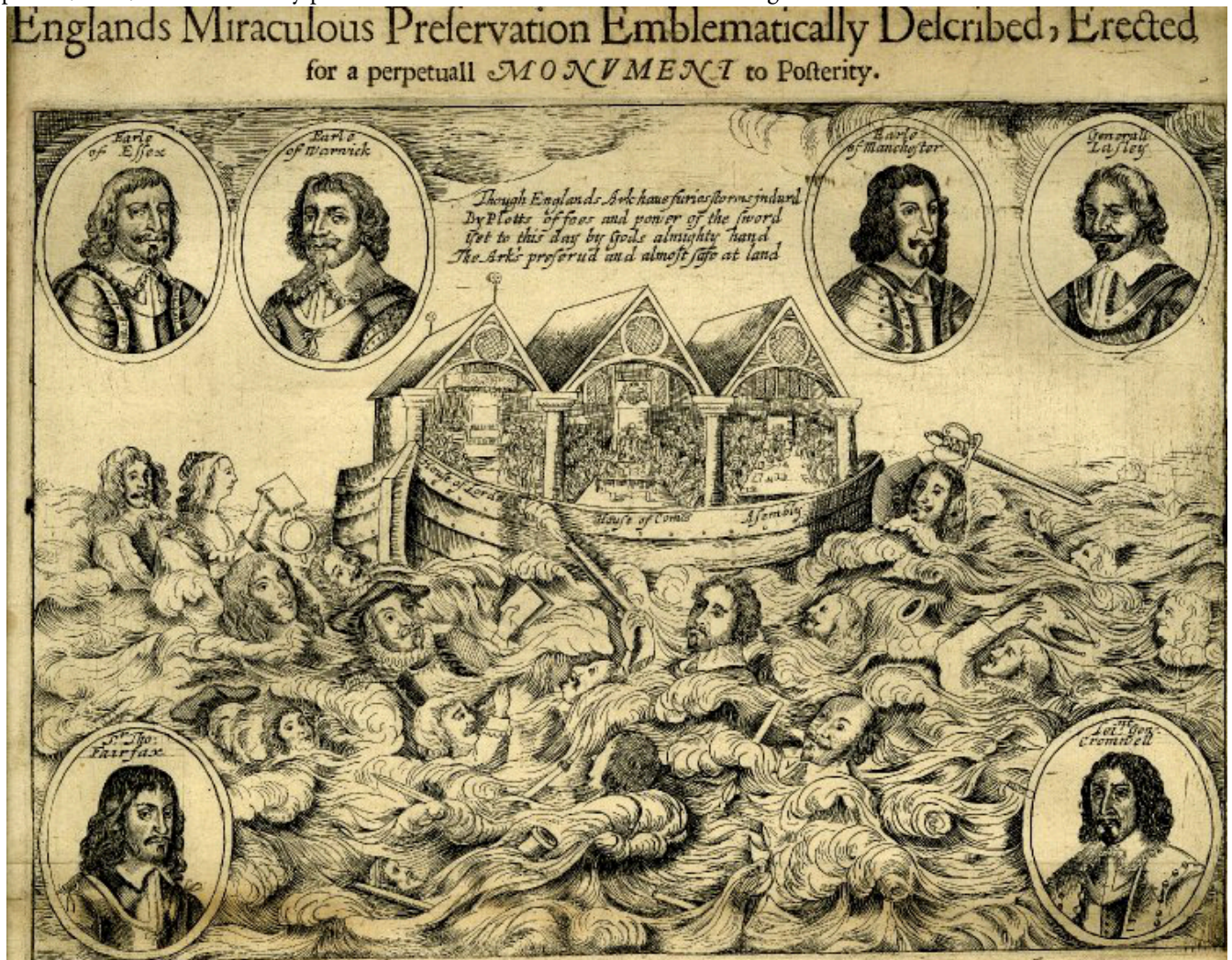
While her reign was plagued by these issues, Elizabeth I was a savvy monarch who was very skilled at reconciling opposing factions and winning over members of parliament to her perspective. She also benefited from what was left of the money her father had looted from the English monasteries. This delicate balance started to fall apart with Elizabeth's death in 1603. She died without an heir (she had never married, rightly recognizing that marriage would undermine her own authority), so her successor was from the Scottish royal house of the Stuarts, fellow royals related to the Tudors. The new king was James I (r. 1603 – 1625), the first of the new royal line to rule England. James was already the king of Scotland when he inherited the English crown, so England and Scotland were politically united and the kingdom of “Great Britain” was born (it was later ratified as a permanent legal reality in 1707 with the “Act of Union” passed by parliament).

James, inspired by developments on the continent, tried to insist on the “royal prerogative,” the right of the king to rule through force of will. He set himself up as an absolute monarch and behaved with noticeable contempt towards members of parliament. Still, England was at peace and James avoided making demands that sparked serious resistance. While members of parliament grumbled about his heavy-handed manner of rule, there were no signs of actual rebellion.

His son, Charles I (r. 1625 – 1649), was a much greater threat from the perspective of parliament. He strongly supported the “high church” faction of the Anglican church just as Puritanism among the common people was growing, and he began to openly encroach on parliamentary authority. While styling himself after Louis XIII of France (to whom he was related), he came to be feared and hated by many of his own people. Charles imposed taxes and tariffs that were not approved by parliament, which was technically illegal, and then he forced rich subjects to grant the crown loans at very low interest rates. In 1629, after parliament protested, he dismissed it and tried to rule without summoning it again. He was able to do so until 1636, when he tried to impose a new high church religious liturgy (set of rituals) in Scotland. That prompted the Scots to openly break with the king and raise an army; to get the money to fund an English response, Charles had to summon parliament.

The result was civil war. Not only were the Scots well trained and organized, when parliament met it swiftly turned on Charles, declaring his various laws and acts illegal and dismissing his ministers, an act remembered as “The Grand Remonstrance.” Parliament also refused to leave, staying in session for years (it was called “the long parliament” as a result). Meanwhile, a huge Catholic uprising took place in Ireland and thousands of Protestants there were massacred. Many in parliament thought that Charles was in league with the Irish. War finally broke out in 1642, pitting the anti-royal “round-heads” (named after their bowl cuts) and their Scottish allies against the royalist “cavaliers.” In 1645, a Puritan commander named Oliver Cromwell united various parliamentary forces in the “New Model Army,” a well-disciplined fighting force whose soldiers were regularly paid and which actually paid for its supplies rather than plundering them.

and living off the land (as did the king's forces). Thanks to the effectiveness of Cromwell, the New Model Army, and the financial backing of the city of London, the round-heads gained the upper hand in the war. In the end, Charles was captured, tried, and executed by parliament in 1649 as a traitor to his own kingdom.



An engraving celebrating the victory of the parliamentary forces as “England’s Miraculous Preservation,” with the royalist forces drowning in the allegorical flood while the houses of parliament and the Church of England float on the ark.

During the English civil war, England went from one of the least militarized societies in Europe to one of the most militarized; one in eight English men were directly involved in fighting, and few regions in England were spared horribly bloody fighting. Simultaneously, debates arose among the round-heads concerning what kind of government they were fighting for; some, called the Levelers, argued in favor of a people’s government, a true democratic republic. The most radical were called the Diggers, who try to set up what amounts to a proto-communist society in which goods and land were held in common. Those more radical elements were ultimately defeated by the army, but the language they use in discussing justice and good government survived to inspire later debates, ultimately informing the concept of modern democracy itself.

Thanks in large part to the ongoing political debates of the period, the Civil War resulted in an explosion of print in England. Various factions attempted to impose and maintain censorship, but they were largely unsuccessful due to the political fragmentation of the period. Instead, there was an enormous growth of political debate in the form of printed

pamphlets; there were over 2,000 political pamphlets published in 1642 alone. Ordinary people had begun in earnest to participate in political dialog, another pattern associated with modern politics.

After the execution of the king in 1649, England became a (technically republican) dictatorship under Cromwell, who assumed the title of Lord Protector in 1649. He ruled England for ten years, carrying out an incredibly bloody invasion of Ireland that is still remembered with bitterness today, and ruling through his control of the army. Following his death in 1658, parliament decided to reinstate the monarchy and the official power of the Church of England (which took until 1660 to happen), essentially because there was a lack of consensus about what could be done otherwise. None of the initial problems that brought about the civil wars in the first place were resolved, and Cromwell himself had ended up being as authoritarian and autocratic as Charles had been.

The Glorious Revolution

Thus, in 1660, Charles II (r. 1660 – 1685), the son of the executed Charles I, took the throne. He was a cousin of Louis XIV of France and, like his father, tried to adopt the trappings of absolutism even though he recognized that he could never achieve a Louis-XIV-like rule (nor did he try to dismiss parliament). Various conspiracy theories surrounded him, especially ones that claimed he was a secret Catholic; as it turns out, he *had* drawn up a secret agreement with Louis XIV to re-Catholicize England if he could, and he proclaimed his Catholicism on his deathbed. A crisis occurred late in his reign when a parliamentary faction called the Whigs tried to exclude his younger brother, James II, from being eligible for the throne because he was openly Catholic. They were ultimately beaten (legally) by a rival faction, the Tories, that supported the notion of the divine right of kings and of hereditary succession.

When James II (r. 1685 – 1688) took the throne, however, even his former supporters the Tories were alarmed when he started appointing Catholics to positions of power, against the laws in place that required all lawmakers and officials to be Anglicans. In 1688, James's wife had a son, which thus threatened that a Catholic monarchy might remain for the foreseeable future. A conspiracy of English lawmakers thus invited William of Orange, a Dutch military leader and lawmaker in the Dutch Republic, to lead a force against James. William was married to Mary, the Protestant daughter of James II, and thus parliament hoped that any threat of a Catholic monarchy would be permanently defeated by his intervention. William arrived and the English army defected to him, forcing James to flee with his family to France. This series of events became known as the Glorious Revolution – “glorious” because it was bloodless and resulted in a political settlement that finally ended the better part of a century of conflict.

William and his English wife Mary were appointed as co-rulers by parliament and they agreed to abide by a new Bill of Rights. The result was Europe's first constitutional monarchy: a government led by a king or queen, but one in which lawmaking was controlled by a parliament and all citizens were held accountable to the same set of laws. Even as absolutism became the predominant mode of politics on the continent, Britain set forth on a different, and opposing, political trajectory.

Great Britain After the Glorious Revolution

One unexpected benefit to constitutional monarchy was that British elites, through parliament, no longer opposed the royal government but instead *became* the government. After the Glorious Revolution, lawmakers in England felt secure enough from royal attempts to seize power unlawfully that they were willing to increase the size and

power of government and to levy new taxes. Thus, the English state grew very quickly, whereas it had been its small size and the intransigence of earlier generations of members of parliament in raising taxes that had been behind the conflicts between king and parliament for most of the seventeenth century.

The English state *could* grow because parliament was willing to make it grow after 1688. It *did* grow because of war. William of Orange had already been at war with Louis XIV before he came to England, and once he was king Britain went to war with France in 1690 over colonial conflicts and because of Louis's constant attempts to seize territory in the continent. The result was over twenty years of constant warfare, from 1690 – 1714.

To raise money for those wars, private bankers founded the Bank of England in 1694. While it was not created by the British government itself, the Bank of England soon became the official banking institution of the state. This was a momentous event because it allowed the government to manage state debt effectively. The Bank issued bonds that paid a reasonable amount of interest, and the British government stood behind those bonds. Thus, individual investors were guaranteed to make money and the state could finance its wars through carefully regulated sales of bonds. In contrast, Louis XIV financially devastated the French government with his wars, despite the efforts of his Intendants and other royal officials to squeeze every drop of tax revenue they could out of the huge and prosperous kingdom. Britain, meanwhile, remained financially solvent even as their wars against France grew larger every year. Ultimately, this would see the transformation of Britain from secondary political power to France's single most important rival in the eighteenth century.

The Overall Effects of Absolutism

While Britain was thus the outstanding exception to the general pattern of absolutism, the growth in its state was comparable to the growth among its absolutist rivals. As an aggregate, the states of Europe were transformed by absolutist trends. Some of those can be captured in statistics: royal governments grew roughly 400% in size (i.e. in terms of the number of officials they employed and the tax revenues they collected) over the course of the seventeenth century, and standing armies went from around 20,000 men during the sixteenth century to well over 150,000 by the late seventeenth century.

Armies were not just larger – they were better-disciplined, trained, and “standardized.” For the first time, soldiers were issued standard uniforms. Warfare, while still bloody, was nowhere near as savage and chaotic as it had been during the wars of religion, thanks in large part to the fact that it was now waged by professional soldiers answering to noble officers, rather than mercenaries simply unleashed against an enemy and told to live off of the land (i.e. the peasants) while they did so. Officers on opposing sides often considered themselves to be part of a kind of extended family; a captured officer could expect to be treated as a respected peer by his “enemies” until his own side paid his ransom.

What united such disparate examples of absolutism as France and Prussia was a shared concept of royal authority. The theory of absolutism was that the king was above the nobles and not answerable to anyone in his kingdom, but he owed his subjects a kind of benevolent protection and oversight. “Arbitrary” power was not the point: the power exercised by the monarch was supposed to be for the good of the kingdom – this was known as *raison d'état*, right or reason of the state. Practically speaking, this meant that the whole range of traditional rights, especially those of the nobles and the cities, had to be respected. Louis XIV famously claimed that “*L'état, c'est moi*” – I am the state. His point was that there was no distinction between his own identity and the government of France itself, and his actions were by

definition for the good of France (which was not always true from an objective standpoint, as was starkly demonstrated in his wars).

Those who lost out in absolutism were the peasants: especially in Central and Eastern Europe, what freedoms peasants had enjoyed before about 1650 increasingly vanished as the newly absolutist monarchs struck deals with their nobility that ratified the latter's right to completely control the peasantry. Serfdom, already in place in much of the east, was hardened in the seventeenth century, and the free labor, fees, and taxes owed by peasants to their lords grew harsher (e.g., the Austrian labor obligation was known as the *robot*, and it could consist of up to 100 days of labor a year). The general pattern in the east was that nobles answered to increasingly powerful kings or emperors, but they were themselves "absolute" rulers of their own estates over their serfs.

The irony of the growth of both royal power and royal tax revenue was that it still could not keep up with the cost of war. Military expenditures were enormous; in a state like France the military took up 50% of state revenues during peacetime, and 80% or more during war (which was frequent). Thus, monarchs granted monopolies on products and then taxed them, and they frequently sold noble titles and state offices to the highest bidder (the queen of Sweden doubled the number of noble families in ten years). They relentlessly taxed the peasantry as well: royal taxes doubled in France between 1630 – 1650, and the concomitant peasant uprisings were ruthlessly suppressed.

One aspect of the hardening of social hierarchies, necessitated in part by the great legal benefits enjoyed by members of the nobility in the absolutist system, was that the rights and privileges of nobility were codified into clear laws for the first time. Most absolutist states created "tables of ranks" that specified exactly where nobles stood vis-à-vis one another as well as the monarch and "princes of the blood." Louis XIV of France had a branch of the royal government devoted entirely to verifying claims of nobility and stripping noble titles from those without adequate proof.

Conclusion

The process by which states went from decentralized and fairly loosely organized to "absolutist" was a long one. Numerous aspects of government even in the late eighteenth century remained strikingly "medieval" in some ways, such as the fact that laws were different from town to town and region to region based on the accumulation of various royal grants and traditional rights over the centuries. That being noted, there is no question that things *had* changed significantly over the course of the seventeenth century: governments were bigger, better organized, and more explicitly hierarchical in organization.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

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CHAPTER 9: TRADE EMPIRES

European society underwent a major change during the early modern period with regards to its outlook on wealth and property. Along with that change came the growth of a new kind of state and society, one not only defined by the growth of bureaucracy seen in absolutism, but in the power of the moneyed classes whose wealth was not predicated on owning land. The rise of that class to prominence in certain societies, especially those of the Netherlands and England, accompanied the birth of the most distinctly modern form of economics: capitalism.

In the Middle Ages, wealth, land, and power were intimately connected. Nobles were defined by their ownership of land and by their participation in armed conflict. That changed by the early modern period, especially as it became increasingly common for monarchs to sell noble titles to generate money for the state. By the seventeenth century the European nobility were split between “nobles of the sword” who inherited their titles from their warlike ancestors and “nobles of the robe” who had either been appointed by kings or purchased titles. Both categories of nobility were far more likely to be owners of land exploiting their peasants than warriors. Among almost all of them, there was considerable contempt for merchants, who were often seen as parasites who undermined good Christian morality and the proper order of society. Even nobles of the robe who had only joined the nobility within the last generation tended to cultivate a practiced loathing for mere merchants, their social inferiors.

In addition, the economic theory of the medieval period posited that there was a finite, limited amount of wealth in the world, and that the only thing that could be done to become wealthier was to get and hold on to more of it. In both the medieval and Renaissance-era mindset, the only forms of wealth were land and bullion (precious metals), and since there is only so much land and so much gold and silver out there, if one society grew richer, by definition every other society grew poorer.

According to this mindset, kingdoms could only increase their wealth by seizing more territory, especially territory that would somehow increase the flow of precious metals into royal coffers. Trade was only important insofar as trade surpluses with other states could be maintained, thereby ensuring that more bullion was flowing into the economy than was flowing out. Colonies abroad provided raw materials and, hopefully, bullion itself. As a whole, this concept was called mercantilism: an economic system consisting of a royal government controlling colonies abroad and overseeing land-holdings at home. The ultimate example of this system was the biggest owner of colonies that produced bullion: Spain.

Mercantilism worked well enough, but commerce fit awkwardly into its paradigm. Trade was not thought to generate new wealth, since it did not directly dig up more silver or gold, nor did it seize wealth from other countries. Trade did not “make” anything according to the mercantilist outlook. Of all classes of society, bankers in particular were despised by traditional elites since they not only did not produce anything themselves, instead (seemingly) profiting off of the wealth of others.

These attitudes started undergoing significant changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, mostly as a result of the incredible success of overseas corporations, groups that generated enormous wealth outside of the auspices of mercantilist theory. Many of the beneficiaries of the new wealth of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were not noblemen, but were instead wealthy merchant townsfolk, especially in places like the Dutch Republic and, later, England, men who amassed huge fortunes but did not fit neatly into the existing power structure of landholding nobles,

the church, and the common people. These changes inspired an increasingly spirited battle over the rights of property, the idea that not just land but wealth itself was something that the state should protect and encourage to grow.

Early Capitalism

The growth of commercial wealth was closely tied to the growth of overseas empires. Whereas the initial wave of European colonization (mostly in the Americas) had been driven by a search for gold and a desire to convert foreigners to Christianity, European powers came to pursue colonies and trade routes in the name of commodities and the wealth they generated by the seventeenth century. In this period of empire-building, European states sought additional territory and power overseas primarily for economic reasons. Because of the enormous wealth to be generated not from gold and silver themselves, but from commodities like sugar, tobacco, and coffee (as well as luxury commodities like spices that had always been important), the states of Europe were willing to war constantly among themselves as well as to perpetrate one of the greatest crimes in history: the Atlantic Slave Trade.

In short, we see in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the first phase of a system that would later be called capitalism: an economic system in which the exchange of commodities for profit generated wealth to be reinvested in the name of still greater profits. In turn, capitalism is dependent on governments that enforce legal systems that protect property and, historically, by wars that tried to carve out bigger chunks of the global market from rivals. To reiterate, capitalism was (and remains) a combination of two major economic and political phenomena: enterprises run explicitly for profit and a legal framework to protect and encourage the generation of profit. The pursuit of profit was nothing new, historically, but the political power enjoyed by merchants, the political focus on overseas expansion for profit, and the laws enacted to encourage these processes *were* new.

Overseas Expansion

The development of early capitalism was intimately connected with overseas expansion – Europe was an important node of a truly global economy by the seventeenth century, and it was that economy that fueled the development of capitalistic, commercial societies in places like the Netherlands and England. While the original impulse behind overseas expansion during this period was primarily commercial, focused on the search for commodities and profit, it was also a major political focus of all of the European powers by the eighteenth century. In other words, European elites actively sought not just to trade with, but to conquer and control, overseas territories both for profit and for their own political “glory” and aggrandizement. The result was a dramatic expansion of European influence or direct control in areas of the globe in which Europe had never before been an influence. The result: by 1800, roughly 35% of the globe was directly or indirectly controlled by European powers. How did that happen?

The first part of the answer is simple: military technology and organization. The early-modern military revolution (i.e. the evolution of gunpowder warfare during and after the Renaissance period) resulted in highly-trained soldiers with the most advanced military technology in the world by the late seventeenth centuries. As European powers expanded, they built fortresses in the modern style and defended them with cannons, muskets, and warships that often outmatched the military forces and technology they encountered. In the case of China, Japan, and the Philippines, for instance, local rulers learned that the easiest way to deal with European piracy was not to try to fight European ships, but instead to cut off trade with European merchants until restitution had been paid.

European states also benefited from the relative political fragmentation of parts of the non-European world. There were powerful kingdoms and empires in Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that defied European attempts at hegemony, but much of the world was controlled by smaller states. A prime example is India, which was divided up into dozens of (relatively) small kingdoms. The Mughal Empire that ruled much of the subcontinent early in the period of British expansion was in rapid decline by the early eighteenth century, well before the British controlled much territory, and it was replaced by many small states instead of another large, powerful one when it finally collapsed in 1739. When the British and French began taking control of Indian territory, it was against the resistance of small Indian kingdoms, not some kind of overall Indian state.

An important note regarding European colonial power: this period saw the consolidation of European holdings in the New World and the beginning of empires in places like India, but it did not include major land-holdings in Africa, the Middle East, or East Asia. In places with powerful states like China, the Ottoman Empire, and Japan, even the relative superiority of European arms was not sufficient to seize territory. Likewise, not only were African states able to successfully fight off Europeans as well, but African diseases made it impossible for large numbers of Europeans to colonize or occupy much African territory. As the Slave Trade burgeoned, Europeans did launch slave raids, but most slaves were instead captured by African slavers who enjoyed enormous profits from the exchange.

Likewise, European states and the corporations they supported worked diligently to establish monopolies on trade with various parts of the world. However, “monopolies” in this case only meant monopolies in trade going to and from Europe. There were enormous, established, and powerful networks of trade between Africa, India, South Asia, Southeast Asia, China, Japan, and the Pacific, all of which were dominated by non-European merchants. To cite one example, the Indian Ocean had served as an oceanic crossroads of trade between Africa and Asia for thousands of years. Europeans broke into those markets primarily by securing control of goods that made their way back to Europe rather than seizing control of intra-Asian or African trade routes, although they did try to dominate those routes when they could, and Europeans were able to seize at least some territories directly in the process.

The Netherlands

The Dutch were at the forefront of these changes. During their rebellion against Spain in the late sixteenth century, the Dutch began to look to revenue generated from trade as an economic lifeline. They served both as the middlemen in European commerce, shipping and selling things like timber from Russia, textiles from England, and wine from Germany, and they also increasingly served as Europe’s bankers. The Dutch invented both formalized currency exchange and the stock market, both of which led to huge fortunes for Dutch merchants. A simple way to characterize the growth of Dutch commercial power was that the Netherlands replaced northern Italy as the heart of European trade itself after the Renaissance.

In 1602, Dutch merchants with the support of the state created the world’s first corporation: the Dutch East India Company (VOC in its Dutch acronym). It was created to serve as the republic’s official trading company, a company with a legal monopoly to trade with a certain region: India and Southeast Asia. The VOC proved phenomenally successful in pushing out other European merchants in the Indies, through a combination of brute force and the careful deployment of legal strategies. A common approach was to offer “protection” from the supposedly more rapacious European powers like Portugal in return for trade monopolies from spice-producing regions. In many cases, the VOC simply used the promise of protection as a smokescreen for seizing complete control of a given area (especially

in Indonesia, which eventually became a Dutch colony), while in other areas local rulers remained in political control but lost power over their own spice production and trade. For the better part of the seventeenth century, the Dutch controlled an enormous amount of the hugely profitable trade in luxury goods and spices from the East Indies as a result.



An early stock certificate from the VOC.

The profits for Dutch merchants and investors were concomitantly high. As an example, above and beyond direct profits by individual members of the company, all stockholders in the VOC received dividends of 30% on their investments within the first ten years, in addition to a dramatic boost in value of the stocks themselves. The other states of Europe were both aghast at Dutch success and grudgingly admiring of it. In 1601, there were 100 more Dutch ships in the port of London at any given time than there were English ships, and by 1620 about half of all European merchant vessels were Dutch.

In 1652, the Dutch seized control of the Cape of Good Hope at the southern tip of Africa, allowing them to control shipping going around Africa en route to Asia, and they exerted additional military force in the Indies to force native merchants to trade only with them (among Europeans). Note here that the Dutch takeover of the Cape of Good Hope was the historical origin of the modern nation of South Africa – these were the first permanent European settlers. The Dutch were also the only European power allowed to keep a small trading colony in Japan, which was otherwise completely cut off to westerners after 1641 (thanks to a failed Portuguese-sponsored Christian uprising against the Japanese shogun).

The iconic moment in the history of the Dutch golden age of early capitalism was the tulip craze of the 1620s – 1630s. Tulips grow well in the Netherlands and had long been cultivated for European elites. A tulip fad among Dutch elites in the 1620s drove up the price of tulip bulbs dramatically. Soon, enterprising merchants started buying and selling bulbs with no intention of planting them or even selling them to someone who would – they simply traded the bulbs as a valuable commodity unto themselves.

In 1625, one bulb was sold for 5,000 guilders, about half the cost of a mansion in Amsterdam. It went up from there – the real height of the craze was the winter of 1636 – 1637, when individual bulbs sometimes changed hands ten times in a day for increasing profits. This was the equivalent of “flipping” bulbs; it had nothing to do with the actual tulips any longer. The element to emphasize is not just the seemingly irrational nature of the boom, but of the mindset: the Dutch moneyed classes were already embracing speculative market economies, in which the value of a given commodity has almost nothing to do with what it *does*, but instead from what people are willing to spend on it. In capitalist economies this phenomenon often leads to “bubbles” of rising values that then eventually collapse. In this

case, the tulip craze did indeed come crashing down in the winter of 1637 – 1638, but in the meantime it presaged the emergence of commodity speculation for centuries to come.

The development of this early form of capitalism unquestionably originated in the Netherlands, but it spread from there. One by one, the other major states of Europe started to adopt Dutch methods of managing finances: sophisticated accounting, carefully organized tax policy, and an emphasis on hands-on knowledge of finances up to the highest levels of royal government. For example, Louis XIV insisted that his son study political economy and Colbert, Louis' head of finance, wrote detailed instructions on how a king should oversee state finances. This was a significant change, since until the mid-seventeenth century at the earliest, to be a king was to refuse to dirty one's hands with commerce. It was because of the incredible success of the Dutch that kings and nobles throughout Europe began to change their outlooks and values. Ultimately, at least among some kings and nobles in Western Europe, humanistic education and the traditional martial values of the nobility were combined with practical knowledge, or at least appreciation, of mercantile techniques.

Ultimately, the Dutch Golden Age was the seventeenth century. The other states of Europe began to focus their own efforts on trade, and when the Netherlands was dragged into the wars initiated by Louis XIV toward the end of the seventeenth century, it spelled the beginning of the end for their dominance (although not their prosperity – the Netherlands has remained a resolutely prosperous country ever since). During that period, however, the Dutch had created a global trade network, proved that commercial dominance would play a crucial factor in political power in the future, and overseen a cultural blossoming of art and architecture.



One of the many self-portraits of the Dutch master Rembrandt, the most prominent painter associated with the golden age of Dutch culture in the seventeenth century.

Britain and the Slave Trade

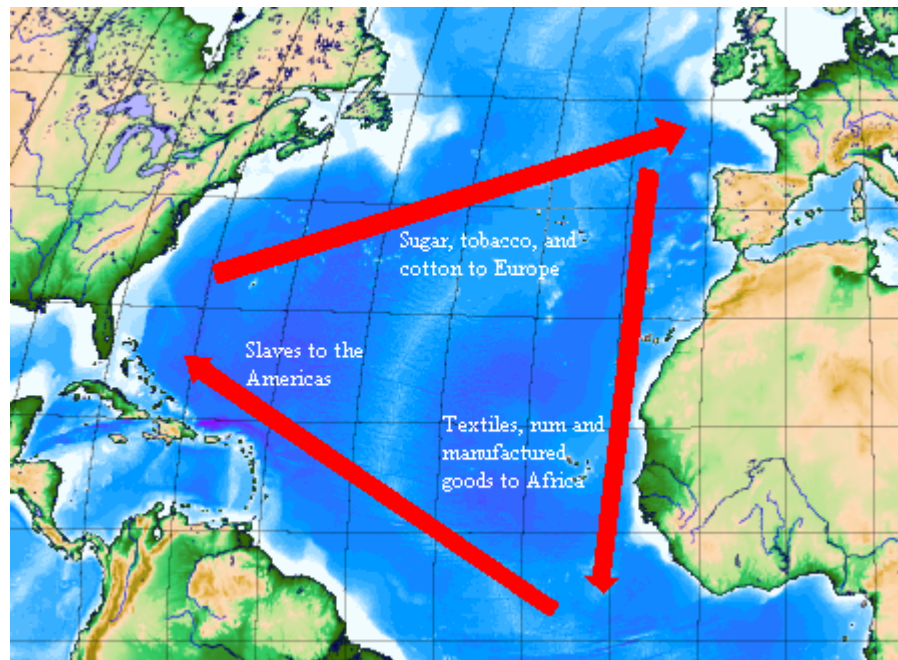
Of the other European states, the British were the most successful at imitating the Dutch. In 1667 the British king Charles II officially designated the royal treasury as the coordinating body of British state finances and made sure that officials trained in the Dutch style of political economy ran it. The British parliament grew increasingly savvy with financial issues as well, with numerous debates emerging about the best and most profitable use of state funds.

In 1651, both to try to seize trade from the Dutch and to fend off Britain's traditional enemies, France and Spain, parliament passed the English Navigation Acts, which reserved commerce with English colonies to English ships. This, in turn, led to extensive piracy and conflict between the powers of Europe in their colonial territories as they tried to seize profitable lands and enforce their respective monopolies. Ultimately, the British fought three wars with the Dutch, defeating them each time and, among other things, seizing the Dutch port of New Amsterdam in North America (which the English promptly renamed New York). Britain also fought Spain in both the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, ultimately acquiring Jamaica and Florida as colonies.

In terms of trade, the major prize, at least initially, was the Caribbean, due to its suitability for growing sugar. Sugar quickly became *the* colonial product, hugely valuable in Europe and relatively easy to cultivate (compared to exotic products like spices, which were only available from Asian sources). In Europe, sugar consumption doubled every 25 years during this period and it was ultimately the profits of sugar that helped bankroll the British growth in power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The only efficient way to grow sugar was through proto-industrialized plantations with rendering facilities built to extract the raw sugar from sugar cane. That, in turn, required an enormous amount of back-breaking, dangerous labor. Most Native American slaves quickly died off or escaped and hence the Atlantic Slave Trade between Africa and the New World began in earnest by the early seventeenth century.

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade between Africa and the New World was, quite simply, one of the worst injustices of human history. Millions of people were ripped from their homeland, transported to a foreign continent in atrocious conditions, and either worked to death or murdered by their owners in the name of “discipline.” The contemporary North American perception of the life of slaves, that of incredibly difficult but not always lethal conditions of work, is largely inaccurate because only a small minority of slaves were ever sent to North America. The immense majority of slaves were instead sent to the Caribbean or Brazil, both areas in which working conditions were far worse than the (still abysmal) working conditions present in North America. The average life of a slave once introduced to sugar cultivation was seven years before he or she died from exhaustion or injury, and sugar was the major crop of the Caribbean and one of the major crops of Brazil. Put simply, most slaves were sent to be worked to death on sugar plantations.

The slave trade was part of what historians have described as the “triangle trade” between Africa, the Americas, and Europe. Slaves from Africa were shipped to the New World to work on plantations. Raw goods (e.g. sugar, tobacco, cotton, coffee, etc.) were processed and shipped to Europe. Finished and manufactured goods were then shipped to Africa to exchange for slaves. This cycle of exchange grew decade-by-decade over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.



The “triangle trade” led to tremendous profits in Europe, horrendous human suffering, and the eventual depopulation of much of West Africa over the centuries.

The leg of the triangle trade that connected Africa and the Americas was known as the Middle Passage because slave ships went directly across the middle of the Atlantic, most traveling to Brazil or the Caribbean as noted above. Slaves

on board ships were packed in so tightly they could not move for most of the voyage, with slave ship captains calculating into their profit margins the fact that a significant percentage of their human cargo would die en route – over a million slaves died during the Middle Passage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a result.

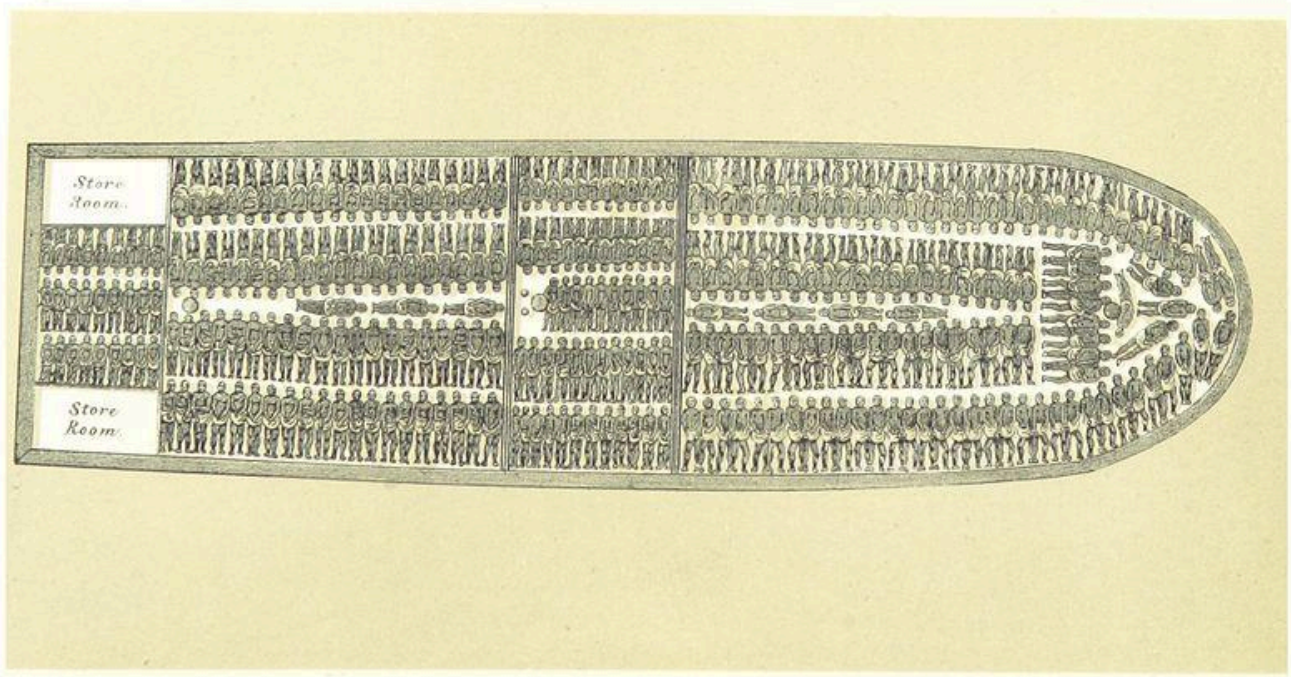


Illustration of a slave ship's human cargo under conditions that often saw more than 10% of the slaves on board perish.

The current data (available on the [Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database](#), which was created and is maintained by professional historians of the Slave Trade) suggests that well over twelve million people were enslaved and transported to the new world from the sixteenth century through the early nineteenth. That number is lower than the actual total, since roughly 20% of transported slaves were in undocumented (i.e. smuggled and technically “illegal” from the standpoint of the slave-trading states) voyages. Thus, the real number is probably closer to fifteen million. Over 90% of slaves were sent to the Caribbean or Brazil because the sugar crop, as well as coffee cultivation and mining in Brazil, demanded constant replacements as slaves perished from exhaustion or injury.

The topic of slavery is vast; it was a huge economic engine and a major part of life in the entire New World. It shaped the demography and the culture of every American society, and its sheer scale dwarfs every other pattern of slavery in world history. That said, of its various aspects, the one that probably casts the longest shadow in terms of its historical significance is the fact that the Atlantic Slave Trade was the first time in history that slavery was specifically racial in character. Because it was Africans who were enslaved to work in the Americas under the control of Europeans, Europeans developed a range of racist theories to excuse the practice from its obvious immorality. In fact, the whole idea of human “race” is largely derived from the Slave Trade – biologically, “race” is nothing more than a handful of unimportant cosmetic differences between people, but thanks to the history of the enslavement of Africans, Europeans in the early modern period led the charge in describing “race” as some kind of fundamental human category, with some races supposedly enjoying “natural” superiority. That conceit would obviously cast a perverse shadow up the present.

Around the Globe

Even as the British were actively participating in the Slave Trade in the Atlantic region, they began the process of seizing control of territory in India as well. There, they set up self-contained merchant colonies (called factories) run by the English East India Company (EIC), which had a legal monopoly of trade just as its Dutch counterpart did in the Netherlands. The original impetus behind the EIC was profitable trade, not political power per se.

Britain, however, eventually came to control India outright. As of the mid-eighteenth century, however, British power in India was limited to its factories, which served as clearinghouses for trade with Indian merchants. In 1756, however, an Indian prince sent an army to Calcutta to drive out the British, whom he hated and resented, resulting in the massacre of hundreds of English noncombatants and thousands of their Indian colleagues and allies. The next year, a small British force of 800 men with 2,000 Indian mercenary troops (called *sepoys*) defeated the prince at the Battle of Plassey, then began the process of taking over the entire province of Bengal.

The takeover of Bengal started the slow creep of British power: tax revenue supplemented mercantile revenue, which allowed the British to hire tens of thousands of sepoys, who they armed with modern European weapons. That, in turn, both allowed the British to drive out the French from Indian territories and to dominate Indian princes, thereby seizing yet more Indian territory. In this patchwork fashion, the EIC expanded its power in India over the next century, directly controlling some territories, indirectly controlling others through Indian puppet princes, and economically dominating others. The result was that the EIC, a private corporation backed by the British state, controlled almost all of the Indian subcontinent by the middle of the nineteenth century.

On the other side of the world, while far less economically important than the Caribbean, North America was still a focus of European colonization. Britain was one of the two major powers – France the other – that colonized areas of the eastern seaboard of North America. While initial attempts at colonization either failed or struggled to survive (e.g. almost all of the original settlers at Jamestown in Virginia were dead by the time more arrived in 1610), the survivors discovered that they could at least grow one cash crop that would both enrich themselves and tempt other Europeans to immigrate: tobacco. Likewise, a relatively small part of the slave trade soon included the importation of slaves to work first the tobacco fields, and then later cotton fields, farther south. Simultaneously, a French explorer named Samuel de Champlain founded the colony of Quebec on the St. Lawrence river. That soon became the center of New France, and its cash “crop” consisted of furs gained through barter with Native American groups or taken by French trappers.

Until the latter half of the seventeenth century, these were small-scale colonies compared to the vast states of Central and South America. Slowly but surely, however, colonists did arrive in North America, and not always for economic reasons. Britain came to boast the largest population of colonists among Europeans in North America in the seventeenth century because English religious dissenters, Puritans, fled persecution from the Anglican state and began to settle in Massachusetts by the thousands in the 1620s (this was during the period under James I and Charles I before the English Civil War). That said, the North American colonies all remained small and economically unimportant compared to the colonies of Latin America and the Caribbean until well into the eighteenth century.

Spain, of course, still held the largest overseas empire. The Spanish not only held almost all of South America, all of Central America, and the American West as far north as Oregon, but they held territory in the Pacific island chain of the Philippines as well. South American silver passed through both Spain and the Philippines en route to China, where it paid for luxury goods that were shipped back to Spain. The Spanish crown, especially under a branch of the Bourbon

royal family that became the royal dynasty of Spain in 1700, exercised direct control over colonial trade and taxation (rather than relying on a corporation as did the Dutch and English).



Spanish territories in the Americas in the eighteenth century, at the height of their territorial expanse.

What set the Spanish empire apart from the other overseas empires was the fact that its colonial system suffered from infighting between Spanish-born royal bureaucrats and the creole elites who dominated the Spanish New World itself. Many of these creole elites lived more like traditional nobles in Europe, dominating land-based economies, rather than overseers of a more commercially-based agriculture like the plantations of the Caribbean or Brazil. To be clear, South and Central America were important regions within the global trade network, but the Spanish state itself did not enjoy the same level of direct control over, or power derived from, its colonial possessions as did its European rivals over theirs. Instead, the vast Spanish empire was relatively fragmented, with regional elites exercising a high degree of local autonomy. Thus, even the vast wealth still generated within the Spanish empire did not translate into an equivalent degree of state or military power for the Spanish monarchy.

Meanwhile, the overseas empire of Portugal steadily shrank as its colonies and factories were seized or handed

over to the Dutch and British in the seventeenth century. While Portugal had enjoyed a (relatively brief) period of ascendancy that began with the remarkable voyage of Vasco Da Gama in the fifteenth century, it was not able to compete with the better-funded and equipped forces of the Netherlands and Britain, and thus most Portuguese colonies and trading posts were lost over time to its rivals. The major exception was Brazil, which was hugely profitable, and which imported staggering quantities of slaves (Brazil was also the last European state to outlaw slavery, in 1888).

Finally, while Russia's emergence as an independent state is considered in a later chapter, it should be noted here that Russian explorers moved eastward across Siberia from the period of the fifteenth through the eighteenth centuries in search of furs. Furs were so critical to the Russian economy at the time that they were often used in lieu of currency outside of the major cities. In turn, Russian fur trappers and traders arrived at the Pacific in the late seventeenth century. From there, they sailed across to Alaska and then down the west coast of North America, establishing small churches and forts but not colonizing territory (i.e. for the most part, they did not stay and establish families). By the early eighteenth century, the various branches of European exploration and expansion converged in the Pacific Northwest of what later became the United States: in the eighteenth century, Russian fur trappers, French fur trappers, Spanish missionaries, and English explorers all arrived in what eventually became the American states of Washington and Oregon.

Conclusion

The greatest changes in world history during the early modern period have to do with the ongoing contact between the different regions of the globe that began with Columbus's (quite literally) misguided voyage in 1492. By the seventeenth century, the peoples of Africa, the Americas, Europe, and Asia were all linked by commerce, trade, politics, slavery, and warfare. Obviously, those contacts would only grow stronger going into the modern period.

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CHAPTER 10: THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

During the seventeenth century, changes in how educated Europeans understood the natural world marked the emergence of a recognizably modern scientific perspective. The practical impact of that shift was relatively minor at the time, but the long-term consequences were enormous. For the first time, a culture emerged in Europe in which empirical observations served as the basis for logical conjecture about how natural laws operated, leading to the possibility of a vast range of scientific discovery.

For well over a thousand years, Europeans had looked backwards for insights into the natural world. They relied on Aristotle and accounts by other ancient authors to explain how the universe functioned, how physics operated, and how the human body regulated itself. These teachings were supplemented by Christian scholarship that sought to find the hand of God in the natural world. There was a marked absence of empirical research: observing, from a neutral and objective standpoint, natural phenomena and using those observations as the basis of informed experimentation as to their causes and operation.

Medieval and early-modern Europeans had never developed an empirical scientific culture because the point of science had never been to *discover* the truth, but to *describe* it. In other words, practically every pre-modern person already knew how the world worked: they knew it from myth, from the teachings of ancient authorities, and from religion. In a sense, all of the answers were already there, and thus empirical observation was seen as redundant. The term used at the time for “science” was “natural philosophy,” a branch of philosophy devoted to observing and cataloging natural phenomena, for the most part without attempting to explain those observations outside of references to ancient authorities and the Bible.

The Scientific Process, Mentality, and Method

The Scientific Revolution grew out of Renaissance humanism. Humanistic scholars by the late sixteenth century were increasingly dissatisfied with some ancient authors, since those authors did not, in fact, explain everything. While ancient authors wrote about astronomy, for instance, they did not adequately explain the observed movements of the stars and planets. Likewise, with the explosion of new translations of classical works, it became clear that ancient scholars had actively debated and even rejected the teachings of figures like Aristotle. This suggested that it was legitimate to question even the most fundamental ancient ideas.

Even to scholars who respected and deferred to ancient authors, much of ancient astronomy was based on some fairly questionable speculations, like the idea that the Earth sits on top of a giant sea that occasionally sloshes around, causing earthquakes. Thus, the first major discoveries in the Revolution had to do with astronomy, as scholars started carrying out their own observations and advancing theories to explain what they saw happening in the heavens. This process is known as inductive reasoning: starting with disparate facts, then working toward a theory to explain them. It is the opposite of deductive reasoning, which starts with a known theory and then tries to prove that observations fit into it. The classic example of the latter was taking the idea that the Earth is the center of the universe as a given, then trying to force the observed movements of the heavenly bodies to make sense through elaborate explanations.

That being noted, deductive reasoning is still an important part of “real” science in that it allows for proofs: in mathematics, for instance, one can start with a known principle and then use it to prove more complex formulas. Mathematics itself played a key role in the Scientific Revolution, since many thinkers insisted that mathematics was part of a divine language that existed apart from but was as nearly important as the Bible itself. God had designed the universe in such a way that mathematics offered the possibility of real scientific certainty. The close relationship between math, physics, and engineering is obvious in the work of people like Da Vinci, Galileo, and Isaac Newton, all of whom combined an advanced understanding of mathematics and its practical applications.

That being said, it would be wrong to claim that the Scientific Revolution sparked a completely objective, recognizably “modern” form of science. What early-modern scientists hoped to do was understand the secrets of the universe. Isaac Newton was a scientist but also an alchemist, devoting considerable time and effort to trying to figure out how to “transmute” base metals like lead into gold. Likewise, many thinkers were intensely interested in the works of an ancient (and, as it turns out, fictional) philosopher and magician named Hermes Trismagistus, Hermes the “Thrice-Blessed,” who had supposedly discovered a series of magical formulas that explained the universe. There was a great deal of crossover between what we might think of as magic and spirituality on the one hand and “real” science on the other.

This is evident not only with Newton, but with other scientists of the era – many were astronomers *and* astrologers, just as many were mathematicians and engineers while also being alchemists. The point here is that, ultimately, even though it turns out that magic does not exist, the interest in discovery piqued by the idea of probing the universe’s secrets still led to genuine scientific discovery.

The major figure in codifying and popularizing the new empirical, inductive process was Francis Bacon (1561 – 1626), an English nobleman. Bacon is best remembered for “creating” the scientific method: advancing a hypothesis to explain observed data, but then trying to disprove the hypothesis rather than trying to force the facts to prove it. In this way, the best that could be hoped for was a highly likely, not-yet-disproven theory, rather than a flimsy, vulnerable theory that needed artificial defenses. Over time, the scientific method came to include a corollary requirement: the results of an experiment had to yield the same results consistently in order for a hypothesis to be considered viable.

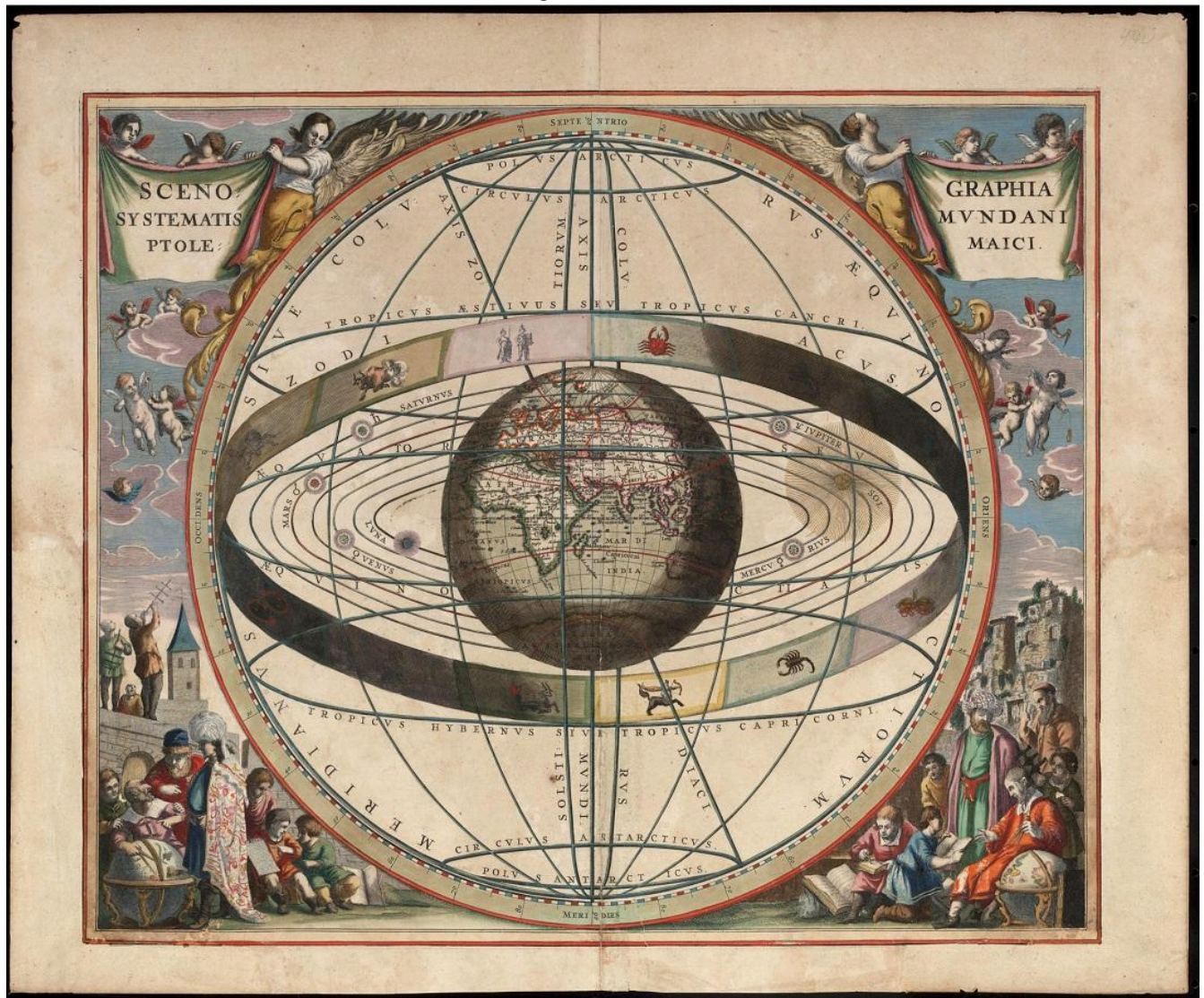
Bacon took the radical step of breaking even with the Renaissance obsession with ancient scholarship by arguing that ancient knowledge of the natural world was all but worthless and that scholars in the present should instead reconstruct their knowledge of the world based on empirical observation. Bacon was a kind of prophet of the movement, not a scientist himself – he was fired as the Lord Chancellor of King James I after accepting bribes, and he died after catching a cold stuffing snow into a dead chicken as some kind of ill-conceived biological experiment. Regardless, he codified the new methodology and worldview of the Scientific Revolution itself.

Scientific Discoveries

Astronomy

The most influential ancient sources of scientific knowledge were Ptolemy, a Greek astronomer and mathematician, and Aristotle. Both argued that the Earth was at the center of the universe, which consisted of a giant crystal sphere studded with the stars. That sphere slowly rotated, while the sun, moon, and planets were suspended above the earth within the sphere and also rotated around the Earth. Ptolemy, who lived centuries after Aristotle, elaborated on the Aristotelian system and claimed that there were not just one but close to eighty spheres, one within the other, which

explained the fact that the different heavenly bodies did not all move in the same direction or at the same speed. The idea that the earth is at the center of the universe is known as *geocentrism*.



The geocentric universe illustrated, with the sun and planets revolving around the Earth. Interestingly, the illustration above was created in 1660, a few decades after Galileo popularized the fact that geocentrism was completely inaccurate.

In this model of the universe, the earth was distinct from the other heavenly bodies. The earth was imperfect, chaotic, and changing, while the heavens were perfect and uniform. Thus, Christian thinkers embraced the Aristotelian model in part because it fit Christian theology so well: God and the angels were on the outside of the most distant crystal sphere in a state of total perfection, while humans and the devil were on, or inside in the case of Satan, the imperfect world. This Christianized version of an ancient Greek model of the universe is where the concept that God and heaven are “up in the sky” and hell is “below the ground” originated. When the astronomers of the Scientific Revolution started detecting irregularities in the heavens, this totally contradicted how most learned people thought about, and had thought about, the essential characteristics of the universe.

The problem with this model is that it did not match the observed paths taken by the stars and, especially, the planets, which do not follow regular, circular orbits. Medieval astronomers tried to account for these differences by ever-more-elaborate caveats and modifications to the idea of simple perfect orbits, positing the existence of hugely

complex paths supposedly taken by various heavenly objects. A Polish priest, Nicolaus Copernicus (1473 – 1543), was the first to argue in a book published just before his death that the whole system would match reality if the sun was at the center of the orbits instead of the earth: this concept is called heliocentrism. He retained the idea of the crystal spheres, and he also used Ptolemy's calculations in his own work, but his was nevertheless the first work to propose the concept of a heliocentric universe. Copernicus himself was a quintessential Renaissance man; he was a medical doctor, an accomplished painter, fluent in Greek, and of course, as an astronomer.

Copernicus's theory was little known outside of astronomical circles, with most astronomers expressing dismay and skepticism at the idea of heliocentrism. A Danish astronomer named Tycho Brahe (1546 – 1601) tried to refute the Heliocentric theory by publishing a massive work of astronomical observations and corresponding mathematical data that attempted to demonstrate that the Earth was indeed at the center of the universe but that the heavenly bodies followed monstrously complex orbits. He spent twenty years carefully observing the heavens from his castle on an island near Copenhagen. The major importance of Brahe's work for posterity was that it provided a wealth of data for later astronomers to work from, even though his central argument turned out to be inaccurate.

A German astronomer, Johannes Kepler (1571 – 1630), who had been Brahe's assistant late in his life, ended up using Brahe's data to argue against Brahe's conclusion, demonstrating that the data actually proved that the sun was indeed at the center of the universe. Kepler also noticed that there was some kind of force emanating from the sun that seemed to hold the planets in orbit; based on the recent work of another scientist concerning magnets, Kepler concluded that some form of magnetism was likely the cause (in fact, Kepler had noticed the role of gravity in space). Interestingly, Kepler did his work while holding a position as the official imperial mathematician of the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolph II, who overlooked the fact that Kepler was a Protestant because he (Rudolph) was so interested in science – and this was against the backdrop of the Thirty Years' War, no less!

In the end, the most significant publicist of heliocentrism was an Italian, Galileo Galilei (1564 – 1642). Galileo built a telescope based on a description he had heard and was delighted to discover previously unknown aspects of the heavenly bodies, such as the fact that the moon and sun did not have smooth, perfect surfaces, and that Jupiter had its own moons. He publicly demonstrated his telescope and quickly became well known among educated elites across Europe. His first major publication, *The Starry Messenger* in 1610, conclusively demonstrated that the heavens were full of previously unknown objects (e.g. the moons of Jupiter) and that planets and moons appeared to be "imperfect" in the same manner as the earth.

In 1632 he published a work, the *Dialogue*, that used the work of earlier astronomers and his own observations to support the heliocentric view of the universe; this work quickly became much better known than had Copernicus's or Kepler's. The Dialogue consisted of two imaginary interlocutors, one of whom presented the case for heliocentrism, the other for geocentrism. The supporter of heliocentrism wins every argument, and his debate partner, "Stupid" (*Simplicio*) is confounded. In publicizing his work, Galileo undermined the idea that the heavens were perfect, that the earth was central, and by extension, that ancient knowledge was reliable. Few things could have been more disruptive.

Galileo was tried by the Inquisition in 1633, in part because his former patron, the pope Urban VIII, thought that Galileo had been mocking him personally by naming the imaginary defender of the Ptolemaic view Stupid. Specifically, Galileo was accused of supporting a condemned doctrine, heliocentrism, not of heresy per se. Galileo was forced to recant and his book was placed on the Catholic *Index* of banned books, where it would remain until 1822. Much of the explanation for this persecution can be found in the fact that his work was published against the backdrop of religious war then engulfing Europe; the Catholic Church was not a tolerant institution in the seventeenth century.

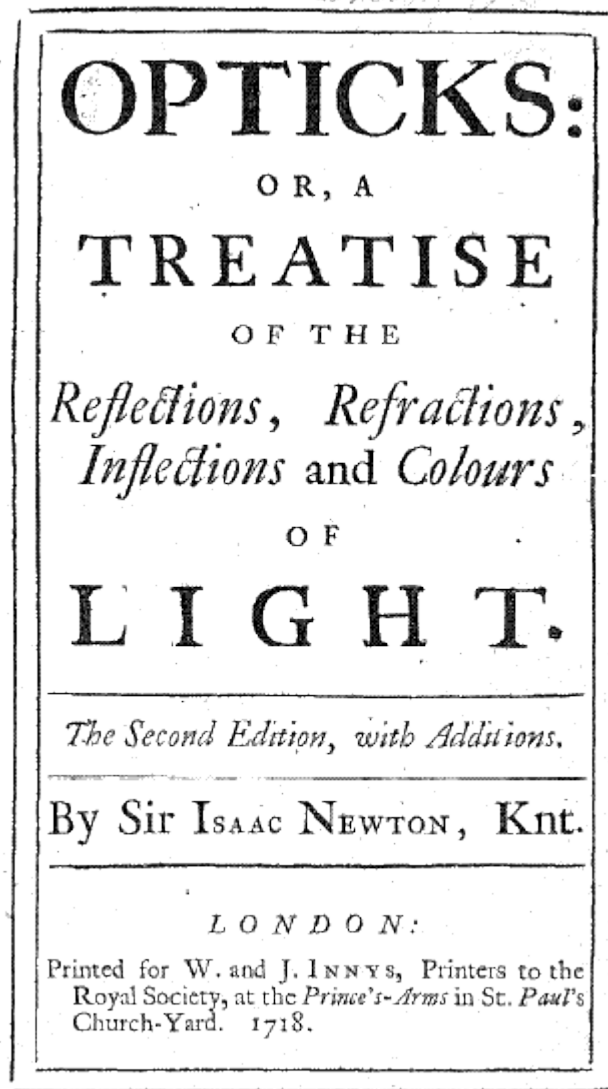
Galileo is less well remembered for his work in physics, but his work there was as important as his astronomy. Six

years after the Dialogue was put on the Index, he published another work, *Two New Sciences of Motion and Mechanics*, that provided a theory and mathematical formulas of inertia and aspects of gravity. These theories refuted Aristotelian physics, which had claimed that objects only stay in motion when there is direct impetus; Galileo demonstrated through experiments the principles of inertia and acceleration and began the task of defining their operation mathematically.

Isaac Newton

Perhaps the single most important figure of the Scientific Revolution was Sir Isaac Newton, an English mathematician (1642 – 1727). Newton was, simply put, a genius. He was a chaired professor of mathematics at Cambridge University at the age of 27 and was renowned within his own lifetime for being one of the great minds of his age. In 1687 he published the *Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, which posited a single universal law of gravitation that applied equally to enormous objects like the planet Earth and tiny objects that could barely be detected by human senses. The entire system of physics was mapped out and described in precise, and accurate, mathematical formulas in the Mathematical Principles. It was one of the single greatest works of science of all time: its importance was not just in being “right,” but in providing a comprehensive system that could replace the work of ancient authors like Aristotle. Following Newton, figures like Aristotle and Ptolemy were increasingly regarded in the manner they are today: important individuals in the history of thought, especially philosophy, but not sources of accurate scientific information.

Newton was one of the great intellectual over-achievers of all time. He correctly calculated the relative mass of earth and water, deduced that electrical impulses had something to do with the nervous system, and figured out that all colors are part of the larger spectrum of light. He personally designed and built a new and more effective kind of telescope, and wrote the founding paper of the modern science of optics.



Newton's treatise on the properties of light, the founding document of optics.

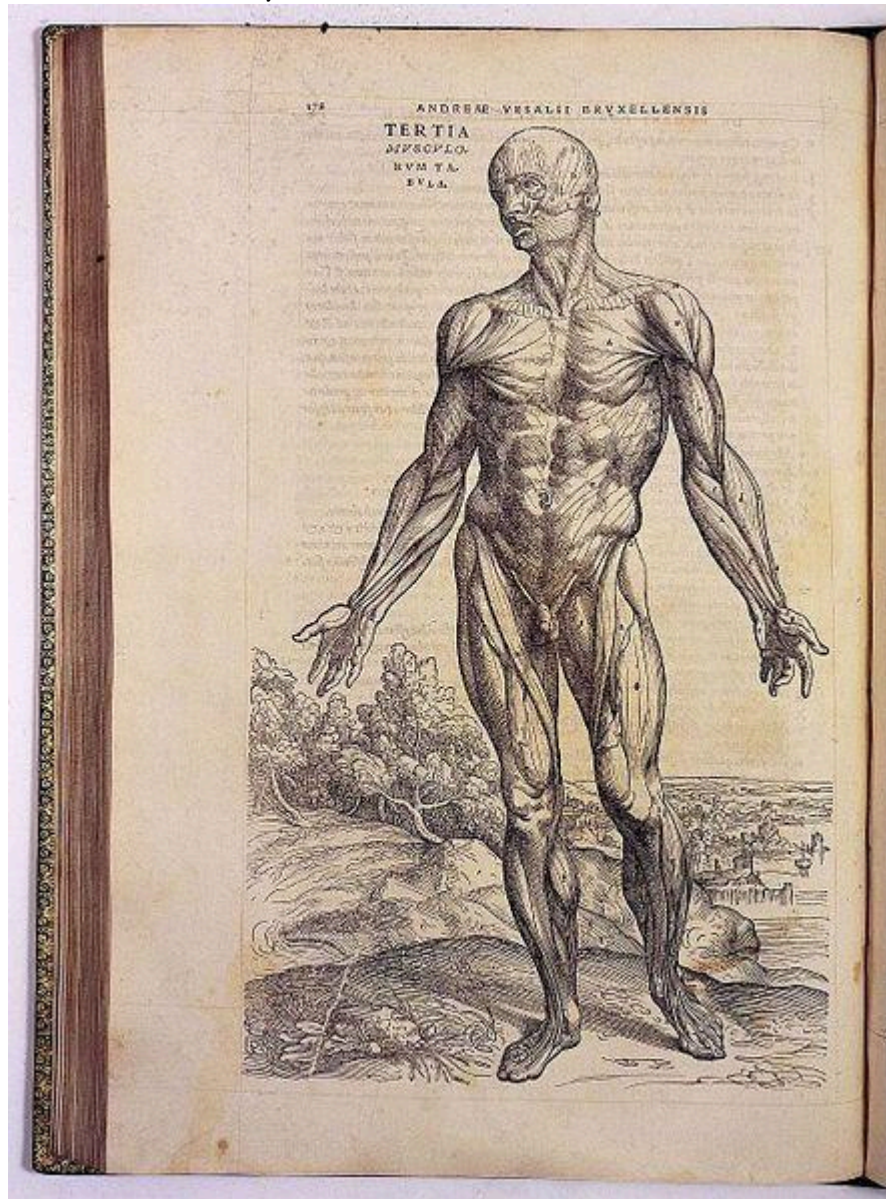
Newton, personally, was a humorless curmudgeon. While he was famous in his own lifetime, ultimately being knighted by King William and serving as the chair of Britain's first scientific society, he only reluctantly published his work, and that only after fearing that his self-understood "rivals" would steal it if he did not. He was also completely chaste his entire life and had what might charitably be described as a "disagreeable" temperament.

Medicine

While astronomy and physics advanced by leaps and bounds during the period of the Scientific Revolution, other scientific disciplines such as medical science and biology advanced much more slowly. At the time there were a host of received notions and prejudices, especially against work on human cadavers, that prevented large-scale experimentation. Instead, most doctors continued to rely on the work of the Greek physician Galen, who in the second century CE had elaborated on the Aristotelian idea of the four "humors" that supposedly governed health: blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. According to that theory, illness was the result of an overabundance of one humor

and a lack of another – hence the centuries-old practice of bleeding someone who was ill in hope of reducing the “excess” blood.

While belief in humors continued to hold sway in the absence of more compelling theories, important advances did occur in anatomy. The Italian doctor Andreas Vesalius (1514 – 1564) published a work on anatomy based on cadavers. Another doctor, William Harvey (1578 – 1657), conclusively demonstrated that blood flows through the body by being pumped by the heart, not emanating out of the liver as had been believed before. Shortly after his death, other doctors used a new invention, the microscope, to detect the capillaries that connect arteries to other tissues. Increasingly, physicians began to consider the human body as an item written into the Book of Nature as well.



One of Vesalius's illustration, in this case of human musculature.

Many medical advances would not have been possible without Renaissance-era advances in other fields. Renaissance artistic techniques made precise, accurate anatomical drawings possible, and print ensured that works on medicine could be distributed across Europe rapidly after their initial publication. Thus, scientists and doctors were able to contribute their discoveries to a growing body of work, all of which led to a more widespread understanding of how

the body worked. Even though the concept of the humors (as well as other ideas like miasmas causing disease) remained prevalent, doctors now had a better idea of how the body was designed and what its constituent parts actually did.

Unfortunately for the health of humankind, the new understanding of anatomy did not lead to an understanding of contagion. The Dutch scientist Antonie Van Leeuwenhoek (1632-1723) invented the microscope, and in the 1670s he was able to identify what were later referred to as bacteria. Unfortunately, he did not deduce that bacteria were responsible for illness; it would take until the 1860s with the French doctor and scientist Louis Pasteur for definitive proof of the relationship between germs and sickness to be established.

Science and Society

Women

An often-overlooked facet of the Scientific Revolution was the participation of (mostly aristocratic) women. Noblewomen were often the collaborators of their husbands or fathers – for example, it was a husband and wife team, the Lavoisiers, in France that invented the premises of modern chemistry in the eighteenth century. In some cases, such as the early entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian, women struck out on their own and conducted experiments and expeditions – Merian took a research trip to South America and did pioneering work on the life cycles of various insect species. Others made important medical discoveries, as when the Countess of Chincon (wife of the Spanish governor of Peru in the early seventeenth century) discovered that quinine was effective in treating malaria.



One of Merian's illustrations, depicting the life cycle of butterflies and moths.

A few male theorists supported a proto-feminist outlook as well. The French scholar François Poulain de la Barre (1647-1725) concluded that empirical observation demonstrated that the custom of male dominance in European society was just that: a custom. Nothing about pregnancy or childbearing made women inherently unsuitable to participate in public life. De la Barre applied a similar argument to non-European peoples, arguing that there were only cosmetic differences between what would later be called “races.” His work was almost unprecedented in its egalitarian vision, anticipating the ideas of human universalism that only really came of age in the nineteenth century, and only became dominant views in the twentieth.

Despite the existence of highly-qualified and educated women scientists, informal rules banned them from joining scientific societies or holding university positions. In general, one of the most obvious failures of the Scientific Revolution to overcome social prejudices was in the marked tendency of male scientists to use the new science to reinforce rather than overthrow sexist stereotypes. Anatomical drawings drew attention to the fact that women had wider hips than did men, which supposedly “destined” them for a primary function of childbearing. Likewise, they

(inaccurately) depicted women as having smaller skulls, supposedly implying lower intelligence. In fields in which women had held very important social roles in the past, such as midwifery, male scientists and doctors increasingly pushed them to the side, insisting on a male-dominated “scientific” superiority of technique.

The Scientific Revolution’s claims about female anatomy ultimately created a pseudo-scientific (i.e. empirically false but claiming scientific truth) theory of sexual difference that was actually *worse* in its outlook on women’s capacity than earlier ideas. Women were not, according to the new theories, just inferior versions of men, they were biologically crafted to be the polar opposite: foolish, overly emotional, and above all incapable of rational thought. Even the old belief that sexual pleasure for both partners was necessary for procreation was abandoned (although it took until the late eighteenth century for that belief to atrophy), with women reduced to passive receptacles whose pleasure was irrelevant. Women were not, supposedly, biologically capable of political participation or intellectual achievement. To sum up, in stark contrast to the breakthroughs in astronomy that proved that the earth is not at the center of the cosmos, it proved easier to overthrow the entire vision of the universe than to upset sexual roles and stereotypes.

Scientific Institutions and Culture

Many developments in the early part of the Scientific Revolution occurred in Catholic countries such as Italy, but over time the center of scientific development shifted north and west. While many Protestants, including Luther himself, were just as hostile as were Catholics to new scientific ideas at first, in the long term Protestant governments proved more tolerant of ideas that seemed to violate the literal truth of the Bible. This had less to do with some kind of inherent tolerance in Protestantism than to the fact that Protestant institutions were less powerful and pervasive than was the Roman church in Catholic countries.

In the Netherlands and England in particular it was possible to openly publish and/or champion scientific ideas without fear of a backlash; in the case of Newton, it was possible to be outright famous. In general, Protestant governments and elites were more open to the idea that God might reveal Himself in nature itself, not just in holy scripture, and thus they were sympathetic to the piety of scientific research. Ultimately, this increased tolerance and support of science would see the center of scientific innovation in the northwest of Europe, not in the heart of the earlier Renaissance in Italy.

That being noted, France was not to be underestimated as a site of discovery, due in part to the cosmopolitanism of Paris and the traditional power of the French kings in holding the papacy at arm’s length. The Royal Academy of Sciences in France was opened in the same year as its sister organization, the Royal Society, in England (1662). Both funded scientific efforts that were “useful” in the sense of serving shipping and military applications as well as those which were more purely experimental, as in astronomy. The English Royal Society was particularly focused on military applications, especially optics and ballistics, setting a pattern of state-funded science in the service of war that continues to this day.

The English and French scientific societies were important parts of the development of a larger “Republic of Science,” the predecessor to present-day “academia.” Learned men (and some women) from all over Europe attended lectures, corresponded, and carried out their own scientific experiments. Newton was the president of the Royal Society, which published *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, the forerunner to academic journals that remain the backbone of scholarship today.

PHILOSOPHICAL
TRANSACTIONS:
GIVING SOME
ACCOMPT
OF THE PRESENT
Undertakings, Studies, and Labours
OF THE
INGENIOUS
IN MANY
CONSIDERABLE PARTS
OF THE
WORLD

Vol I.

For *Anno* 1665, and 1666.

In the SAVOY,
Printed by T. N. for John Martyn at the Bell, a little with-
out Temple-Bar, and James Allestry in Duck-Lane,
Printers to the Royal Society.

The cover of the first volume of the Philosophical Transactions, arguably the first formal academic journal in history.

The importance of the Republic of Science cannot be overstated, because the ongoing exchange of ideas and fact-checking among experts allowed science to progress incrementally and continually. In other words, no scientist had to “start from scratch,” because he or she was already building on the work of past scholars. Rather than science requiring an isolated genius like Da Vinci, now any intelligent and self-disciplined individual could hope to make a meaningful contribution to a scientific field. Newton explicitly acknowledged the importance of this incremental growth of knowledge when he emphasized that “If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

The Republic of Science also inaugurated a shift away from the use of Latin as the official language of scholarship in learned European culture. Scientific essays were often written in the vernacular by scientists like Kepler and Galileo in part because they wanted to differentiate their work from church doctrine (which, of course, was traditionally written in Latin). Newton initially wrote in Latin so that it could be read by his peers on the continent, but his later works were in English. Over the course of the eighteenth century, Latin steadily declined as the practical language of learning, replaced by the major vernaculars, especially French and English.

The Philosophical Impact of Science

One of the effects of the scientific discoveries of the sixteenth century was a growing belief that the universe itself operated according to regular, predictable, “mechanical” laws that could be described through mathematics. This outlook lent itself to one in which God could be seen as a great scientist or clockmaker: the divine intelligence who created a perfect universe and then set it in motion. In this sense, then, the new scientific discoveries in no way undermined religious belief at the time, despite the fact that they contradicted certain specific passages of the Bible. This kind of religious outlook became known as *deism*, and its proponents deists, people who believed that God did not intervene in everyday life but instead simply set the universe in motion, then stepped back to watch.

Some thinkers, most notably the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596 – 1650), tried to apply this new logical outlook to theology itself. Descartes tried to subject belief and doubt to a thorough logical critique, asking what he could be absolutely sure of as a philosophical starting-point. His conclusion was that the only thing he really knew was that he doubted, that there was something thinking and operating skeptically, which in turn implied that there was a thing, himself, capable of thought. This led to his famous statement “I think, therefore I am.” Descartes went on to follow a series of logical “proofs” from this existing, thinking being to “prove” that God Himself existed, as the original source of thought. This was a philosophical application not just of the new mechanical and mathematical outlook, but of deductive reasoning. Descartes, personally, embraced the view that God was a benevolent and reasonable power of creation, but one who did not lower Himself to meddle in the universe.

Perhaps the most important cultural change that emerged from the Revolution was the simple fact that science acquired growing cultural authority. The results of the new science were demonstrable; Galileo delighted onlookers by allowing them to use his telescope not just to look at the sky, but at buildings in Rome, thereby proving that his invention worked. The possibility that science could, and in fact already had, disproved claims made in the Bible laid the foundation for a whole new approach to knowledge that threatened a permanent break with a religiously-founded paradigm. In other words, scientific advances inadvertently led to the growth in skepticism about religion, sometimes up to and including outright atheism: the rejection of the very idea of the existence of God.

The most extreme figure in this regard was Baruch Spinoza (1632 – 1677), a Sephardic Jew who was born and raised in Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Spinoza took the insights of the era and applied them wholeheartedly to religion itself, arguing that the universe of natural, physical laws was synonymous with God, and that the very idea of a human-like God with a personality and intentions was superstitious, unprovable, and absurd. He was excommunicated from Judaism itself when he was only twenty-four but went on to continue publishing his works, in the process laying the groundwork for what were later known as “freethinkers” – people who may or may not have been actual atheists, but who certainly rejected the authority of holy writings and churches.

Spinoza’s work was controversial enough that he was condemned as an atheist not only by the Jewish community, but by both the Catholic Church and various Protestant churches as well. One of the things about his thought that infuriated practically everyone was that Spinoza claimed that there was no such thing as “spirit” or “the soul” – all of the universe was merely matter, and the only way to truly learn about its operation was to combine empirical experimentation with mathematics. This “materialism” as it was called at the time was so close to outright atheism as to be almost indistinguishable.

The other side of skepticism was a kind of cynical version of religious belief that dispensed with the emotional connection to God and reduced it to a simple act of spiritual insurance: the French mathematician Blaise Pascal (1623 – 1662), inventor of the field of probability, postulated “Pascal’s Wager.” In the Wager, Pascal argued that either God does

or does not exist, and each person can choose either to acknowledge Him or not. If He does exist, and one acknowledges Him, then one is saved. If He does exist, and one rejects Him, then one is damned. If He does not exist and one acknowledges Him, nothing happens, and if He does not exist and one does not acknowledge Him, nothing happens either. Thus, one might as well worship God in some way, since there is no negative fallout if He does not exist, but there is (i.e. an eternity of torment in hell) if He does.

Pascal applied an equally skeptical view to the existing governments of his day. He noted that “We see neither justice nor injustice which does not change its nature with change in climate. Three degrees of latitude reverse all jurisprudence; a meridian decides the truth. Fundamental laws change after a few years of possession...a strange justice that is bounded by a river! Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side.” In other words, there was no fixed or eternal or God-given about royal decrees and laws; they were arbitrary customs enforced through the state.

Conclusion

The Scientific Revolution, while it certainly achieved many important breakthroughs and discoveries, was as much about a cultural and intellectual shift as the discoveries themselves. It was not, for example, accompanied by technological advances of note with a few exceptions like telescopes. Instead, its importance lay in the fact that, first, educated people came to believe that the workings of the universe could be discovered through inquiry and experimentation, and second, that the universe itself was structured along rational lines. Those conclusions would in turn lead to a monumental movement of philosophy and thought during the eighteenth century: the Enlightenment.

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CHAPTER 11: THE ENLIGHTENMENT

In 1784, a Prussian philosopher named Immanuel Kant published a short essay entitled *What is Enlightenment?* He was responding to nearly a century of philosophical, scientific, and technical advances in Central and Western Europe that, he felt, had culminated in his own lifetime in a more enlightened and just age. According to Kant, Enlightenment was all about the courage to think for one's self, to question the accepted notions of any field of human knowledge rather than relying on a belief imposed by an outside authority. Likewise, he wrote, ideas were now exchanged between thinkers in a network of learning that itself provided a kind of intellectual momentum. Kant's point was that, more than ever before, thinkers of various kinds were breaking new ground not only in using the scientific method to discover new things about the physical world, but in applying rational inquiry toward improving human life and the organization of human society. While Kant's essay probably overstated the Utopian qualities of the thought of his era, he was right that it did correspond to a major shift in how educated Europeans thought about the world and the human place in it.

Following Kant, historians refer to the intellectual movement of the eighteenth century as the Enlightenment. Historians now tend to reject the idea that the Enlightenment was a single, self-conscious movement of thinkers, but they still (usually) accept that there were indeed innovative new themes of thought running through much of the philosophical, literary, and technical writing of the period. Likewise, new forms of media and new forums of discussion came of age in the eighteenth century, creating a larger and better-informed public than ever before in European history.

The Enlightenment: Definitions

The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that lasted about one hundred years, neatly corresponding to most of the eighteenth century; convenient dates for it are from the Glorious Revolution in Britain to the beginning of the French Revolution: 1688 – 1789. The central concern of the Enlightenment was applying rational thought to almost every aspect of human existence: not just science, but philosophy, morality, and society. Along with those philosophical themes, central to the Enlightenment was the emergence of new forms of media and new ways in which people exchanged information, along with new “sensibilities” regarding what was proper and desirable in social conduct and politics.

We owe the Enlightenment fundamental modern beliefs. Enlightenment thinkers embraced the idea that scientific progress was limitless. They argued that all citizens should be equal before the law. They claimed that the best forms of government were those with rational laws oriented to serve the public interest. In a major break from the past, they increasingly claimed that there was a real, physical universe that could be understood using the methods of science, in contrast to the false, made-up universe of “magic” suitable only for myths and storytelling. In short, Enlightenment thinkers proposed ideas that were novel at the time, but were eventually accepted by almost everyone in Europe (and many other places, not least the inhabitants of the colonies of the Americas).

The Enlightenment also introduced themes of thought that undermined traditional religious beliefs, at least in the long run. Perhaps the major theme of Enlightenment thought that ran contrary to almost every form of religious practice at the time was the rejection of “superstitions,” things that simply could not happen according to science (such

a virgin giving birth to a child, or wine turning into blood during Communion). Most Enlightenment thinkers argued that the “real” natural universe was governed by natural laws, all watched over by a benevolent but completely remote “supreme being” – this was essentially the same as the Deism that had emerged from the Scientific Revolution. While few Enlightenment thinkers were outright atheists, almost all of them decried many church practices and what they perceived as the ignorance and injustice behind church (especially Catholic) laws.

The Enlightenment was also against “tyranny,” which meant the arbitrary rule of a monarch indifferent to the welfare of his or her subjects. Almost no Enlightenment thinkers openly rejected monarchy as a form of government – indeed, some Enlightenment thinkers befriended powerful kings and queens – but they roundly condemned cruelty and selfishness among individual monarchs. The perfect state was, in the eyes of most Enlightenment thinkers, one with an “enlightened” monarch at its head, presiding over a set of reasonable laws. Many Enlightenment thinkers thus looked to Great Britain, since 1689 ruled by a monarch who agreed to its written constitution and worked closely with an elected parliament, as the best extant model of enlightened rule.

Behind both the scientific worldview and the rejection of tyranny was a focus on the human mind’s capacity for reason. Reason is the mental faculty that takes sensory data and orders it into thoughts and ideas. The basic argument that underwrote the thought of the Enlightenment is that reason is universal and inherent to humans, and that if society could strip away the pernicious patterns of tradition, superstition, and ignorance, humankind would arrive naturally at a harmonious society. Thus, almost all of the major thinkers of the Enlightenment tried to get to the bottom of just that task: what is standing in the way of reason, and how can humanity become more reasonable?

Context and Causes

One of the major causes of the Enlightenment was the Scientific Revolution. It cannot be overstated how important the work of scientists was to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, because works like Newton’s *Mathematical Principles* demonstrated the existence of eternal, immutable laws of nature (ones that may or may not have anything to do with God) that were completely rational and understandable by humans. Indeed, in many ways the Enlightenment begins with Newton’s publication of the *Principles* in 1687.

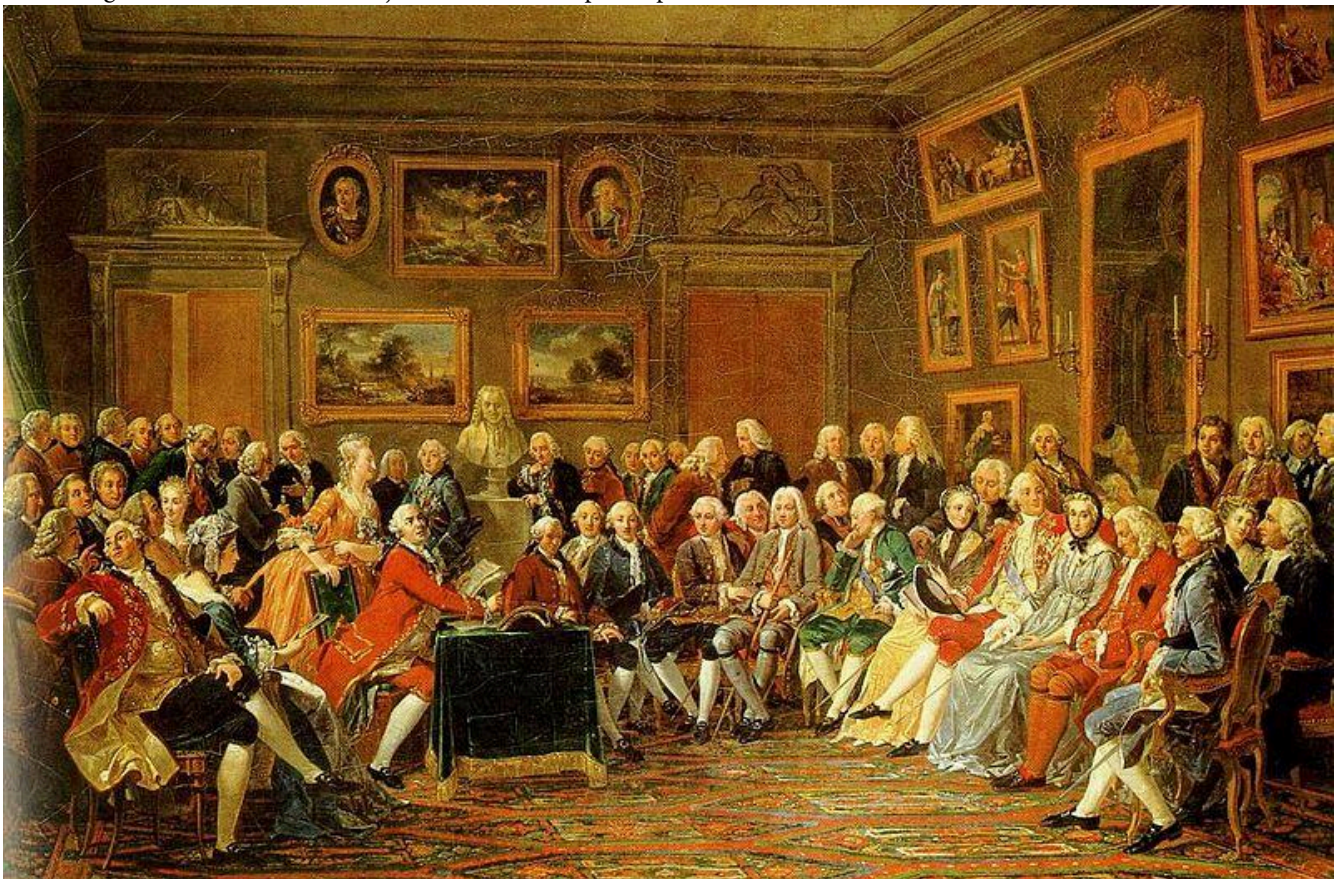
Having thus established that the universe was rational, one of the major themes of the Enlightenment was the search for equally immutable and equally rational laws that applied to everything else in nature, most importantly *human* nature. How do humans learn? How might government be designed to ensure the most felicitous environment for learning and prosperity? If humans are capable of reason, why do they deviate from reasonable behavior so frequently?

Among the other causes of the Enlightenment, perhaps the most important was the significant growth of the urban literate classes, most notably what was called in France the *bourgeoisie*: the mercantile middle class. Ever since the Renaissance era, elites increasingly acquired at least basic literacy, but by the eighteenth century even artisans and petty merchants in the cities of Central and Western Europe sent their children (especially boys) to schools for at least a few years. There was a real reading public by the eighteenth century that eagerly embraced the new ideas of the Enlightenment and provided a book market for both the official, copyrighted works of Enlightenment philosophy and pirated, illegal ones. That same reading public also eagerly embraced the quintessential new form of fiction of the eighteenth century: the novel, with the reading of novels becoming a major leisure activity of the period.

Thus, the Enlightenment thought took place in the midst of what historians call the “growth of the public sphere.” Newspapers, periodicals, and cheap books became very common during the eighteenth century, which in turn helped the ongoing growth of literacy rates. Simultaneously, there was a full-scale shift away from the sacred languages to

the vernaculars (i.e. from Latin to English, Spanish, French, etc.), which in turn helped to start the spread of the modern state-sponsored vernaculars as spoken languages in regions far from royal capitals. For the first time, large numbers of people acquired at least a basic knowledge of the official language of their state rather than using only their local dialect. Those official languages allowed the transmission of ideas across entire kingdoms. For example, by the time the French Revolution began in the late 1780s, an entire generation of men and women was capable of expressing shared ideas about justice and politics in the official French tongue.

There were various social forums and spaces in which groups of self-styled “enlightened” men and women gathered to discuss the new ideas of the movement. The most significant of these were coffee houses in England and salons in France and Central Europe. Coffee houses, unlike their present-day analogs, charged an entry fee but then provided unlimited coffee to their patrons. Those patrons were from various social classes, and would gather together to discuss the latest ideas and read the periodicals provided by the coffee house (all while becoming increasingly caffeinated). Salons, which were common in the major cities of France and Germany, were more aristocratic gatherings in which major philosophers themselves would often read from their latest works, with the assembled group then engaging in debate and discussion. Salons were noteworthy for being led by women in most cases; educated women were thought to be the best moderators of learned discussion by most Enlightenment thinkers, men and women alike. Likewise, women writers were contributing members of salons, not just hostesses but participants in discussions and debates.



One of the best-known salons, run by Marie Thérèse Rodet Geoffrin, seated on the right. All of the men pictured are their actual likenesses. Two are of particular note: seated under the marble bust is Jean le Rond D'Alembert, noted below, and the bust is of Voltaire (also described below), whose work is being read to the gathering in the picture.

Outside of the gatherings at coffee houses and salons, the ideas and themes of the Enlightenment

reached much of the reading public through the easy availability of cheap print, and it is also clear that even regular artisans were conversant in many Enlightenment ideas. To cite a single example, one French glassworker, Jacques-Louis Menetra, left a memoir in which he demonstrated his own command of the ideas of the period and even claimed to have chatted over drinks with the great Enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The major thinkers of the Enlightenment considered themselves to be part of a “republic of letters,” similar to the “republic of science” that played such a role in the Scientific Revolution. They wrote voluminous correspondence and often sent one another unpublished manuscripts. Thus, from the thinkers themselves participating in the republic of letters down to artisans trading pirated copies of enlightenment works, the new ideas of the period permeated much of European society.

Enlightenment Philosophes

The term most often used for Enlightenment thinkers is *philosophe*, meaning simply “philosopher” in French. Many of the most famous and important philosophes were indeed French, but there were major English, Scottish, and Prussian figures as well. Some of the most noteworthy philosophes included the following.

John Locke: 1637 – 1704

Locke was an Englishman who, along with Newton, was among the founding figures of the Enlightenment itself. Locke was a great political theorist of the period of the English Civil Wars and Glorious Revolution, arguing that sovereignty was granted by the people to a government but could be revoked if that government violated the laws and traditions of the country. He was also a major advocate for religious tolerance; he was even bold enough to note that people tended to be whatever religion was prevalent in their family and social context, so it was ridiculous for anyone to claim exclusive access to religious truth.

Locke was also the founding figure of Enlightenment educational thought, arguing that all humans are born “blank slates” – *Tabula Rasa* in Latin – and hence access to the human faculty of reason had entirely to do with the proper education. Cruelty, selfishness, and destructive behavior were because of a lack of education and a poor environment, while the right education would lead anybody and everybody to become rational, reasonable individuals. This idea was hugely inspiring to other Enlightenment thinkers, because it implied that society could be perfected if education was somehow improved and rationalized.

Voltaire: 1694 – 1778

The pen name of François-Marie Arouet, Voltaire was arguably the single most influential figure of the Enlightenment. The greatest novelist, poet, and philosopher of France during the height of the Enlightenment period, Voltaire became famous across Europe for his wit, intelligence, and moral battles against what he perceived as injustice and superstition.

In addition to writing hilarious novellas lambasting everything from Prussia’s obsession with militarism to the idiotic fanaticism of the Spanish Inquisition, Voltaire was well known for publicly intervening against injustice. He wrote essays and articles decrying the unjust punishment of innocents and personally convinced the French king Louis XV to commute the sentences of certain individuals unjustly convicted of crimes. He was also an amateur scientist and

philosopher – he wrote many of the most important articles in the “official” handbook of the Enlightenment, the *Encyclopedia* (described below).



Voltaire

While he was a tireless advocate of reason and justice, it is also important to note the ambiguities of Voltaire’s philosophy. He was a deep skeptic about human nature, despite believing in the existence and desirability of reason. He acknowledged the power of ignorance and outmoded traditions to govern human behavior, and he expressed considerable skepticism that society could ever be significantly improved. For example, despite his personal disdain for Christian (especially Catholic) institutions, he noted that “if God did not exist, it would be necessary to invent Him,” because without a religious structure shoring up their morality, the ignorant masses would descend into violence and barbarism.

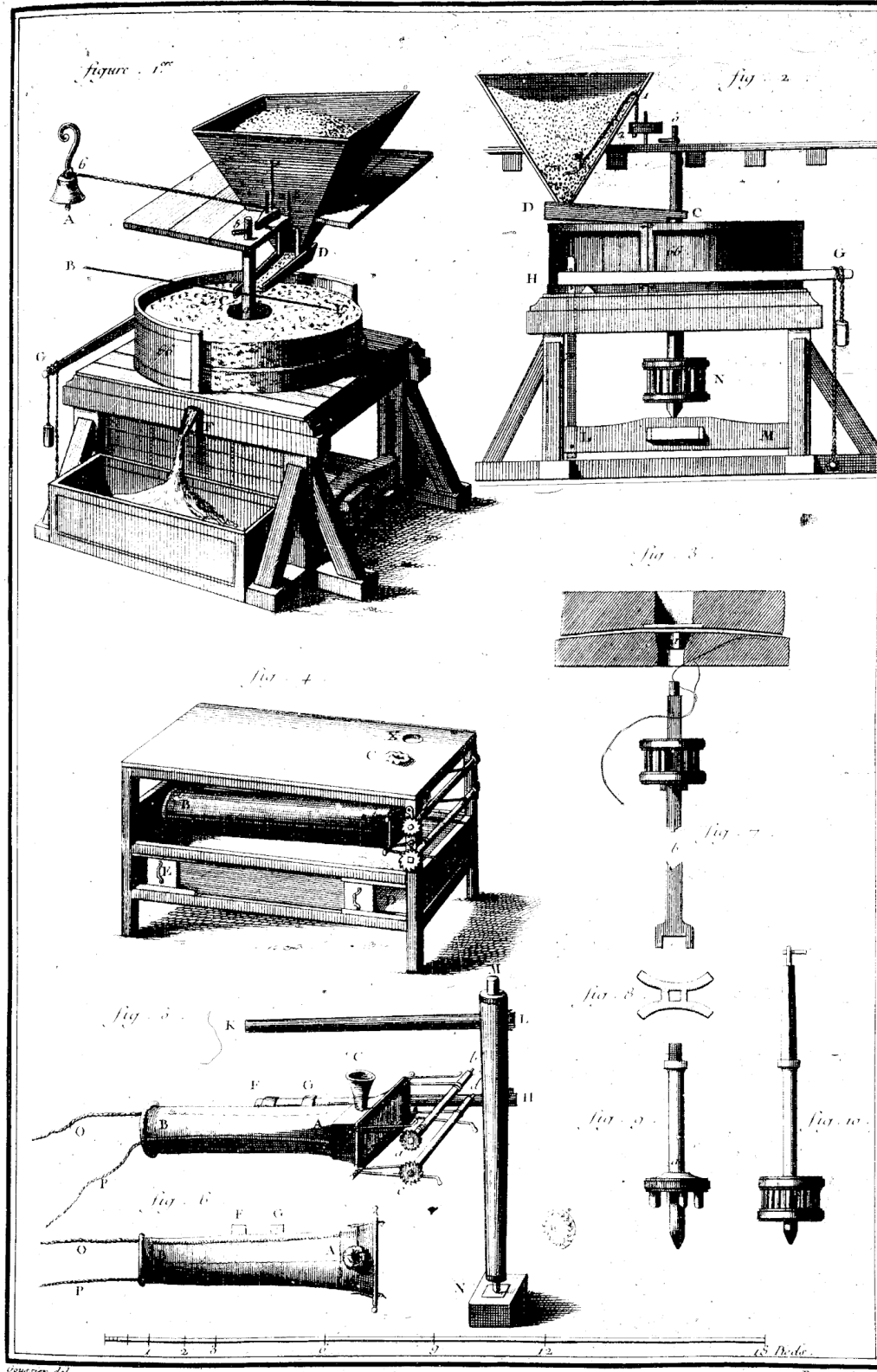
Emilie de Châtelet: 1706 – 1749

A major scientist and philosopher of the period, Châtelet published works on subjects as diverse as physics, mathematics, the Bible, and the very nature of happiness. Perhaps her best-known work during her lifetime was an annotated translation of Newton’s *Mathematical Principles* which explained the Newtonian concepts to her (French) readers. Despite the gendered biases of most of her scientific contemporaries, she was accepted as an equal member of the “republic of science.” In Châtelet the link between the legacy of the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment is

clearest: while her companion (and lover) Voltaire was keenly interested in science and engaged in modest efforts at his own experiments, Châtelet was a full-fledged physicist and mathematician.

The Encyclopedia of Diderot and D'Alembert (1751)

The brainchild of two major French philosophes, the Encyclopedia was a full-scale attempt to catalog, categorize, and explain all of human knowledge. While its co-inventors, Jean le Rond D'Alembert and Denis Diderot, themselves wrote many of the articles, the majority were written by other philosophes, including (as noted above) Voltaire. The first volume was published in 1751, with other volumes following. In the end the Encyclopedia consisted of 28 volumes containing 60,000 articles with 2,885 illustrations. While its volumes were far too expensive for most of the reading public to access directly, pirated chapters ensured that its ideas reached a much broader audience.



Agriculture Économique Rustique.
Détail des Moulins.

One of the illustrations from the Encyclopedia, in this case diagrams of (at the time, state of the art) agricultural equipment.

The Encyclopedia was explicitly organized to refute traditional knowledge, namely that provided by the church and (to a lesser extent) the state. The claim was that the application of reason to any problem could result in its solution. It also attempted to be a technical resource for would-be scientists and inventors, not only describing aspects of science but including detailed technical diagrams of everything from windmills to mines. In short, the Encyclopedia was intended to be a kind of guide to the entire realm of human thought and technique – a cutting-edge description of all of the knowledge a typical philosophe might think necessary to improve the world.

David Hume: 1711 – 1776

Hume was the major philosopher associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, an outpost of the movement centered in the Scottish capital of Edinburgh. Hume was one of the most powerful critics of all forms of organized religion, which he argued smacked of superstition. To him, any religion based on “miracles” was automatically invalid, since miracles do not happen in an orderly universe knowable through science. In fact, Hume went so far as to suggest that belief in a God who resembled a kind of omnipotent version of a human being, with a personality, intentions, and emotions, was simply an expression of primitive ignorance and fear early in human history, as people sought an explanation for a bewildering universe.

Hume also expressed enormous contempt for the common people, who were ignorant and susceptible to superstition. Hume is important to consider because he embodied one of the characteristics of the Enlightenment that often seems the most surprising from a contemporary perspective, namely the fact that it did *not* champion the rights, let alone anything like the right to political expression, of regular people. To a philosopher like Hume, the average commoner (whether a peasant or a member of the poor urban classes) was so mired in ignorance, superstition, and credulity that he or she should be held in check and ruled by his or her betters.

Adam Smith: 1723 – 1790

Smith was another Scotsman who did his work in Edinburgh. He is generally credited with being the first real economist: a social scientist devoted to analyzing how markets function. In his most famous work, *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith argued that a (mostly) free market, one that operated without undue interference of the state, would naturally result in never-ending economic growth and nearly universal prosperity. His targets were the monopolies and protectionist taxes and tariffs that limited trade between nations; he argued that if states dropped those kind of burdensome practices, the market itself would increase wealth as if the general prosperity of the nation was lifted by an “invisible hand.”

Smith’s importance, besides founding the discipline of economics itself, was that he applied precisely the same kind of Enlightenment ideas and ideals to market exchange as did the other philosophes to morality, science, and so on. Smith, too, insisted that something in human affairs – economics – operated according to rational and knowable laws that could be discovered and explained. His ideas, along with those of David Ricardo, an English economist a generation younger than Smith, are normally considered the founding concepts of “classical” economics.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712 – 1778)

Rousseau was the great contrarian philosophe of the Enlightenment. He rose to prominence by winning an essay contest in 1749, penning a scathing critique of his contemporary French society and claiming that its so-called “civilization” was a corrupt facade that undermined humankind’s natural moral character. He went on to write both novels and essays that attracted enormous attention both in France and abroad, claiming among other things that children should learn from nature by experiencing the world, allowing their natural goodness and character to develop. He also championed the idea that political sovereignty arose from the “general will” of the people in a society, and that citizens in a just society had to be fanatically devoted to both that general will and to their own moral standards (Rousseau claimed, in a grossly inaccurate and anachronistic argument, that ancient Sparta was an excellent model for a truly enlightened and moral polity). Rousseau’s concept of a moralistic, fanatical government justified by a “general will” of the people would go on to become of the ideological bases of the French Revolution that began just a decade after his death.

Politics and Society

The political implications of the Enlightenment were surprisingly muted at the time. Almost every society in Europe exercised official censorship, and many philosophes had to publish their more provocative works using pseudonyms, sometimes resorting to illegal publishing operations and book smugglers in order to evade that censorship (not to mention their own potential arrest). Likewise, one of the important functions of the salons mentioned above was in providing safe spaces for Enlightenment ideas, and many of the women who ran salons supported (sometimes financially) controversial projects like the Encyclopedia in its early stages. In general, philosophes tended to openly attack the most egregious injustices they perceived in royal governments and the organized churches, but at the same time their skepticism about the intellectual abilities of the common people was such that almost none of them advocated a political system besides a better, more rational version of monarchy. Likewise, philosophes were quick to salute (to the point of being sycophantic at times) monarchs who they thought were living up to their hopes for the ideal of rational monarchy.

In turn, various monarchs and nobles were attracted to Enlightenment thought. They came to believe in many cases in the essential justice of the arguments of the philosophes and did not see anything contradictory between the exercise of their power and enlightenment ideas. That said, monarchs tended to see “enlightened reforms” in terms of making their governments more efficient. They certainly did not renounce any of their actual power, although some did at least ease the burdens on the serfs who toiled on royal lands.

One major impact that Enlightenment thought unquestionably had on European (and, we should note, early American) politics was in the realm of justice. A noble from Milan, Cesare Bonesana, wrote a brief work entitled *On Crimes and Punishment* in 1764 arguing that the state’s essential duty was the protection of the life and dignity of its citizens, which to him included those accused of crimes. Among other things, he argued that rich and poor should be held accountable before the same laws, that the aim of the justice system should be as much to prevent future crimes as to punish past ones, and that torture was both barbarous and counter-productive. Several monarchs in the latter part of the eighteenth century did, in fact, ban torture in their realms, and “rationalized” justice systems slowly evolved in many kingdoms during the period.

Perhaps the most notable “enlightened monarch” was Frederick II (the Great) of Prussia (r. 1740 – 1786). A

great lover of French literature and philosophy, he insisted only on speaking French whenever possible (he once said that German was a language only useful for talking to one's horse), and he redecorated the Prussian royal palace in the French style, in which he avidly hosted Enlightenment salons. Frederick so impressed the French philosophes that Voltaire came to live at his palace for two years until the two of them had a falling out. Inspired by Enlightenment ideas, he freed the serfs on royal lands and banned the more onerous feudal duties owed by serfs owned by his nobles. He also rationalized the royal bureaucracy, making all applicants pass a formal exam, which provided a limited path of social mobility for non-nobles.

Another ruler inspired by Enlightenment ideas was the Tsarina Catherine the Great (r. 1762 – 1796) of Russia. Catherine was a correspondent of French philosophes and actively cultivated Enlightenment-inspired art and learning in Russia. Hoping to increase the efficiency of the Russian state, she expanded the bureaucracy, reorganized the Russian Empire's administrative divisions, and introduced a more rigorous and broad education for future officers of the military. She also created the first educational institution for girls in Russia, the Smolny Institute, admitting the daughters of nobles and, eventually, well-off commoners (ironically, given her own power, the Institute trained noble girls to be dutiful, compliant wives rather than would-be leaders).

Catherine was not just an admirer of Enlightenment philosophy, but an active member of the “Republic of Letters,” writing a series of plays, memoirs, and operas meant to celebrate Russian culture (not least against accusations of Russian backwardness by writers in the West), as well as her own success as a ruler. Her enthusiasm for the Enlightenment dampened considerably, however, as the French Revolution began in 1789, and while Russian nobles found their own privileges expanded, the vast majority of Russian subjects remained serfs. Like Frederick of Prussia, Catherine's appreciation for “reason” had nothing to do with democratic impulses.

One major political theme to emerge from the Enlightenment that did not require the goodwill of monarchs was the idea of human rights (or “the rights of man” as they were generally known at the time). Emerging from a combination of rationalistic philosophy and what historians describe as new “sensibilities” – above all the recognition of the shared humanity of different categories of people – concepts of human rights spread rapidly in the second half of the eighteenth century. In turn, they fueled both demands for political reform and helped to inspire the vigorous abolitionist (anti-slavery) movement that flourished in Britain in particular. Just as torture came to be seen by almost all Enlightenment thinkers as not just cruel, but archaic and irrational, so slavery went from an unquestionable economic necessity to a loathsome form of ongoing injustice. Just as the idea of human rights would soon inspire both the American and French Revolutions in the closing decades of the eighteenth century, the antislavery movements of the time would see many of their objectives achieved in the first few decades of the nineteenth (Britain would ban the slave trade in 1807 and slavery itself in 1833, although it would take the American Civil War in the 1860s to end slavery in the United States).

That concern for rights did not, with a few noteworthy exceptions, extend to women. Just as the Scientific Revolution had abandoned actual empirical methods entirely in merely endorsing ancient stereotypes about female inferiority, the vast majority of male philosophes either ignored women in their writing entirely or argued that women had to be kept in a subservient social position. The same philosophes who eagerly attended women-run salons often wrote *against* educated women relating to men as peers. The great works of early feminism that emerged in the late Enlightenment, such as the English writer Mary Wollstencraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1791, were viciously attacked and then largely ignored until the modern feminist movement forced the issue the better part of a century later.

The Radical Enlightenment and The Underground

While the mainstream Enlightenment was definitely an elite affair conducted in public, there were other elements to it. The so-called Radical Enlightenment (the term was invented by historians, not people involved in it) had to do with the ideas too scandalous for mainstream philosophes to support, like outright atheism. One example of this phenomenon was the emergence of Freemasonry, “secret,” although not difficult to find for most male European elites, groups of like-minded Enlightenment thinkers who gathered in “lodges” to discuss philosophy, make political connections, and socialize.

Some Masonic lodges were associated with a much more widespread part of the “radical” Enlightenment: the vast underground world of illegal publishers and smugglers. In areas with relatively relaxed censorship like the Netherlands and Switzerland, numerous small printing presses operated throughout the eighteenth century, cranking out illegal literature. Some of this literature consisted of the banned works of major philosophes themselves, but much of it was simply pirated and “dumbed-down” versions of things like the Encyclopedia. This illegal industry supplied the reading public, especially the reading public with little money to spend on books, with their essential access to Enlightenment thought.

For example, as noted above, an actual volume (let alone the entire multi-volume set) of the Encyclopedia was much too expensive for a common artisan or merchant to afford. Such a person *could*, however, afford a pamphlet-sized, pirated copy of several of the articles from the Encyclopedia that might interest her. Likewise, many works that were clearly outside of the acceptable bounds of legal publishing at the time (including both outright attacks on Christianity as a fraud as well as a shocking amount of pornography) were published and smuggled into places like France, England, and Prussia from the underground publishing houses. Perhaps the greatest impact of the Radical Enlightenment at the time is that it made mainstream Enlightenment ideas – however poorly summarized they might have been in pirated works – more accessible to far more of European society as a whole than they would have been otherwise.

Conclusion: Implications of the Enlightenment

The noteworthy philosophes of the Enlightenment rarely attacked outright the social hierarchy that they were part of. The abuses of the church, the ignorance of the nobility, even the injustices of kings might be fair game for criticism, but none of the better-known philosophes called for the equivalent of a political revolution. Only Rousseau was bold enough to advocate a republican form of government as a viable alternative to monarchy, and his political ideas were far less well-known during his lifetime than were his ruminations on education, nature, and morality. Even Kant’s essay celebrated what he described as the “public use of reason,” namely intellectuals exchanging ideas, while defending the authoritarian power of the (Prussian, in his case) king to demand that his subjects “obey!”

The problem was that even though most of the major figures of the Enlightenment were themselves social elites, their thought was ultimately disruptive to the Christian society of orders. Almost all of the philosophes claimed that the legitimacy of a monarch was based on their rule coinciding with the prosperity of the nation and the absence of cruelty and injustice in the laws of the land. The implication was that people have the right to judge the monarch in terms of his or her competence and rationality. Likewise, one major political and social structure that philosophes *did* attack was the fact that nobles enjoyed vast legal privileges but had generally done nothing to deserve those privileges besides being born

a member of a noble family. In contrast, philosophes were quick to point out that many members of the middle classes were far more intelligent and competent than was the average nobleman.

In addition, despite the inherent difficulty of publishing against the backdrop of censorship, philosophes did much to see that organized religion itself was undermined. The one stance all of the major Enlightenment thinkers agreed on regarding religion was that “revealed” religion – religion whose authority was based on miracles – was nonsense. According to the philosophes, the history of miracles could be disproved, and contemporary miracles were usually experienced by lunatics, women, and the poor (and were thus automatically suspect from their elite, male perspective). Miracles, by their very nature, purported to violate natural law, and according to the very core principles of Enlightenment thought, that simply was not possible.

Thus, the Enlightenment did more to disrupt the social and political order by the late eighteenth century than most of its members ever intended. The most obvious and spectacular expression of that disruption took place in a pair of political revolutions: first in the American colonies of Great Britain in the 1770s, then in France starting in the 1780s. In both of those revolutions, ideas that had remained in the abstract during the Enlightenment were made manifest in the form of new constitutions, laws, and principles of government, and in both cases, one of the byproducts was violent upheaval.

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CHAPTER 12: THE SOCIETY OF ORDERS

The eighteenth century was the (last) great century of monarchical power and the aristocratic control of society in Europe. It was also the end of the early modern period, before industrialism and revolution marked the beginning of the modern period at the end of the century. Ironically, the enormous changes that happened at the end of the century were totally unanticipated at the time. No one, even the most radical political philosopher, believed that the political order or the basic technological level of their society would be fundamentally changed.

One example of that outlook is that of a philosopher and writer, Louis-Sébastien Mercier, who in 1781 published *The Painting of Paris*, which depicted a more orderly and perfect French society of the future. In the Paris of the future, an enlightened king oversees a rationally-governed society and extends personal audiences to his subjects. The streets are clean, orderly, well-lit, and (unlike the Paris of his day) houses are numbered. Religious differences are calmly discussed and never result in violence. Strangely, from a present-day perspective, however, there is no new technology to speak of, and the political and social order remains intact: a king, nobility, clergy, and commoners occupy their respective places in society – they simply interact more “rationally.”

The *Painting of Paris* depicted an idealized version of Mercier’s contemporary society. With the exception of Britain’s constitutional monarchy and strong parliament, the monarchs of the major states of Europe succeeded in the eighteenth century in controlling governments that were at least “absolutist” in their pretensions, even though the nobility and local assemblies had a great deal of real power almost everywhere. In turn, the social orders were starkly divided, not just by wealth but by law and custom as well. This set of divisions was summarized in the system of “Estates” in France, the societal descendants of the divisions between “those who pray, those who fight, and those who work” in the Middle Ages.



A late-medieval portrayal of the three orders or estates. A reasonably accurate take on social divisions in the Middle Ages, but one that was increasingly out of date by the eighteenth century.

The First Estate, consisting of the clergy, ran not just the churches, but education, enormous tracts of land held by the church and the monasteries, orders like the Jesuits and Benedictines, and great influence in royal government. In Protestant lands, there was the equivalent in the form of the official Lutheran or Anglican churches, although the political power of the clergy in Protestant countries was generally weaker than was the Roman Church in Catholic countries.

The Second Estate, the nobility, was itself divided by the elite titled nobility with hereditary lordships of various kinds (Dukes, Counts, etc.) and a larger group of lesser nobles who owned land but were not necessarily very wealthy. In Britain, the latter were called the gentry and controlled the House of Commons in parliament; the House of Lords was occupied by the “peers of the realm,” the elite families of nobles often descended from the ancient Normans. Generally, the nobility as a whole represented no more than 4% of the overall population (with peculiar exceptions such as Poland and Hungary that had large numbers of nobles, most of whom were scarcely wealthier than peasants).

The Third Estate was simply everyone else, from rich bankers and merchants without titles down to the destitute urban poor and landless peasant laborers. During the Middle Ages, the Third Estate was represented by wealthy elites from the cities and large towns, with the peasantry – despite being the majority of the population – enjoying no representation whatsoever. By the eighteenth century, the Third Estate was far more diverse, dynamic, and educated than ever before. It did not, however, enjoy better political representation. As the century went on, a growing number of members of the Third Estate, especially those influenced by Enlightenment thought, came to chafe at a political order that remained resolutely medieval in its basic structure.

Social Orders and Divisions

The Nobility

In most countries, the nobility maintained an almost complete monopoly of political power. The higher ranks of the clergy were drawn from noble families, so the church did not represent any kind of check or balance of power. The king, while now generally standing head-and-shoulders above the aristocracy individually, was still fundamentally the first among equals, “merely” the richest and most powerful person of the richest and most powerful family: the royal dynasty of the kingdom.

Despite the social and political changes of the preceding centuries, European nobles continued to enjoy tremendous legal and social privileges. Nobles owned a disproportionate amount of land, and in some kingdoms (like Russia), only nobles *could* own land. Only nobles could serve as officers in the army, reaping the spoils of war and generous salaries in the process. Only nobles had political representation in various parliamentary bodies, with the notable caveat that cities still held privileges of their own (the *parlement* of Paris, for example, wielded a great deal of meaningful power in French politics). Nobles had their own courts, were tried by their peers, and would subject to more humane treatment than were commoners. Perhaps most importantly, nobles everywhere paid few taxes, especially in comparison to the taxes, fees, and rents that beleaguered the peasantry.

A whole system of status symbols was maintained by both law and custom as well – to cite just a few, only members of the aristocracy could wear masks at masquerade balls, nobles led processions in towns and had special places to sit at operas and churches alike, and only nobles could wear swords during peacetime. Some of these legal separations were not trivial; only nobles could hunt game, and the legal systems of Europe viciously persecuted poachers even if the poachers were motivated by famine. Non-nobles were constantly reminded of their inferior status thanks to both the legal privileges enjoyed by nobles and the array of visible status symbols.

By the eighteenth century, the nobility actively cultivated learning and social grace, hearkening back to the glory days of the Renaissance courtier and bypassing the relatively uncouth period of the religious wars. Education, music, and art became fashionable in Europe in the eighteenth century, and being witty, well-dressed, musically talented, and well read became a status symbol almost as important as owning a lavish estate. The eighteenth century was the height of so-called “polite society” among the nobility: a legally-reinforced elite that fancied themselves possessed of true “good taste.”

The Common People

The nobility also exercised considerable power over the (mostly rural) common people: peasants in the west

and serfs in the east. Landowning lords had the right to extract financial dues, fees, and rents on peasants in the west. In the east, they had almost total control over the lives and movements of their serfs, including the requirement for serfs to perform lengthy periods of unpaid labor on behalf of their lords. In its most extreme manifestations, serfdom was essentially the same thing as slavery. Russian estates were even sold according to the number of serfs (“souls”) they contained rather than the physical size of the plot.

Starting in the late seventeenth century and culminating in the eighteenth, many kingdoms saw the gradual elimination of the common lands that had been an essential economic safety net for the peasantry in the earlier centuries. The nobility proved astute at reorganizing agriculture along more capitalistic lines, and in turn their land-hunger prompted laws of “enclosure,” especially in Britain. The result was ongoing, sometimes debilitating, pressure on the peasants. Many peasant families who had once owned small plots of their own had to sell them to rich nobles and became landless agricultural laborers, only one step up from the truly destitute who fled to the cities in search of either work or church charity.

Peasants often fought back, especially when the nobility tried to impose new fees or tried to cut them off from the commons. There were cases of rural revolts, of peasants hiring lawyers and taking their lords to royal courts, and other forms of resistance. There were also truly enormous uprisings in the east – in both the Austrian Empire and Russia, giant peasant uprisings succeeded in killing thousands of nobles, only to be eventually put down by brutal government suppression. Thus, the nobility were in increasing conflict with the peasantry, largely because the former were trying to extract more wealth from the latter.

Another new factor was the rise of the bourgeoisie, the non-noble urban mercantile class. The bourgeoisie became a very important class in terms of the economies of the kingdoms of Europe, especially in the west, yet it did not “fit” into the society of orders. While wealthy members of the bourgeoisie blended in with and sometimes married into the nobility, others thought of themselves as being distinct, celebrating a life of productive work and serious education over what they saw as the foppiness and excess of the aristocracy. It was this latter self-conscious bourgeoisie that would play an important role in the revolutions of the end of the century. The (literate and urban) bourgeois class were also among those most keenly interested in Enlightenment ideas.

The Great Powers

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of five states, all of which were monarchies, comprising what would eventually be referred to as the Great Powers. Each of these states had certain characteristics: a strong ruling dynasty, a large and powerful army, and relative political stability. Over the course of the century, they jockeyed for position and power not only in Europe itself, but overseas: whole wars were fought between the Great Powers thousands of miles from Europe itself.

Of the Great Powers, France was regarded as the greatest at the time. France had the largest population, the biggest armies, the richest economy, and the greatest international prestige. Despite the fact that the crown was hugely debt-ridden, following Louis XIV’s wars and the fact that the next two kings were little better at managing money than he had been, the French monarchy was admired across Europe for its sophistication and power. French was also the international language by the eighteenth century: when a Russian nobleman encountered an Austrian and an Englishman, all three would speak French with one another.

In fact, the nobles of Europe largely thought of themselves in terms of a common aristocratic culture that had

its heartland in France – Russian nobles often spoke Russian very poorly, and nobles of the German lands often regarded the German language as appropriate for talking to horses or commoners, but not to other nobles (supposedly, Frederick the Great of Prussia claimed that he used German to speak to his horse and other languages to speak to people). The French dynasty of the Bourbons, the descendants of Henry IV, continued the practice of keeping court at Versailles and only going into Paris when they had to browbeat the Parisian city government into ratifying royal laws.

Great Britain was both the perennial adversary of France in war during the eighteenth century and the most marked contrast in politics. As a constitutional monarchy, Britain was a major exception to the continental pattern of absolutism. While still exercising considerable power, the German-born royal line of the Hanovers deferred to parliament on matters of law-making and taxation after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. A written constitution reigned in anything smacking of “tyranny” and wistful continental philosophers like Voltaire often looked to Britain as the model of a more rational, fair-minded political system against which to contrast the abuses they perceived in their own political environments.

In addition to warring with France, the focus of the British government was on the expansion of the commercial overseas empire. France and Britain fought repeatedly in the eighteenth century over their colonial possessions. Britain enjoyed great success over the course of the century in pushing France aside as a rival in regions as varied as North America and India. On the verge of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars in the last decades of the century, Britain was poised to become *the* global powerhouse.

France’s traditional rival was the Habsburg line of Austria. What had once been the larger and more disparate empire of the Habsburgs was split into two different Habsburg empires in 1558, when the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V abdicated. Charles V handed his Spanish possessions to his son and his Holy Roman imperial possessions to his younger brother. The Spanish line died off in 1700 when the last Spanish Habsburg, Charles II, died without an heir, which prompted the War of the Spanish Succession as the Bourbons of France fought to put a French prince on the Spanish throne and practically every other major power in Europe rallied against them.



The Holy Roman Empire in 1789. The territories depicted in dark yellow were those of the Habsburgs. The territory marked in blue in the northeast is the kingdom of Prussia, the great rival of Habsburg Austria. Note also that the Kingdom of Poland outside of the Holy Roman Empire was soon to be partitioned out of existence, its territory divided between Prussia, Russia, and Austria. That process was completed in 1795.

The Holy Roman line of Habsburgs remained strongly identified with Austria and its capital of Vienna. That line continued to rule the Austrian Empire, a political unit that united Austria, Hungary, Bohemia and various other territories in the southern part of Central Europe. While its nominal control of the Holy Roman Empire was all but political window dressing by the eighteenth century, the Austrian empire itself was by far the most significant German state and the Habsburgs of Austria were often the greatest threat to French ambitions on the continent.

The other German state of note was Prussia, the “upstart” great power. As noted in the discussion of absolutism, the Prussian royal line, the Hohenzollerns, oversaw the transformation of Prussia from a poor and backwards set of lands in northern Germany into a major military power, essentially by putting all state spending into the pursuit of military perfection. By the middle of the eighteenth century, the Prussian army was a match of the much larger Austrian force, with the two states emerging as military rivals.

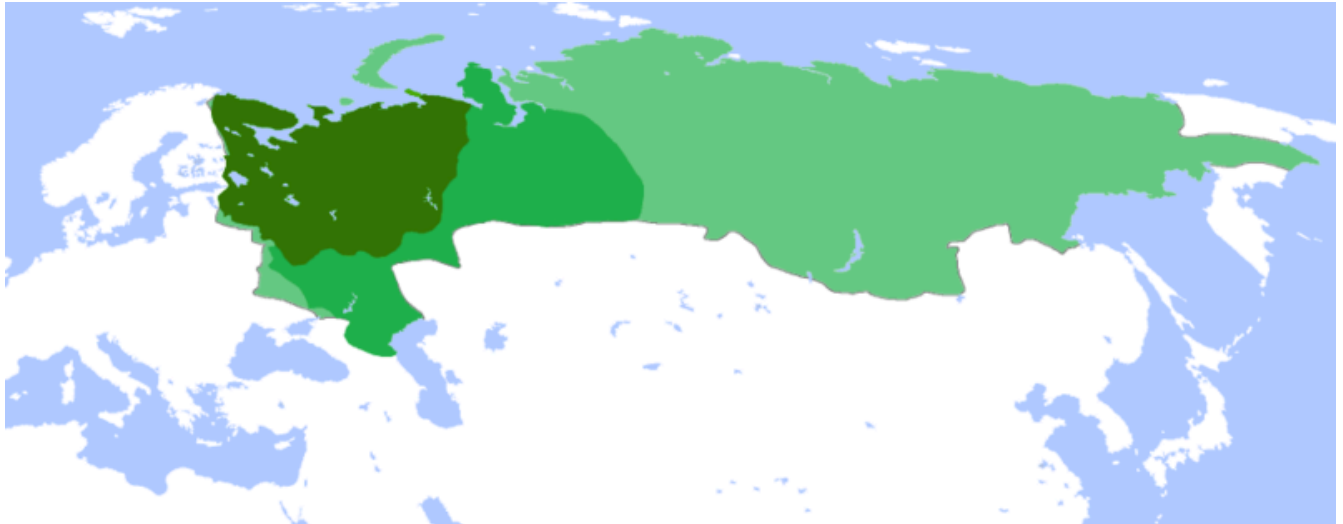
Russia

While this textbook has traced the development of the other Great Powers, it has not considered the case of Russia to this point. That is simply because there was no unified state called “Russia” before the late fifteenth century. Originally populated by Slavic tribal groups, Swedish Vikings called the Rus colonized and then mixed with the native Slavs over the course of the ninth century. The Rus were led by princes who ruled towns that eventually developed into small cities, the most important of which was Kiev in the present-day country of Ukraine. The Rus were eventually converted to Eastern Orthodox Christianity thanks to the influence of Byzantium and its missionaries, but their historical development was undermined by the Mongol invasion of the thirteenth century. The period of Mongol rule is still referred to as the “Mongol yoke” in Russian history, meaning a period in which the Russian people were used as beasts of burden and sources of wealth by their Mongol lords, like animals yoked to plows.

Russia emerged from the “Mongol yoke” thanks to the efforts of the Grand Prince of the city of Moscow, Ivan III (r. 1462 – 1505) and his grandson Ivan IV – “the Terrible” (r. 1533 – 1584). Ivan III was the prince of Muscovy, the territory around the city of Moscow, but thanks to his ruthless militarism, he expanded Muscovy’s influence to the Baltic Sea, fighting the Polish – Lithuanian Commonwealth to the west and conquering the prosperous city of Novgorod and its territories. He also overthrew the authority of the Mongol Golden Horde in his lands and began the process of permanently ending Mongol control in Russia. For the first time, a Russian prince had carved out a significant territory through conquest.

Two generations later, Ivan IV came to power in Muscovy. Ivan IV was, like his grandfather, a highly successful leader in war. Muscovy conquered a large part of the Mongol Golden Horde’s territory and also pushed back Turkic khans in the south. He dispatched explorers and hunters into Siberia, beginning the long process of the conquest of Siberia by Russia. He was also the first Russian ruler to claim the title of Tsar (also anglicized as Czar), meaning “Caesar.” Because Russia had adopted the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity centuries earlier, and because Constantinople (and the last remnant of the *actual* Roman Empire) fell to the Turks in 1453, Russian rulers after Ivan claimed that *they* were the true inheritors of the political power of the ancient Roman emperors. Just as the Holy Roman Emperors in the west claimed to be the political descendants of Roman authority (the German word “Kaiser,” too, means “Caesar”) so too did the Tsars of Russia.

Ivan IV was called The Terrible because of his incredible sadism: he had the beggars of Novgorod burned to death, he had nobles that displeased him ripped apart by wolves and dogs, and he crushed his own son’s skull with a club while in a rage. He had whole noble families slaughtered when he thought they posed a threat to his authority or were simply slow to respond to his demands that they serve him personally at his court. His overall goal was the transformation of the Russian nobles – called *boyars* – into servants of the state, one in which their power was based only on their loyalty to the Tsar. During his reign, he succeeded in asserting his authority through sheer brutality and terror.



The expansion of Russian imperial control from the early sixteenth century until 1700, with earlier territories marked in darker shades of green on the map. Imperial power reached the Pacific by the end of the seventeenth century.

After Ivan's death in 1584, Russia was plunged into a thirty-year period of anarchy called the Time of Troubles in which no one reigned as the recognized sovereign. Nobles reasserted their independence and Russia existed in a state of civil war (or armed anarchy, depending on one's perspective) for decades. The period between rulers ended when an assembly of nobles elected the first member of the Romanov family to hold the title of Tsar in 1613 – Michael I – but the Tsars remained weak and plagued by both resistance by nobles and huge peasant uprisings for many decades. One enormous peasant uprising, led by a man who claimed to be the “true” Tsar, threatened to overwhelm the forces of the real Tsar before being defeated in 1670.

The institution of serfdom was cemented in the midst of the chaos of the seventeenth century. When times were hard for Russian peasants, they frequently fled to the frontier, either Siberia or what would later be called the Ukraine (meaning “border region”). Since Russia was so enormous, this exacerbated an ongoing labor shortage problem. Unlike in the west, there was more than enough land in Russia, just not enough peasants to work it. Thus, the tsarist state instituted serfdom in 1649 across the board, formalizing what was already a widespread institution. This made peasants legally little better than slaves, forced to work the land and to serve the state in war when conscripted.

Russia's transformation and engagement with the rest of Europe began in earnest under Tsar Peter I (the Great), r. 1682 – 1725. Up to that point, so little was known about Russia in the west that Louis XIV once sent a letter to a tsar who had been dead for twelve years. Russian nobles themselves tended to be uneducated and uncouth compared to their western counterparts, and the Russian Orthodox Church had little emphasis on the learning that now played such a major role in both the Catholic and Protestant churches of the west. Peter learned about Western Europe from visiting foreigners in his early twenties and decided to go and see what the west had to offer himself – he disguised himself as a normal workman (albeit one who was seven feet tall) and undertook a personal journey of discovery.



The young Peter the Great, in a portrait he presented to the English King William III (whom he was visiting during his travels around Western Europe).

In the process, Peter personally learned about shipbuilding and military organization, returning intent on transforming the Russian state and military. He forced the Russian nobility to dress and act more like Western Europeans, sent Russian noble children abroad for their education, built an enormous navy and army to fight the Swedes and the Turks, and (on the backs of semi-slave labor) created the new port city of St. Petersburg as the new imperial capital. His military reforms were huge in scope – he instituted conscription in 1705 that required one out of every twenty serfs to serve for life in his armies, and he oversaw the construction of Russia's navy from nothing. Over two-thirds of state revenues went to the military even after he instituted new taxes and royal monopolies. He also forced the boyars to undergo military education and serve as army officers, with all male nobles after 1722 required to serve the state either as civil officials or military officers.

Peter fought an ultimately-unsuccessful war against the Ottomans in 1711, but he did capture some Turkish territory in the process; likewise, he seized the Baltic territories of Livonia and Estonia from what was then the unified

kingdom of Poland – Lithuania (a state that began a rapid, painful decline over the course of the century). His major enemy, though, was Sweden. Sweden was a powerful late-medieval and early-modern kingdom. By the 1650s, Sweden ruled Denmark, Norway, Finland, and the Baltic region. The king Charles XI (r. 1660 – 1697) successfully imitated Louis XIV’s absolutism by pitting lesser nobles against greater ones, forcing the nobles to serve him directly. His son Charles XII (r. 1697 – 1718) was so arrogant that he snatched the crown from the hand of the Lutheran minister at his own coronation and put it on his head; he also refused to swear the normal coronation oath. He was the true paragon of Swedish absolutism.

Charles XII faced by an attempt by Denmark, joined by the German principedom of Saxony, to reassert its sovereignty in 1700. This turned into the Great Northern War (1700 – 1721) when Peter the Great joined in, intent on seizing Baltic territory for a permanent port. The Swedes defeated a large Russian army in 1700, but then Charles shifted his focus to Poland and Saxony rather than invading Russia itself. The Russians rallied and, in 1703, captured the mouth of the Neva River; Tsar Peter ordered the construction of his new capital city, St. Petersburg, the same year. The war dragged on for years, with Charles XII dying fighting a rebellion in Norway in 1718, leaving no heir. The Swedish forces were finally and definitively beaten in 1721, leaving Russia dominant in the Baltic region.

By the time Peter died (after contracting pneumonia or the flu from diving into the freezing Neva to save a drowning man) in 1725, the Russian Empire was now six times larger than it had been under Ivan the Terrible. Thanks to its territorial gains on the Baltic and the construction of St. Petersburg, it was now a resolutely European power, albeit an unusual one. While Russia suffered from a period of weak rule after Peter’s death, it was simply so large and the Tsar’s authority so absolute that it remained a great power.

In 1762, the Prussian-born empress Catherine (who later acquired the honorific “the Great”) seized power from her husband in a coup. Catherine would go on to introduce reforms meant to improve the Russian economy, creating the first state-financed banks and welcoming German settlers to the region of the Volga River to modernize farming practices. She also modernized the army and the state bureaucracy to improve efficiency. Despite being an enthusiastic supporter of “Enlightened” philosophy (as noted in the last chapter), Catherine was as focused on Russian expansion as Peter had been half a century earlier, seizing the Crimean Peninsula from the Ottoman Empire, expanding Russian power in Central Asia, and extinguishing Polish independence completely, with Poland divided between Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795. By her death in 1796 Russia was more powerful than ever before.

Wars

Raw economics became a major focus of war in the seventeenth century, when the rival commercial empires of Europe fought over territory and trade routes, not just glory and dynastic lines. The Dutch and British fought repeatedly from 1652 – 1675, conflicts which resulted in the loss of Dutch territory in North America (hence the city of New York instead of New Amsterdam). The British also fought the Spanish over various territories. The noteworthy result was that the formerly-Spanish territory of Florida was handed over to the British in return for the Cuban port of Havana.

The most significant conflicts, however, were the ongoing series of wars between the two greatest powers of the eighteenth century: Britain and France. Britain had established naval dominance by 1700, but the French state was richer, its army much larger, and its navy almost Britain’s match. The French monarchy was also the established model of absolutism. Despite the financial savvy of the British government, most Europeans looked to France for their idea of a truly glorious state.

France became a highly aggressive power under Louis XIV, who saw territorial gains as essential to his own glory (he had the phrase “The Last Argument of Kings” stamped onto his cannons). His “grand strategy” was to seize territory from Habsburg Spain and Habsburg Austria by initiating a series of wars; he planned to force conquered populations to help pay for the wars and ultimately hoped to expand France to the Pyrenees in the south and the Rhine in the east. His wars in the late seventeenth century resulted in the seizure of small territories around the existing French borders, most notably in the Pyrenees. These wars, however, also drove the other powers of Europe into a defensive alliance against France, since it was clear that France threatened all of their interests (at one point Louis even tried to invade England; this would-be invasion was so unsuccessful it exists as a footnote in military history rather than the major event of something like the Spanish Armada).

The most significant war started by Louis was the War of the Spanish Succession (1701 – 1713). The last Spanish Habsburg died in 1700, and the heir was Louis’ grandson Philip. The Austrian Habsburgs rejected the legitimacy of the claim, and soon they recruited the British to help defeat France. The fighting dragged on for a decade as more European powers were drawn in. Finally, with France teetering on the edge of bankruptcy and Louis himself now old and ill, the powers agreed to negotiate. The results of the war were that Britain acquired additional territory in the Americas and a member of the Bourbon line was confirmed as the new Spanish king. However, the French and Spanish branches of the Bourbons were to be permanently distinct from one another: France would not control Spain, in other words. In addition, the Austrian Habsburgs absorbed the remaining Spanish possessions in Italy and the Hapsburg-controlled parts of the Netherlands, meaning Spain was now bereft of its last European territories outside of the Iberian peninsula itself.

Conflicts continued on and off between the Great Powers even after the War of the Spanish Succession. The next major conflict was the Seven Years War (1756 – 1763), better known in America as the French and Indian War. The war began when Prussia attempted a blatant land-grab from Austria, which quickly led to the involvement of the other Great Powers. This was a particularly bloody conflict, especially for the Native American tribes that allied with French or British colonial forces. The results of this war, another British victory, were far-reaching: France lost its Canadian possessions, including the entire French-speaking province of Quebec, it lost almost all of its territories in India, and Britain achieved dominance of commercial shipping to the Americas. While France was still the most powerful kingdom on the European continent, there were now no serious rivals to Britain on the oceans, something that allowed it to become the predominant imperial power in the world in the nineteenth century.

In turn, the Seven Years War directly led to the American Revolution (1775 – 1783). The British Parliament tried to impose unpopular taxes on the American colonists to help pay for the British troops garrisoned there during and after the Seven Years War. Open revolt broke out in 1775 and the Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. The French provided both material and, then, actual military aid to the Americans starting in 1778, and Britain was finally forced to concede American independence in 1783. Significantly, this was the only war that France “won” over the course of the eighteenth century, and it gained nothing from it but the satisfaction of having finally beaten its British enemy. The real winners were the American colonists who were now able to go about creating an independent nation.

Conclusion

The eighteenth century was the culmination of many of the patterns that first came about in the late medieval and early Renaissance periods. The Great Powers were centralized, organized states with large armies and global

economic ties. The social and legal divisions between different classes and categories were never more starkly drawn and enforced than they were by the eighteenth century. Wars explicitly fought in the name of gaining power and territory, often territory that spanned multiple continents (as in Britain's seizure of French territory in both the Americas and India).

Ironically, given the apparent power and stability of this political and social order, everything was about to change. As the ideas of the Enlightenment spread and as the groups that made up the Third Estate of commoners grew increasingly resentful of their subservient political position, a virtual powder keg was being lit under the political structure of Europe. The subsequent explosion began in France in 1789.

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CHAPTER 13: THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The French Revolution was a radical political transformation of what had been one of the most traditional and most powerful of the great European states in the space of a few short years. France went from a Catholic absolute monarchy to a radical, secular republic with universal manhood suffrage, a new calendar, a new system of weights and measures, and the professed goal of conquering the rest of Europe in the name of freedom, all in about five years. Even though the Revolution failed to achieve the aims of its most radical proponents in the short term, it set the stage for everything else that happened in Europe for the rest of the nineteenth century, with major consequences for world history.

The Causes of the Revolution

The immediate cause of the French Revolution was the dire financial straits of the French state after a century of war against Britain and an outdated system of taxation. As noted in the last chapter, starting at the end of the seventeenth century there was an (on-again, off-again) century of warfare between France and Britain, much of it fought overseas (in India, the Caribbean, and North America). With the noteworthy exception of the American Revolution, Britain won every single war. The major impact of the colonial wars between France and Britain in the eighteenth century on France was to push the state to the brink of bankruptcy – even as Britain funded its wars through the sale of bonds from the official national bank, the French state struggled to raise revenue. The loans it desperately sought had to be found from private banks, traders, and wealthy individuals, and the interest rates it was obliged to pay were punishingly high.

Not only did France lose much of its empire in Canada, the Caribbean, and India to the British, the state also accumulated a huge burden of debt which consumed 60% of tax revenues each year in interest payments. In turn, the problem for the monarchy was that there was no way to raise more money: taxes were tied to land and agriculture, rather than commerce, and nobles and the church were exempt from taxation. As they had been since the Middle Ages, taxes were drawn almost entirely from peasant agriculture, supplemented by a few special taxes on commodities like salt. Since the nobility and church were all but tax-exempt, and the monarchy did not have a systematic way to tax commerce, there was a lot of wealth in France that the crown simply could not access through taxation.

In turn, the power of the nobility ensured that any dream of far-reaching reform was out of the question. There were about 200,000 nobles in France (which had a population of 26 million at the time). All of the senior members of the administration, the army, the navy, and the Catholic Church were nobles. The nobility owned a significant percentage of the land of France outright – about one-third – and had lordly rights over most of the rest of it. The pageantry around the person of the king and queen first established by Louis XIV continued at the palace of Versailles, but nothing changed the fact that noble wealth remained largely off-limits to the state and nobles exercised a great deal of real political power.

The one war in which France managed to defeat Britain was the American Revolutionary War of the 1770s and early 1780s. France subsidized the American Revolution and offered weapons, advisers, and naval support. The result was to push the state to the verge of outright bankruptcy, with no direct economic benefit to France from American

victory. Traditionally, the French kings dismissed financial concerns as being beneath their royal dignity, but the situation had reached such a point of desperation that even the king had to take notice.

Starting In the early 1780s, the French King Louis XVI (great-great-grandson of Louis XIV) appointed a series of finance ministers to wade through the mountains of reports and ledgers to determine how much the state owed, to whom, and how paying it back would be possible. Attempts to overhaul the tax system as a whole were shouted down by the major city governments and powerful noble interests alike. By 1787, it was clear that the financial situation was simply untenable and the monarchy had to secure more revenue, somehow. The king was at a loss of what to do. He reluctantly came to realize that only taxing the nobility and, perhaps, the Church could possibly raise the necessary revenue. Thus, Louis XVI was up against the entrenched interests of the most powerful classes of his kingdom.

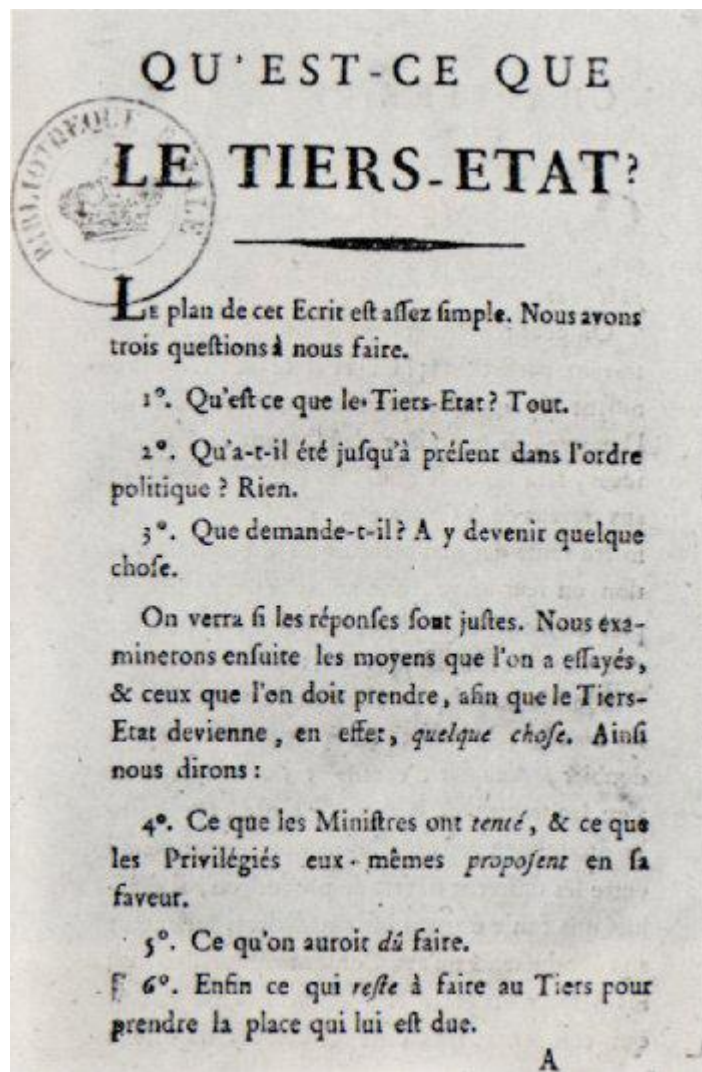
Events of the Early Revolution

When his efforts to increase tax receipts met with resistance from the nobility, Louis XVI first called an Assembly of Notables to deliberate with him. That Assembly consisted of the most powerful noblemen in France, who outright refused to grant new revenues to the crown. Louis reluctantly agreed to revive France's ancient representative assembly, the Estates General, in the hope of persuading that body to provide more revenue. For the first time in the history of French absolutism, a king was thus required to formally negotiate with his subjects simply to stave off bankruptcy.

The Estates General had not met since 1614. Like the British parliament, its original function was to serve as a venue for the French king to bargain with the entire nation for money, almost always in the service of war. The Estates General was a gathering of representatives of the three estates – clergy, nobility, and everyone else – in which the French king could ask for tax revenue in return for various bargains and promises (often the promise not to ask for more taxes in the future). This had not happened for over 150 years, and thus no living French person had any experience of what to expect.

The result in the spring of 1789 was a surprisingly democratic election, with the majority of the male population voting for delegates to the Estates General. Many hoped that the meeting would result in royal intervention in a host of perceived injustices, not just more money for the state. Before the estates met, many voters and their representatives drew up lists of grievances demanding relief from unfair financial burdens imposed by the nobility, of better representation of townsfolk and peasants, and of royal intervention on behalf of the people of France, among other things. These political expectations rose at the very moment when the price of bread was skyrocketing – 1787 and 1788 had both seen very poor harvests, and there was widespread fear of outright famine. Even as members of the Third Estate drew up their lists of grievances, rumors were spreading that nobles and wealthy merchants were hoarding grain to drive up prices.

In the past, the Estates General had consisted of three separate groups, representing the clergy (the First Estate), the nobility (the Second Estate), and prosperous townsfolk (the Third Estate). In turn, voting was done by estate, not by proportional representation, with the first and second estates generally joining together to outvote the third. Thus, the small minority of the population that consisted of nobles and clerics could always outvote the majority of the population in this traditional system of voting. The problem for the political stability of the kingdom was that French society had changed enormously since the last meeting of the Estates General. Many of the representatives of the Third Estate thought of themselves as the representatives of France *itself*, since the immense majority of the population consisted of commoners and laypeople. The key issue was whether the king would allow voting to follow the number of representatives, which would give the Third Estate a clear majority, or if he would insist on the old model in which the clergy and nobility dominated.



*The cover of *What Is The Third Estate?*, a highly influential pamphlet written by a liberal clergyman, the Abbé Sieyès, in the lead-up to the meeting of the Estates General. His argument: the Third Estate was “everything,” representing the nation of France as a whole.*

The king vacillated on this question for weeks, but as the representatives came together in June of 1789 he confirmed that voting would be by estate. This prompted a spontaneous, and for the moment peaceful, act of defiance on the part of many of the representatives of the Third Estate, joined by some sympathetic nobles and priests. First, they declared themselves to be not just the representatives of the Third Estate, but of France itself as a whole: they were the “National Assembly” in whom the will of the French people would be expressed. Then, discovering on the morning of June 20 that their meeting hall was locked (by accident, as it turned out, although they feared royal interference), they occupied the tennis court of Versailles and pledged not to leave until they had drafted a constitution and the king had accepted it – this came to be known as the Tennis Court Oath, generally considered to be the moment at which the French Revolution truly began.



The greatest painter of the revolutionary era, Jacques-Louis David, captured the moment in which the Tennis Court Oath was declared. Note the Catholic priest, Protestant minister, and agnostic “freethinker” embracing in the front of the crowd: religious divisions were to be laid aside in the name of national unity.

The King was, as was typical for Louis XVI, unsure of how to proceed. He addressed representatives of all three estates a few days later, promising reform, and when faced with continued defiance, he ordered the representatives of all three estates to join together in the National Assembly. As the crucial weeks of late June and early July unfolded, however, a faction of conservative nobles and the queen tried to persuade Louis to use force to eliminate what they correctly perceived to be a fundamental challenge to royal authority, and he cautiously moved forward with a plan to summon troops to watch over the proceedings.

In Paris, about twenty miles away, rumors spread that the king was going to crush the new National Assembly with force. As a result, crowds took to the streets on July 12th. On the 14th, a crowd searching for weapons overwhelmed the Bastille, a royal prison and arsenal, and murdered its guards. Soon, royal troops started abandoning their posts and joining with the rebels. This event, when a popular uprising in Paris spontaneously employed force to stave off the threat of a royalist crackdown, remains the national holiday of the French Republic to this day, commemorated as Bastille Day. On July 16th the war minister advised the king that the army could no longer be relied upon. The king accepted the appointment of a liberal nobleman, Lafayette, as commander of a new “National Guard” and, reluctantly, committed himself to working with the National Assembly.

Meanwhile, rioting had spread to the countryside as peasants, learning of the developments in Versailles and

Paris, sought to both feed themselves and to lash out against the nobility who, they thought, were driving them into destitution. Rumors spread among the peasantry that nobles were hoarding stores of grain, driving up prices and starving the peasants into submission. The result was the “Great Fear,” in which peasants attacked and looted noble manors. Their main target was the debt ledgers that nobles kept on their peasants, which the peasants gleefully burned (thereby erasing their debts entirely – there was no such thing as a “backup copy” in 1789).

Under these circumstances of anarchy in the countryside, the National Assembly needed to do something dramatic to maintain control of the situation. On August 4, 1789, it voted to end feudal privilege (the landlords’ rights to coerce labor and fees of various kinds from the peasantry), on August 14th it abolished the sale of offices, and on August 26th it issued a Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, modeled in part on the American Bill of Rights. In October, in a single bold stroke, the Assembly seized church lands and property, selling them at auction to fund the Revolutionary state itself. Finally, in early 1790 it abolished noble titles altogether, something that was almost redundant since those titles no longer had legal privileges associated with them.

The abolition of privilege meant that a government – especially in the matter of taxation and law – should treat people as individual citizens rather than as members of social classes. People differed quantitatively in the amount of wealth they owned, but not qualitatively according to social rank or estate. Thus, in a shockingly short amount of time, the French state was forced to accept that legitimate power belongs to the nation as a whole, not to the king, and that every citizen should be equal before the law. The Revolutionaries summarized their ideals with the motto of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity” – to this day, the official credo of the French state.

“Equality”

Of the three elements of the Revolutionary motto, “equality” was in some ways the most fraught with implications. All of the members of the National Assembly were men. Almost all were Catholic – a few were Protestants, but none were Jews. All were white as well, despite the existence of a large population of free blacks and mixed-race inhabitants of the French colonies (especially in the Caribbean). The initial claim that all citizens ought to be equal before the law seemed straightforward enough until the Assembly had to decide if that equality extended to those besides the people who had held a monopoly on political representation of any kind in most of French history: property-owning male Catholics. The eminent historian of France, Lynn Hunt, in her *The Invention of Human Rights*, traces some of the ways in which the promise of “equality” brought about changes that the members of the Assembly had never anticipated early on – some of her arguments are presented below.

While some of the early Revolutionaries had spoken in favor of the extension of rights to Protestants before the Revolution, fewer had spoken on behalf of France’s Jewish minority. Despite misgivings from Catholic conservatives in the Assembly, Protestants saw their rights recognized by the end of 1789 thanks in part to the fact that Protestants already exercised political rights in parts of southern France. In turn, while the idea of legal equality for Jews was practically unthinkable before the Revolution, the logic of equality seemed to acquire its own momentum over the course of 1789 – 1791, with French Jews winning their rights as French citizens in September of 1791.

For both Protestants and Jews, the members of the Assembly concluded that religious faith was essentially a private matter that did not directly impact one’s ability to exercise political rights. Having already broken with the Catholic church – and seized much of its property – the Assembly now created a momentous precedent for religious tolerance. Religion was now officially stripped of its political valence for the first time in European history. This was more

than a “separation of church and state”: it suggested that religious belief was in fact irrelevant to political loyalty and public conduct. Clearly, much had changed in the centuries since the Protestant Reformation unleashed its firestorm of controversy and bloodshed.

In the case of the blacks and mixed-race peoples of the French colonies, however, the Assembly at first showed little interest in extending any form of political rights. Several members of the Assembly argued that slavery should be abolished, but they were in the minority. France’s Caribbean colonies, above all its sugar-producing plantation colony of St. Domingue (present-day Haiti), produced enormous wealth for the French state and for numerous slave-based plantation owners and their French business partners. Thus, even those in favor of major reforms in France itself often balked at the idea of meddling with the wealth of the slave economies of the Caribbean. Once again, however, the logic of equality worked inexorably to upset centuries-old political hierarchies. Free blacks and mixed-race inhabitants of the colonies, once learning of the events in France, swiftly petitioned to have their own rights recognized. Much more alarmingly to the members of the Assembly, the slaves of St. Domingue (who comprised approximately 90% of its population) also learned of the Revolution and of its egalitarian promise.

The Assembly took steps to recognize the rights of free people of color only slowly at first. In the summer of 1791, however, a slave uprising in St. Domingue forced the issue. The Assembly desperately scrambled to maintain control of the situation, hoping in part to win over the free people of color in the colony to fight alongside white plantation owners to maintain control. Over the course of the following years, the rebellion in St. Domingue saw French authority destroyed, plantations overrun, and hundreds of thousands of slaves seizing their freedom. Having already lost control, the Assembly finally voted to abolish slavery entirely in February of 1794. Thus, unlike the cases of Protestant and Jewish enfranchisement, racial equality was only “granted” by the Assembly because it could not be maintained by force.



The slave rebellion in St. Domingue, soon to be the nation of Haiti, was led by Toussaint L'Ouverture, a former slave himself.

In the rhetoric of the Assembly, missing from the emancipatory logic entirely however, were women. There were no debates on the floor of the Assembly having to do with women's rights, in stark contrast to the lengthy arguments over religious minorities and the black inhabitants of the colonies. French men, radicals very much included, simply took it for granted that women were incapable of exercising political independence. As a matter of fact, however, women exercised political independence at several key moments in the revolution, drawing up grievances to be submitted to the king at the Estates General, participating in the storming of the Bastille, and forcibly removing the royal family from Versailles to Paris (it was a group of armed women who carried out that particular change of address for the king, queen, and heir to the throne).

Some women both in France and abroad forcefully drove home the implication of the Revolution's promise of "equality," with the playwright Olympe de Gouges issuing a *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* in 1791 in parallel to the Assembly's 1789 *Rights of Man and Citizen*. In England, the writer Mary Wollstonecraft wrote one of the founding texts

of modern feminism, *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in 1792, that made a straightforward claim: the liberation of women would play a key role in the disintegration of unwarranted social and political hierarchy for all. Both highlighted the obvious connection between the liberal promise of equality driving the revolution forward and an even more far-reaching project of human emancipation.

Neither work, however, inspired sympathy among the vast majority of the male population of France (or Britain), and as the revolution grew more radical (see below), the members of the Assembly grew ever-more hostile to the demand for rights for women. De Gouges was eventually executed on orders from the Assembly as a “counter-revolutionary,” and the political clubs of women that had sprung up since 1789 were shut down. It would take the better part of a century for women to force the issue and begin the long, arduous process of seizing political rights.

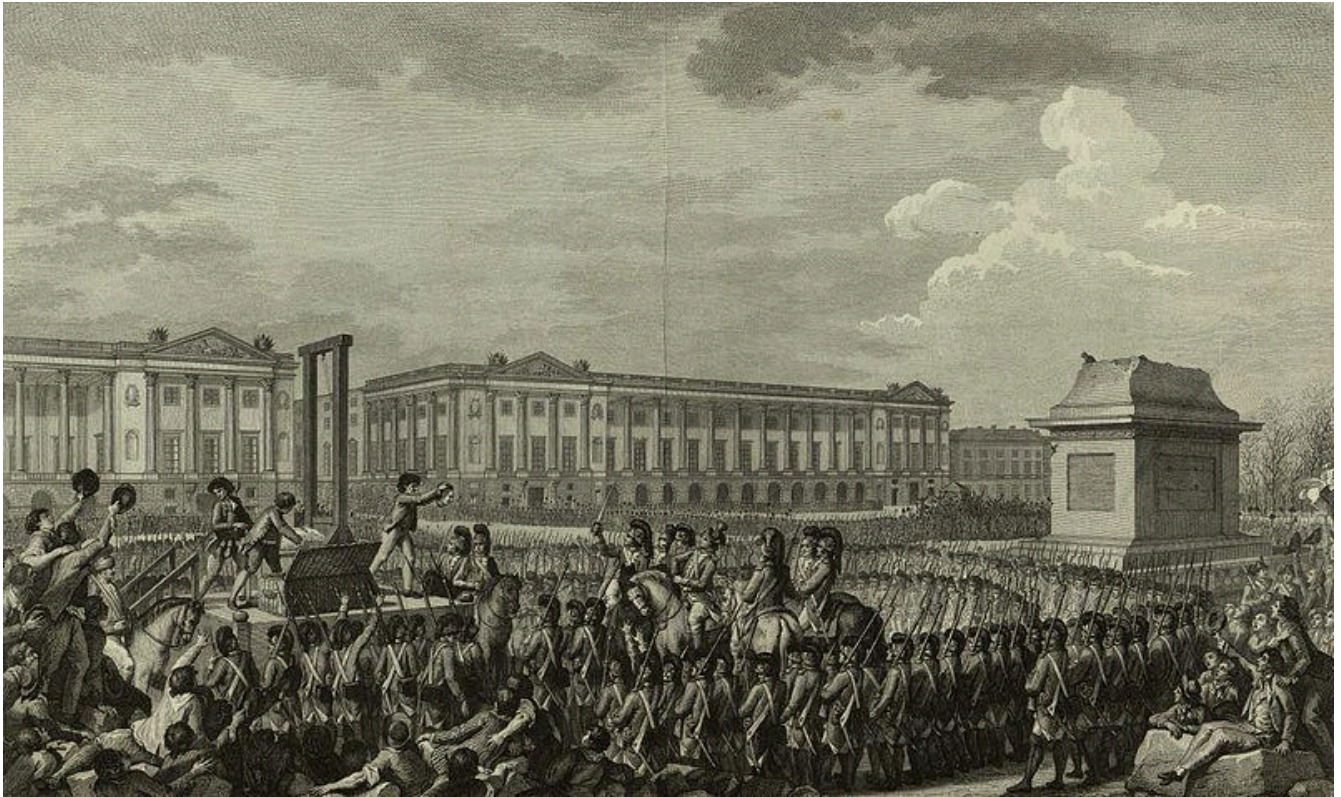
The Radical Phase and the Terror

Until June of 1791, the National Assembly tried to build a constitutional monarchy, even as it faced increasing hostility among the great powers of Europe, all of which were monarchies, along with problems with inflation and hunger in the countryside. In June of 1791, the king and his family fled Paris, but were caught on the border (supposedly by a postal worker who recognized the king from his portrait on coins). It was soon discovered that the royal family had been corresponding with foreign monarchs and nobles, hoping to inspire an invasion from abroad to restore the king to the throne and to end the Revolution by force. The situation rapidly radicalized as the prestige of the king was destroyed overnight; even as the new French Constitution was formally passed in October of 1791, making France a constitutional monarchy, the king himself was under house arrest.

The latter situation prompted the kings of Austria and Prussia to call upon the monarchs of Europe to fully restore Louis XVI to control of his country, although they did not yet declare war on France. Radical elements of the National Assembly, however, anticipated war and convinced the Assembly to declare preemptive war on Austria in April of 1792; Prussia soon joined in an alliance with Austria against France. The Assembly dispatched the new National Guard and a hastily-assembled army, many of whom were former soldiers of the royal army, against the forces of Austria and Prussia along the French border.

In September of 1792, as the war began in earnest and the king languished in prison, a new constitution was instituted that formally abolished the monarchy and made France into a republic with universal manhood suffrage. This was the first time in the history of Europe that every adult male was allowed the right to vote regardless of wealth or status. In just over three years, France had gone from an absolute monarchy to the first major experiment in democracy since the days of the Roman Republic nearly two thousand years earlier.

In January of 1793, Louis XVI was executed as a traitor to the republic after heated debate and a close vote in the Assembly. The war grew as Britain and the Dutch Republic joined with Prussia and Austria against France, further increasing the military pressure on the French borders. The middle part of 1793 saw fear of foreign invasion and food shortages, along with royalist uprisings in parts of France itself. The result was the appointment of a dictatorial emergency committee, the Committee for Public Safety, headed by twelve of the most radical members of the republican government.



The aftermath of the execution of Louis XVI, with his head displayed to the crowd. He was executed by guillotine, the newly-invented 'humane' method of execution favored by the Revolutionary government.

The twelve members of this committee would rule France from September 1793 to July 1794 as a dictatorial council, charged with defending the Revolution from both its external enemies and internal rebels. It was extremely successful in the former regard, issuing a *levée en masse*, or total mobilization for war, which swelled the ranks of the French forces and held the Austrian and Prussian armies in check. Meanwhile, the Revolutionary government set up a subsistence committee to develop and elaborate a system of price controls, requisitions, and currency regulation, backed by police power. The committee restored order to rebellious areas by sending its members on missions with instructions for ruthless repression, again backed by violence.

Thus, just five years after the Revolution had begun, control was now in the hands of a small dictatorial committee of radicals who used violent repression to hold the nation together, continue the war against almost all of Europe, and soon, to pass even more radical measures. They made extensive use of the guillotine, a new “humane” technology of execution named after the medical doctor who invented it, and their leader was the (in)famous Maximilien Robespierre, whom his followers called “the Incorruptible” for his single-minded focus on seeing the Revolution succeed.

Under Robespierre’s leadership, the Committee for Public Safety attempted to reorganize and “rationalize” French society as a whole, not just win wars. The Revolutionary government passed a number of radical measures under Robespierre’s leadership. First, it sponsored the creation of the metric system. From an unsystematic smattering of different standards of weights and measures across France, the Revolutionary government oversaw the invention and use of a simple, unified system based on increments of ten (i.e. 100 centimeters is equal to 1 meter, 1,000 meters is equal to one kilometer, 1,000 grams is equal to 1 kilogram, etc.). Of all the changes instituted by the Revolutionary government during its radical phase, this was to be the most successful and long-lasting.

Since the members of the committee believed that not just France, but the world was on the threshold of a new era, they proclaimed the creation of a new calendar that began on September 22, 1792 (Day 1, Year 1), the day that the republic had been declared. All of history was to follow from that first day. Likewise, new ten-day weeks were introduced, with new four-week months named after their weather rather than arbitrary historical figures (e.g. the month of August, named after Augustus Caesar, was renamed “Thermidor,” which means “hot.” February became “Brumaire,” which means “foggy,” and April became “Prairial,” meaning “springlike.”) Year-end celebrations were planned to pay tribute to the Revolution itself in quasi-religious ceremonies presided over by republican officials.

In perhaps the most astonishing campaign, the Revolutionary state launched a major attempt to “de-Christianize” the nation, removing crosses from buildings and graveyards and renaming churches “temples to reason.” The cathedral of Notre Dame in the center of Paris was stripped of its Christian iconography, and Robespierre oversaw new ceremonies meant to worship a (newly invented) supreme being of reason. This was the culmination of the anticlerical measures that had begun in the first year of the Revolution, with the seizure of church lands and property, but it now aimed at nothing less than the suspension of Christianity itself in France. In something of a symbolic parallel, the committee also had the bodies of dead French kings disinterred and dumped into a common grave (the corpse of Louis XIV landed on that of his grandfather, Henry IV).

To enforce its will and ensure “security,” the Committee for Public Safety instituted what was later dubbed “The Terror,” as suspected traitors were arrested, interrogated, and confronted with the possibility of imprisonment or execution. While estimates vary considerably, somewhere between 35,000 – 55,000 accused enemies of the Revolution were executed or died in prison during the Terror, which was further intensified by widespread imprisonment (totaling half a million people, 3% of the adult population). To impose its policies on grain procurement and prices, the government had to rely largely on local organizations of militants who often terrorized the very peasants they were supposed to represent. Likewise, the most significant battles fought by French troops were against royalist rebels, not foreign soldiers.

In fact, the bloodiest repression seen during the Terror happened far from Paris, and did not involve any guillotines. A western region of France, the *Vendée*, had been the site of the largest royalist insurrection against the Revolution in early 1793, featuring a rebel army of conservative peasants. It took until the summer for the royalists to be defeated, and in the aftermath of that defeat the revolutionary army inflicted a form of revenge against the people of the region that came close to outright genocide. Men and women were slaughtered regardless of whether or not they had participated in the uprising, villages were burned to the ground, and the death toll easily exceeded 100,000 people (some estimates place the number far higher).

Against the backdrop of the Terror, many members of the Revolutionary government itself began to fear for their lives. Likewise, the mandate for the committee’s very existence – protecting the Revolution against its foreign and domestic enemies – was made somewhat obsolete when French forces won major victories against Prussia and Austria in the summer of 1794. Robespierre inspired revulsion and fear among even some of his erstwhile supporters because of his fanatical devotion to the Revolutionary cause and his overt attachment to using terror to achieve his ends. Thus, in July of 1794 a conspiracy of worried Revolutionaries succeeded in arresting, briefly trying, and then executing Robespierre as a tyrant. The Committee of Public Safety was dissolved.

After the fall of Robespierre the Revolution began to slide away from its most radical positions. A government of property owners took over under a new “Directory” in 1795, which rescinded price controls and ended the abortive attempt to de-Christianize the nation. A wave of reprisals against former radicals known as the “white terror” saw tens of thousands murdered (as many died in the white terror as had under the Committee of Public Safety’s campaigns of

persecution). France remained at war with most of the rest of Europe, even as royalist uprisings continued in areas across the nation itself. It was in this context of violence and insecurity that, In October of 1795, a young, accomplished general named Napoleon Bonaparte put down a royalist insurrection in Paris and came to the attention of ambitious politicians within the Directory.

Conclusion

The influence of the ideals of the French Revolution was fairly limited outside of France in its early years. Monarchs and social elites watched in horror as the Revolution radicalized, and the armies of states like Prussia and Austria sought to contain it even as their police forces cracked down on would-be sympathizers. All too soon, however, the Revolutionary armies had a new leader, one who would ultimately bring radical reform to much of Europe at the point of bayonet: Napoleon.

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SECTION III

CHAPTER 1: NAPOLEON

Napoleon

Considering that he would go on to become one of the most significant French rulers of all time, there is considerable irony in the fact that Napoleon Bonaparte was not born in France itself, but on the island of Corsica in the Mediterranean. A generation earlier, Corsica had been won by France as a prize in one of its many wars, and Napoleon was thus born a French citizen. His family was not rich, but did have a legitimate noble title that was recognized by the French state, meaning Napoleon was eligible to join the ranks of noble-held monopolies like the officer corps of the French army. Thus, as a young man, his parents sent him to France to train as an artillery officer. There, he endured harassment and hazing from the sons of “real” French nobles, who belittled his Corsican accent and treated him as a foreign interloper. Already pugnacious and incredibly stubborn, the hazing contributed to his determination to someday arrive at a position of unchallenged authority. Thanks to his relentless drive, considerable intellectual gifts, and more than a little luck, he would eventually achieve just that.

Napoleon was a great contrast. On the one hand, he was a man of the French Revolution. He had achieved fame only because of the opportunities the revolutionary armies provided; as a member of a minor Corsican noble family, he would never have risen to prominence in the pre-revolutionary era. Likewise, with his armies he “exported” the Revolution to the rest of Europe, undermining the power of the traditional nobility and instituting a law code based on the principle of legal equality. Decades later, as a prisoner in a miserable British island-prison in the South Atlantic, Napoleon would claim in his memoirs that everything he had done was in the name of France and the Revolution.

On the other hand, Napoleon was a megalomaniac who indulged his every political whim and single-mindedly pursued personal power. He appointed his family members to run newly-invented puppet states in Europe after he had conquered them. He ignored the beliefs and sentiments of the people he conquered and, arguably, of the French themselves, who remained loyal because of his victories and the stability and order he had returned to France after the tumult of the 1790s. He micro-managed the enormous empire he had created with his armies and trusted no one besides his older brother and the handful of generals who had proved themselves over years of campaigning for him. Thus, while he may have truly believed in the revolutionary principles of reason and efficiency, and cared little for outdated traditions, there was not a trace of the revolution’s democratic impulse present in his personality or in the imperial state that he created.

The Rise of Napoleon’s Empire

Napoleon had entered the army after training as an artillery officer before the revolution. He rose to prominence against the backdrop of crisis and war that affected the French Republic in the 1790s. As of 1795, political power had shifted again in the revolutionary government, this time to a five-man committee called the Directorate. The war against the foreign coalition, which had now grown to include Russia and the Ottoman Empire, ground on endlessly even as the economic situation in France itself kept getting worse.

Napoleon first came to the attention of the revolutionary government when he put down a royalist insurrection in Paris in 1795. He went on in 1796 and 1797 to lead French armies to major victories in Northern Italy against the Austrians. He also led an attack on Ottoman Turkish forces in Egypt in 1797, where he was initially victorious, only to have the French fleet sunk behind him by the British (he was later recalled to France, leaving behind most of his army in the process). Even in defeat, however, Napoleon proved brilliant at crafting a legend of his exploits, quickly becoming the most famous of France's revolutionary generals thanks in large part to a propaganda campaign he helped finance.

In 1799, Napoleon was hand-picked to join a new three-man conspiracy that succeeded in seizing power in a coup d'état; the new government was called the Consulate, its members "consuls" after the most powerful politicians in the ancient Roman Republic. Soon, it became apparent that Napoleon was dominating the other two members completely, and in 1802 he was declared (by his compliant government) Consul for Life, assuming total power. In 1804, as his forces pushed well beyond the French borders, he crowned himself (the first ever) emperor of France. He thought of himself as the spiritual heir to Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar, declaring that, a member of the "best race of the Caesars," he was a founder of empires.



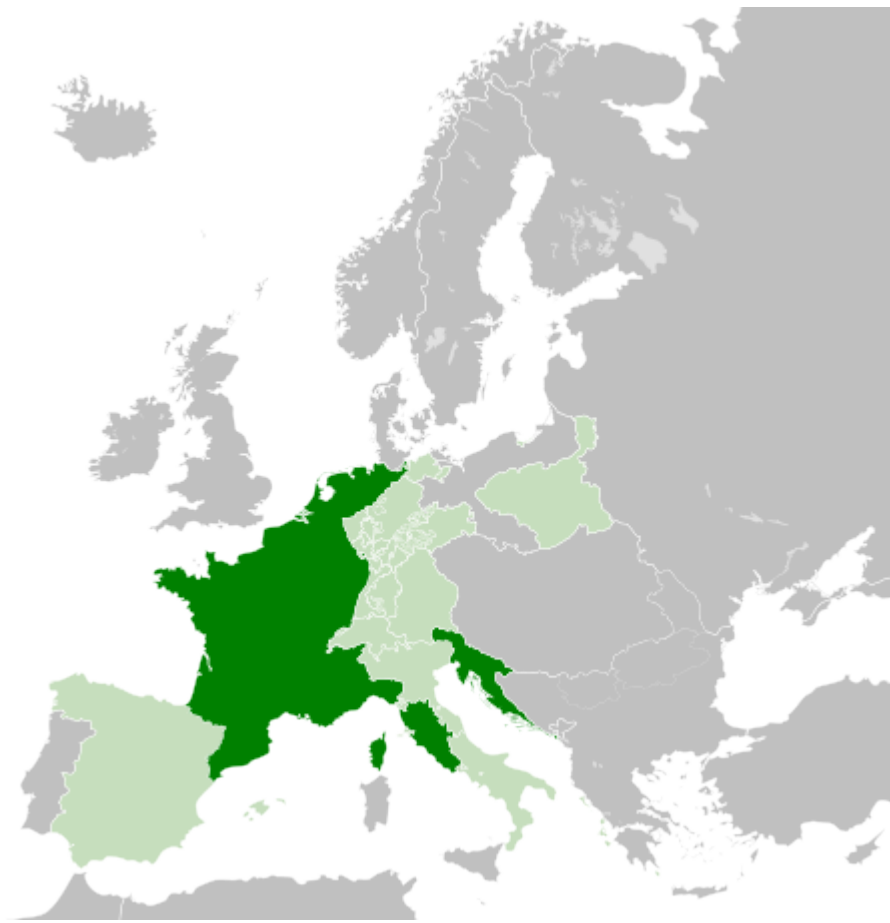
Napoleon on his imperial throne. He was not one for subtlety.

Even as he was cementing his hold on political power, Napoleon was leading the French armies to victory against the foreign coalition. He continued the existing focus on total war that had begun with the *levée en masse*, but he enhanced it further by paying for the wars (and new troops) with loot from his successful conquests. He ended up controlling a million soldiers by 1812, the largest armed force ever seen. From 1799 to 1802, he defeated Austrian and British forces and secured a peace treaty from both powers, one that lasted long enough for him to organize a new grand strategy to conquer not only all of continental Europe, but (he hoped), Britain as well. That treaty held until late 1805, when a new coalition of Britain, Austria, and Russia formed to oppose him.

His one major defeat during this early period was when he lost the ability to threaten Britain itself: in October of 1805, at the Battle of Trafalgar, a British fleet destroyed a larger French and allied Spanish one. The British victory was so decisive that Napoleon was forced to abandon his hope of invading Britain and had to try to indirectly weaken it instead. Even the fact that the planned invasion never came to pass did not slow his momentum, however, since the enormous army of seasoned troops he assembled for it was available to carry out conquests of states closer to home in Central Europe.

Thus, despite the setback at Trafalgar, the years of 1805 and 1806 saw stunning victories for Napoleon. In a series of major battles in 1805, Napoleon defeated first Austria and then Russia. The Austrians were forced to sign a treaty and Vienna itself was occupied by French forces for a short while, while the Russian Tsar Alexander I worked on raising a new army. The last major continental power, Prussia, went to war in 1806, but its army was no match for Napoleon, who defeated the Prussians at the Battle of Jena and then occupied Berlin. Fully 96% of the over 170,000 soldiers in the Prussian army were lost, the vast majority (about 140,000) taken prisoner by the French. In 1806, following his victories over the Austrians and Prussians, Napoleon formally dissolved the (almost exactly 1,000-years-old) Holy Roman Empire, replacing much of its territory with a newly-invented puppet state he called the Confederation of the Rhine.

After another (less successful) battle with the Russians, Napoleon negotiated an alliance with Tsar Alexander in 1807. He now controlled Europe from France to Poland, though the powerful British navy continued to dominate the seas. His empire stretched from Belgium and Holland in the north to Rome in the south, covering nearly half a million square miles and boasting a population of 44 million. In some places Napoleon simply expanded French borders and ruled directly, while in others he set up puppet states that ultimately answered to him (he generally appointed his family members as the puppet rulers). Despite setbacks discussed below, Napoleon's forces continued to dominate continental Europe through 1813; attempts by the Prussians and, to a lesser extent, Austrians to regain the initiative always failed thanks to French military dominance.



Napoleon's empire at its height. The regions in dark green were governed directly by Napoleon's imperial government, while the regions in light green were puppet states that answered to France.

Military Strategy

Napoleon liked to think that he was a genius in everything. Where he was actually a genius was in his powers of memory, his tireless focus, and his mastery of military logistics: the movement of troops and supplies in war. He memorized things like the movement speed of his armies, the amount of and type of supplies needed by his forces, the rate at which they would lose men to injury, desertion, and disease, and how much ammunition they needed to have on hand. He was so skilled at map-reading that he could coordinate multiple army corps to march separately, miles apart, and then converge at a key moment to catch his enemies by surprise. He was indifferent to luxury and worked relentlessly, often sleeping only four or five hours a night, and his intellectual gifts (astonishing powers of memory foremost among them) were such that he was capable of effectively micro-managing his entire empire through written directives to underlings.

Unlike past revolutionary leaders, Napoleon faced no dissent from within his government or his forces, especially the army. Simply put, Napoleon was always able to rely on the loyalty of his troops. He took his first step toward independent authority in the spring of 1796, when he announced that his army would be paid in silver rather than the paper money issued by the French Republic that had lost almost all of its value.

Napoleon led his men personally in most of the most important battles, and because he lived like a soldier like them, most of his men came to adore him. His victories kept morale high both among his troops and among the French populace, as did the constant stream of pro-Napoleonic propaganda that he promoted through imperial censorship.

Napoleon's military record matched his ambition: he fought sixty battles in the two decades he was in power, winning

all but eight (the ones he lost were mostly toward the end of his reign). His victories were not just because of his own command of battlefield tactics, but because of the changes introduced by the French Revolution earlier. The elimination of noble privilege enabled the French government to impose conscription and to increase the size and flexibility of its armies. It also turned the officer corps into a true meritocracy: now, a capable soldier could rise to command regardless of his social background. Mass conscription allowed the French to develop permanent divisions and corps, each combining infantry, cavalry, artillery, and support services. On campaign these large units of ten to twenty thousand men usually moved on separate roads, each responsible for extracting supplies from its own area, but capable of mutual support. This kind of organization multiplied Napoleon's operational choices, facilitating the strategies of dispersal and concentration that bewildered his opponents.

In some ways, however, his strengths came with related weaknesses. In hindsight, it seems clear that his greatest problem was that he could never stop: he always seemed to need one more victory. While supremely arrogant, he was also self-aware and savvy enough to recognize that his rule depended on continued conquests. For the first several years of his rule, Napoleon appeared to his subjects as a reformer and a leader who, while protecting France's borders, had ended the war with the other European powers and imposed peace settlements with the Austrians and the British which were favorable to France. By 1805, however, it was clear to just about everyone that he intended to create a huge empire far beyond the original borders of France.

Civil Life

Napoleon was not just a brilliant general, he was also a serious politician with a keen mind for how the government had to be reformed for greater efficiency. He addressed the chronic problem of inflation by improving tax collection and public auditing, creating the Bank of France in 1800, and substituting silver and gold for the almost worthless paper notes. He introduced a new Civil Code of 1804 (as usual, named after himself as the Code Napoleon), which preserved the legal egalitarian principles of 1789.

Despite the rapacity of the initial invasions, French domination brought certain beneficial reforms to the puppet states created by France, all of them products of the French Revolution's innovations a decade earlier: single customs areas, unified systems of weights and measures, written constitutions, equality before the law, the abolition of archaic noble privileges, secularization of church property, the abolition of serfdom, and religious toleration. At least for the early years of the Napoleonic empire, many conquered peoples – most obviously commoners – experienced French conquest as (at least in part) a liberation.

In education, his most noteworthy invention was the *lycée*, a secondary school for the training of an elite of leaders and administrators, with a secular curriculum and scholarships for the sons of officers and civil servants and the most gifted pupils of ordinary secondary schools. A Concordat (agreement) with the Pope in 1801 restored the position of the Catholic Church in France, though it did not return Church property, nor did it abandon the principle of toleration for religious minorities. The key revolutionary principle that Napoleon imposed was efficiency – he wanted a well-managed, efficient empire because he recognized that efficiency translated to power. Even his own support for religious freedom was born out of that impulse: he did not care what religion his subjects professed so long as they worked diligently for the good of the state.

Napoleon was no freedom-lover, however. He imposed strict censorship of the press and had little time for democracy. He also took after the leading politicians in the revolutionary period by explicitly excluding women from the political community – his 1804 law code made women the legal subjects of their fathers and then their husbands,

stating that a husband owed his wife protection and a wife owed her husband obedience. In other words, under the Code Napoleon, women had the same legal status as children. From all of his subjects, men and women alike, Napoleon expected the same thing demanded of women in family life: obedience.

The Fall of Napoleon's Empire

Unable to invade Britain after the Battle of Trafalgar, Napoleon tried to economically strangle Britain with a European boycott of British goods, creating what he hoped would be a self-sustaining internal European economy: the “Continental System.” By late 1807 all continental European nations, except Denmark, Sweden, and Portugal, had closed their ports to British commerce. But far from buckling under the strain of the Continental System, Britain was getting richer, seizing the remains of the French Empire in the Caribbean and smuggling cheap but high-quality manufactured goods into Europe. Napoleon’s own quartermasters (i.e. the officers who purchased supplies) bought the French army’s uniforms from the British!

Napoleon demanded that Denmark and Portugal comply with his Continental System. Britain countered by bombarding Copenhagen and seizing the Danish fleet, an example that encouraged the Portuguese to defy Napoleon and to protect their profitable commerce with Britain. Napoleon responded with an invasion of the Iberian peninsula in 1808 (initially an ally of the Spanish monarchy, Napoleon summarily booted the king from his throne and installed his own brother Joseph as the new monarch), which in turn sparked an insurrection in deeply conservative Spain. The British sent a small but effective expeditionary force under the Duke of Wellington to support the insurrection, and Napoleon found himself tied down in a guerrilla war – the term “guerrilla,” meaning “little war,” was invented by the Spanish during the conflict.

Napoleon’s forces ended up trapped in this new kind of war, one without major battles or a clear enemy army. The financial costs of the invasion and occupation were enormous, and over the next seven years almost 200,000 French soldiers lost their lives in Spain. Even as Napoleon envisioned the further expansion of his empire, most of his best soldiers were stuck in Spain. Napoleon came to refer to the occupation as his “Spanish ulcer,” a wound in his empire that would not stop bleeding.



Francisco Goya's
"The Third of May,"
commemorating the
massacre of Spanish
villagers by French
troops.

The problem for the French forces was that they had consistently defeated enemies who opposed them in large open battles, but that kind of battle was in short supply in Spain. Instead, the guerrillas mastered the art of what is now called "asymmetrical warfare," in which a weaker but determined force defeats a stronger one by whittling them down over time. The French controlled the cities and most of the towns, but even a few feet beyond the outskirts of a French camp they could fall victim to a sudden ambush. French soldiers were picked off piecemeal as the years went on despite the fact that the Spanish did not field an army against them. In turn, the French massacred villagers suspected of collaborating with the guerrillas, but all the massacres did was turn more Spanish peasants against them. Napoleon poured hundreds of thousands of men into Spain in a vain attempt to turn the tide and pacify it; instead, he found his best troops caught in a war that refused to play by his rules.

Meanwhile, while the Spanish ulcer continued to fester, Napoleon faced other setbacks of his own design. In 1810, he divorced his wife Josephine (who had not produced a male heir) and married the princess of the Habsburg dynasty, Marie-Louise. This prompted suspicion, muted protest, and military desertion since it appeared to be an open betrayal of anti-monarchist revolutionary principles: instead of defying the kings of Europe, he was trying to create his own royal line by marrying into one! In the same year, Napoleon annexed the Papal States in central Italy, prompting Pope Pius VII to excommunicate him. Predictably, this alienated many of his Catholic subjects.

Russia, Elba, and Waterloo

Meanwhile, the one continental European power that was completely outside of his control was Russia. Despite the obvious problem of staging a full-scale invasion – Russia was far from France, it was absolutely enormous, and it remained militarily powerful – Napoleon concluded that it had come time to expand his empire's borders even further.

In this, he not only saw Russia as the last remaining major power on the continent that opposed him, but he hoped to regain lost inertia and popularity. His ultimate goal was to conquer not just Russia, but the European part (i.e. Greece and the Balkans) of the Ottoman Empire. He hoped to eventually control Constantinople and the Black Sea, thereby re-creating most of the ancient Roman Empire, this time under French rule. To do so, he gathered an enormous army, 600,000 strong, and in the summer of 1812 it marched for Russia.

Napoleon faced problems even before the army left, however. Most of his best troops were fighting in Spain, and more than half of the “Grand Army” created to invade Russia was recruited from non-French territories, mostly in Italy and Germany. Likewise, many of the recruits were just that: new recruits with insufficient training and no military background. He chased the Russian army east, fighting two actual battles (the second of which, the Battle of Borodino in August of 1812, was extremely bloody), but never pinning the Russians down or receiving the anticipated negotiations from the Tsar for surrender. When the French arrived in Moscow in September, they found it abandoned and largely burned by the retreating Russians, who refused to engage in the “final battle” Napoleon always sought. As the first snowflakes started falling, the French held out for another month, but by October Napoleon was forced to concede that he had to turn back as supplies began running low.

The French retreat was a horrendous debacle. The Russians attacked weak points in the French line and ambushed them at river crossings, disease swept through the ranks of the malnourished French troops, and the weather got steadily worse. Tens of thousands starved outright, desertion was ubiquitous, and of the 600,000 who had set out for Russia, only 40,000 returned to France. In contrast to regular battles, in which most lost soldiers could be accounted for as either captured by the enemy or wounded, but not dead, at least 400,000 men lost their lives in the Russian campaign. In the aftermath of this colossal defeat, the anti-French coalition of Austria, Prussia, Britain, and Russia reformed.



Napoleon's retreat.

Amazingly, Napoleon succeeded in raising still more armies, and France fought on for two more years. Increasingly, however, the French were losing, the coalition armies now trained and equipped along French lines and anticipating

French strategy. In April of 1814, as coalition forces closed in, Napoleon finally abdicated. He even attempted suicide, drinking the poison he had carried for years in case of capture, but the poison was mostly inert from its age and it merely sickened him (after his recovery, his self-confidence quickly returned). Fearing that his execution would make him a martyr to the French, the coalition's leadership opted to exile him instead, and he was sent to a manor on the small Mediterranean island of Elba, near his native Corsica.

He stayed less than a year. In March of 1815, bored and restless, Napoleon escaped and returned to France. The anti-Napoleonic coalition had restored the Bourbons to the throne in the person of the unpopular Louis XVIII, younger brother of the executed Louis XVI, and when a French force sent to capture Napoleon instead defected to him, the coalition realized that they had not really won. Napoleon managed to scrape together one more army, but was finally defeated by a coalition force of British and Prussian soldiers in June of 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo. Napoleon was imprisoned on the cold, miserable island of Saint Helena in the South Atlantic, where he finally died in 1821 after composing his memoirs.

The Aftermath

What were the effects of Napoleon's reign? First, despite the manifest abuses of occupied territories, the Napoleonic army still brought with it significant reform. It brought a taste for a more egalitarian social system with it, a law code based on rationality instead of tradition, and a major weakening of the nobility. It also directly inspired a growing sense of nationalism, especially since the Napoleonic Empire was so clearly

French despite its pretensions to universalism. Napoleon's tendency to loot occupied territories to enrich the French led many of his subjects to recognize the hypocrisy of his "egalitarian" empire, and in the absence of their old kings they began to think of themselves as Germans and Italians and Spaniards rather than just subjects to a king.

The myth of Napoleon was significant as well – he became the great romantic hero, despite his own decidedly unromantic personality, thought of as a modern Julius Caesar or Alexander the Great (just as he had hoped). He gave France its greatest hour of dominance in European history, and for more than fifty years the rest of Europe lived in fear of another French invasion. This was the context that the kingdoms that had allied against him were left with in 1815. At a series of meetings known as the Congress of Vienna, Britain, Russia, Prussia, and Austria gathered together in the Austrian capital of Vienna to try to rebuild the European order. What they could not do, however, was undo everything that Napoleon's legacy completely, and so European (and soon, world) history's course was changed by a single unique man from Corsica.

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CHAPTER 2: THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Big Changes

One of the most vexing questions for historians is how to identify the causes of nineteenth-century European dominance: how does one explain the simple fact that Europe controlled a staggering amount of territory all around the globe by 1900? The old Eurocentric viewpoint was that there was something unique about European culture that gave it a competitive edge in the world. The even older version, popular among Europeans themselves in the late nineteenth century, was openly racist and chauvinistic: it claimed that European civilization was the bearer of critical thought itself, of technological know-how, of piercing insight and practical sense. All other civilizations were, in this model, regarded as either hopelessly backward or stuck in a previous stage of cultural or even biological evolution.

That explanation was, obviously, not just self-serving but inaccurate. Nineteenth-century Europeans rarely lived up to their own inflated view of themselves, and more to the point, their dominance was extremely short-lived. Europe had a technological lead on most other world regions for less than a century. The Industrial Revolution began in England in about 1750, took almost a century to spread to other parts of western Europe (a process that began in earnest around 1830), and reached maturity by the 1850s and 1860s. In turn, European industrial power was overwhelming in comparison to the rest of the world, except the United States starting in the last decades of the nineteenth century, from about 1860 – 1914. After that, Europe's competitive edge began a steady decline, one that coincided with the collapse of its global empires after World War II.

A more satisfying explanation for the explosion of European power than one that claims that Europeans had some kind of inherent cultural advantage has to do with energy. For about a century, Europe and, eventually, the United States, had almost exclusive access to what amounted to unlimited energy in the form of fossil fuels. The iconic battles toward the end of the century between rifle-wielding European soldiers and the people they conquered in Africa and parts of Asia were not just about the rifles; they were about the factories that made those rifles, the calories that fed the soldiers, the steamships that transported them there, the telegraph lines that conveyed orders for thousands of miles away, the medicines that kept them healthy, and so on, all of which represented an epochal shift from the economic and technological reality of the people trying to resist European imperialism. All of those inventions could be produced in gigantic quantities thanks to the use of coal and, later, oil power.

While many historians have taken issue with the term “revolution” in describing what was much more of a slow evolution at the time, there is no question that the changes industrial technology brought about really were revolutionary. Few things have mattered as much as the Industrial Revolution, because it fundamentally transformed almost everything about how human beings live, perhaps most strikingly including humankind's relationship with nature. Whole landscapes can be transformed, cities constructed, species exterminated, and the entire natural ecosystem fundamentally changed in a relatively short amount of time.

Likewise, “the” Industrial Revolution was really a linking together of distinct “revolutions” – technology started it, but the effects of those technological changes were economic and social. All of society was eventually transformed, leading to the phrase “industrial society,” one in which everything is in large part based on the availability of a huge

amount of cheap energy and an equally huge number of mass-produced commodities (including people, insofar as workers can be replaced). To sum up, the Industrial Revolution was as momentous in human history as was the agricultural revolution that began civilization back in about 10,000 BCE. Even if it was a revolution that took over a century to come to fruition, from a long-term world-historical perspective, it still qualifies as revolutionary.

Geography of the Industrial Revolution

The Industrial Revolution occurred first in Great Britain, and that simple fact goes a long way toward explaining why Britain became the single most powerful European country of the nineteenth century. Britain was well positioned to serve as the cradle of industrialism. One of the background causes of the Industrial Revolution was the combination of rapidly increasing populations and more efficient agriculture providing more calories to feed that population. Even fairly rudimentary improvements in sanitation in the first half of the eighteenth century resulted in lower infant mortality rates and lower disease rates in general. The Little Ice Age of the early modern period ended in the eighteenth century as well, increasing crop yields. Despite the fact that more commercially-oriented agriculture, something that was well underway in Britain by the middle of the eighteenth century, was often experienced as a disaster by peasants and farmers, the fact is that it did increase the total caloric output of crops at the same time. In short, agriculture definitively left the subsistence model behind and became a commercial enterprise in Britain by 1800. Thus, there was a “surplus population” (to quote Ebenezer Scrooge of *A Christmas Carol*, speaking of the urban poor) of peasants who were available to work in the first generations of factories.



English workers arriving for their shift in 1900. Note the young boy on the right, employed by the factory in lieu of being in school.

In addition, Britain has abundant coal deposits concentrated in northern England. In a very lucky coincidence for British industry, northern England in the eighteenth century was the heart of the existing British textile industry, which became the key commercial force in the early period of industrialization. The northern English coal deposits are part of an underground band of coal that reaches across to Belgium, eastern France, and western Germany. This stretch of land would become the industrial heartland of Europe – one can draw a line down a map of Western Europe from England

stretching across the English Channel toward the Alps and trace most of the industrial centers of Europe in the first half of the nineteenth century.

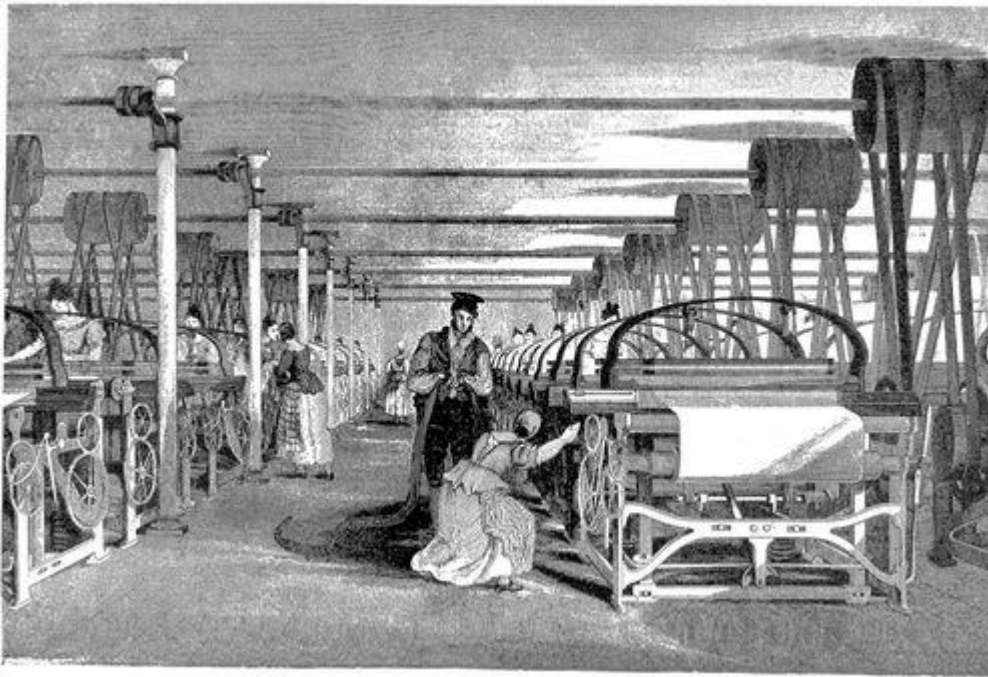
Britain had coal, and the English and Scottish had long known that you could burn it and produce heat. For many centuries, however, it was an unpopular fuel source. Coal produces a noxious, toxic smoke, along with heaps of black ash. It has to be mined, and coal mines in northwestern Europe tended to rapidly fill with water as they dipped below the water table, requiring cumbersome pumping systems. In turn, conditions in those mines were extremely dangerous and difficult. Thus, coal was only used in small amounts in England until well into the Renaissance period.

What changed was, simply, Britain ran out of forests. Thanks to the need for firewood and charcoal for heat, as well as timber for building (especially shipbuilding; Britain's navy consumed a vast quantity of wood in construction and repairs), Britain was forced to import huge quantities of wood from abroad by the end of the seventeenth century. As firewood became prohibitively expensive, British people increasingly turned to coal. Already by the seventeenth century, former prejudices against coal as dirty and distasteful had given way to the necessity of its use as a fuel source for heat. As the Industrial Revolution began in the latter half of the eighteenth century, thanks to a series of key inventions, the vast energy capacity of coal was unleashed for the first time. By 1815, annual British coal production yielded energy equivalent to what could be garnered from burning a hypothetical forest equal in area to all of England, Scotland, and Wales.

There were a series of technological breakthroughs that powered the expansion of the Industrial Revolution, all of them originating in Britain. Most importantly, a Scottish engineer named James Watt developed an efficient steam engine in 1763, which was subsequently manufactured in 1775 (Watt was not the inventor of the concept, but his design was vastly more effective than earlier versions). Steam engines were originally used to pump water out of mines, but soon it was discovered that they could be used to substitute for water-power itself at mills, with Watt developing a rotary (spinning) mechanism tied to the engine. In turn, this enabled the conversion of thermal energy unleashed by burning a fossil fuel like coal into kinetic energy (the energy of movement). With a steam engine, coal did not just provide heat, it provided

power. Watt, in turn, personally invented the term “horsepower” in order to explain to potential customers what his machine could do. Almost anything that moved could now be tied to coal power instead of muscle power, and thus began the vast and dramatic shift toward the modern world's dependence on fossil fuels.

The first and most important industry to benefit from coal power besides mining itself was the northern English textile industry, which harnessed steam power to drive new machines that processed the cotton and transformed it into finished cloth. Building on various other machine breakthroughs, an inventor named Edmund Cartwright developed the power loom in 1787, the first large-scale textile machine that could process an enormous amount of cotton fiber. By the end of the 1800s, a single “mule” (a spinning invention linked to steam power in 1803) could produce thread 200 to 300 times as fast as could be done by hand. By 1850 Britain was producing 200 times as much cotton cloth than it had in 1780.



Power looms in 1835. Female labor was preferred by factory-owners because women could be paid less than men for doing the same work.

In turn, textiles were the basis of the Industrial Revolution for straightforward practical reasons: raw material was available from the American south thanks to slave labor, and there was an endless market for textiles all across Europe. British cloth processed by the new machines was of very high quality and, because of the vast quantity that British mills could produce, it was far cheaper than textiles produced by hand. Thus, British cloth rapidly cornered the market everywhere in Europe, generating tremendous profits for British industrialists. The impact on Britain's economy was enormous, as was its textile industry's growing dominance over its European rivals. France initially tried to keep British fabric out of its own markets, but in 1786 the two kingdoms negotiated the Eden Treaty, which allowed the importation of British manufactured goods. The result was a tidal wave of British cloth in French markets, which forced French manufacturers to implement industrial technology in their own workshops.

In its first century, the areas in Europe that benefited the most from the Industrial Revolution were the ones closest to coal. Besides access to coal, the other major factors driving industrial expansion in Britain were political and cultural. The reason that Britain was far and away the leading industrial power is that its parliament was full of believers in the principles of free trade, which meant that commercial enterprises were not hampered by archaic restrictions or cultural prejudices. Britain was also the richest society in Europe in terms of available capital: money was available through reliable, trustworthy banking institutions. Thus, investors could build up a factory after securing loans with fair interest rates and they knew that they had a legal system that favored their enterprise. Finally, taxes were not arbitrary or extremely high (as they were in most parts of Spain and Italy, for example).

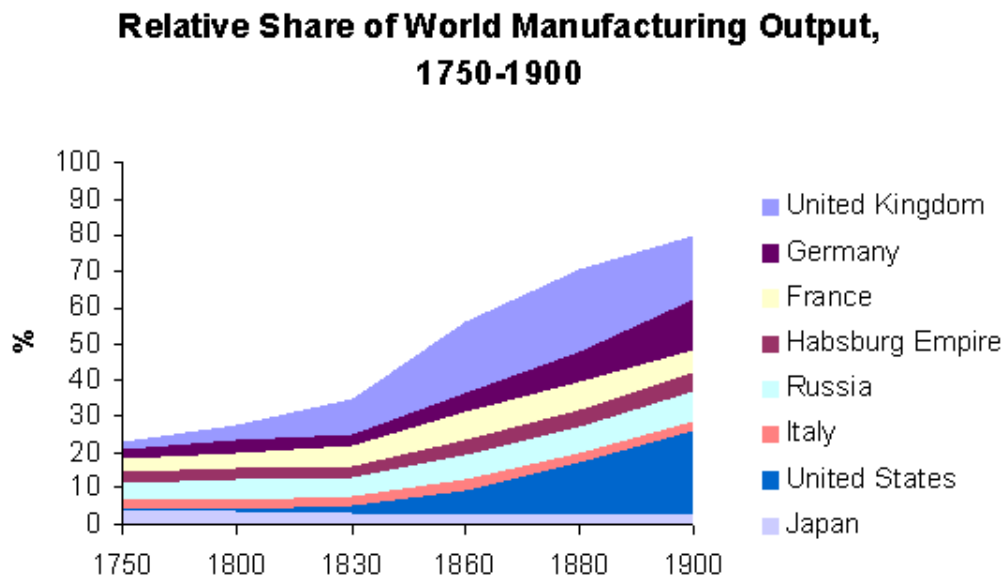
The other major reason that Britain enjoyed such an early and long-lasting lead in industrialization is that British elites, especially the powerful gentry class of landowners, were not hostile to commercial enterprise. In many kingdoms on the continent, members of the nobility were banned from actively practicing commerce until the period of the French Revolution. Even after the Napoleonic wars, when noble titles could no longer be lost by engaging in commerce, banking, or factory ownership, there remained deep skepticism and arrogance among continental nobles about the new industries. In short, nobles often looked down on those who made their wealth not from land, but from factories. This attitude helped to slow the advent of industrialism for decades.

The only continental region to industrialize in earnest before the 1840s was the southern swath of the Netherlands, which became the newly-created nation of Belgium in 1830 after a revolution. That region, immediately a close ally of Great Britain, had usable waterways, coal deposits, and a skilled artisanal workforce. By the 1830s the newly-minted country was rapidly industrializing. Belgium's neighbor to the southwest, France, was comparatively slow to follow despite its large population and considerable overall wealth, however. The traditional elites who dominated the restored monarchy were deeply skeptical of British-style commercial and industrial innovations. Despite Napoleon's having established the first national bank in 1800, the banking system as a whole was rudimentary and capital was restricted. In turn, the transportation of goods across France itself was prohibitively expensive due to the lack of navigable waterways and the existence of numerous tolls.

There were also important cultural factors that impeded industrial expansion in France. Whereas Britain's large population of landless rural laborers and poor peasants had little option but to seek factory work, most French peasants were independent farmers who had no interest in going to cities to work in miserable conditions. Second, French industry had always concentrated on high-quality luxury goods, and French artisans fiercely resisted the spread of lower-quality and lower-skilled work and goods. Industrialization was thus limited to the northeastern part of the country, which had coal deposits, until the second half of the century.

In the German lands, it was not until the establishment of the Zollverein, a customs union, in 1834 that trade could flow freely enough to encourage industrial growth in earnest. Following its creation, railroads spread across the various kingdoms of northern Germany. Western Germany had extensive coal deposits, and by 1850 German industry was growing rapidly, especially in the Ruhr valley near the border with France.

Meanwhile, outside of Western Europe, there was practically no large-scale industry. It took until the late nineteenth century for the Industrial Revolution to "arrive" in places like northern Italy and the cities of western Russia, with some countries like Spain missing out entirely until the twentieth century.



While the UK enjoyed the early lead in industrial manufacturing, its share of global output had dropped by 1900. The United States became the major industrial power of the world in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Transportation and Communication

The Industrial Revolution began with mining and textiles, but its effects were probably most dramatic in transportation. The first experimental railroad was put in use in 1820, and the first passenger railroad followed in 1830, traveling between the industrial cities of Manchester and Liverpool in northern England. By the middle of the century some trains could go 50 MPH, far faster than any human had ever gone before (except when falling from a great height). About 6,500 miles of rail was built in Britain between 1830 and 1850, just 20 years, and railroad expansion soon followed suit on the continent. The construction of railroads became a massive industry unto itself, fueling both profitable investment and the occasional disastrous financial collapse.

Above and beyond their economic impact, railroads had a myriad of social and cultural effects. The British developed the system of time zones, based on Greenwich (part of London) Mean Time as the “default,” because the railroads had to be coordinated to time departures and arrivals. This was the first time when a whole country, and soon a whole continent, had to have a precise shared sense of timing.

Likewise, the telegraph was invented in 1830 and used initially to warn train stations when multiple trains were on the track. Telegraphs allowed almost instant communication over huge distances – they sent a series of electrical impulses over a wire as “long” and “short” signals. The inventor of the telegraph, Samuel Morse, invented a code based off of those signals that could be translated into letters and, as a result, be used to send messages. Morse Code thus enabled the first modern mass communications device. This was the first time when a message could travel faster than a messenger on horseback, vastly increasing the speed by which information could be shared and disseminated.

Simultaneously, steamships were transforming long-distance commerce. The first sailed in 1816, going about twice as fast as the fastest sailing ship could. This had obvious repercussions for trade, because it became cheaper to transport basic goods via steamship than it was to use locally-produced ones; this had huge impacts on agriculture and forestry, among other industries. Soon, it became economically viable to ship grain from the United States or Russia across oceans to reach European markets. The first transatlantic crossing was a race between two steamships going from England to New York in 1838; soon, sailing vessels became what they are today: archaic novelties.

Two other advances in transportation are often overlooked when considering industrialization: paved roads and canals. A Scottish engineer invented a way to cheaply pave roads in the 1830s, and in the 1850s an overland, pan-European postal service was established that relied on “post roads” with stations for changing horses. Thus, well before the invention of cars, road networks were being built in parallel to railroads. Likewise, even though canals had been around since ancient times, there was a major canal-building boom in the second half of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century. Canals linked Manchester to coal fields, the Erie Canal was built in the US to link the Great Lakes to the eastern seaboard, and even Russia built a canal between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

The net effect of these innovations was that travel was vastly cheaper, simpler, and faster than it had ever been in human history. In essence, every place on earth was closer together than ever before.

Social Effects

The most noteworthy transformation that occurred in quotidian life due to the Industrial Revolution was urbanization, which absolutely exploded in the nineteenth century. Manchester, in northern England, is the quintessential example of an industrial city. It was close to major coal deposits, it had a large textile industry, it was linked to the sea via canal as of

1761, and it had an army of artisans and laborers because of its historic role as a site of wool production. In 1750 it had a population of 20,000, by 1775 it was 40,000, by 1831 it was 250,000, and by 1850 it was 400,000 – a 200% increase in a century.



View of Manchester in 1840. While the painting is in the Romantic style, with the nature scene in the foreground, the masses of factory smokestacks are visible in the distance.

The living conditions, however, were abysmal. Whole families were crammed into one-room cellars, hovels, and cheap apartments. Pollution produced by the new factories streamed unfiltered into the air and water. Soot and filth covered every surface – early evolutionary biologists noted that certain moths that had a mutation that made them soot-brown survived and multiplied while their normal lightly-colored cousins died off. To deal with the pollution, factory owners simply started building taller smokestacks, which spread the pollution farther. Waste from mining (which was often toxic) was simply left in “slag heaps,” through which rainwater ran and from which toxic runoff reached water supplies. A coal miner who entered the mines as a teenager would almost certainly be dead by “middle age,” (40 at the oldest) since his or her lungs were ridden with toxic coal dust.

Landlords in the cities took advantage of the influx of laborers and their families by building cheap tenements in which several families often lived in a single room. There was no running water and sanitation was utterly inadequate. Food was expensive, in part because of an 1815 act in the British Parliament called the Corn Laws that banned the importation of grain and kept prices up (the wealthy, land-owning gentry class had pushed the law through parliament). Given the incredible squalor, epidemics were frequent. In turn, wages were paid at a near-subsistence level until after (roughly) 1850. Whenever there was a market downturn, sometimes lasting for years (e.g. 1839 – 1842), workers were summarily fired to cut costs, and some starved as a result.

The English poet William Blake famously referred to the factories as “satanic mills.” Likewise, the English novelist Charles Dickens used the grim reality of cities like Manchester as inspiration and setting for his novels like *Hard Times* and *Oliver Twist*. Since real wages did not increase among working people until fairly late in the century, the actual living conditions of the majority of the population generally worsened in industrial regions until the second

half of the century. In Britain, laws were passed to protect horses before they were passed to protect children working in mines and factories.

The major cause of this misery was simple: the ruthless pursuit of profit by factory owners and manufacturers. The aim of the early factory owners and managers was to simplify the stages of the manufacturing process so that they could be executed by cheap, unskilled labor. Many skilled workers or artisans experienced the factory system as a disaster, bringing in its wake subjection to harsh work discipline, the degradation of craft skills, long hours, cheap wages, and the abuse of young women and children (who worked under the same conditions as did adult men).

While they had little reason to consider it, the industrial workers of northern England lived in a state of misery that was tied to another that was even worse across the Atlantic: the slave-based cotton economy of the American south which provided the raw material. Despite the British ban on the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807, the existing population of African-American slaves was sustained by natural reproduction and remained locked in a position of complete legal subservience, enforced with brutal violence. In a startling parallel, the efficiency of cotton production increased to keep pace with textile manufacturing in Britain despite the absence of major new technologies besides the invention of the cotton gin in 1794. That increase was due to the application of ever-increasing degrees of brutality, as slaves were forced to pick and process cotton at unprecedented speed, spurred on by raw violence at the hands of overseers.

Back in Europe, one unforeseen effect of the Industrial Revolution, tied to the misery of working conditions, was the creation of social classes. Until the modern era “class” was usually something one was born into; it was a legally-recognized and enforced “estate.” With industrialization, the enormous numbers of dirt-poor industrial workers began to recognize that their social identity was defined by their poverty and their working conditions, just as rich industrialists and tenement-owning slumlords recognized that they were united by their wealth and their common interest in controlling the workers. The non-noble rich and middle class came to distinguish themselves both from the working class and the old nobility by taking pride in their morality, sobriety, work ethic, and cleanliness. They often regarded the workers as little better than animals, but some also regarded the old nobles as corrupt, immoral, and increasingly archaic.

The middle classes that arose out of industrialization were the ranks of engineers, foremen, accountants, and bureaucrats that were in great demand for building, overseeing, and running new industrial and commercial operations. Some were genuine “self-made men” who worked their way up, but most came from families with at least some wealth to begin with. The most vulnerable group were the so-called “petty bourgeoisie,” shop-owners and old-style artisans, whose economic life was precarious and who lived in constant fear of losing everything and being forced to join the working class.

From this context, socialism, the political belief that government should be deeply invested in the welfare of the common people, emerged. Well before mass socialist parties existed, there were struggles and even massacres over working conditions; one notorious event was the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 in which hundreds of protesting workers in Manchester were gunned down by middle-class volunteer cavalry. Another famous group, the Luddites, destroyed factory equipment in a vain attempt to turn back the clock on industrialization and go back to hand-work by artisans.

Appalled more by the sexual impropriety of young girls and women being around male workers in mines and factories than by the working conditions per se, the British parliament did pass some laws mandating legal protections. The Factory Act of 1833 limited child labor in cotton mills, the Miners Act of 1842 banned the employment of girls and women (and boys under 10) underground, and in 1847 a Ten Hour Law limited the workday for women and children. These were exceptional laws; further legal protections for workers took decades and constant struggle by the emerging socialist groups and parties to achieve.

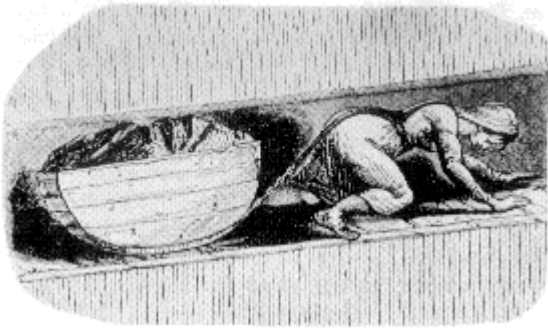


Image of a girl hauling a “tub” of coal up a narrow mine shaft. The image originates with the British parliament’s investigation of working conditions in mines.

Gender

The Industrial Revolution had very different effects on gender roles depending on social class. Women in the working class, as noted above, labored alongside or even in lieu of men in factories, in mines, and in mills, almost always doing the same or similar work for lower wages (laws banning wage differentials based solely on sex were not put in place the late nineteenth century at the earliest, and they were rarely enforced even then). Women industrial workers were still expected to carry out domestic labor as well, tending to children, cooking, and cleaning, a nearly impossible combination of demands that made life for women in the industrial cities even harder than it was for men.

The hardest workers of all, however, were probably the legions of domestic servants that toiled in the houses of others. A “maid of all work” in a middle-class household could expect to rise before dawn to light the home’s hearth and cookfire, cook and clean throughout the day, run errands if necessary, and finally collapse after up to seventeen hours of nearly nonstop work. Domestic service was the single largest employment sector in nineteenth-century Britain, yet economic thinkers (even communists like the great theorist Karl Marx) routinely ignored servants – they were both taken for granted and effectively invisible, replaceable when injured or sick, and paid so little that they were only a minor item in a household budget. As late as 1940, more than half of European women who earned an income were domestic servants of one kind or another.

These “maids” were necessary because of the growth of the middle classes and a concomitant shift in gender roles. A badge of honor for the middle classes was that the woman of the house did not have to work for wages, nor was she to perform hard work around the house if possible. Thus, a servant was believed to be essential. “Idleness” was still thought of as dangerous and sinful, however, so middle-class women were increasingly involved with raising their own children, maintaining the social relationships that demonstrated membership in the polite classes, and involving themselves in charity. A cult of “sentimentality” grew throughout the nineteenth century associated with family life, with middle-class women leading the way in placing greater emphasis on loving bonds between family members. That cultural shift was a byproduct of two factors brought about by industrialism: the wealth that allowed middle-class women to “outsource” the drudgery of domestic duties to a poor servant girl, and medical and sanitary advances that saw more children survive infancy.

Men, meanwhile, often struggled to maintain their own sense of masculine worth in the face of the changes brought about by industrial society. For the working classes, it was almost impossible for a family to survive on one man’s wages, so while men stubbornly insisted on their leadership of the family unit, they were codependent on their wives (and, all too often, their children) to work as well. Artisanal skills were slowly but surely rendered obsolete, and as noted above it took until the second half of the nineteenth century for socialist movements to grow large and strong enough to effect

meaningful improvements in the daily lives of most working people. Thus, all too often working class men turned to alcohol as their consolation; it is no coincidence that the first-wave feminist movement (described in a subsequent chapter) was closely tied to the temperance movement that sought legal bans on alcohol. Simply put, too many women saw their male family members plummet into alcoholism, leading to even greater financial struggles and horrific scenes of domestic violence.

Cultural Effects

The Industrial Revolution was responsible for enormous changes in how people lived their everyday lives, not just how they made a living or how the things they used were made. Many of those changes were due to the spread of the transportation and communication technologies noted above. The speed of railway travel made everything “closer” together, and in doing so it started a long, slow process of tying together distant regions. People could travel to the capital cities of their kingdom or, later, their “nations,” and the intense localism of the past started to fade. For the first time, members of the middle classes could travel just for fun – middle-class vacations were an innovation made possible by the railroad, and the first beneficiaries were the English middle class, who “went on holiday” to the seashore whenever they could.

Simultaneously, new, more advanced printing presses and cheaper paper made newspapers and magazines available to a mass reading public. That encouraged the spread of not just information and news, but of shared written languages. People had to be able to read the “default” language of their nation, which encouraged the rise of certain specific vernaculars at the expense of the numerous dialects of the past. For example, “French” was originally just the language spoken in the area around the city of Paris, just as “Spanish” was just the dialect spoken around Madrid. Rulers had long fought, unsuccessfully, to impose their language as the daily vernacular in the regions over which they ruled, but most people continued to speak regional dialects that often had little in common with the language of their monarch. With the centers of newspaper production often being in or near capital cities, usually written in the official language of state, more and more people at least acquired a decent working knowledge of those languages over time.

Those capital cities grew enormously, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. Industry, finance, government itself, and railroads all converged on capitals. Former suburbs were simply swallowed up as the cities grew, and there was often a sense among cultural elites that the only places that mattered were the capitals: London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna, St. Petersburg, etc. One peculiar phenomenon arising from the importance of capital cities was that political revolutions often began as revolutions of a single city – if a crowd could take over the streets of Paris, for example, they might well send the king running for the proverbial hills and declare themselves to be a new government (which happened in 1830 and 1848). In some cases, the rest of the nation would read about the revolution in their newspapers or via telegraph after the revolution had already succeeded.

While all of the cultural effects of the Industrial Revolution are too numerous to detail here, one other effect should be noted: the availability of food. With cheap and fast railway and steamship transport, not only could food travel hundreds or even thousands of miles from where it was grown or farmed or caught to where it was consumed, but the daily diet itself underwent profound changes. Tea grown in India became cheap enough for even working people to drink it daily; the same was true of South American coffee on the continent. Fruit appeared in markets halfway across the world from where it was grown, and the long term effect was a more varied (although not always more nutritious) diet. Whole

countries sometimes became economic appendages of a European empire, producing a single product: for a time, New Zealand (which became a British colony in 1840) was essentially the British Empire's sheep ranch.

The great symbol of changes in the history of food brought on by the Industrial Revolution is that quintessential English invention: fish and chips. Caught in the Atlantic or Pacific, packed on steamships, and transported to Britain, the more desirable parts of fish were sold at prices the upper and middle classes could afford. The other bits – tails, fins and all – were fried up with chunks of potato, heavily salted, and wrapped in the now-cheap newspaper. The result was the world's first greasy, cheap, and wildly popular fast food.

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CHAPTER 3: POLITICAL IDEOLOGIES AND MOVEMENTS

After the Revolution

The French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars profoundly shook Europe. The French Revolution was seen by the European great powers as both threatening and, as it progressed and radicalized, morally repulsive, but at least it had largely stayed confined to France. From the perspective of elites, Napoleon's conquests were even worse because everywhere the French armies went the traditional order of society was overturned. France may have been the greatest economic beneficiary, but Napoleon's Italian, German, and Polish subjects (among others) also had their first taste of a society in which one's status was not defined by birth. The kings and nobles of Europe had good cause to fear that the way of life they presided over, a social order that had lasted for roughly 1,000 years, was disintegrating in the course of a generation.

Thus, after Napoleon's defeat, there had to be a reckoning. Only the most stubborn monarch or noble thought it possible to completely undo the Revolution and its effects, but there was a shared desire among the traditional elites to re-establish stability and order based on the political system that had worked in the past. They knew that there would have to be

some

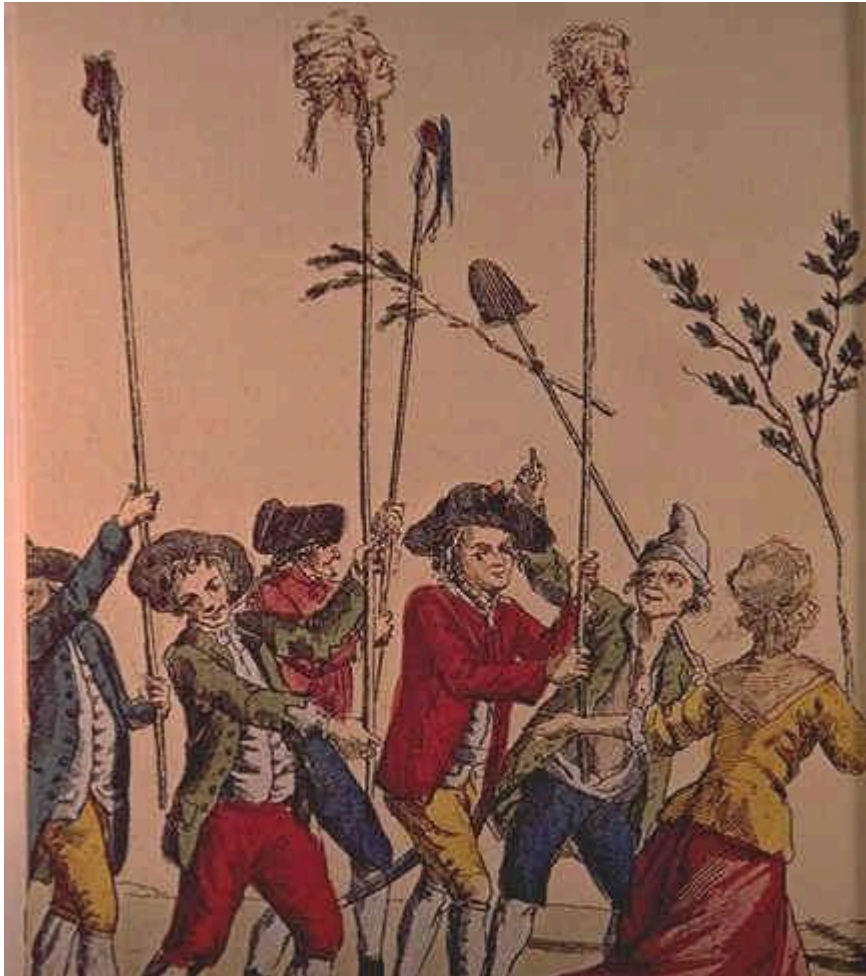
concessions to a generation of people who had lived with equality under the law, but they worked to reinforce traditional political structures while only granting limited compromises.

Conservatism

That being noted, how did elites understand their own role in society? How did they justify the power of kings and nobles over the majority of the population? This was not just about wealth, after all, since there were many non-noble merchants who were as rich, or richer, than many nobles. Nor was it viable for most nobles to claim that their rights were logically derived from their mastery of warfare, since only a small percentage of noblemen served in royal armies (and those that did were not necessarily very good officers!). Instead, European elites at the time explained their own social role in terms of peace, tradition, and stability. Their ideology came to be called conservatism: the idea that what had worked for centuries was inherently better at keeping the peace both within and between kingdoms than were the forces unleashed by the French Revolution.

Conservatism held that the old traditions of rule were the best and most desirable principles of government, having proven themselves relatively stable and successful over the course of 1,000 years of European history. It was totally opposed to the idea of universal legal equality, let alone of suffrage (i.e. voting rights), and it basically amounted to an attempt to maintain a legal political hierarchy to go along with the existing social and economic hierarchy of European society.

The fundamental argument of conservatism was that the French Revolution and Napoleon had already proved that too much change and innovation in politics was inherently destructive. According to conservatives, the French Revolution had started out, in its moderate phase, by arguing for the primacy of the common people, but it quickly and inevitably spun out of control. During the Terror, the king and queen were beheaded, French society was riven with bloody conflict, tens of thousands were guillotined, and the revolutionary government launched a blasphemous crusade against the church. Napoleon's takeover – itself a symptom of the anarchy unleashed by the Revolution – led to almost twenty years of war and turmoil across the map of Europe. These events proved to conservatives that while careful reform might be acceptable, rapid change was not.



Images like the above (from the French Revolution) were used by conservatives to illustrate the violence and bloodshed they claimed were an intrinsic part of revolutionary change.

Many conservatives believed that human nature is basically bad, evil, and depraved. The clearest statement of this idea in the early nineteenth century came from Joseph de Maistre, a conservative French nobleman. De Maistre argued that human beings are not enlightened, not least because (as a staunch Catholic), he believed that all human souls are tainted by original sin. Left unchecked, humans with too much freedom would always indulge in depravity. Only the allied forces of a strong monarchy, a strong nobility, and a strong church could hold that inherent evil in check. It is worth noting that De Maistre wrote outside of France itself during the revolutionary period, first in the small Italian kingdom

of Piedmont-Sardinia (he was a noble in both France and Piedmont) and then in Russia. His message resonated strongly with the arch-conservative Russian Tsar Alexander I in particular.

A more pragmatic conservative take was exemplified by a British lord, Edmund Burke. He argued that, given the complexity and fragility of the social fabric, only the force of tradition could prevent political chaos. As the French Revolution had demonstrated, gradual reforms had the effect of unleashing a tidal wave of pent-up anger and, more to the point, foolish decisions by people who had no experience of making political decisions. In his famous pamphlet *Reflections On The Revolution in France*

, he wrote “It is said that twenty-four millions ought to prevail over two hundred thousand. True; if the constitution of a kingdom be a problem of arithmetic.” To Burke, the common people were a mob of uneducated, inexperienced would-be political decision-makers and had no business trying to influence politics. Instead, it was far wiser to keep things in the basic form that had survived for centuries, with minor accommodations as needed.

Burke was an eminently practical, pragmatic political critic. De Maistre’s ideas may have looked back to the social and political thought of past centuries, but Burke was a very grounded and realistic thinker. He simply believed that “the masses” were the last people one wanted running a government, because they were an uneducated, uncultivated, uncivilized rabble. Meanwhile, the European nobility had been raised for centuries to rule and had developed both cultural traditions and systems of education and training to form leaders. It was a given that not all of them were very good at it, but according to Burke there was simply no comparison between the class of nobles and the class of the mob – to let the latter rule was to invite disaster. And, of course, conservatives had all of their suspicions confirmed during the Terror, when the whole social order of France was turned upside down in the name of a perfect society (Burke himself was particularly aggrieved by the execution of the French Queen Marie Antoinette, whom he saw as a perfectly innocent victim).

Early nineteenth-century conservatism at its best was a coherent critique of the violence, warfare, and instability that had accompanied the Revolution and Napoleonic wars. In practice, however, conservatism all too often degenerated into the stubborn defense of corrupt, incompetent, or oppressive regimes. In turn, despite the practical impossibility of doing so in most cases, there were real attempts on the part of many conservative regimes after the defeat of Napoleon to completely turn back the clock, to try to sweep the reforms of the revolutionary era under the collective rug.

One additional conservative figure who lived a generation later than Burke and De Maistre deserves particular attention: the French aristocrat Arthur de Gobineau (1816 – 1882). By the time Gobineau was an adult, the earlier versions of conservatism seemed increasingly outdated, especially De Maistre’s theological claims regarding original sin. Gobineau chose instead to adopt the language of the prevailing form of intellectual authority of the later nineteenth century: science. From 1853 to 1855 he published a series of volumes collectively entitled *Essay on the Inequality of the Human Races*. The Essay claimed that the European nobility had once been an unsullied “pure” example of a superior race rightfully ruling over social inferiors who were born of lesser racial stock. Over time, however, the nobility had foolishly mixed with those inferiors, diluting the precious racial characteristics that had sustained noble rule. Likewise, by conquering the Americas and parts of Africa and Asia, Europeans as a whole undermined their “purity” and hence their superiority to non-Europeans.

The Essay’s power to persuade was in large part because Gobineau claimed that his arguments were “scientific.” In debates with his friend and patron Alexis de Tocqueville, one of the major intellectual voices of liberalism, Gobineau asserted that he was merely describing reality by pointing out that some people were racially superior to others. Needless to say, Gobineau’s claims were nonsense in terms of actual scientific reality, but by using the language of science

Gobineau's grandiose celebration of racial hierarchy served to support the authority and wealth of those already in power behind a facade of a "neutral" analysis.

Gobineau's work was enormously influential over time. It would inspire the Social Darwinist movement that arose later in the nineteenth century that claimed that the lower classes were biologically inferior to the upper classes. It would be eagerly taken up by anti-Semites who claimed that Jews were a "race" with inherent, destructive characteristics. In the twentieth century it would directly inspire Nazi ideology as well: Hitler himself cited Gobineau in his own musings on racial hierarchy. Thus, Gobineau represents a transition in nineteenth-century conservatism, away from the theological and tradition-bound justifications for social hierarchy of a De Maistre or Burke and towards pseudo-scientific claims about the supposed biological superiority of some people over others.

Ideologies

Following Napoleon's final defeat in 1815, conservatives faced the daunting task of not just creating a new political order but in holding in check the political ideologies unleashed during the revolutionary era: liberalism, nationalism, and socialism. Enlightenment thinkers had first proposed the ideas of social and legal equality that came to fruition in the American and French Revolutions. Likewise, the course of those revolutions along with the work of thinkers, writers, and artists helped create a new concept of national identity that was poised to take European politics by storm. Finally, the political, social, and economic chaos of the turn of the nineteenth century (very much including the Industrial Revolution) created the context out of which socialism emerged.

An "ideology" is a set of beliefs, often having to do with politics. What is the purpose of government? Who decides the laws? What is just and unjust? How should economics function? What should be the role of religion in governance? What is the legal and social status of men and women? All of these kinds of questions have been answered differently from culture to culture since the earliest civilizations. In the nineteenth century in Europe, a handful of ideologies came to predominate: conservatism, nationalism, liberalism, and socialism. In turn, briefly put, three of those ideologies had one thing in common: they opposed the fourth. For the first half of the nineteenth century, socialists, nationalists, and liberals all agreed that the conservative order had to be disrupted or even dismantled entirely, although they disagreed on how that should be accomplished and, more importantly, what should replace it.

Romanticism

Even before the era of the French Revolution, the seeds of nationalism were planted in the hearts and minds of many Europeans as an aspect of the Romantic movement. Romanticism was not a political movement – it was a movement of the arts. It emerged in the late eighteenth century and came of age in the nineteenth. Its central tenet was the idea that there were great, sometimes terrible, and literally "awesome" forces in the universe that exceeded humankind's rational ability to understand. Instead, all that a human being could do was attempt to pay tribute to those forces – nature, the spirit or soul, the spirit of a people or culture, or even death – through art.

The central themes of romantic art were, first, a profound reverence for nature. To romantics, nature was a vast, overwhelming presence, against which humankind's activities were ultimately insignificant. At the same time, romantics celebrated the organic connection between humanity and nature. They very often identified peasants as being the people

who were “closest” to nature. In turn, it was the job of the artist (whether a writer, painter, or musician) to somehow gesture at the profound truths of nature and the human spirit. A “true” artist was someone who possessed the real spark of creative genius, something that could not be predicted or duplicated through training or education. The point of art was to let that genius emanate from the work of art, and the result should be a profound emotional experience for the viewer or listener.

Quite by accident, Romanticism helped plant the seeds of nationalism, thanks to its ties to the folk movement. The central idea of the folk movement was that the essential truths of national character had survived among the common people despite the harmful influence of so-called civilization. Those folk traditions, from folk songs to fairytales to the remnants of pre-Christian pagan practices, were the “true” expression of a national spirit that had, supposedly, laid dormant for centuries. By the early eighteenth century, educated elites attracted to Romanticism set out to gather those traditions and preserve them in service to an imagined national identity.

The iconic examples of this phenomenon were the Brothers Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm, who were both expert philologists and avid collectors of German folk tales. The Brothers Grimm collected dozens of folk (“fairy”) tales and published them in the first definitive collection in German. Many of those tales, from *Sleeping Beauty* to *Cinderella*, are best known in American culture thanks to their adaptation as animated films by Walt Disney in the twentieth century, but they were famous already by the mid-nineteenth. The Brothers Grimm also undertook an enormous project to compile a comprehensive German dictionary, not only containing every German word but detailed etymologies (they did not live to see its completion; the third volume *E – Forsche* was published shortly before Jacob’s death).

The Grimm brothers were the quintessential Romantic nationalists. Many Romantics like them believed that nations had spirits, which were invested with the core identity of their “people.” The point of the Grimm brothers’ work was reaching back into the remote past to grasp the “essence” of what it meant to be “German.” At the time, there was no country called Germany, and yet romantic nationalists like the Grimms believed that there was a kind of German soul that lived in old folk songs, the German language, and German traditions. They worked to preserve those things before they were further “corrupted” by the modern world.

In many cases, romantic nationalists did something that historians later called “inventing traditions.” One iconic example is the Scottish kilt. Scots had worn kilts since the sixteenth century, but there was no such thing as a specific color and pattern of plaid (a “tartan”) for each family or clan. The British government ultimately assigned tartans to a new class of soldier recruited from Scotland: the Highland Regiments, with the wider identification of tartan and clan only emerging in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. The point was instilling a nationalist pride in a specific group of military recruits, not celebrating an “authentic” Scottish tradition. Likewise, in some cases folk tales and stories were simply made up in the name of nationalism. The great epic story of Finland, the *Kalevala*, was written by a Finnish intellectual in 1827; it was based on actual Finnish legends, but it had never existed as one long story before.



British soldiers of the Highland Regiments in government-issued kilts in 1744.

The point is not, however, to emphasize the falseness of the folk movement or invented traditions, but to consider why

people were so intent on discovering (and, if necessary, inventing) them. Romanticism was, among other things, the search for stable points of identity in a changing world. Likewise, folk traditions – even those that were at least in part invented or adapted – became a way for early nationalists to identify with the culture they now connoted with the nation. It is no coincidence that the vogue for kilts in Scotland, ones now identified with clan identity, emerged for the first time in the 1820s rather than earlier.

Nationalism

Romantic nationalism was an integral part of actual nationalist political movements, movements that emerged in earnest in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic wars. Those movements would ultimately succeed in seeing their goals

realized almost without exception, although that process took over a century in some cases (as in Poland and Ireland). Central to nationalist movements was the concept that the state should correspond to the identity of a “people,” although who or what defines the identity of “the people” proved a vexing issue on many occasions.

The discussion of nationalism starts with the French Revolution, because more than any other event, it provided the model for all subsequent nationalisms. The French revolutionaries declared from the outset that they represented the whole “nation,” not just a certain part of it. They erased the legal privileges of some (the nobles) over others, they made religion subservient to a secular government, and when threatened by the conservative powers of Europe, they called the whole “nation” to arms. The revolutionary armies sang a national anthem, the Marseillaise, whose lyrics are as warlike as the American equivalent. Central to French national identity in the revolutionary period was fighting for *la patrie*, the fatherland, in place of the old allegiance to king and church.

The irony of the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, however, was that the countries invaded by the French eventually adopted their own nationalist beliefs. The invaded countries turned the democratic French principle of self-determination into a sacred right to defend their own national identities, shaped by their own particular histories, against the universalist pretensions of the French. That was reflected in the Spanish revolt that began in 1808, the revival of Austria and Prussia and their struggles of “liberation” against Napoleon, Russia’s leadership of the anti-Napoleonic coalition that followed, and fierce British pride in their defiance to French military pretensions.

Nationalisms Across Europe

As the Napoleonic wars drew to a close for the first time in 1814, the great powers of Europe convened a gathering of monarchs and diplomats known as the Congress of Vienna, discussed in detail in the next chapter, to deal with the aftermath. That meeting lasted months, thanks in part to Napoleon’s inconvenient return from Elba and last stand at Waterloo, but in 1815 it concluded, having rewarded the victorious kingdoms with territorial gains and restored conservative monarchs to the thrones of states like Spain and France itself. Nothing could have mattered less to the diplomatic representatives present at the Congress of Vienna than the “national identity” of the people who lived in the territories that were carved up and distributed like pieces of cake to the victors – the inhabitants of northeastern Italy were now subjects of the Austrian king, the entirety of Poland was divided between Russia and Prussia, and Great Britain remained secure not only in its growing global empire, but in its possession of the entirety of Ireland.

Thus, many of Europe’s peoples found themselves without states of their own or in states squeezed between the dominant powers of the time. Among the notable examples are the Italians and the Poles. Italy had suffered from the domination of one great power or another since the Renaissance; after 1815 it was the Austrians who were in control of much of northern Italy. Poland had been partitioned between Austria, Prussia, and Russia in the eighteenth century, simply vanishing from the map in the process. Germany, of course, was not united; Prussia and Austria vied with each other for dominance of the German lands, but both were fundamentally conservative powers uninterested in “German” unification until later in the century.

What had changed, however, was that the language of nationalism and the idea of national identity had come into its own by the late Napoleonic period. For example, German nationalism was powerful and popular after the Napoleonic wars; in 1817, just two years after the end of the Congress of Vienna, German nationalists gathered in Wartburg where Martin Luther had first translated the Bible into German, waving the black, red, and gold tricolor flag that would (over a century later) become the official flag of the German nation. Two years later, a nationalist poet murdered a conservative one, and the Austrian Empire passed laws that severely limited freedom of speech, specifically to contain and restrict the

spread of nationalism. Despite this effort, and the Austrian secret police, nationalism continued to spread, culminating in a large and self-consciously nationalistic movement seeking German unity.

The 1830s were a pivotal decade in the spread of nationalism. The Italian nationalist leader Giuseppe Mazzini founded Young Italy in 1831, calling for a “springtime of peoples” in which the people of each “nation” of Europe would topple conservative monarchs and assert their sovereignty and independence. That movement would quickly spread beyond Italy: “young” became the rallying word and idea of nationalism. In addition to Young Italy, there was a Young Germany and a Young Ireland, among others – the idea was that all people should and would eventually inhabit nations, and that this new “youthful” manner of politics would lead to peace and prosperity for everyone. The old, outdated borders abandoned, everyone would live where they were supposed to: in nations governed by their own people. Nationalists argued that war itself could be rendered obsolete. After all, if each “people” lived in “their” nation, what would be the point of territorial conflict? To the nationalists at the time, the emergence of nations was synonymous with a more perfect future for all.

Central to the very concept of nationalism in this early, optimistic phase was the identity of “the people,” a term with powerful political resonance in just about every European language: *das Volk*, *le peuple*, *il popolo*, etc. In every case, “the people” was thought to be something more important than just “those people who happen to live here.” Instead, the people were those tied to the soil, with roots reaching back centuries, and who deserve their own government. This was a profoundly romantic idea because it spoke to an essentially emotional sense of national identity – a sense of camaraderie and solidarity with individuals with whom a given person might not actually share much in common.

When scrutinized, the “real” identity of a given “people” became more difficult to discern. For example, were the Germans people who speak German, or who lived in Central Europe, or who were Lutheran, or Catholic, or who think that their ancestors were from the same area in which they themselves were born? If united in a German nation, who would lead it – were the Prussians or the Austrians more authentically German? What of those “Germans” who lived in places like Bohemia (i.e. the Czech lands) and Poland, with their own growing sense of national identity? The nationalist movements of the first half of the nineteenth century did not need to concern themselves overmuch with these conundrums because their goals of liberation and unification were not yet achievable. When national revolutions of various kinds did occur, however, they proved difficult to overcome.

Liberalism

Nationalism’s supporters tended to be members of the middle classes, including everyone from artisans to the new professional class associated with commerce and industry in the nineteenth century. Many of the same people supported another doctrine that had been spread by the Napoleonic wars: liberalism. The ideas of liberalism were based on the Enlightenment concepts of reason, rationality, and progress from the eighteenth century, but as a movement liberalism came of age in the post-Napoleonic period; the word itself was in regular use by 1830.

Nineteenth-century liberals were usually educated men and women, including the elites of industry, trade, and the professions as well as the middle classes. They shared the conviction that freedom in all its forms—freedom from the despotic rule of kings, from the obsolete privilege of nobles, from economic interference and religious intolerance, from occupational restrictions and limitations of speech and assembly—could only improve the quality of society and the well-being of its members.

In something of a contrast to the abstract nature of national identity among nationalists, liberalism had

straightforward beliefs, all of them reflecting not just abstract theories but the concrete examples of the liberal American and French Revolutions of the prior century. Perhaps liberalism's most fundamental belief was that there should be equality before the law, in stark contrast to the old "feudal" (almost a slur to liberals) order of legally-defined social estates. From that starting point of equality, the very purpose of law to liberals was to protect the rights of each and every citizen rather than enshrine the privileges of a minority.

Whereas "rights" had meant the traditional privileges enjoyed by a given social group or estate in the past, from the king's exclusive right to hunt game in his forests to the peasants' right to access the common lands, rights now came to mean a fundamental and universal privilege that was concomitant with citizenship itself. Liberals argued that freedom of speech, of a press free from censorship, and of religious expression were "rights" that should be enjoyed by all. Likewise, most liberals favored the abolition of archaic economic interference from the state, including legal monopolies on trade (e.g. in shipping between colonies) and the monopolies enjoyed by those craft guilds that remained – the "right" to engage in market exchange unhindered by outdated laws was part of the liberal paradigm as well.

Just as had the French revolutionaries in the early phase of the revolution, most liberals early nineteenth-century liberals looked to constitutional monarchy as the most reasonable and stable form of government. Constitutions should be written to guarantee the fundamental rights of the citizenry and to define, and restrict the power of the king (thus staving off the threat of tyranny). Liberals also believed in the desirability of an elected parliament, albeit one with a restricted electorate: almost universally, liberals at the time thought that voting should be restricted to those who owned significant amounts of property, thereby (they thought) guaranteeing social stability.

Unlike nationalists, liberals saw at least some of their goals realized in post-Napoleonic Europe. While its Bourbon monarchy was restored in France, there was now an elected parliament, religious tolerance, and relaxed censorship. Britain remained the most "liberal" power in Europe, having long stood as the model of constitutional monarchy. A liberal monarchy emerged as a result of the Belgian Revolution of 1830, and by the 1840s limited liberal reforms had been introduced in many of the smaller German states as well. Thus, despite the opposition of conservatives, much of Europe slowly and haltingly liberalized in the period between 1815 and 1848.

Socialism

The third and last of the new political ideologies and movements of the early nineteenth century was socialism. Socialism was a specific historical phenomenon born out of two related factors: first, the ideological rupture with the society of orders that occurred with the French Revolution, and second, the growth of industrial capitalism. It sought to address both the economic repercussions of the industrial revolution, especially in terms of the living conditions of workers, and to provide a new moral order for modern society.

The term itself is French. It was created in 1834 to contrast with individualism, a favorite term among liberals but one that early socialists saw as a symptom of moral decay. Right from its inception, socialism was contrasted with individualism and egoism, of the selfish and self-centered pursuit of wealth and power. Socialism proposed a new and better moral order, one in which the members of a society would care not only for themselves, but for one another. For the first decades of its existence socialism was less a movement with economic foundations than with ethical ones. It had economic arguments to make, of course, but those arguments were based on moral or ethical claims.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the word socialism came to be used more widely to describe several different movements than had hitherto been considered in isolation from one another. Their common factor was the idea that

material goods should be held in common and that producers should keep the fruits of their labor, all in the name of a better, happier, more healthy community and, perhaps, nation. The abiding concern of early socialists was to address what they saw as the moral and social disintegration of European civilization in the modern era, as well as to repair the rifts and ameliorate the suffering of workers in the midst of early industrial capitalism.

There was a major shift in socialism that occurred over the course of the century: until 1848, socialism consisted of a movements that shared a concern with the plight of working people and the regrowth of organic social bonds. This kind of socialism was fundamentally

optimistic – early socialists thought that almost everyone in European society would eventually become a socialist once they realized its potential. Following the later work of Friedrich Engels, one of the major socialist thinkers of the second half of the nineteenth century, this kind of socialism is often referred to as “utopian socialism.” In turn, after 1848, socialism was increasingly militant because socialists realized that a major restructuring of society could not happen peacefully, given the strength of both conservative and liberal opposition. The most important militant socialism was Marxism, named after its creator Karl Marx.

Three early socialist movements stand out as exemplary of so-called “utopian” socialism: the Saint-Simonians, the Owenites, and the Fourierists. Each was named after its respective founder and visionary. The binding theme of these three early socialist thinkers was not only radical proposals for the reorganization of work, but the idea that economic competition was a moral problem, that competition itself is in no way natural and instead implies social disorder. The Saint-Simonians called egoism, the selfish pursuit of individual wealth, “the deepest wound of modern society.”

In that, they found a surprisingly sympathetic audience among some aristocratic conservatives who were also afraid of social disorder and were nostalgic for the idea of a reciprocal set of obligations that had existed in pre-revolutionary Europe between the common people and the nobility. In turn, the early socialists believed that there was nothing inherent in their ideas threatening to the rich – many socialists expected that the privileged classes would recognize the validity of their ideas and that socialism would be a way to bridge the class divide, not widen it.

The Saint-Simonians, named after their founder Henri de Saint-Simon, were mostly highly educated young elites in France, many from privileged backgrounds, and many also graduates of the *École Polytechnique*, the most elite technical school in France founded by Napoleon. Their ideology, based on Saint-Simon’s writings, envisaged a society in which industrialism was harnessed to make a kind of heaven on earth, with the fruits of technology going to feed, clothe, and house, potentially, everyone. They were, in a word, the first “technocrats,” people who believe that technology can solve any problem. The Saint-Simonians did not inspire a popular movement, but individual members of the movement went on to achieve influential roles in the French industry, and helped lay the intellectual foundations of such ventures as the creation of the Suez Canal between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean.

The Owenites were initially the employees of Robert Owen, a British factory owner. He built a community for his workers in New Lanark, Scotland that provided health care, education, pensions, communal stores, and housing. He believed that productivity was tied to happiness, and his initial experiments met with success, with the New Lanark textile mill realizing consistent profits. He and his followers created a number of cooperative, communalist “utopian” communities (many in the United States), but those tended to fail in fairly short order. Instead, the lasting influence of Owenism was in workers organization, with the Owenites helping to organize a number of influential early trade unions, culminating in the London Working Men’s Association in 1836.

The Fourierists were part of a very peculiar movement, because their founder Charles Fourier was a very peculiar man. Fourier, who may have been at least partially insane, believed that he had unlocked a “science of the passions.” According to Fourier, the reason that most people detested what they did to survive was that they were not doing the

right kind of work. There were 810 specific kinds of personalities in the world, each of which was naturally inclined toward a certain kind of work. Thus, if 1,620 people (one man and one woman of each type) were to come together in a community, and each did the kind of work they “should” do, perfect happiness became possible. For example, according to Fourier, murderers were just people who should have been butchers, and children should be trash collectors, because they loved to play in the dirt. These planned communities would be called “Phalanxes,” after the fighting formations of ancient Greece.

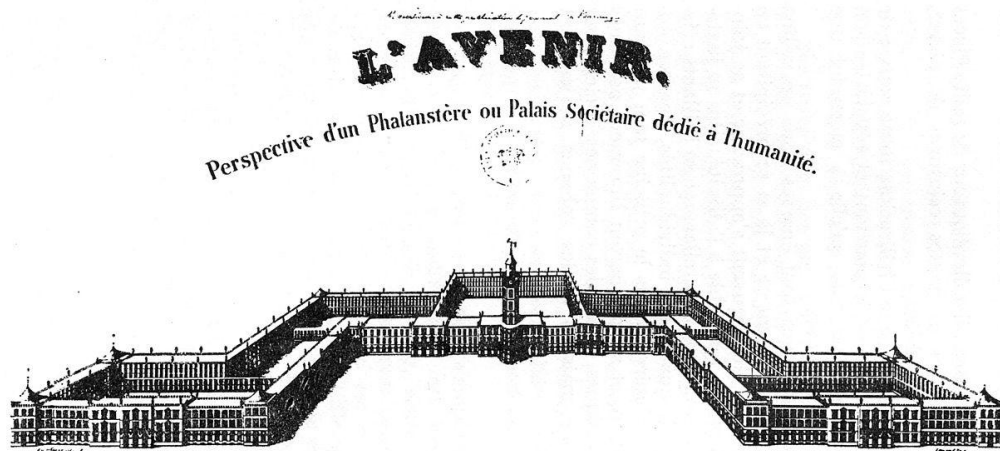


Illustration of a Fourierist phalanx. The heading simply reads “The Future.”

Fourier was far more radical than most other self-understood socialists. For one, he advocated complete gender equality and even sexual liberation – he was very hostile to monogamy, which he believed to be unnatural. Regarding marriage as an outdated custom, he imagined that in his phalanxes children would be raised in common rather than lorded over by their parents. Above and beyond forward-thinking ideas about gender, some of his concepts were a bit more puzzling. Among other things, he claimed that planets mated and gave birth to baby planets, and that once all of humanity lived in phalanxes the oceans would turn into lemonade.

Practically speaking, the importance of the fourierists is that many phalanxes were actually founded, including several in the United States. While the more oddball ideas were conveniently set aside, they were still among the first real experiments in planned, communal living. Likewise, many important early feminists began their intellectual careers as Fourierists. For instance, Flora Tristan was a French socialist and feminist who emerged from Fourierism to do important early work on tying the idea of social progress to female equality.

In general, the broad “Utopian” socialism of the 1840s was quite widespread leading up to 1848, it was peaceful in orientation, it was democratic, it believed in the “right” to work, and its followers hoped that the higher orders might join it. These early movements also tended to cross over with liberal and nationalist movements, sharing a vision of more just and equitable laws and a more humane social order in contrast to the repression all three movements identified with conservatism. Few socialists in this period believed that violence would be necessary in transforming society.

Considered in detail in the next chapter, there was an enormous revolutionary explosion all over Europe in 1848. From Paris to Vienna to Prague, Europeans rose up and, temporarily as it turned out, overthrew their monarchs. In the end, however, the revolutions collapsed. The awkward coalitions of socialists and other rebels that had spearheaded them soon fell to infighting, and kings (and in France, a new emperor) eventually reasserted control. Socialists made important realizations following 1848. Democracy did not lead inevitably to social and political progress, as majorities typically voted for established community leaders (often priests or nobles). Class collaboration was not a possibility, as the

wealthier bourgeoisie and the nobility recognized in socialism their shared enemy. Peaceful change might not be possible, given the forces of order's willingness to employ violence to achieve their ends. Russia, for instance, invaded Hungary to ensure the continued rule of (Russia's ally at the time) Habsburg Austria. After 1848 socialism was increasingly militant, focused on the necessity of confrontational tactics, even outright violence, to achieve a better society. Two post-Utopian and rival forms of socialist theory matured in this period: state socialism and anarchist socialism.

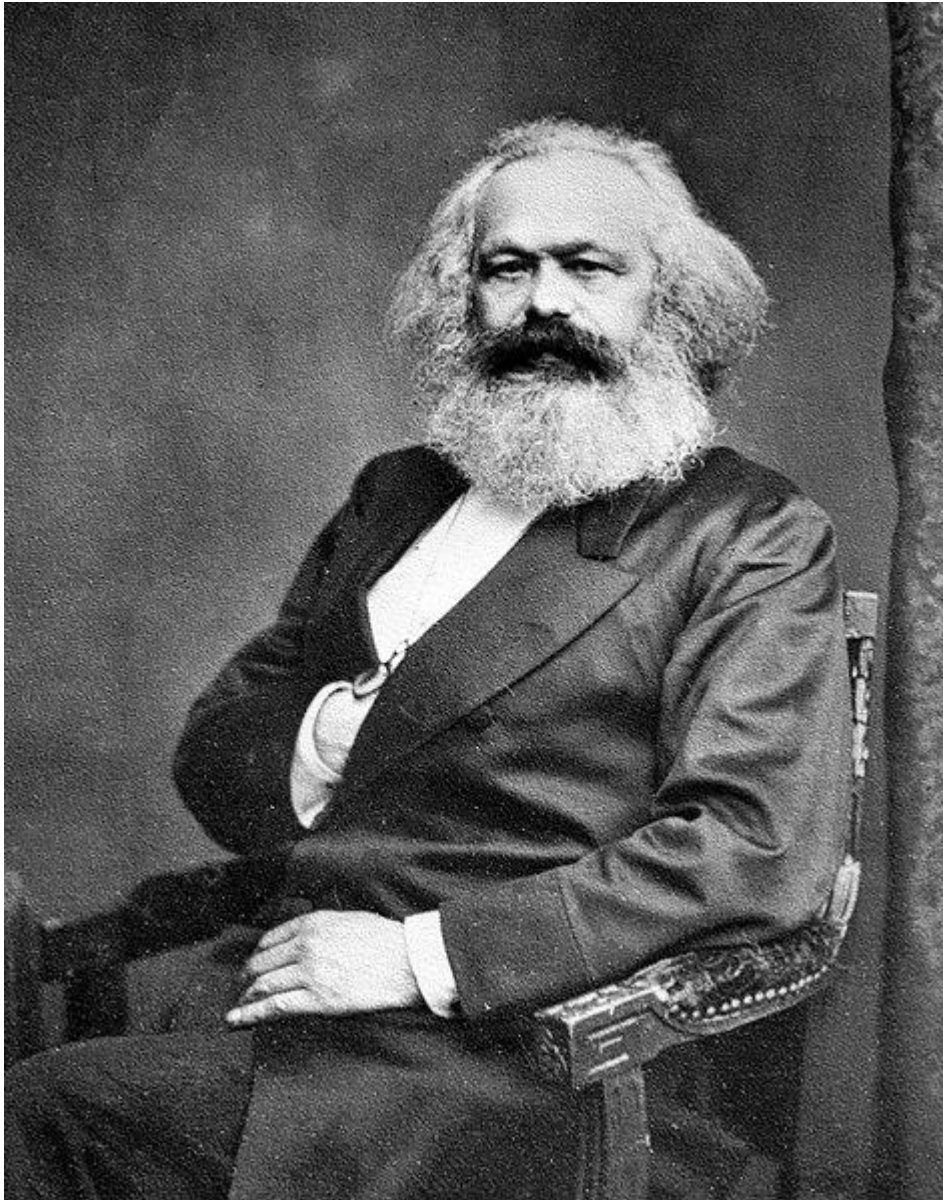
The first, state socialism, is represented by the French thinker and agitator Louis Blanc. Blanc believed that social reform had to come from above. It was, he argued, unrealistic to imagine that groups could somehow spontaneously organize themselves into self-sustaining, harmonious units. He believed that universal manhood suffrage should and would lead to a government capable of implementing necessary economic changes, primarily by guaranteeing work for all citizens. He actually saw this happen in the French revolution of 1848, when he briefly served in the revolutionary government. There, he pushed through the creation of National Workshops for workers, which provided paid work for the urban poor.

In stark contrast was anarchist socialism. A semantic point: anarchism means the rejection of the state, not the rejection of all forms of social organization or even hierarchy (i.e. it is perfectly consistent for there to be an organized anarchist movement, even one with leaders). In the case of nineteenth-century anarchist socialism, there were two major thinkers: the French Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and the Russian Mikhail Bakunin.

Proudhon was the author of a book entitled "What Is Property?" in which he answered unequivocally that "property is theft." The very idea of ownership was vacuous and false to Proudhon, a conceit that ensured that the wealthy maintained their hold on political and legal power. Unlike his rival Louis Blanc, Proudhon was skeptical of the state's ability to effect meaningful reform, and after the failure of the French revolution of 1848 he came to believe that all state power was inherently oppressive. Instead of a state, Proudhon advocated local cooperatives of workers in a kind of "economic federalism" in which cooperatives would exchange goods and services between one another, and each cooperative would reward work with the fruits of that work. Simply put, workers themselves would keep all profit. He believed that the workers would have to emancipate themselves through some kind of revolution, but he was not an advocate of violence.

The other prominent anarchist socialist was Mikhail Bakunin, a contemporary, sometimes friend, and sometimes rival of Proudhon. Briefly, Bakunin believed in the necessity of an apocalyptic, violent revolution to wipe the slate clean for a new society of free collectives. He loathed the state and detested the traditional family structure, seeing it as a useless holdover from the past. Bakunin thought that if his contemporary society was destroyed, the social instincts inherent to humanity would flower and people would "naturally" build a better society. He was also the great champion of the outcasts, the bandits, and the urban poor. He was deeply skeptical about both the industrial working class, who he noted all wished could be middle class, and of western Europe, which was shot-through with individualism, egoism, and the obsession with wealth. He ended up organizing large anarchist movements in Europe's "periphery," especially in Italy and Spain. By about 1870 both countries had large anarchist movements.

In the end, the most influential socialist was a German: Karl Marx. Marx was born in 1818 in the Rhineland, the son of Jewish parents who had converted to Lutheranism (out of necessity – Marx's father was a lawyer in conservative, staunchly Lutheran Prussia). He was a passionate and brilliant student of philosophy who came to believe that philosophy was only important if it led to practical change – he wrote "philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways. The point, however, is to change it."



The best-known portrait of Marx, dating from 1875.

A journalist as a young man, Marx became an avowed socialist by the 1840s and penned (along with his friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels) the nineteenth century's most famous and influential socialist work, *The Communist Manifesto*. Exiled to Great Britain in the aftermath of the failure of the Revolutions of 1848, Marx devoted himself to a detailed analysis of the endogenous tendencies of capitalist economics, ultimately producing three enormous volumes entitled, simply, *Capital*. The first was published in 1867, with the other two edited from notes and published by Engels after Marx's death. It is worthwhile to consider Marx's theories in detail because of their profound influence: by the middle of the twentieth century, fully a third of the world was governed by communist states that were at least nominally "Marxist" in their political and economic policies.

All of history, according to Marx, is the history of class struggle. From ancient pharaohs to feudal kings and their nobles, classes of the rich and powerful had always abused and exploited classes of the poor and weak. The world had moved on into a new phase following the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution, however, one that (to Marx) simplified that ongoing struggle from many competing classes to just two: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The

bourgeoisie were the rising middle classes, the owners of factories and businesses, the bankers, and all of those with direct control over industrial production. The proletariat was the industrial working class.

Before this, the classes of workers in the pre-modern era generally had direct access to their livelihood: a small parcel of land, access to the common lands, the tools of their trade in the case of artisans. They had, in Marx's language, some kind of protected access to "the means of production," which could mean anything from some land, a plow, and an ox to a workshop stocked with a carpenter's tools. In the modern era, however, those rights and those tools were systematically taken away. The common lands were closed off and replaced with commercial farms. Artisans were rendered obsolete by the growth of industry. Peasants were pushed off the land or owned plots so small their children had to look for work in the cities. The net effect was, generally, that the class of workers who had "nothing to sell but their labor," the proletariat, grew.

At the same time, the people who did own property, "the bourgeoisie," were under pressure themselves. In the climate of the new capitalism, of unregulated markets and cutthroat competition, it was terribly easy to fall behind and go out of business. Thus, former members of the bourgeoisie lost out and became proletarians themselves. The net effect was that the proletariat grew and every other conceivable class (including peasants, the owners of small shops, etc.) shrank.

Meanwhile, industry produced more and more products. Every year saw improvements in efficiency and economy in production, arriving at a terrific glut of products available for purchase. Eventually, there was simply too much out there and not enough people who could afford to buy it, as one of the things about the proletariat, one of their forms of "alienation," was their inability to buy the very things they made. This resulted in a "crisis of overproduction" and a massive economic collapse. This would be unthinkable in a pre-modern economy, where the essential problem a society faced was the scarcity of goods. Thanks to the Industrial Revolution, however, products need consumers more than consumers need products.

In the midst of one of these collapses, Marx wrote, the members of the proletariat could realize their common interests in seizing the unprecedented wealth that industrialism had made possible and using it for the common good. Instead of a handful of super-rich expropriators, everyone could share in material comfort and freedom from scarcity, something that had never been possible before. That vision of revolution was very powerful to the young Marx, who wrote that, given the inherent tendencies of capitalism, revolution was inevitable.

In turn, revolutions did happen, most spectacularly in 1848, which Marx initially greeted with elation only to watch in horror as the revolutionary momentum ebbed and conservatives regained the initiative. Subsequently, as he devoted himself to the analysis of capitalism's inherent characteristics rather than revolutionary propaganda, Marx became more circumspect. With staggering erudition, he tried to make sense of an economic system that somehow repeatedly destroyed itself and yet regrew stronger, faster, and more violent with every business cycle.

In historical hindsight, Marx was really writing about what would happen if capitalism was allowed to run completely rampant, as it did in the first century of the Industrial Revolution. The hellish mills, the starving workers, and the destitution and anguish of the factory towns were all part of nineteenth-century European capitalism. Everything that could contain those factors, primarily in the form of concessions to workers and state intervention in the economy, had not happened on a large scale when Marx was writing – trade unions themselves were outlawed in most states until the middle of the century. In turn, none of the factors that might mitigate capitalism's destructive tendencies were financially beneficial to any individual capitalist, so Marx saw no reason that they would ever come about on a large scale in states controlled by moneyed interests.

To Marx, revolution seemed not only possible but probable in the 1840s, when he was first writing about philosophy and economics. After the revolutions of 1848 failed, however, he shifted his attention away from revolution and towards

the inner workings of capitalism itself. In fact, he rarely wrote about revolution at all after 1850; his great work *Capital* is instead a vast and incredibly detailed study of how England's capitalist economy worked and what it did to the people "within" it.

To boil it down to a very simple level, Marx never described in adequate detail when the material conditions for a socialist revolution were possible. Across the vast breadth of his books and correspondence, Marx (and his collaborator Friedrich Engels) argued that each nation would have to reach a critical threshold in which industrialism was mature, the proletariat was large and self-aware, and the bourgeoisie was using increasingly harsh political tactics to try to keep the proletariat in check. There would have to be, and according to Marxism there always would be, a major economic crisis caused by overproduction.

At that point, somehow, the proletariat could rise up and take over. In some of his writings, Marx indicated that the proletariat would revolt spontaneously, without guidance from anyone else. Sometimes, such as in the second section of his early work *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx alluded to the existence of a political party, the communists, who would work to help coordinate and aid the proletariat in the revolutionary process. The bottom line is, however, that Marx was very good at critiquing the internal laws of the free market in capitalism, and in pointing out many of its problems, but he had no tactical guide to revolutionary politics. And, finally, toward the end of his life, Marx himself was increasingly worried that socialists, including self-styled Marxists, would try to stage a revolution "too early" and it would fail or result in disaster.

In sum, Marx did not leave a clear picture of what socialists were supposed to do, politically, nor did he describe how a socialist state would work if a revolution was successful. This only mattered historically because socialist revolutions were successful, and those nations had to try to figure out how to govern in a socialistic way.

Social Classes

How much did European society resemble the sociological description provided by Marx? At first sight, nineteenth-century Europe seems more similar to how it was in earlier centuries than it does radically new – most people were still farmers, every country but Britain was still mostly rural, and the Industrial Revolution took decades to spread beyond its British heartland. That being said, European society was undergoing significant changes, and Marx was right in identifying the new professional middle class, the bourgeoisie, as the agents of much of that change.

The term "bourgeoisie" is French for "business class." The term originally meant, simply, "townspeople," but over time it acquired the connotation of someone who made money from commerce, banking, or administration but did not have a noble title. The bourgeoisie made up between 15% and 20% of the population of central and western Europe by the early 1800s. The male members of the bourgeoisie were factory owners, clerks, commercial and state bureaucrats, journalists, doctors, lawyers, and everyone else who fell into that ambiguous class of "businessmen." They were increasingly proud of their identity as "self-made" men, men whose financial success was based on intelligence, education, and competence instead of noble privilege and inheritance. Many regarded the old order as an archaic throwback, something that was both limiting their own ability to make money and society's possibilities of further progress. At the same time, they were defined by the fact that they did not work with their hands to make a living; they were neither farmers, nor artisans, nor industrial workers.

The growth of the bourgeoisie arose from the explosion of urbanization that took place due to both industrialism and the breakdown of the old social order that started with the French Revolution. Cities, some of which grew almost

1000% in the course of the century, concentrated groups of educated professionals. It was the middle class that reaped the benefits of a growing, and increasingly complex, economy centered in the cities.

While the bourgeoisie was proud of its self-understood sobriety and work ethic, in contrast to the foppery and frivolity of the nobility, successful members of the middle class often eagerly bought as much land as they could, both in emulation of the nobles and because the right to vote in most of western Europe was tied for decades to land-ownership. In turn, nobles were wary of the middle class, especially because so many bourgeois were attracted to potentially disruptive ideologies like liberalism and, increasingly, nationalism, but over the course of the century the two classes tended to mix based on wealth. Old families of nobles may have despised the “nouveau riche,” but they still married them if they needed the money.

The bourgeoisie had certain visible things that defined them as a class, literal “status symbols.” They did not perform manual labor of any kind, and insisted on the highest standards of cleanliness and tidiness in their appearance and their homes. In turn, all but the most marginal bourgeois families employed at least one full-time servant (recruited from the working class and always paid a pittance) to maintain those standards of hygiene. If possible, bourgeois women did no paid work at all, serving instead as keepers of the home and the maintainers of the rituals of visiting and hosting that maintained their social network. Finally, the bourgeoisie socialized in private places: private clubs, the new department stores that opened in for the first time in the mid-nineteenth century, and the foyers of private homes. The working classes met in taverns (“public houses” or just “pubs” in Britain), while bourgeois men and women stayed safely inside.



Clothing among the bourgeoisie came to resemble a specific “uniform” of respectability in the nineteenth century – the top hat in particular was an iconic mark of class identity by the middle of the century.

In addition, the members of the bourgeoisie were supposed to live by certain codes of behavior. In contrast to the

sexual libertinage of the old nobility, bourgeois men and women were expected to avoid extra-marital affairs (although, practically speaking, bourgeois men regularly took advantage of prostitutes). A bourgeois man was to live up to high standards of honesty and business ethics. What these concepts shared was the fear of shame – the literature of the time describing this social class is filled with references to the failure of a bourgeois to live up to these standards and being exposed to vast public humiliation.

What about the nobility? The legal structures that sustained their identity slowly but surely weakened over the course of the nineteenth century. Even more threatening than the loss of legal monopolies over land-owning, the officer corps of the army, and political status was the enormous shift in the generation of wealth away from land to commerce and industry. Relatively few noblemen had been involved in the early Industrial Revolution, thanks in large part to their traditional disdain for commerce, but by the middle of the century it was apparent that industry, banking, and commerce were eclipsing land-ownership as the major sources of wealth. Likewise, the one thing that the bourgeoisie and the working class had in common was a belief in the desirability of voting rights; by the end of the century universal manhood suffrage was on the horizon (or had already come to pass, as it did in France in 1871) in almost every country in Europe.

Thus, the long-term pattern of the nobility was that it came to culturally resemble the bourgeoisie. While stubbornly clinging to its titles and its claims to authority, the nobility grudgingly entered into the economic fields of the bourgeoisie and adopted the bourgeoisie's social habits as well. The lines between the upper echelons of the bourgeoisie and the bulk of the nobility were very blurry by the end of the century, as bourgeois money funded old noble houses that still had access to the social prestige of a title.

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CHAPTER 4: THE POLITICS OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth century is, among many other things, a study in contrasts. On the one hand, it witnessed spectacular political, economic, and social changes that saw the birth of new nations and the demise of old kingdoms. On the other, even its newborn nations often looked back to the most traditional form of political sovereignty: dynastic identity. One of the great historians of the period, Eric Hobsbawm, noted in his

The Age of Empire

that Europe had never seen so many states ruled by “emperors” as it did at the turn of the twentieth century: the Empress of the British Empire, the Kaiser of the German Reich, the Kaiser of the Austrian Reich, and the Tsar of the Russian Empire were not just contemporaries, they were all related by dynastic marriages. And yet, each emperor ruled over a profoundly different “empire” than had his or her predecessors, ones in which (even in Russia by 1905) at least some men voted to elect representatives with real political power.

At its simplest, nineteenth-century European politics can be seen as a series of struggles and compromises between different political ideologies and their corresponding movements. From 1815 until 1848, those struggles normally pitted conservatives against liberals and nationalists. A series of revolutions shook much of Europe in 1848, but in their aftermath conservative monarchs regained control almost everywhere. After 1848, conservatism itself slowly adopted liberal and nationalistic traits, culminating in the conservative-led national unifications of Italy and Germany. Of the new political movements considered in the last chapter, only socialism failed to achieve its stated goals at least somewhere in Europe, instead becoming an increasingly militant movement opposed not just to conservatives, but its occasional former allies: liberals and nationalists.

The backdrop of these struggles was a wholly uncharacteristic state of peace that held for most of the nineteenth century. After the Napoleonic wars, the great powers of Europe deliberately crafted a new political arrangement whose purpose was, in part, to maintain peace between them. That peace was broken occasionally starting in 1853, but the subsequent wars were shorter, less bloody, and less frequent than those of any previous century. Historians have often noted that the nineteenth century

technically ended in 1900, but in terms of its prevailing political, social, and cultural patterns, it really ended in 1914, with the advent of the horrendous bloodshed and destruction of World War I.

The Congress of Vienna

This period of peace began as a product of the post-Napoleonic order. When Napoleon was first defeated in 1814, representatives from the victorious states gathered in the Austrian capital of Vienna to establish what was to be done in the aftermath of his conquests. Napoleon’s escape from Elba and inconvenient attempt to re-establish his empire forced the representatives to suspend their meetings while British and Prussian armies finally ended his reign for good. The conference, known later as the Congress of Vienna, was then re-convened, finally concluding in 1815. While various

states in Europe, including the Ottoman Empire, sent representatives, the Congress was dominated by the five “great powers”: the Austrian Empire, Great Britain, Prussia, Russia, and (by the end) France itself.

By its conclusion, the Congress of Vienna had redrawn the map of Europe with the goal of preventing France from threatening the balance of power again. But unlike the conference that ended the First World War a century later, the Congress of Vienna did not impose a huge penalty on the aggressor. Once it had been agreed to place Louis XVIII, the younger brother of the executed Louis XVI, on the throne of France, the powers that had defeated Napoleon had the good sense to see that it would be illogical to punish the French (not least because the French might opt to have yet another revolution in response). Much of the credit was due to a wily diplomat, Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Périgord, himself a former official under Napoleon, who convinced the other representatives to include France as an equal partner rather than an enemy to be punished. Instead, the victors deprived the French of their conquests and imposed a modest indemnity, but they did not dismember the country. They did, however, redraw the map of Europe.

The powers that defeated Napoleon had a few specific goals at the conference. They sought to create a lasting conservative order in France itself. They hoped to restrain French ambition and stave off the threat of another revolution. They sought to reward themselves with territory taken from weaker states like Poland and the formerly independent territories of northern Italy. And, finally, they devoted themselves to the suppression of future revolutionary movements. The political order that emerged in 1815 became known as the Congress System (also known as the Concert of Europe): a conservative international political network maintained by the five great powers.

The Congress System was devoted to peace, stability, and order. While Great Britain was content with any political arrangement that prevented a disruption like the Napoleonic wars from occurring again, the more conservative states were not: led by the Russian Tsar Alexander I, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and France (the latter under its new Bourbon monarch Louis XVIII) joined in a “Holy Alliance” that promised to put down revolutions wherever they might occur. Now, war was to be waged in the name of dynastic sovereignty and the conservative political order, not territorial ambition. In other words, the next time France invaded Spain and Russia invaded Hungary, they did so in the name of restoring foreign conservative monarchs to their “rightful” position of power, not in order to enrich themselves.

Revolts and Revolutions

As it turns out, they did not have long to wait to put the military commitment of the Holy Alliance into action. The first liberal revolt against a conservative monarch occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Congress of Vienna in what had traditionally been one of the most conservative states of Europe: Spain.

During the Napoleonic period, Spanish liberal intellectuals had been stuck in an awkward position. Their country was ruled by a foreign power, France, one that taxed it and extracted resources for its wars, but it was also one that represented the best hope of liberal reform. The French Revolution was the symbol, for liberals all over Europe, of progress, even if they had misgivings about the Terror. When the Spanish resistance sprung up against the French under Napoleon, it was an alliance of conservative priests and peasants, along with conservative nobles, who spearheaded it. Most Spanish liberals did end up supporting the resistance, but they still hoped that the post-Napoleonic order would see liberal reforms to the Spanish monarchy.

Toward the end of the Napoleonic period, the Spanish representative assembly, the cortes, approved a liberal constitution. Once he was back in power, however, the restored Spanish King Ferdinand VII refused to recognize the constitution, and he also refused to summon the cortes. With the approval of the other

conservative monarchies of Europe, Ferdinand essentially moved to turn back the clock in Spain to the pre-revolutionary period.

Ferdinand was able to force Spain back toward the old order, but he proved unable to squelch independence movements in Spain's American colonies. In 1816 an anti-Spanish uprising in Argentina began and soon spread to the other colonies. By 1824 all of Central and South America was independent. In the midst of the failure of Spanish military expeditions to stop the revolutions, in 1820 an alliance of liberal politicians and military officers staged a coup against Ferdinand and began remaking Spain as a liberal state.



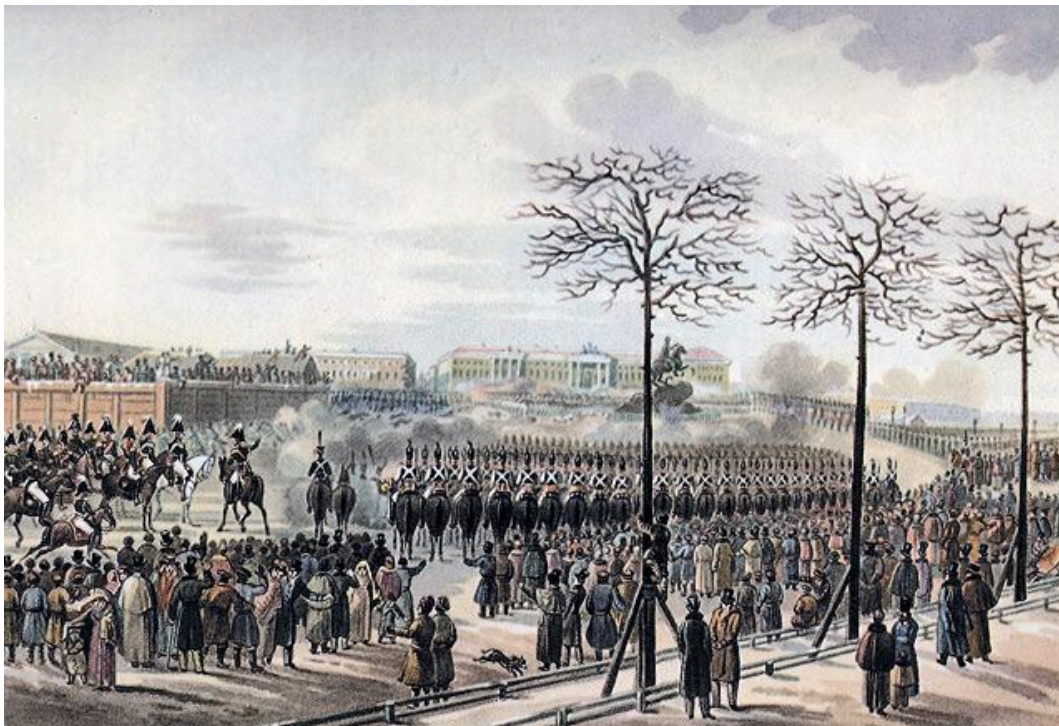
The
Arch-Conservative
Spanish King
Ferdinand VII

The Spanish liberal coup of 1820 was the first major test of the Holy Alliance's commitment to prevent revolution anywhere in Europe. True to form, the continental members of the alliance supported a French army of 200,000 in invading Spain and restoring Ferdinand to the throne. The liberals were persecuted and hounded, and Spain was

essentially ruled by an arch-conservative order for the next few decades. Incidentally, it was in this context that the American president James Monroe issued the Monroe Doctrine, which forbid European powers from interfering in the politics of the Americas. Monroe was afraid that the Holy Alliance would try to extend its intervention to the now-former Spanish colonies and he thus issued a proclamation that any attempt by a European power to intervene in the western hemisphere would be considered a threat to US peace and safety.

The next liberal revolt occurred in the most conservative political context in Europe at the time: that of Russia. Late in the Napoleonic wars, some Russian officers in the Tsarist army underwent a pair of related revelations. First, they came to admire the bravery and loyalty of their soldiers, all of whom were drawn from the ranks of the serfs. In turn, they experienced the west firsthand as Russian armies fought Napoleon's forces and then during the occupation of France. There, the sheer backwardness of Russia stood in contrast to the dynamism and vitality they discovered in French society (especially in Paris itself). The officers came to see serfdom as both fundamentally immoral and as totally incompatible with any hope of progress for Russia. Thus, as Russian armies returned home after the Congress of Vienna, a conspiracy of liberal officers emerged, intent on creating a liberal political order for the Russian state once the aging, fanatically religious, and arch-conservative Tsar Alexander I died.

Ten years later (in 1825) he did die, and the result was the "Decembrist" uprising. During the years that followed Napoleon's defeat, the conspiracy of army officers put plans in motion to force the government to accept liberal reforms, especially a constitution guaranteeing basic rights and freeing the serfs. When the new Tsar, Nikolai I, was crowned in December of 1825, the officers staged a rebellion in the square in front of the royal palace in St. Petersburg, hoping that the army as a whole would side with them and force the Tsar to accept reforms. Instead, after a tense day of waiting, troops loyal to the Tsar opened fire and crushed the uprising.



The Decembrist uprising, depicted at the moment troops loyal to the tsar opened fire.

The Decembrist uprising was the one and only attempt at implementing liberal reform in Russia in the nineteenth century; it would take until 1905 for the next revolution to come to pass. Nikolai I was the ultimate reactionary, personally overseeing the police investigation of the Decembrist conspiracy and creating Europe's first secret police force,

The Third Section. He would go on to a long rule (r. 1825 – 1855) guided by the principles he defined for the Russian state: autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality. In the decades that followed, the slightest sign of dissent from a Russian subject was grounds for imprisonment or exile to a Siberian prison-village, and the political and social changes that swept across the rest of Europe were thus held at bay. Tsarist power remained intact, but Russian society (and the Russian economy) stagnated.

Even as the Decembrist uprising failed, another revolt was being fought in the heartland of “Western Civilization” itself: Greece. The Balkans, including not only Greece but territories like Bosnia, Serbia, and Macedonia, had been part of the Ottoman Empire for hundreds of years. There, the predominantly Christian subjects of the Ottomans enjoyed official religious toleration, but chafed at the tax burden and, increasingly by the late eighteenth century, resented the “foreign” rule of the Turks. This resentment coalesced around the new political ideology of nationalism by the early nineteenth century – just as “Germans” resented the conservative Austrian regime and Poles detested the Russian and Prussian states that had divided up Polish territory, Greeks (as well as Serbs, Croats, and the other peoples of the Balkans) increasingly saw themselves as autonomous peoples artificially ruled by a foreign power.

In 1821, a Greek prince named Alexander Ypsilantis organized a revolt centered on the demand for a Greek state. A series of uprisings occurred in Greece and on various islands in the Aegean Sea. Despite the fact that the Ottoman Empire was a nominal ally of the members of the Holy Alliance and an official part of the Congress System, and despite the fact that the Greek uprising was precisely the kind of thing that the Holy Alliance had been organized to prevent, Europeans soon flocked to support the rebellion. European scholars wrote impassioned articles about how Greece, as the birthplace of European culture, needed to be liberated from the “oriental” tyranny of the Turks.

After reports of a Turkish massacre of Greeks were publicized in Europe, the Holy Alliance demanded that Turkey grant Greek independence. The Ottomans refused, so in 1827 a combined fleet of Britain, France, and Russia sunk an Ottoman fleet. Fighting continued between the rebels and the Ottomans for a few years, with support going to the rebels from the European powers (and Russia actually declaring war in 1829), and in 1833 the Ottomans finally relented and granted independence to Greece.

Thus, in this case, the cultural bias pitting European Christians against (perceived) non-European Muslims proved stronger than the pragmatic, conservative concern with suppressing revolutions among the European powers. Following the Greek uprising, the Ottoman Empire entered a period of marked decline in power, its territories attracting the unwanted attention of the European states. Europeans soon referred to the Ottoman Empire as the “sick man of Europe,” and squabbling over Ottoman territory became an increasing source of tension between the European great powers by the middle of the century.

While the Greek uprising was raging in the eastern Mediterranean, revolution was brewing once again in France. King Charles X, the arch-conservative and nearly delusional king of France from 1824 – 1830, was one of the most unpopular monarchs in Europe. Under his watch the small group of rich politicians allowed to sit in the French Chamber of Deputies passed a law making religious sacrilege punishable by death (no one was ever actually executed), and he re-instituted harsh censorship even as French society had become increasingly literate and liberal. In July of 1830, angered at the growing strength of liberalism, Charles disenfranchised most of those who had been able to vote at all and further clamped down on the freedom of the press.

The result was a kind of accidental revolution in which angry crowds took to the streets and the king lost his nerve and fled. Just as they had in the first French Revolution, the army sided with the crowd of protesters, not with the king. Charles X fled to exile in England, the last ever Bourbon monarch to have held the throne of France, and his cousin

Louis-Philippe of the Orléans branch of the royal line became the king. The “citizen king” as he was called expanded the electorate, reinstituted freedom of the press, and abandoned the kind of medieval court etiquette favored by Charles X.

The irony of the “July Monarchy” of Louis-Philippe is that it demonstrated some of the limitations of liberalism at the time. The electorate was very small, comprised of the wealthy (both noble and bourgeois). The government essentially ran like a company devoted to making the rich and connected richer and better connected, while leaving the majority of the population without access to political power. Workers were banned from forming unions and even relatively prosperous bourgeois were not rich enough to vote. Louis-Philippe himself became increasingly unpopular as the years went on (satirical cartoons at the time often depicted him as an obese, spoiled pear). The July Monarchy only lasted fourteen years, toppled during the revolutions of 1848.

Meanwhile, in Great Britain, it seemed possible that a revolution might come to pass as well. Britain as of 1815 was comparatively “liberal” already, having been a constitutional monarchy since 1689, but there was still plenty for British liberals to attack. There was a limited representative government in the parliament, and the electorate mostly represented the landowning gentry class. Furthermore, the electoral districts were either totally out of sync with the British population or were, in fact, complete nonsense. Voting districts had not been revised to reflect changes in population since the eighteenth century, and thus, the north was sorely underrepresented. Also, there were “rotten boroughs,” electoral districts with no one in them which were controlled remotely by a lord. One was a pasture. Another, called Dunwich, was literally underwater; due to changes in sea walls, it had been inundated for centuries. It still sent a representative to parliament, however, namely the descendant of the lords who had controlled it before it was submerged.

A series of reforms in Britain, however, staved off a revolution along continental lines. First, in 1828 and 1829, separate bills made it legal for Catholics and non-Anglican Protestants to hold office. Then, the Great Reform Bill of 1832 expanded the electorate to encompass most of the urban middle class and eliminated the rotten boroughs entirely; it only passed the arch-conservative House of Lords because the lords were terrified that the disgruntled middle class would join with workers in an actual revolution. The newly liberalized parliament that followed swiftly voted to end slavery in British territories (1833), passed the controversial Poor Laws that created public workhouses (1834) for the unemployed, and eliminated corrupt and archaic city governments and replaced them with elected councils. A decade later, the hated Corn Laws were finally repealed after a protracted political struggle (1846). Thus, the pattern in British politics in the nineteenth century was a slow, steady liberalization, even as Britain clinched its position as the most powerful single state in Europe by the middle of the century.

The Revolutions of 1848

The new political ideologies that had emerged from the backdrop of the French Revolution and Napoleonic period coalesced in 1848. That year, all across Europe, there were a series of revolutions that combined the liberal, socialist, and nationalist movements in a temporary alliance against the conservative order. Starting in France, but quickly spreading to Prussia, Austria, the smaller German kingdoms, and regions like Italy and Hungary, coalitions rose up and, temporarily, succeeded in either running their monarchs out of their capital cities (as in Paris) or forcing their monarchs to agree to constitutions and rationalized legal systems (as in Prussia and Austria).

In February of 1848 in France, the unpopular king Louis-Philippe unwisely tried to crack down on gatherings of would-be reformers. A revolutionary crowd gathered and, after panicked soldiers fired and killed forty protesters, began

to build barricades and prepare to fight back. The king promptly fled the city. A diverse group of liberals and socialists formed a provisional government, declared France to be a new republic, and began to draw up plans for a general election for representatives to a new government. There would be no property restrictions on voting – although women remained disenfranchised, as they did everywhere else – and never again would a monarch hold the throne of France simply because of his or her dynastic birth.

Meanwhile, in Austria, crowds took to the streets of Vienna after learning of the revolution in Paris (telegraphs now carried information across Europe in hours; thus, this was the first time revolutions were tied together via “social media”). Peasants marched into the capital demanding the end of feudalism. Workers demanded better wages and conditions. Liberals demanded a constitution. In non-German areas like the Czech lands and Hungary, after learning of the news in Vienna, nationalists rose up in the regional capitals of Prague and Budapest demanding their own independent nations. For a time it looked like the Austro-Hungarian Empire itself was on the verge of collapse.



Europe in 1848.
Note the red marks
on the map – those
denote major
revolutionary
outbreaks.

In Prussia and the other German kingdoms, a series of revolutions saw a gathering of hundreds of would-be politicians in the city of Frankfurt. The first popularly elected national assembly in German history gathered to draw up a constitution based on the principle of German unity and a liberalized legal order. Not only Prussians, but representatives of the various other kingdoms of Germany came together and began the business of creating a unified state. The representatives, however, had to debate some thorny issues. Should the German liberals support free enterprise or a guaranteed “right to work,” as demanded by German socialists? Should they support the independence of Poland at the expense of the German minority there? Should they favor Bohemian independence at the expense of the German minority in the Czech lands? There were about 800 delegates gathered, elected from all over the German states, operating without the official sanction of any of the kings and princes of their homelands, and they all wanted the chance to speak.

In turn, the major debate that broke out among the delegates was about the form of German nationalism that should be adopted: should Germany be a “smaller German” state defined by German-speakers and excluding Austria, or a

“greater German” state including Austria and all of its various other ethnicities and languages? It took months for the former position to win out in debate, and the final conclusion was that any state could join Germany, but only if it “left behind” non-German territories (like Hungary). It should be noted, however, that the delegates agreed that Polish and Czech nationalism had to be crushed because of German “racial” superiority, an early anticipation of the Germanic ethnocentrism that would eventually give rise to Nazism almost a century later.

This flowering of revolutionary upheaval, however, proved shockingly short-lived. The coalitions of artisans, students, and educated liberals who had spearheaded the uprisings were good at arguing with one another about the finer points of national identity, but not at establishing meaningful links to the bulk of the population who did not live in or near the capital cities. The Frankfurt Congress was the quintessential expression of that form of dysfunction: impassioned, educated men, most of them lawyers, with few direct links to the majority of the German population, despite the growing popularity of German nationalism. The problem for the revolutionaries across Europe was that only in France did the king stay out of power permanently. In the German kingdoms, Italy, and Austria, monarchs and their officials worked behind the scenes to re-establish control of their armies and to shore up their own support while hastily-created assemblies were trying to draw up liberal constitutions.

Likewise, revolutionary coalitions soon discovered that their constituent elements did not necessarily agree on the major political issues that had to be addressed in creating a new government. The first sign of this dissent was in France: the socialists in the new French parliament (called the National Assembly, just as it was in the first French republic half a century earlier) created new “National Workshops” in Paris that offered good wages to anyone in need of work. Soon, however, the alliance between liberals and socialists broke down over resentment at the costs of running the workshops and the Assembly shut them down. The workers of Paris rose up in protest and a series of bloody street battles called the June Days broke out in which thousands of Parisian workers were killed or imprisoned. Conservative peasants were sent by railroad from the countryside under orders from the Assembly and in just a few days, the great socialist experiment was crushed.

In the aftermath of the June Days, the government of the Second Republic was torn between liberals, socialists, and conservatives (the latter of whom wanted to restore the French monarchy). In the midst of the chaos, Napoleon Bonaparte’s nephew, Louis Napoleon, successfully ran for president of the Republic, winning in large part because of the simple power of his name. Posing as a unifying force above the fray of petty politics, he was genuinely popular across class and regional lines throughout France. In 1852 he staged a coup and declared himself Emperor of France, just as his uncle had decades earlier. And, also like the first Napoleon, he had his power ratified by bypassing the Assembly entirely and calling for a plebiscite (vote of the entire male population) in support of his title, which he won by a landslide. He took the title of Napoleon III (Napoleon II, the first Napoleon’s son, had died years earlier). Thus, in a few short years the second experiment in democratic politics in France ended just as the first one had: a popular dictator named Napoleon took over.

In both Austria and Prussia (as well as the smaller German kingdoms) conservative forces turned the tide as the revolutionary coalitions wasted time debating the minutiae of the new political order. Forces loyal to the Austrian emperor, aided by a full-scale Russian invasion of Hungary in the name of Holy Alliance principles, restored Habsburg rule across the entirety of the empire by the autumn of 1849. In the meantime, by the time the representatives had finally drafted a constitution for a united Germany under Prussian rule, the Prussian king Wilhelm IV had verified the loyalty of the army. When he was presented with the constitution, he simply refused to accept it (he called the offered position a “crown from the gutter”), and one by one the kings of the smaller German states reasserted their control across the German lands.

Ultimately, all of the revolutions “failed” in their immediate goals of creating liberal republics, to say nothing of socialist dreams of state-sponsored workshops for the unemployed. One prominent historian, much later, noted that 1848 was the year that European history (specifically, German history, although the comment was often applied to the whole revolutionary enterprise) “reached its turning point and failed to turn.” That is not entirely true, however. Even though conservative regimes ultimately retained power, the very definition of conservatism and the methods conservatives used were altered by the revolutions.

First, some limited constitutional and parliamentary reforms did occur in many kingdoms. Even though (again, relying on Russian support) the Austrian Empire had been restored by conservative forces, the new constitution of 1849 did institute a parliament, and elected representative bodies became the norm across Europe by the latter decades of the century. Electorates were almost always limited to property-owners, and nowhere did those electorates include women until the twentieth century, but they still represented a major shift toward a key element of liberal politics. Likewise, the very fact that conservative monarchies accepted the need for written constitutions, and the final end of the old feudal obligations of peasants in areas where those still existed, were marked steps toward liberalism.

Second, just as significantly, the power of nationalism was obvious to everyone in the aftermath of 1848, conservative monarchs included. Only Russian invasion had prevented Hungary from achieving its independence, and Italian uprisings against Austria had been contained only with great difficulty. Subsequently, conservatives themselves began to adopt some of the trappings of nationalism in the name of retaining their own power – as considered below, the most noteworthy success stories of nineteenth-century nationalism, those of Italy and Germany, were led by conservative politicians, not by utopian insurgents.

National Unifications

The most spectacular successes of the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century were in Italy and Germany, two areas with ancient regional identities but a total lack of political unity. Italy had last been united during the period of the Roman Empire, whereas Germany had never been truly united. Each term – Italy and Germany – referred to a region and a language, not a kingdom or nation, places where people spoke similar lingual dialects and had some kind of a shared history, but were divided between various kingdoms, cities, and empires.

This very lack of unity was, however, a source of inspiration for the nationalists of the first half of the nineteenth century. One of the great nationalist thinkers was an Italian, Giuseppe Mazzini, whose Young Italy movement inspired comparable movements all over Europe in the 1830s. Mazzini was the quintessential romantic nationalist, someone who believed that nations would organically emerge to replace the tyranny of the old feudal order of conservative monarchs. Young Italy was just one of a number of “Young Europes” (e.g. Young Germany, Young Ireland) that shared this essentially optimistic, even utopian, outlook. In turn, many Germans dreamed of a united Germany that might escape the oppressive influence of censorship and oppression. Those kind of radical nationalists had their day in the Revolutions of 1848, but then saw their hopes dashed when the conservative kings of Prussia and Austria rallied their military forces and re-took power.

That being noted, in the aftermath of 1848, even kings came to accept that the popular desire for nations was too strong to resist forever, and at least in Prussia, the idea that a conservative monarch might “use” nationalism to enhance his power came to the fore. Instead of allowing a popular uprising that might permanently replace them, conservative monarchs began maneuvering to co-opt the very idea of nationalism. This was not a great, sinister master

plan, but instead a series of pragmatic political calculations, usually led by high-ranking royal officials rather than the kings themselves. Through a combination of deliberate political manipulation and sheer chance, the first nation to unite under conservative leadership was Italy.

Italy had been dominated by foreign powers since about 1500, when Spain and France jostled for control and extinguished the independence of most of the Italian city-states of the Renaissance during the Italian Wars. Later, it was Austria that came to dominate in the north, adding Italian regions and cities to the Austrian Empire. The south was an essentially feudal kingdom, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, dominated by lesser branches of first the Habsburg and then the Bourbon royal lines. In the middle was the Papal States, ruled directly by the pope and still controlling Rome as of the 1850s (after a short-lived republic in 1848 was dismantled by the French under Napoleon III). Despite the popularity of the concept of nationalism among the members of the small northern-Italian middle class, it had relatively little mass support (and less than 3% of the population was literate in the standard “Italian” language, the dialect spoken in the region of Tuscany).

The core of Italian unification was the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, a small kingdom consisting of a large island in the Mediterranean and a chunk of land wedged between France, Spain, and the Austrian-dominated northern Italian states. Its king, Vittorio Emanuele II, was from the old royal house of Savoy, and the kingdom retained independence following the Napoleonic period because it served as a useful buffer state between the French and Austrian spheres of influence. Vittorio Emanuele enjoyed interfering in foreign policy and took pride in his military prowess, but he was too lazy to become involved in domestic affairs, which he left to his ministers. In turn, the most intelligent and important of his ministers was Count Camillo di Cavour (1810-1861), the true architect of Italian unification.



Vittorio Emanuele II of Piedmont-Sardinia. Even by the standards of the time, he favoured an impressive moustache.

Cavour was determined to increase Piedmont-Sardinia's power, and he used Italian nationalism to do it. He did not have any sentimental attachment to the concept of "Italy." Instead, he wanted to make Piedmont-Sardinia the center of a larger, more powerful kingdom. As of the 1850s, a war (the Crimean War, described below) had torn apart the system

of alliances that had been so crucial in maintaining the balance of power after the Congress of Vienna, and Cavour knew that he could play one great power off against the other to Piedmont's benefit. His plan was to use the rivalry between France and Austria to his advantage, by having France support some kind of Italian independence from Austria in order to weaken the Habsburgs. Cavour successfully bargained with Napoleon III, the new emperor of France as of 1852, and in 1859, with French military support, Piedmont-Sardinia pushed the Austrians out of northern Italy and gained political ascendancy in the name of a new "Italian nation." Cavour gave France the city of Nice in return for continued support in holding the Austrians in check.

Out of nowhere, another figure entered the story: Giuseppe Garibaldi, an unexpected political leader who brought southern Italy into the equation. Garibaldi was an adventurer, a romantic nationalist, and a revolutionary who had spent most of his adult life as a mercenary battling in independence campaigns and wars, mostly in South America. He rushed back to Italy during the Revolutions of 1848 only to see his hopes of both a united Italy and freedom from foreign control dashed thanks to the machinations of the Austrians, the French, and the papacy.

Following Piedmont-Sardinia's success in pushing Austria back in the north, however, Garibaldi returned. In May 1860, Garibaldi, with a tiny force of 1,000 red-shirted volunteers (mostly townsmen from the north, including numerous under-employed professional men and students hoping to avoid their examinations) packed aboard two leaky steamships, set out to invade Sicily. Very rapidly, Garibaldi captured Palermo, the chief city of Sicily. He succeeded because he won the support of the Sicilian peasants by suspending taxes and promising to divide up the large estates and distribute the land. The landowners of Sicily, even those who were most reactionary, were forced to see that the only hope of law and order lay in protection by this radical dictator and his revolution. Their gradual and reluctant transference of allegiance to the insurrection was a decisive event and helped to make possible the next phase of Garibaldi's astonishing conquest.

On August 18 Garibaldi crossed to mainland Italy, entering Naples. He planned an invasion of the Papal States, but Cavour convinced Napoleon III that it was necessary to block the further progress of Garibaldi's adventurers and assured him that the position of the papacy itself (under French protection) would not be affected. Cavour threw the bulk of the Piedmontese army into the Papal States, annexing them and heading off Garibaldi. When he arrived, Garibaldi ceded his conquests to Vittorio Emanuele, and Italy thus grew to encompass both Sicily and the south. Thus, in about six months, the northern conquests of Piedmont-Sardinia were united with Garibaldi's bizarre conquest of the south.

Cavour's schemes for a Piedmontese-led united Italy had not included the south, which like most northern Italians he held in contempt. Thus, in a real sense southern Italy emerged as the unfortunate loser of the wars of unification, even more so than did Austria. Taxes had to be increased, because the war of 1859 had to be paid for, and the new Italian state needed a larger army and navy. There was also the fact that the extension of low tariffs from Piedmont to economically backward regions often completely extinguished the few local industries that existed. Nor did the new state have funds to alleviate distress or to undertake public works and infrastructure projects in the south. The rural poor became more totally dependent than ever on the local landowning class in their adjustment to the new scheme of things. Some refused to adjust and became "brigands" who rose up against the new political order almost immediately. The restoration of order in the south required a major military operation, the so-called Bandit Wars, which over three years that cost more lives than had the wars of the unification itself. In the aftermath of the wars, the south was treated almost like a colony rather than a full-fledged part of the Italian nation, and politics in the south revolved around the growing relationship between the official Italian government and (as of the 1880s) organized crime.

At the time of Cavour's death in 1861 the new state had a population of twenty-two million but an electorate of only half a million, limited to property-owners. Politics in the new Italian state (a constitutional monarchy in which the king still had considerable power) was about patronage: getting jobs for one's cronies and shifting the burden of taxation onto

those who could least afford to pay it. In many respects, unification had amounted to the occupation of the rest of the country by the north. It would be many years before the new state would begin to serve the needs and interests of the majority of its citizens.

Germany

In Prussia, it was an official similar to Cavour, but far more memorable, chancellor Otto Von Bismarck, who was personally responsible for unifying Germany for the first time. Bismarck was ruthless, practical, and completely amoral in his service to the Prussian king. He was the inventor of “Realpolitik”: a political philosophy that insisted on being completely pragmatic and realistic, rather than pursuing empty goals like “glory” or pulling punches in the name of moral rectitude. He was such a pragmatist that he ended up introducing social reforms to blunt the growth of socialism, even though he was an arch-conservative (and thus detested the very idea of reform). He was from an old Prussian noble family, a Junker, and he had no time for romantic nationalist drivel, yet he directly brought about German unification. He once said that “the great questions of the time are not determined by speeches and majority decisions – that was the error of 1848 – but by iron and blood.”

After 1815, “Germany” was nothing more than the “German Confederation,” a free trade zone containing a number of independent kingdoms. German nationalism, however, was very strong, and in 1848 it culminated in the roughly year-long standoff between the elected group of self-understood German nationalist politicians in Frankfurt and the kings of Prussia and Austria (and those of the smaller German kingdoms). Despite the fact that the revolution failed to create a “Germany” in 1848, it was now clear that a German state probably would come into being at some point; the question remained, however, of whether it would be a “greater Germany” under Austrian leadership or a “smaller Germany” under Prussia.

During the eighteenth century Prussia had risen from being a fairly poor backwater in the north, lacking natural resources and remote from the centers of intellectual and cultural life farther south, to being one of the great kingdoms of Europe. That was thanks largely to its royal house, the Hohenzollerns, who relied on a combination of ruthless administrative efficiency and a relentless focus on building up Prussia’s military. Whereas the other royal houses sought to live in the style of the glorious French kings, the Hohenzollerns lived like reasonably well-off nobles, pouring state revenues into the army and insisting on brutal discipline. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Prussia was an established Great Power, part of the coalition that had defeated Napoleon, a military equal with Austria, and was poised to exert an even greater role in Central Europe.



The Holy Roman Empire in 1789. While many of the smallest states of the region vanished during the Napoleonic period, “Germany” remained nothing more than an idea in the early nineteenth century.

Otto Von Bismarck was an inheritor of these Prussian traditions, a Prussian conservative who served in various diplomatic posts in the Prussian kingdom before being promoted to chancellor by the Prussian King Wilhelm I. Bismarck did not have a master plan to unify Germany. His goal was always to maintain or, preferably, increase Prussia’s power (in that sense, he was a lot like Cavour in Piedmont-Sardinia). He became highly skilled at manipulating nationalist passions to inflame popular support for Prussian wars, but he was, personally, deeply skeptical about a “national spirit” animating the need for unification.

Bismarck achieved German unification through war. He egged Austria on in a conflict over control of a region in northwestern Germany, recently seized from Denmark, and succeeded in getting the Austrians to declare war on Prussia. Prussia’s modernized and well-trained army smashed the Austrians in a few months in 1866. Significantly, however, Bismarck convinced the Prussian king not to order a march on Vienna and the occupation of Austria itself; the goal for Bismarck had been to knock Austria out of contention as the possible governing power of Germany, not to try to conquer and control it. Conquest of Austria, he thought, would just lead to more headaches for Prussia since the Austrians would resent the Prussian takeover. This decision – not to conquer Austria when Prussia could have – was a perfect example of Realpolitik: a bloodless, realistic, coldly calculating approach to achieving greater political power without succumbing to some kind of ill-considered quest for “glory.”

After defeating Austria, Bismarck essentially tricked France into going to war. Bismarck had toyed with Napoleon III, ignoring French demands for territory if it came to war between Austria and Prussia. In the aftermath of the war itself, the Spanish throne suddenly became available because of a coup, and Bismarck sponsored a Prussian candidate related to the former Spanish ruling line, none other than the Bourbons of France. Even though Napoleon III was not a Bourbon, this was a direct attack on France’s sphere of influence. Napoleon III was infuriated – Bismarck even

humiliated Napoleon by leaking a memo to the press in which Napoleon's machinations for territory before the Austro-Prussian War were revealed. Feeling both threatened and belittled, Napoleon insisted that France declare war on Prussia.

The ensuing Franco-Prussian War was short and sweet for Prussia; it started in late 1870 and was over by early 1871. Napoleon III foolishly led the French army into battle personally (sick with the flu and without an ounce of his famous uncle's tactical expertise) and was subsequently captured in the field. French forces were poorly led and could not stand up to Prussian training and tactics, and every important engagement was won by the Prussians as a result. In one fell swoop, the myth of French military supremacy, a legacy from the first Napoleon, was destroyed, and Europeans were confronted with the fact that a new military power had asserted its strength in its stead.

In the aftermath of the Prussian victory, a new German empire was declared at Versailles, with Wilhelm I taking the title of Kaiser (emperor) of the German Reich (empire). The various smaller German kingdoms renounced their independence and pledged themselves to the newborn state in the process. France lost two important eastern regions, Alsace and Lorraine, and had to pay a considerable war indemnity, inspiring an enormous amount of resentment among the French (and leading to a desire for *revanche* – revenge). The German Empire became a constitutional monarchy in which all men over 25 could vote for representatives in the Reichstag, the parliament, but an unelected federal council held considerable power and the emperor held more. Thus, even though Germany was a constitutional monarchy, it was hardly the liberal vision of a democratic state.

In one of the more bizarre historical episodes of the time, the city of Paris refused to concede defeat and fought on against the Prussians for a short while before the Prussians simply fell back and handed off the issue to the hastily-declared Third Republic of France (Napoleon III went into exile). Paris declared itself an independent city-state organized along socialist lines, the “Paris Commune,” and for a few months (from March through late May) the French army besieged the

communards in the capital. In the end, a French army stormed the city and approximately 20,000 communards were executed.

While Italian unification had redrawn the map of Europe and disturbed the balance of power at least somewhat, German unification utterly destroyed it. Germany was not just Prussia, it was Prussia and most of the rest of what once had been the Holy Roman Empire. It had a large population, a rapidly industrializing, wealthy economy, and proven military might. The period after German unification, from 1871 until the start of World War I in 1914, was one in which the European great powers jockeyed for position, built up their respective military strength, and scrambled to seize territory overseas before their rivals did. Long gone were the days of the Congress System and a balance of power based on the desire for peace.



Germany after unification. Note that the color-coded regions were the states of the German Empire: they retained considerable autonomy despite now being part of a single unified nation.

Russia

In many ways, the histories of Great Britain and Russia were always exceptional in the context of nineteenth-century European politics. Neither underwent revolutionary upheavals, and neither had much difficulty suppressing nationalist movements from within their respective empires. And yet, the two countries were in many ways polar opposites: Britain was an advanced industrial economy with a liberal constitution and a monarchy whose real political power declined over time, while Russia was an overwhelmingly agricultural – even feudal – economy with a powerful, autocratic head of state: the Tsar. The modernizing trends that changed much of the rest of Europe over the course of the century had the least impact on Russia of any of the major states.

Tsar Alexander I, who ruled from 1801 – 1825, was present at the Congress of Vienna. He was intensely conservative and had a powerful attraction to Orthodox Christian mysticism. In turn, he sincerely believed that he had a mission from God to maintain the sacred order of monarchy, nobility, and clergy. In this, he was influenced by timing: he became Tsar shortly after Napoleon seized power in France. To Alexander, the French Revolution was not just a bad idea or a threat to his personal power, it was an unholy abomination, a perversion of the proper order of society as it had been ordained from on high. Ultimately, it was the Russians who defeated Napoleon's armies in 1812, thanks largely to the

winter and their brilliant tactical decision to camp out and wait for the French to run out of supplies. Alexander sat in a position of great power at the Congress of Vienna because of the strength of his armies and the prestige he had earned chasing the French forces back to France and aiding in their defeat in 1814 and 1815.

In 1815, Russia, along with Austria and Prussia (and, technically, the restored French monarchy), formed the Holy Alliance that vowed to crush attempts to overthrow the social and political order with force. For Austria, this was a pragmatic gesture because the Habsburgs had the most to lose in the face of nationalism. For Prussia, it was a way to cement their great power status and to be treated as an equal by the other members of the anti-Napoleonic coalition. For Russia and for Alexander, however, it was nothing less than a true holy mission that had to happen regardless of any practical benefits. Russia did indeed intervene to crush rebellions over the course of the next few decades, most importantly in 1848 when it decimated the Hungarian Revolution and returned Hungary to the Austrians.

Alexander I died in 1825 and his death promptly set off the Decembrist Uprising (noted above). Not only was the uprising crushed, but Alexander's younger brother and heir Nikolai I took a personal hand in interrogating its organizers. Nikolai was much less of a mystic than his brother had been, but he was equally trenchant in his opposition to any loosening of the Russian social order. He went on to rule for decades (r. 1825 – 1855), and during that time he did everything in his power to champion the conservative cause. As noted earlier, not only was he a staunch supporter of the Holy Alliance, but he formed the world's first modern secret police force, The Third Section. Nikolai declared his three principles of government in 1832: autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality, the last of the three in service to the idea of Russian supremacy over its enormous empire (and the other ethnic groups present in it).

Not only were the Tsars of the nineteenth century arch-conservatives, the vast majority of the Russian population had no interest in political change. They were among the poorest, least educated, and most oppressed in Europe: the Russian serfs. The Russian Orthodox Church was closely tied to the government and preached total obedience to the authority of the Tsar. For that tiny sliver of educated society that could read and had access to foreign books, even to discuss politics at all, let alone advocate reform of any kind, was a punishable crime, with thousands exiled to Siberia for the crime of having made an off-hand remark about politics or owning a book describing a political concept originating in the west.



Tsar Nikolai I,
architect of
nineteenth-century
Russian autocracy

These people, almost all of whom were nobles, formed the Russian intelligentsia: a small class of educated and very self-consciously cultured people who were at the forefront of Russian literature and artistic creation. They were the ones who began modern Russian literature itself in this period, producing great Russian novelists like Turgenev, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov. The themes of their art dealt with both the thorny political issues of their time and a kind of ongoing spiritual quest to understand the Russian “soul,” something that was usually identified with both nature and the mystical qualities of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The problem with being a member of the intelligentsia in Russia, however, was that reading or discussing anything to do with politics was itself sufficient cause for arrest and exile to Siberia. Many of the great novelists spent at least part of their lives in Siberia as a result; even Dostoevsky, who ended up being a deeply conservative thinker who was hostile to radical, or even disruptive, politics, spent part of his life in exile. To be an intellectual was almost the equivalent of being a criminal in the eyes of the state. It was a short step for intellectuals to simply act like criminals. It was in large part thanks to the police apparatus that matured under Nikolai I’s rule that this phenomenon occurred.

That being noted, a momentous event occurred late in Nikolai's reign unrelated to Tsarist autocracy per se: the destruction of the Congress System created at the Congress of Vienna, thanks to the Crimean War. From 1854 – 1856, France and Britain fought a war against Russia in the Crimea, a peninsula on the northern shore of the Black Sea. The war was fought over great power politics: Russia tried to take advantage of the political decline of the Ottoman Empire to assert total control in the region of the Black Sea, and both France and Britain recognized those machinations as a threat to the balance of power. The Austrian government unwisely stayed neutral during the ensuing war, which ruptured the alliance between it and Russia (after all, Russia had just put down the Hungarian uprising on Austria's behalf during the Revolutions of 1848).

The Crimean War, while not long by the standards of the Napoleonic period, was nevertheless a major conflict. 600,000 men died in the war, the majority from disease thanks to the abysmal conditions at the front. Russia ultimately lost, and the end result was that the Congress System was finally undone. From that point on, the great powers of Europe were in open competition with one another, fearing and resenting each other more so than they feared revolutionary forces from within – one manifestation of this newfound rivalry was the wars that saw the birth of Italy and Germany, described above.

Nikolai finally died in 1855, and his son Alexander II took the throne (in the midst of the war). In 1861, following Russia's defeat, Alexander made the momentous decision to emancipate the serfs, two years before the Emancipation Proclamation in the United States freed the African-American slaves. It was thought by many Russian elites that one of the reasons Russia had lost the war was its backwardness, a backwardness that Alexander and many others believed could not be mitigated with serfdom weighing down the possibility of progress. The emancipation, however, had surprisingly little immediate impact on Russian society, because the serfs legally owed the government the money that had been distributed to buy their freedom from the nobility. Thus, for generations, serfs were still tied to the same land, laboring both to survive and to pay off the debt incurred with their "freedom."

The emancipation of the serfs was the single most significant reform spearheaded by a Russian Tsar of the nineteenth century. It is thus ironic that Alexander II was the only Tsar assassinated by a radical terrorist group. The group that killed him, The People's Will, believed that the assassination of a Tsar would result in an enormous uprising of the newly-"liberated" peasants (i.e. the former serfs). In this, they were inspired by the anarchist socialism of the exiled Mikhail Bakunin, whose vision of an apocalyptic revolutionary transformation spoke directly to the social and political conditions of his native Russia.

Before the assassination, young members of the intelligentsia formed a social movement known as the Narodniks. The Narodniks advocated going "back to the people," living among and trying to educate the former serfs, which they did during the spring of 1874. The Narodniks believed that the serfs would form the nucleus of a revolutionary class that would rise up and dismantle Tsarist autocracy if properly educated. Instead, the serfs were deeply suspicious of the urban, educated Narodniks, and in many cases the serfs actually turned the Narodniks in to the local authorities. It was disappointed Narodniks that formed the People's Will, and in March of 1881 they succeeded in killing Alexander II.

While The People's Will had hoped that their assassination of Alexander II would result in a spontaneous uprising of the peasants against Tsarist despotism, nothing of the sort occurred. Instead, another reactionary Tsar, Alexander III, came to the throne and ruthlessly hunted down the terrorist groups. What had changed by the 1880s, however, was that there

were

terrorist groups, not just intellectuals guilty of discussing politics, and the one thing that practically every intellectual in Russian society (terrorist or not) believed was that meaningful change would require a significant, even radical,

restructuring of Russian society. To many intellectuals and terrorists, there was no room for weak-kneed reformism; it was revolution or nothing. This is the context into which Vladimir Lenin and the other future Bolsheviks, the leaders of the Russian Communist Party who seized power in 1917, were born. Lenin was a brilliant intellectual who synthesized the writings of Marx with the tradition of Russian radical terrorism, producing a potent combination of theoretical and practical political concepts that were realized in 1917.

Thus, by the late nineteenth century Russia had changed the least among the great powers of Europe. Whereas the other states, from Austria to the new Germany to France, had all adopted at least some form of representative government, Russia remained staunchly autocratic and monarchical. The Russian economy was overwhelmingly agricultural and rural, with industrialization only arriving at the very end of the century in and around some of the large cities of western Russia. Russia was, in a sense, stuck in a historical impasse. That impasse would only end with outright revolution, first in 1905 and again in 1917.

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CHAPTER 5: CULTURE, SCIENCE, AND PSEUDO-SCIENCE

Victorian Culture

Along with the enormous economic and political changes that occurred in Europe over the course of the nineteenth century came equally momentous shifts in culture and learning. The cultural era of this period is known as “Victorianism,” the culture of the dominant bourgeoisie in the second half of the nineteenth century. That culture was named after the British Queen Victoria, who presided over the zenith of British power and the height of British imperialism. Victoria’s astonishingly long reign, from 1837 to 1901, coincided with the triumph of bourgeois norms of behavior among self-understood elites.



Queen Victoria, the symbolic matriarch of Western culture in the nineteenth century.

Victorianism was the culture of top hats, of dresses that covered every inch of the female body, of rigid gender norms, and of an almost pathological fear of sexuality. Its defining characteristic was the desire for security, especially security from the influence of the lower classes. Class divisions were made visible in the clothing and manners of individuals, with each class outfitted in distinct “uniforms” – this was a time when one’s hat indicated one’s income and class membership. It was a time in which the bourgeoisie, increasingly mixed with the old nobility, came to assert a self-confident vision of a single European culture that, they thought,

should dominate the world. Social elites insisted that scientific progress, economic growth, and their own increasing political power were all results of the superiority of European civilization, a civilization that had reached its pinnacle thanks to their own ingenuity. Particularly by the latter decades of the century, they characterized that superiority in racial terms.

According to the great Victorian psychologist Sigmund Freud, Victorianism was fundamentally about the repression of natural instincts. There were always threats present in the lives of social elites at the time: the threat of sexual impropriety, the threat of financial failure, the threat of immoral behavior being discovered in public, threats which were all tied to shame. There was clearly a Christian precedent for Victorian obsessions, and Victorianism was certainly tied to Christian piety. What had changed, however, is that the impulse to tie morality to a code of shame was secularized in the Victorian era to apply to everything, especially in economics. Simply put, there was a moral connection between virtue and economic success. The wealthy came to regard their social and economic status as proof of their strong ethical character, not just luck, connections, or hard work. Thus, Victorian culture included a belief in the existence of good and evil in the moral character of individuals, traits that science, they thought, should be able to identify just as it was now able to identify bacteria.

In turn, the Victorian bourgeoisie accused the working class of inherent weakness and turpitude. In the minds of the bourgeoisie, as the labor movements and socialist parties grew, the demands of the working class for shortened working days spoke not to their exhaustion and exploitation, but to their laziness and lack of work ethic. The Victorian bourgeoisie were the champions of the notion that everyone got what they deserved and that science itself would eventually ratify the social order. What the Victorian elite feared more than anything was that the working class would somehow overwhelm them, through a communist revolution or by simply “breeding” out of control. They tended to fear a concomitant national decline, sometimes even imagining that Western Civilization itself had reached its pinnacle and was doomed to degenerate.

There were some remarkable contrasts between the ideology of Victorian life and its lived reality. Even though much of the fear of social degeneration was exaggerated, it is also true that alcoholism became much more common (both because alcohol was cheaper and because urbanization lent itself to casual drinking), and drug use spread. Cocaine was regarded as a medicinal pick-me-up, and respectable diners sometimes finished meals with strawberries dipped in ether.

Many novels written around the turn of the twentieth century critiqued the hypocrisy of social elites and their pretensions to rectitude. Two classics of horror writing, *Dracula* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, are both about the monsters that lurked within bourgeois society. Both were written about Victorian elites who were actually terrible beasts, just under the surface of their respectable exteriors.

Nowhere was the Victorian obsession with defining and restricting people into carefully-defined categories stronger than in gender roles. Male writers, theorists, and even scientists claimed that men and women were opposites: rational, forceful, naturally courageous men were contrasted with irrational, but gentle and demure, women. Men of all social classes dressed increasingly alike, in sensible, comfortable trousers, jackets, and hats (albeit with different hats for different classes). Women wore wildly impractical dresses with sometimes ludicrously tight corsets underneath, the better to serve their social function as ornaments to beautify the household. The stifling restrictions on women and their infantilization by men were major factors behind the rise of the feminist movement in the second half of the century, described below.

Scientific and Pseudo-Scientific Discoveries and Theories

Science made incredible advances in the Victorian era. Some of the most important breakthroughs had to do with medicine and biology. Those genuine advances, however, were accompanied by the growth of scholarship that claimed to be truly scientific, but that violated the tenets of the scientific method, employed sloppy methods, were based on false premises, or were otherwise simply factually inaccurate. Those fields constitute branches of “pseudo-”, meaning “false,” science.

Disease had always been the greatest threat to humankind before the nineteenth century – of the “four horsemen of the apocalypse,” it was Pestilence that traditionally delivered the most bodies to Death. In turn, the link between filth and disease had always been understood, but the rapid urbanization of the nineteenth century lent new urgency to the problem. This led to important advances in municipal planning, like modern sewer systems – London’s was built in 1848 after a terrible epidemic of cholera. Thus, before the mechanisms of contagion were understood, at least some means to combat it were nevertheless implemented in some European cities. Likewise, the first practical applications of chemistry to medicine occurred with the invention of anesthesia in the 1840s, allowing the possibility of surgery without horrendous agony for the first time in history.

By far the most important advance in medicine, however, was in bacteriology, first pioneered by the French chemist Louis Pasteur (1822 – 1895). Starting with practical experiments on the process of fermentation in 1854, Pasteur built on his ideas and proved that disease was caused by microscopic organisms. Pasteur’s subsequent accomplishments are Newtonian in their scope: he definitively proved that the “spontaneous generation” of life was impossible and that microbes were responsible for putrefaction. He developed the aptly named technique of pasteurization to make foodstuffs safe (originally in service to the French wine industry), and he went on to develop effective vaccines against diseases like anthrax that affected both humans and animals. In the course of just a few decades, Pasteur overturned the entire understanding of health itself. Other scientists followed his lead, and by the end of the century, deaths in Europe by infectious disease dropped by a full sixty percent, primarily through improvements in hygiene (antibiotics would not be developed until the end of the 1920s).



Pasteur, with some of his early experimental subjects.

These advances were met with understandable excitement. At the same time, however, they fed into a newfound obsession with cleanliness. All of a sudden, people understood that they lived in a dirty world full of invisible enemies – germs. Good hygiene became both a matter of survival and a badge of class identity for the bourgeoisie, and the inherent dirtiness of manual labor was further cause for bourgeois contempt for the working classes. For those who could afford the servants to do the work, homes and businesses were regularly scrubbed with caustic soaps, but there was little to be done in the squalor of working-class tenements and urban slums.

Comparable scientific breakthroughs occurred in the fields of natural history and biology. For centuries, naturalists (the term for what would later be known as biologists) had been puzzled by the fact that the fossils of marine animals could be found on mountaintops. Likewise, fossils embedded in rock were a conundrum that the biblical story of creation could not explain. By the early nineteenth century, some scientists argued that these phenomena could only occur through stratification of rock, a process that would take millions, not thousands, of years. The most famous geologist at the time was the British naturalist Charles Lyell, whose

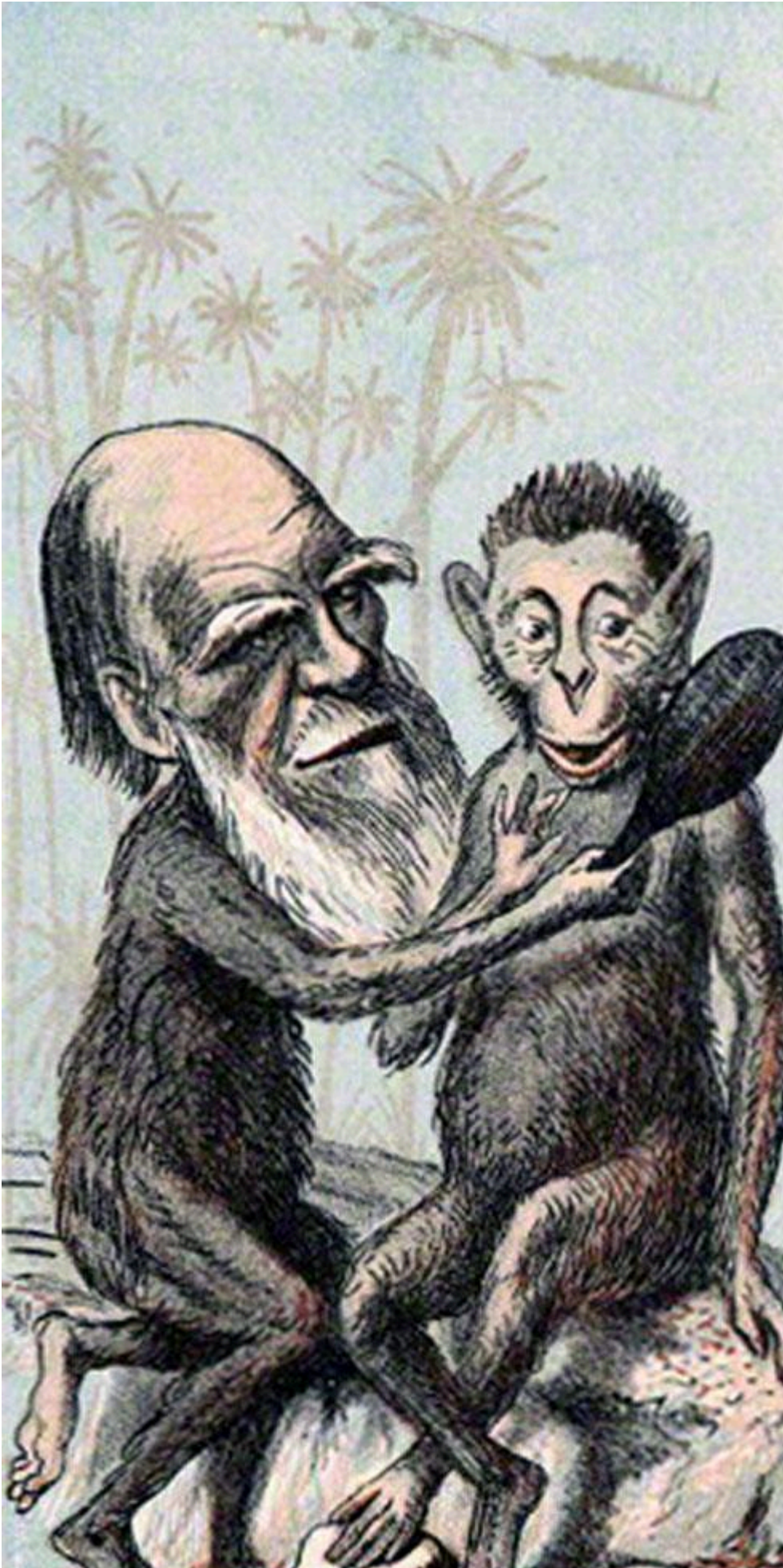
Principles of Geology

went through eleven editions it was so popular among the reading public. Archeological discoveries in the middle of the century linked human civilization to very long time frames as well, with the discovery of ancient tools and the remains of settlements pushing the existence of human civilization back thousands of years from earlier concepts (all of which had been based on a literal interpretation of the Christian Bible).

In 1859, the English naturalist Charles Darwin published his *Origin of the Species*. In it, Darwin argued that lifeforms “evolve” over time thanks to random changes in their physical and mental structure. Some of these traits are beneficial and increase the likelihood that the individuals with them will survive and propagate, while others are not and tend to disappear as their carriers die off. Darwin based his arguments on both the fossil record and what he had discovered as the naturalist aboard a British research vessel, the HMS Beagle, that toured the coasts of South America and visited the Galapagos Islands off its west coast. There, Darwin had encountered numerous species that were uniquely adapted to live only in specific, limited areas. On returning to Britain, he concluded that only changes over time within species themselves could account for his discoveries.

Darwin’s arguments shocked most of his contemporaries. His theory directly contradicted the biblical account of the natural world, in which God’s creation is fundamentally static. In addition, Darwin’s account argued that nature itself was a profoundly hostile place to all living things; even as nature sustains species, it constantly tests individuals and kills off the weak. Evolutionary adaptations are random, not systematic, and are as likely to result in dangerous (for individuals) weaknesses as newfound sources of strength. There was no plan embedded in evolution, only random adaptation.

Nevertheless, Darwin’s theory was the first to systematically explain the existence of fossils and biological adaptation based on hard evidence. As early as 1870 three-quarters of British scientists believed evolutionary theory to be accurate, even before the mechanism by which evolution occurred, genetics, was understood. In 1871, in his *Descent of Man*, Darwin explicitly tied human evolution to his earlier model and argued that humans are descended from other hominids – the great apes. Despite popular backlash prompted by both religious conviction and the simple distaste of being related to apes, Darwinian theory went on to become one of the founding discoveries of modern biological science.



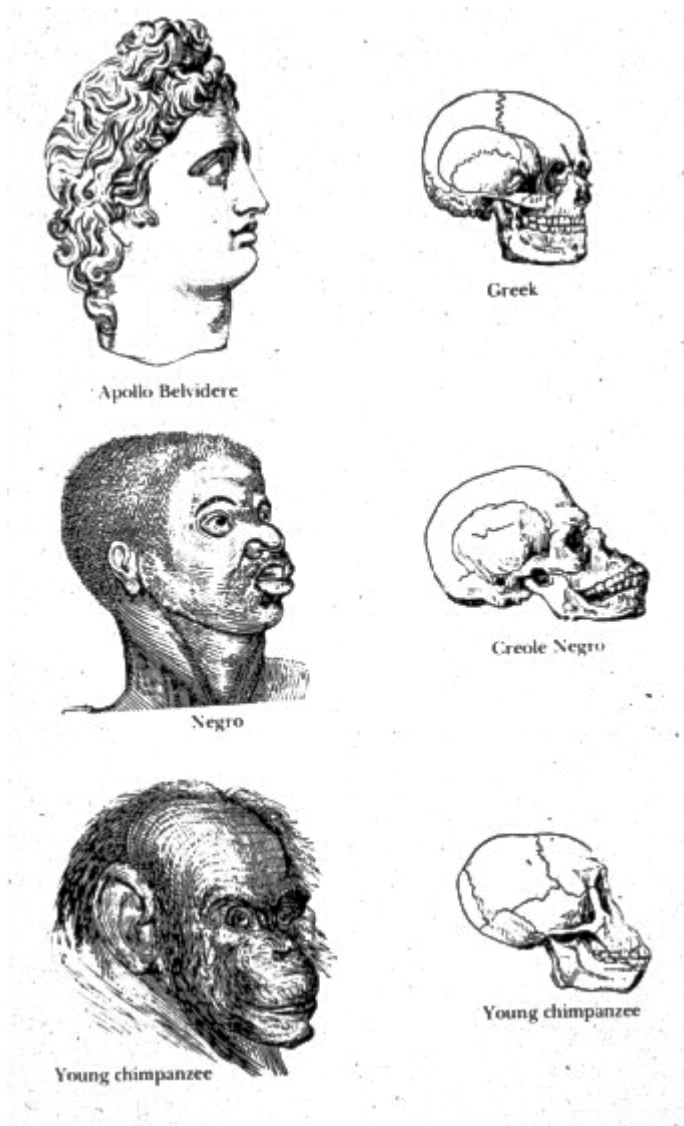
Caricatures of Darwin as a monkey appeared almost as soon as the *Descent of Man* was published.

The mechanism of how evolution occurred, was not known during Darwin's lifetime, at least to very many people. Unknown to anyone at the time, during the 1850s and 1860s an Austrian monk named Gregor Mendel carried out a series of experiments with pea plants in his monastery's garden and, in the process, discovered the basic principles of genetics. Mendel first presented his work in 1865, but it was entirely forgotten. It was rediscovered by a number of scholars simultaneously in 1900, and in the process, was linked to Darwin's evolutionary concepts. With the rediscovery of Mendel's work, the mechanisms by which evolution occurs were revealed: it is in gene mutation that new traits emerge, and genes that favor the survival of offspring tend to dominate those that harm it.

Social Science and Pseudo-Science

Many Europeans regarded Darwinian theory as proof of progress: nature itself ensured that the human species would improve over time. Very quickly, however, evolutionary theory was taken over as a justification for both rigid class distinctions and racism. A large number of people, starting with elite male theorists, came to believe that Darwinism implied that a parallel kind of evolutionary process was at work in human society. In this view, success and power is the result of superior breeding, not just luck and education. The rich fundamentally deserve to be rich, and the poor (encumbered by their poor biological traits) deserve to be poor. This set of concepts came to be known as Social Darwinism. Drawing on the work of Arthur de Gobineau, the great nineteenth-century proponent of racial hierarchy described in a previous chapter, the British writer and engineer Herbert Spencer emerged as the most significant proponent of Social Darwinism. He summarized his outlook with the phrase "the survival of the fittest," a phrase often misattributed to Darwin himself. Spencer was a fierce proponent of free market economics and also contributed to the process of defining human races in biological terms, rather than cultural or historical ones.

In turn, the new movement led an explosion of pseudo-scientific apologetics for notions of racial hierarchy. Usually, Social Darwinists claimed that it was not just that non-white races were inherently inferior, it was that they had reached a certain stage of evolution but stopped, while the white race had continued to evolve. Illustrations of the evolutionary process in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century encyclopedias and dictionaries were replete with an evolutionary chain from small creatures through monkeys and apes and then on to non-white human races, culminating with the supposedly "fully evolved" European "race."



A typical pseudo-scientific racial hierarchy. (In fact, all human races have skulls of identical dimensions and shapes, not to mention identical intellectual and moral capacities.)

In addition to non-white races, Social Darwinists targeted elements of their own societies for vilification, often lumping together various identities and behaviors as “unfit.” For Social Darwinists, the “unfit” included alcoholics, those who were promiscuous, unwed mothers, criminals, the developmentally disabled, and those with congenital disabilities. Social Darwinism’s prevailing theory was that charity or “artificial” checks on the exploitation of workers like trade unions would lead to the survival of the unfit, which would in turn cause the human species to decline. Likewise, charity, aid, and rehabilitation were misplaced, since they would supposedly lead to the survival of the unfit and thereby drag down the health of society overall. Thus, the best policy was to allow the “unfit” to die off if possible, and to try to impose limits on their breeding if not. Social Darwinism soon led to the field of eugenics, which advocated programs to sterilize the “unfit.”

Ironically, even as Social Darwinism provided a pseudo-scientific foundation for racist and sexist cultural assumptions, these notions of race and culture also fed into the fear of degeneration mentioned above. In the midst of the squalor of working-class life, or in terms of the increasing rates of drug use and alcoholism, many people came to fear that certain destructive traits were not only flourishing in Europe, but were being passed on. There was thus a great fear that the

masses of the weak and unintelligent could and would spread their weakness through high birth-rates, while the smart and capable were simply overwhelmed.

Not all of the theories to explain behavior were so morally and scientifically questionable, however. In the late nineteenth century, a Frenchman (Emile Durkheim) and a German (Max Weber) independently began the academic discipline that would become sociology: the systematic study of how people behave in complex societies. Durkheim treated Christianity like just another set of rituals and beliefs whose real purpose was the regulation of behavior, while Weber provided an enormous number of insights about the operation of governments, religious traditions, and educational institutions. Another German, Leopold von Ranke, created the first truly systematic forms of historical research, in turn creating the academic discipline of history itself.

Sociology and academic history were part of a larger innovation in human learning: the social sciences. These were disciplines that tried to deduce facts about human behavior that were equally valid to natural science's various insights about the operations of the natural world. The dream of the social sciences was to arrive at rules of behavior, politics, and historical development that were as certain and unshakable as biology or geology. Unfortunately, as academic disciplines proliferated and scholars proposed theories to explain politics, social organization, and economics it was often difficult to distinguish between sound theories based on empirical evidence and pseudo-scientific or pseudo-scholarly theories (like those surrounding racial hierarchy) based instead on ideology and sloppy methodology.

Mass Culture

The Victorian era saw the emergence of the first modern, industrialized, “mass” societies. One of the characteristics of industrial societies, above and beyond industrial technology and the use of fossil fuels themselves, is the fact that culture itself becomes mass produced. Written material went from the form of books, which had been expensive and treated with great care in the early centuries of printing, to mass-market periodicals, newspapers, and cheap print. People went from inhabitants of villages and regions that were fiercely proud of their identities to inhabitants of larger and larger, and hence more anonymous and alienating, cities. Material goods, mass-produced, became much cheaper over the course of the nineteenth century thanks to industrialization, and in the process they could be used up and thrown away with a much more casual attitude by more and more people. Two examples of this phenomenon were the spread of literacy and the rise of consumerism.

The nineteenth century was the century of mass literacy. In France, male literacy was just below 50% as of the French Revolution, but it was almost 80% in 1870 and almost 100% just thirty years later. Female literacy was close behind. This had everything to do with the spread of printing in vernacular languages, as well as mass education. In France, mass secular free education happened in 1882 under the prime minister of the Third Republic, Jules Ferry. Free, public primary school did more to bind together the French in a shared national culture than anything before or since, as every child in France was taught in standard French and studied the same subjects.

Paper became vastly cheaper as well. Paper had long been made from rags, which were shredded, compressed together, and reconstituted. The resulting paper was durable but expensive. In the late nineteenth century printers began to make paper out of wood pulp, which dropped it to about a quarter of the former price. As of 1880, the linotype machine was invented, which also made printing much cheaper and more simple than it had been. Thus, it became vastly cheaper and easier to publish newspapers by the late nineteenth century.

There was also a positive change in the buying power of the average person. From 1850 to 1900, the average

French person saw their real purchasing power increase by 165%. Comparable increases occurred in the other dynamic, commercial, and industrial economies of western Europe (and, eventually, the United States). This increase in the ability of average people to afford commodities above and beyond those they needed to survive was ultimately based on the energy unleashed by the Industrial Revolution. Even with the struggles over the quality of life of working people, by the late nineteenth century goods were simply so cheap to produce that the average person actually did enjoy a better quality of life and could buy things like consumables and periodicals.

One result of the cheapening of print and the rise in buying power was “yellow” journalism, sensationalized accounts of political events that stretched the truth to sell copies. In France, the first major paper of this type was called *Le Petit Journal*, an extremely inexpensive and sensationalistic paper which avoided political commentary in favor of banal, mainstream expressions of popular opinion. Rival papers soon sprang up, but what they had in common was that they did not try to change or influence opinion so much as they reinforced it – each political persuasion was now served by at least one newspaper that “preached to the choir,” reinforcing pre-existing ideological outlooks rather than confronting them with inconvenient facts.

Overall, the kind of journalism that exploded in the late nineteenth century lent itself to the cultivation of scandals. Important events and trends were tied to the sensationalizing journalism of the day. For instance, a naval arms race between Britain and Germany that was one of the causes of World War I had much to do with the press of both countries playing up the threat of being outpaced by their national rival. The Dreyfus Affair, in which a French Jewish army officer was falsely accused of treason, spun to the point that some people were predicting civil war thanks largely to the massive amount of press on both sides of the scandal (the Dreyfus Affair is considered in detail below). Likewise, imperialism, the practice of invading other parts of the world to establish and expand global empires, received much of its popular support from articles praising the civilizing mission involved in occupying a couple of thousand square miles in Africa that the reader had never heard of before.

In short, the politics of the latter part of the nineteenth century were embedded in journalism. As almost all of the states of Europe moved toward male suffrage, leaders were often shocked by the fact that they had to cultivate public opinion in order to pass the laws they supported. Journals became the mouthpieces of political positions, which both broadened the public sphere to an unprecedented extent and, in a way, sometimes cheapened political opinions to the level of banal slogans.

Another seismic shift occurred in the sphere of acquisition. In the early modern era, luxury goods were basically reserved for the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie. There simply was not enough social wealth for the vast majority of Europeans to buy many things they did not need. The average peasant or shopkeeper, even fairly prosperous ones, owned only a few sets of clothes, which were repaired rather than replaced over time. More to the point, most people did not think of money as something to “save” – in good years in which the average person somehow had “extra” money, he or she would simply spend it on more food or, especially for men, alcohol, because it was impossible to anticipate having a surplus again in the future.

Perhaps the iconic example of a shift in patterns of acquisition and consumerism was the advent of department stores. Department stores represented the shift into recognizably modern patterns of buying, in which people shopped not just for necessities, but for small luxuries. The former patterns of consumption had been of small, family-run shops and traveling peddlers, a system in which bargaining was common and there was next to no advertising to speak of. With department stores, prices were fixed and a wide variety of goods of different genres were on display together. Advertising became ubiquitous and branded products could be found across the length and breadth of a given country – just as print and primary education inculcated national identity, so did the fact that consumer goods were increasingly standardized.

The first area to be affected by these shifts was textiles, both in terms of clothing and housewares like sheets and curtains. Manufacturing and semi-skilled labor dramatically decreased the price of textiles, and department stores carried large selections that many people could afford. People below the level of the rich came not only to own many different items of clothing, but they voluntarily replaced clothing due to shifts in fashion, not just because it was worn out.

The first real department store was the Bon Marché in Paris. It was built in the 1840s but underwent a series of expansions until it occupied an entire city block. By 1906 it had 4,500 employees. During the 1880s it had 10,000 clients a day, up to 70,000 a day during its February “white sales” in which it sold linens for reduced prices. The 1860s were the birth of the seaside holiday, which the Bon Marché helped invent by selling a whole range of holiday goods. By the 1870s there were mail-order catalogs and tourists considered a visit to the Bon Marché to be on the same level as one to the Arc de Triomphe built by Napoleon to commemorate his victories.



The Bon Marché – the “temple of consumerism.”

Ultimately, the Victorian Era saw the birth of modern consumerism, in which economies became dependent on the consumption of non-essential goods by ordinary people. The “mass society” inaugurated by the industrial revolution came of age in the last decades of the nineteenth century, a century after it had begun in the coal mines and textile mills of Northern England. That society, with its bourgeois standards, its triumphant self-confidence, and its deep-seated “scientific” social and racial attitudes, was in the process of taking over much of the world at precisely the same time.

Culture Struggles

As demonstrated by the conservative appropriation of nationalism in the cases of Italy and Germany, the stakes of political and cultural identity had changed significantly over the course of the nineteenth century. Within the nations of Europe – and for the first time in history it was appropriate to speak of nations instead of just “states” – major struggles erupted centering on national identity. After all, liberal and nationalistic legal frameworks had triumphed

almost everywhere in Europe by turn of the twentieth century, but in significant ways the enfranchisement of each nation's citizens was still limited. Most obviously, nowhere did women have the right to vote, and women's legal rights in general were severely curtailed everywhere. Likewise, while voting rights existed for some male citizens in most nations by 1900 (generally, universal manhood suffrage came about only in the aftermath of World War I), conflicts remained concerning citizenship itself.

These struggles over national identity and legal rights occurred across Europe. The term "culture struggle" itself comes from Germany. Following German unification, Otto von Bismarck led an officially-declared culture struggle – a *Kulturkampf* – against Roman Catholicism, and later, against socialism. The term lends itself, however, to a number of conflicts that occurred in Europe (and America) around the turn of the century, most significantly those having to do with feminism and with the legal and cultural status of European Jews.

The *Kulturkampf* was in part a product of Germany's unique form of government. The political structure of the newly-united nation of Germany set it apart from the far more liberal regimes in Britain and France. While there was an elected parliament, the Reichstag, it did not exercise the same degree of political power as did the British parliament or the French Chamber of Deputies and Senate. The German chancellor and the cabinet answered not to the Reichstag but to the Kaiser (the emperor), and while the regional governments had considerable control locally, the federal structure was highly authoritarian. In turn, there was a comparatively weak liberal movement in Germany because most German liberals saw the unification of Germany as a triumph and held Bismarck in high regard, despite his arch-conservative character. Likewise, most liberals detested socialism, especially as the German socialist party, the SPD, emerged in the 1870s as one of the most powerful political parties.

Bismarck represented the old Lutheran Prussian nobility, the Junkers, and he not only loathed socialism but also Catholicism. He (along with many other northern Germans) regarded Catholicism as alien to German culture and an existential threat to German unity. Since the Reformation of the sixteenth century, the majority of northern Germans had been Lutherans, and many were very hostile to the Catholic church. Still, 35% of Germans were Catholic, mostly in the south, and the Catholic Center Party emerged in 1870 to represent their interests. The same year the Catholic church issued the doctrine of papal infallibility – the claim that the Pope literally could not be wrong in matters of faith and doctrine – and Bismarck feared that a future pope might someday order German Catholics not to obey the state.

Thus, in 1873 he began an official state campaign against Catholics. Priests in Germany had to endure indoctrination from the state in order to be openly ordained, and the state would henceforth only recognize civil marriages. More laws followed, including the right of the state to expel priests who refused to abide by anti-Catholic measures. A young German Catholic tried to assassinate Bismarck in 1874, which only made him more intent on carrying forward with his campaign.

Soon, however, Bismarck realized that the state might need the alliance of the Catholic Center Party against the socialists, as the SPD continued to grow. Thus, he relaxed the anti-Catholic measures (although Catholics were still kept out of important state offices, as were Jews) and instead focused on measures against the SPD. Two assassination attempts against the Kaiser, despite being carried out by men who had nothing to do with socialism, gave Bismarck the pretext, and the Reichstag immediately passed laws that amounted to a ban on the SPD itself.

The SPD itself represented a major shift in the identity of socialism following the Revolutions of 1848. Whereas early socialists rarely organized into formal political parties – not least because most states in Europe before 1848 were not democracies of any kind – socialists in the post-1848 era became increasingly militant and organized. In September of 1864, a congress of socialists from across Europe and the United States gathered in London and founded the International Workingmen's Association – the "First International" – in order to better coordinate their efforts.

Within the nations of Europe, socialist parties soon acquired mass followings among the industrial working class, with the SPD joined by sister parties in France, Britain (where it was known as the Labour Party), Italy, and elsewhere.

The SPD was founded in 1875 out of various other socialist unions and parties that united in a single socialist movement. Bismarck was utterly opposed to socialism, and after mostly abandoning the anti-Catholic focus of the *Kulturkampf*, he pushed laws through the Reichstag in 1878 that banned the SPD and trade unions entirely. Ironically, however, individual socialists could still run for office and campaign for socialism. Bismarck's response was typically pragmatic: he supported social legislation, including pensions for workers, in a bid to keep the socialists from attracting new members and growing even more militant. Thus, in an ironic historical paradox, some of the first "welfare state" provisions in the world were passed by a conservative government to weaken socialism.

The SPD was legalized again in 1890 (following the new Kaiser's firing of Bismarck himself) and it issued a new manifesto for its goals. Like many of the other European socialist parties at the time, its ideological stance was explicitly Marxist. The party's leaders asserted that Marx had been right in all of his major analyses, that capitalism would inevitably collapse, and that the party's primary goal was thus to prepare the working class to rise up and take over in the midst of the coming crisis. Its secondary goals, the "in the meantime" activities, were focused on securing universal manhood suffrage and trying to shore up the quality of life of workers. This amounted to an uncomfortable hybrid of a revolutionary waiting game and a very routine pursuit of legislative benefits for workers.

This tension culminated in a fierce debate between two of the leaders of the SPD in the late 1890s: Karl Kautsky and Eduard Bernstein. Kautsky, the party leader who had written most of its theoretical manifestos, continued to insist that the real function of the party was to reject parliamentary alliances and to agitate for revolution. Bernstein, however, claimed that history had already proven that what the party should be doing was to improve the lives of workers in the present, not wait for a revolution that may or may not ever happen in the future. Bernstein was still a socialist, but he wanted the SPD to build socialism gradually; he called his theory "revisionism." Ironically, the SPD rejected Bernstein's revisionism, but what the party actually did was indeed "revisionist": fighting for legal protection of workers, wages, and conditions of labor.

Comparable cases of historical irony marked many of the other socialist parties (Britain's Labour Party was a noteworthy exception in that it never adopted Marxism). On the one hand, there were increasingly democratic parliaments and mass parties, and at least in some cases the beginning of social welfare laws. On the other hand, rather than the state socialist doctrines of Louis Blanc, the revolutionary, "scientific" socialism of Marxism became the official ideology of the majority of these parties. This practical split between socialism as social welfare and socialism as the revolutionary rejection of capitalism was to have serious consequences for the next hundred years of world history.

First-Wave Feminism

Even as socialist parties were growing in size and strength, another political and cultural conflict raged: the emergence of feminism. A helpful definition of feminism from the historians Bonnie Anderson and Judith Zinsser's

A History of Their Own

asserts that feminism consists of the claim that women are fully human, not secondary or inferior to men, that women have been oppressed throughout history, and that women must recognize their solidarity with other women in order to end that oppression and create a more just and equitable society. Those claims go back centuries; perhaps the first distinctly feminist thinker in Western society was the Renaissance courtier Christine de Pizan (noted in the previous volume of this textbook), and later feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft explicitly linked the feminist demand for equality

to the revolutionary promise of the American and French Revolutions of the late eighteenth century. It was not until the late nineteenth century, however, that a robust feminist movement emerged to champion women's rights.

In the context of the Victorian era, most Europeans believed in the doctrine of gender relations known as “separate spheres.” In separate spheres, it was argued that men and women each had useful and necessary roles to play in society, but those roles were distinct from one another. The classic model of this concept was that the man's job was to represent the family unit in public and make decisions that affected the family, while the woman's job was to maintain order in the home and raise the children, albeit under the “veto” power of her husband. The Code Napoleon, in Article 231, proclaimed that the husband owed his wife protection, and the wife owed her husband obedience. Until the late nineteenth century, most legal systems officially classified women with children and the criminally insane in having no legal identity.

As of 1850, women across Europe could not vote, could not initiate divorce (in those countries in which divorce was even possible), could not control custody of children, could not pursue higher education, could not open bank accounts in their own name, could not maintain ownership of inherited property after marriage, could not initiate lawsuits or serve as legal witnesses, and could not maintain control of their own wages if working and married. Everywhere, domestic violence against women (and children) was ubiquitous – it was taken for granted the the “man of the house” had the right to enforce his will with violence if he found it necessary, and the very concept of marital rape was nonexistent as well. In sum, despite the claim by male socialists that the working class were the “wretched of the earth,” there is no question that male workers enjoyed vastly more legal rights than did women of any social class at the time.

What had changed since the dawn of the nineteenth century, however, was the growth of liberalism. It was a short, logical step from making the claim that “all men are equal” to “all people

are equal,” and indeed some women (like Wollstonecraft) had very vocally emphasized just that point in the early liberal movement in the era of the French Revolution. By the late nineteenth century, liberal legal codes were present in some form in most of Europe, and after World War I all men won the vote in Britain, France, and Germany (along with most of the smaller countries in Central and Western Europe). Thus, early feminists argued that their enfranchisement was simply the obvious, logical conclusion of the political evolution of their century.

Late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century feminism is referred to by historians as “first-wave” feminism (there have been three “waves” so far). Its defining characteristic was the battle against legally-mandated discrimination against women in terms of property laws, control over children within the family, and the right to vote. Of all of the culture struggles and legal battles of the period, however, first-wave feminism faced the greatest opposition from those in power: men. Biologists routinely claimed that women were simply physiologically less intelligent than men. Women who, against the odds, had risen to positions of note were constantly attacked and belittled; one example is the inaugural address of a new female scientist at the University of Athens in the early 1900s, whose speech was interrupted by male students shouting “back to the kitchen!” Queen Victoria herself once said that the demand for equal rights for women was “a mad, wicked folly...forgetting every sense of womanly feelings and propriety.”

In response, first-wave feminists argued that women were only “inferior” because of their inferior education. If they were educated at the same level and to the same standards as men, they would be able to exercise their reason at the same level as well, and would hence deserve to be treated as full equals by the law. As early as the French Revolution, some women had demanded equal rights for women as a logical outgrowth of the new, more just society under construction

in the Revolution. The most famous revolutionary feminist of French Revolution, Olympe de Gouges, was executed for daring to argue that things like “equality” and “liberty” obviously implied that men and women should be equals. A century later, her vision remained unfulfilled.

One of first-wave feminism’s major goals was women’s suffrage: the right of women to vote. In 1867 in Britain the National Society for Women’s Suffrage was founded. Comparable movements spread across the continent over the next three decades. The word “feminist” itself came about in 1890, after a French Suffrage activist, Hubertine Auclert, described herself as such (Auclert made a name for herself in part because she refused to pay taxes, arguing that since she was not represented politically, she had no obligation to contribute to the state). Only in Finland and Norway, however, did women gain the vote before World War I. In some cases, it took shockingly long for women to get the vote: France only granted it in 1944 as a concession to the allies who liberated the country from the Nazis, and it took Switzerland until 1971(!).

The struggle for the vote was closely aligned to other feminist campaigns. In fact, it would be misleading to claim that first-wave feminism was primarily focused on suffrage, since suffrage itself was seen by feminists as only one component of what was needed to realize women’s equality. An iconic example is the attitude of early feminists to marriage: for middle class women, marriage was a necessity, not a choice. Working class women worked in terrible conditions just to survive, while the truly desperate were often driven to prostitution not because of a lack of morality on their part but because of brutal economic and legal conditions for unmarried poor women. In turn, middle class women suffered the consequences when their husbands, succumbing to the temptation of prostitution, brought sexually transmitted diseases into the middle class home. Women, feminists argued, needed economic independence, the ability to support themselves before marriage without loss of status or respectability, and the right to retain the property and earnings they brought to and accumulated during marriage. Voting rights and the right to initiate divorce were thus “weapons of self defense” according to first wave feminists.

After decades of campaigns by feminists, divorce became a possibility in countries like Britain and France in the late nineteenth century, but it remained difficult and expensive to secure. For a woman to initiate divorce, she had to somehow have the means to hire a lawyer and navigate labyrinthine divorce laws; as a result, only the well-off could do so. In other countries, like Russia, divorce remained illegal. Much more common than legal separation was the practice of men simply abandoning their wives and families when they tired of them; this made the institutions of middle-class family life open to mockery by socialists, who, as did Marx and Engels, pointed out that marriage was nothing but a property contract that men could choose to abandon at will (the socialist attitude toward feminism, incidentally, was that gender divisions were byproducts of capitalism: once capitalism was eliminated, gender inequality would supposedly vanish as well).

Even as the feminist movement in Britain became focused on voting rights, feminists waged other battles as well. In the 1870s and 1880s, British feminists led by Josephine Butler attacked the Contagious Diseases Act, which subjected prostitutes to mandatory gynecological inspections (but did not require the male clients of prostitutes to be examined), and drew the radical conclusion that prostitution was simply the most obvious example of a condition that applied to practically all women. In marriage, after all, women exchanged sexual access to their bodies in return for their material existence. Butler’s campaign weathered years of failure and scorn before finally triumphing: the Contagious Diseases Act was repealed and the age of consent for girls was raised from

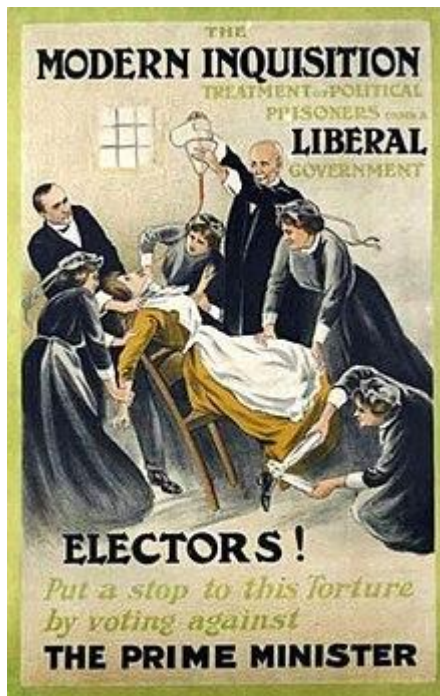
twelve

(!) to sixteen.

The demand for the vote, however, was stymied by the fact that male politicians across the political spectrum refused to champion the issue, albeit for different reasons. On the political right, the traditional view that women had no place in politics prevailed. On the left, however, both liberal and socialist politicians were largely in support of women's suffrage...in theory. In practice, however, leftist politicians (falling prey to yet more sexist stereotypes) feared that women would vote for traditional conservatives because women "naturally" longed for the comfort and protection of tradition. Thus, even nominally sympathetic male politicians repeatedly betrayed promises to push the issue forward in law.

While most feminists persisted in peaceful demands for reform, others were galvanized by these political betrayals and turned to militancy. In Britain, the best known militant feminists were the Pankhursts: the mother Emmeline (1858 – 1928) and daughters Christabel and Sylvia, who formed a radical group known as the Suffragettes in 1903. Much of the original membership came from the ranks of Lancashire textile workers before the group moved its headquarters to London in 1906. The Pankhursts soon severed their links with the Labour Party and working class activists and began a campaign of direct action under the motto "deeds, not words". By 1908 they had moved from heckling to stone-throwing and other forms of protest, including destroying paintings in museums and, on one occasion, attacking male politicians with horsewhips on a golf course. In the meantime, both militant and non-militant feminists did succeed in making women's suffrage a mainstream political issue: as many as 500,000 women and pro-feminist men gathered at one London rally in 1908.

Militant activists who staged public demonstrations were on several occasions treated brutally by police, and those who were arrested were subjected to coercive feeding when they went on hunger strikes. That brutality led to more widespread public support for the Suffragettes, but there were still no legal changes forthcoming; even the British Liberal Party that had, on various occasions, claimed to support women's suffrage always ended up putting it on the back-burner in parliament. In the most spectacular and tragic act of protest, a Suffragette named Emily Davison threw herself under the horse owned by the British king George V during the Derby (the hugely popular national horse race) of 1913 and was killed – in the aftermath it was discovered that she had stuffed her dress with pamphlets demanding the vote for women.



Suffragettes who went on hunger strikes were often brutally force-fed while jailed; here, their jailors are described as a “modern inquisition.”

Somewhat ironically, given the importance of the suffrage movement, feminists secured other legal rights before they did the right to vote in the period before World War I. By and large, women secured the right to enter universities by the early twentieth century and the first female academics secured teaching positions soon after – the first woman to hold a university post in France was the famous Marie Curie, whose work was instrumental in understanding radiation. Women secured the right to initiate divorce in some countries even earlier, along with the right to control their own wages and property and to fight for the custody of children. In short, thanks to feminist agitation, women had secured a legal identity and meaningful legal rights in at least some of the countries of Europe, and the United States, by the onset of World War I in 1914, but as mentioned above, only in two Scandinavian countries could they yet vote.

Modern Anti-Semitism

The great irony of feminism – or, rather, the need for feminism – was that women were not a “minority” but nevertheless faced prejudice, violence, and legal restrictions. European Jews, on the other hand, were a minority everywhere they lived. Furthermore, because of their long, difficult, and often violent history facing persecution from the Christian majority, Jews faced a particularly virulent and deep-seated form of hatred from their non-Jewish neighbours. That hatred, referred to as anti-Semitism (also spelled antisemitism), took on new characteristics in the modern era that, if anything, made it even more dangerous.

Jews had been part of European society since the Roman Empire. In the Middle Ages, Jews were frequently persecuted, expelled, or even massacred by the Christian majority around them. Jews were accused of responsibility for the death of Christ, were blamed for plagues and famines, and were even thought to practice black magic. Jews were unable to own land, to marry Christians, or to practice trades besides sharecropping, peddling goods, and lending money (since Christians were banned from lending money at interest until the late Middle Ages, the stereotypes of Jewish greed originated with the fact that money-lending was one of the only trades Jews

could

perform). Starting with the late period of the Enlightenment, however, some Jews were grudgingly “emancipated” legally, being allowed to move to Christian cities, own land, and practice professions they had been banned from in the past.

That legal emancipation was complete almost everywhere in Europe by the end of the nineteenth century, although the most conservative states like Russia still maintained anti-Semitic restrictions. Anti-Jewish hatred, however, did not vanish. Instead, in the modern era, Jews were vilified for representing everything that was wrong with modernity itself. Jews were blamed for urbanization, for the death of traditional industries, for the evils of modern capitalism, but also for the threat of modern socialism, for being anti-union and for being pro-union, for both assimilating to the point that “regular” Germans and Frenchmen and Czechs could no longer tell who was Jewish, and for failing to assimilate to the point that they were “really” the same as everyone else. To modern anti-Semites, Jews were the scapegoat for all of the problems of the modern world itself.

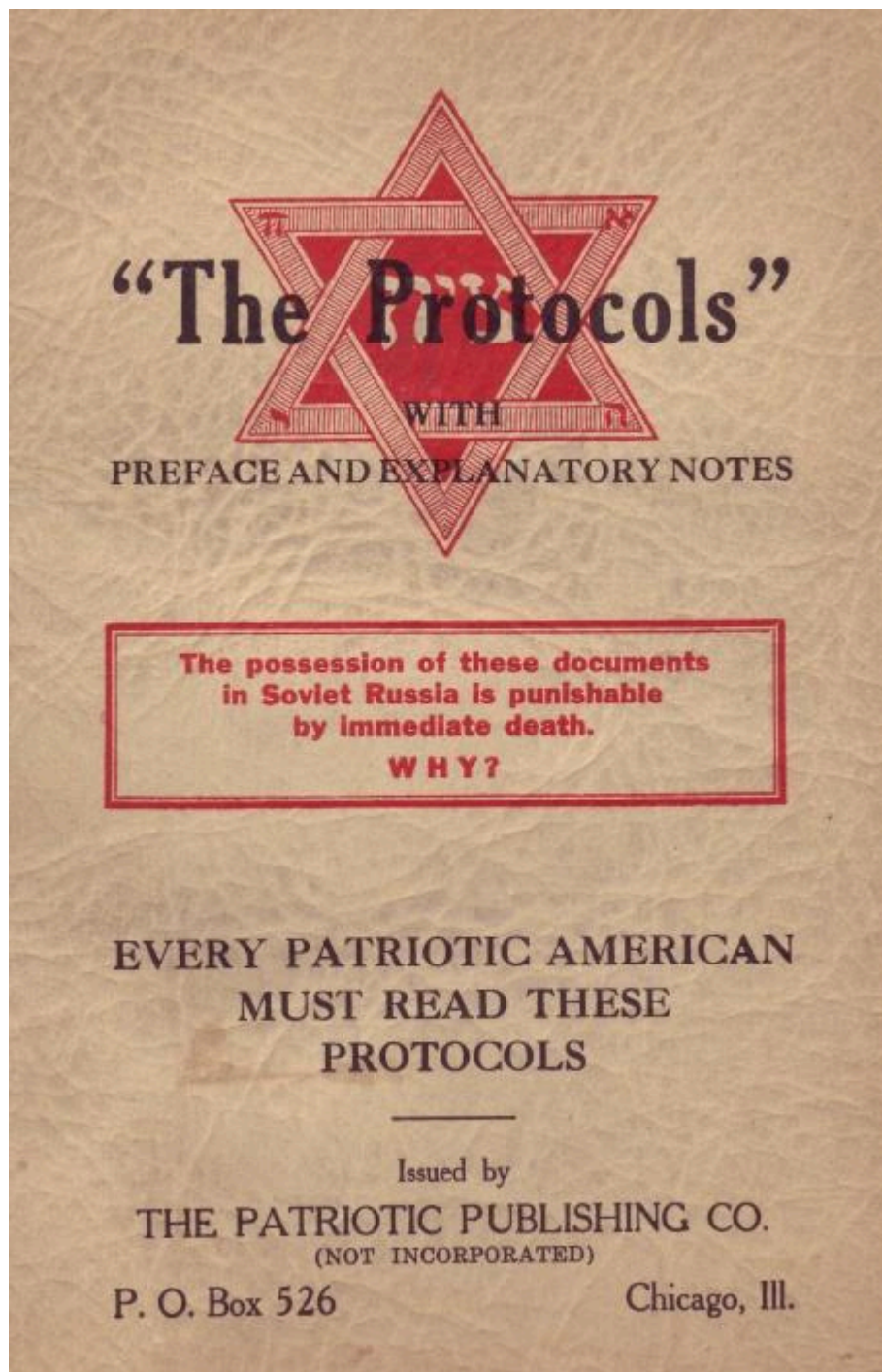
At the same time, modern anti-Semitism was bound up with modern racial theories, including Darwinian evolutionary theory, its perverse offspring Social Darwinism, and the Eugenics movement which sought to purify the racial gene pool of Europe (and America). Many theorists came to believe that Jews were not just a group of people who traced their ancestry back to the ancient kingdom of Judah, but were in fact a “race,” a group defined first and foremost by their blood, their genes, and by supposedly inexorable and inherent characteristics and traits.

Between vilification for the ills of modernity and the newfound obsession with race that swept across European and American societies in the late nineteenth century, there was ample fuel for the rise of anti-Semitic politics. The term anti-Semitism itself was invented and popularized by German and Austrian politicians in the late nineteenth century – an Anti-Semitic League emerged in Germany in the 1870s under the leadership of a politician named Wilhelm Marr. Marr claimed that Jews had “without striking a blow” “become the socio-political dictator of Germany.” In fact, Jews were about 1% of the German population and, while well-represented in business and academia, they had negligible political influence. Following Marr’s efforts, other parties emerged over the course of the 1880s.

Parties whose major platform was anti-Semitism itself, however, faded from prominence in the 1890s. The largest single victory won by anti-Semitic political parties in the German Empire was in 1893, consisting of only 2.9% of the vote. Subsequently, however, mainstream right-wing parties adopted anti-Semitism as part of their platform. Thus, even though parties that defined themselves solely by anti-Semitism diminished, anti-republican, militaristic, and strongly Christian-identified parties on the political right in France, Austria, and Germany soon started using anti-Semitic language as part of their overall rhetoric.

Along with the new, racist, version of anti-Semitism, the modern conspiracy theory of global Jewish influence was a distinctly modern phenomenon. A Prussian pulp novelist named Hermann Goedsche published a novel in 1868 that included a completely fictional meeting of a shadowy conspiracy of Rabbis who vowed to seize global power in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through Jewish control of world banking. That “Rabbi’s Speech” was soon republished in various languages as if it had actually happened. Better known was the Protocols of the Elders of Zion, a document claiming to be the minutes from a meeting of international Jewish leaders that copied whole sections Goedsche’s “Speech” and combined them with various equally spurious accounts of Jewish political machinations. The Protocols were first published in 1903 by the Russian secret police as justification for continued anti-Semitic restrictions in the Russian Empire, and they subsequently became important after World War I when they were used as “proof” that the Jews had caused the war in order to disrupt the international political order.

An American copy of the “Protocols” published in 1934.



Another iconic moment in the history of anti-Semitism occurred in France in the 1890s, when a French Jewish military officer named Alfred Dreyfus was framed for espionage, stripped of his rank, and imprisoned. An enormous public debate broke out in French society over Dreyfus’s guilt or innocence which revolved around his identity as a French Jew. “Anti-Dreyfusards” argued that no Jew could truly be a Frenchman and that Dreyfus, as a Jew, was inherently predisposed to lie and cheat, while “Dreyfusards” argued that anyone could be a true, legitimate French citizen, Jews included.

In the end, the “Dreyfus Affair” culminated in Dreyfus’s exoneration and release, but not before anti-Semitism was

elevated to one of the defining characteristics of anti-liberal, authoritarian right-wing politics in France. Some educated European Jews concluded that the pursuit of not just legal equality, but cultural acceptance was doomed given the strength and virulence of anti-Semitism in European culture, and they started a new political movement to establish a Jewish homeland in the historical region of ancient Israel. That movement, Zionism, saw a slow but growing migration of European Jews settling in the Levant, at the time still part of the Ottoman Empire. Decades later, it culminated in the emergence of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

Conclusion

The growth of science, the pernicious development of pseudo-science, and the culture struggles that raged in European society all occurred simultaneously, lending to an overall sense of disruption and uncertainty as the twentieth century dawned. Lives were transformed for the better by consumerism and medical advances, but many Europeans still found the sheer velocity of change overwhelming and threatening. At least some of the virulence of the culture struggles of the era was due to this sense of fear and displacement, fears that spilled over to the growing rivalries between nations. In turn, the world itself provided the stage on which those rivalries played out as European nations set themselves the task of conquering and controlling vast new empires overseas.

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CHAPTER 6: IMPERIALISM

“Imperialism” in the context of modern history refers to global empire-building by modern states – to distinguish it from the earlier expansion of European states (e.g. the Spanish empire in the Americas), it is sometimes referred to as “neo-imperialism.” Specifically, imperialism refers to the enormous growth of European empires in the nineteenth century, culminating in the period before World War I in which European powers controlled over 80% of the surface of the globe.

The aftershocks of this period of imperialism are still felt in the present, with national borders and international conflicts alike tied to patterns put in place by the imperialist powers over a century ago.

Modern imperialism was a product of factors that had no direct parallel in earlier centuries. For a brief period, Europe (joined by the United States at the end of the century) enjoyed a monopoly on industrial production and technology.

The scientific advances described in the last chapter lent themselves directly to European power as well, most obviously in that modern medicine enabled European soldiers and administrators to survive in regions like Sub-Saharan Africa that had been deathtraps for them in the past because of the prevalence of tropical diseases. In addition, ideological developments like the emergence of Social Darwinism and the obsession with race inspired Europeans to consider their conquests as morally justified, even necessary. It was, in short, a “perfect storm” of technology and ideology that enabled and justified Europe’s global feeding frenzy.

While Europeans tended to justify their conquests by citing a “civilizing mission” that would bring the guiding lights of Christianity and Western Civilization to supposedly benighted regions, one other factor was at work that provided a much more tangible excuse for conquest: the rivalry between European states. With the Congress System a dead letter in the aftermath of the Crimean War, and with the wars of the Italian and German unifications demonstrating the stakes of intra-European conflict, all of the major European powers jockeyed for position on the world stage during the second half of the century. Perhaps the most iconic example was the personal obsession of the King of Belgium, Leopold II, with the creation of a Belgian colony in Africa, which he thought would elevate Belgium’s status in Europe (and from which he could derive enormous profits). In the end, his personal fiefdom – the Congo Free State – would become the most horrendous demonstration of the mismatch between the high-minded “civilizing mission” and the reality of carnage and exploitation.

Technology

Technology made the new imperialism possible. It vastly increased the speed of communication, it armed European soldiers with advanced weapons that overwhelmed resistance, and it protected Europeans from tropical diseases. Simply put, technology explains how European dominance grew from about 35% of the globe to over 80% over the course of the nineteenth century. In hindsight, European technological dominance was nothing more or less than a historical accident, the circumstantial development of tools and techniques that originated with the Industrial Revolution. At the time, however, most Europeans and Americans considered their technology as proof of their “racial” and cultural superiority.

For example, for the first time cities in Europe acquired the means to communicate almost instantaneously (via

telegraph) with their colonies. Before telegraphs, it could take up to two years for a message and reply to travel between England and India, but after telegraph lines were constructed over the course of the middle decades of the nineteenth century, a message and reply could make the circuit in just two days. This, of course, vastly increased the efficiency of governing in the context of global empires.

Europeans were not just able to communicate with territories thousands of miles away thanks to technology – they could survive there as well. Africa had never been colonized by Europeans before the nineteenth century, except for relatively small territories along the coasts. The continent was largely impenetrable to Europeans thanks to its geography: there were few harbors for ships, the interior of the continent had no rivers that were navigable by sail, and most importantly, there were numerous lethal diseases (especially a particularly virulent form of malaria) to which Europeans had little resistance. Until the second half of the century, Africa was sometimes referred to as the “white man’s graveyard,” since Europeans who travelled there to trade or try to conquer territory often died within a year.

That started changing even before the development of bacteriology. In 1841, British expeditions discovered that daily doses of quinine, a medicine derived from a South American plant, served as an effective preventative measure against the contraction of malaria. Thus, since malaria had been the most dangerous tropical disease, Europeans were able to survive in the interior of Africa at much higher rates following the quinine breakthrough. Once Pasteur’s discoveries in bacteriology did occur, it became viable for large numbers of European soldiers and officials to take up permanent residence in the tropical regions of Africa and Asia.

Advances in medicine were joined by those in transportation. The steamboat, with its power to travel both with and against the flow of rivers, enabled Europeans to push into the interior of Africa (and many parts of Asia as well). Steamboats were soon armed with small cannons, giving rise to the term “gunboat.” In turn, when Europeans began steaming into harbors from Hong Kong to the Congo and demanding territory and trading privileges, the term “gunboat diplomacy” was invented, the quintessential example of which was in the unwilling concession to western contact and trade on the part of Japan, considered below.



A typical small and, in this case, unarmed steamship on the Congo River in Central Africa. "Steamers" as they were called varied greatly in size and armaments.

In addition, major advances in weapons technology resulted in an overwhelming advantage in the ability of Europeans to inflict violence in the regions they invaded. In the 1860s, the first breech-loading rifles were developed, first seeing widespread use in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 in which Prussian infantry utterly overwhelmed Austrian soldiers armed with older muskets. Breech-loaders were incredibly accurate and quick to reload compared to earlier muzzle-loading firearms. A European soldier armed with a modern rifle could fire accurately up to almost half a mile away in any weather, while the inhabitants of Africa and Asia were armed either with older firearms or hand weapons. Likewise, the first machine gun, the Maxim Gun, was invented in the 1880s. For a few decades, Europeans (and Americans) had a monopoly on this technology, and for that relatively brief period the advantage was decisive in numerous conquests. Smug British soldiers invented a saying that summarized that superiority: "whatever happens, we have got, the Maxim Gun, and they have not..."



A British soldier with a maxim gun in South Africa.

The Second Industrial Revolution

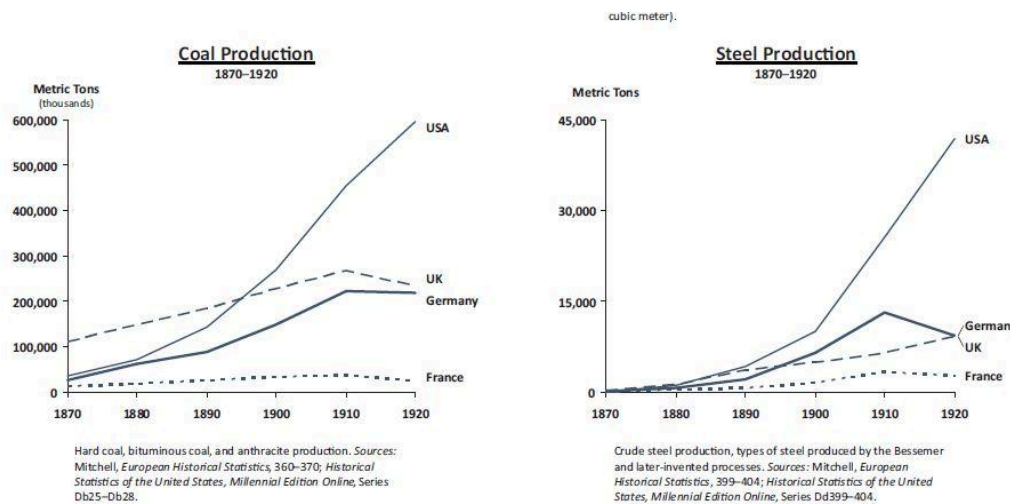
Technology thus enabled imperialism. It also created a motive for imperialism, because of a phenomenon referred to by historians as the “Second Industrial Revolution.” The Second Industrial Revolution consisted of the development and spread of a new generation of technological innovation: modern steel, invented in 1856, electrical generators in 1870 (leading to electrical appliances and home wiring by 1900 in wealthy homes), and both bicycles and automobiles by the 1890s. The American inventor Alexander Graham Bell invented the telephone in 1876, and thousands of phones, carrying millions of calls annually, were in operation already by the early 1880s. These advances created a huge demand for the raw materials – rubber, mineral ores, cotton – that were components of the new technologies.

In the initial phases of the Industrial Revolution, the raw materials necessary for production had been in Europe itself: coal deposits and iron ore. The other raw material, cotton, that played a key role in the Industrial Revolution was available via slave labor in the American south and from weaker states like Egypt (which seized virtual independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1833). The raw material of the Second Industrial Revolution, however, was mostly located outside of the older areas under European control, which meant that European business interests pressured their respective governments to seize as much territory overseas as possible. For example, when oil fields were discovered in Persia in 1908, European interest in Middle Eastern imperialism reached a fever pitch, with European powers cultivating contacts among Arab nationalist groups and undermining the waning unity of the Ottoman Empire.

Mines and plantations were crucial to this phase of imperialism in Africa and Asia, as they had been to the early European exploitation of the Americas. Mining in particular offered the prospect of huge profits. There were Canadian nickel deposits for steel alloys, Chilean nitrates, Australian copper and gold, and Malaysian tin, just to name a few mineral resources coveted by Europeans (of course, in the case of Canada, the people being colonized were Indigenous Canadians, and the colonists were themselves of European descent). Thus, while the motives behind imperialism

were often strongly ideological, they were also tied to straightforward economic interests, and many of the strongest proponents of imperialism had ties to industry.

While the United States was not one of the major imperial powers per se (although it did seize control of the Philippines from Spain in 1898 and exercised considerable power in Central America), it played a major role in imperialism nonetheless. The US eclipsed Europe as the major manufacturing power and the major source of exports in a shockingly short period – from about 1870 into the early 1900s – driving Europeans to sometimes-hysterical levels of fear of being rendered economically obsolete. The response of European politicians and businessmen alike was to focus on territorial acquisition overseas to counterbalance the vast natural resources of the US, which had achieved its dominance thanks to the enormity and richness of American territory (seized by force from Native Americans). Thus, even though the US did not join in the Scramble for Africa or assert direct control of East Asian territories, fear of American economic strength was a major factor driving European imperialism forward.



American resource production and industrial output vastly outpaced European production over time; already by the 1870s astute European observers correctly anticipated the rapid acceleration of American production.

The British Empire

The best known phrase associated with the British Empire from the middle of the nineteenth century until the early twentieth was that “the sun never set” over its dominions. That was, quite literally, true. Roughly 25% of the surface of the globe was directly or indirectly controlled by the British in the aftermath of World War I (1918). Enormous bureaucracies of “natives” worked under white British officials everywhere from the South Pacific to North Africa. The ultimate expression of British imperialism was in India, where just under 100,000 British officials governed a population of some 300,000,000 Indians.

Until 1857, India was governed by the British East India Company (the EIC), the state-sponsored monopoly established in the seventeenth century to profit from overseas trade and which controlled a monopoly on Indian imports and exports. Through a long, slow creep of territorial expansion and one-sided treaties with Indian princes, the EIC governed almost all of the Indian subcontinent by 1840. India produced huge quantities of precious commodities, including cotton, spices, and narcotics. In fact, the EIC was the single largest drug cartel in world history, with the explicit approval of the British government. Most of those narcotics consisted of opium exported to China.

By the 1830s, 40% of the total value of Indian exports took the form of opium, which led to the outbreak of the first major war between a European power, namely Britain, and the Chinese Empire. In 1840, Chinese officials tried to stop

the ongoing shipments of opium from India and open war broke out between the EIC, supported by the British navy, and China. A single British gunboat, the *Nemesis*, arrived after inconclusive fighting had gone on for five months. In short order, the *Nemesis* began an ongoing rout of the Chinese forces. The Chinese navy and imperial fortresses were nearly helpless before gunboats with cannons, and steamships were able to penetrate Chinese rivers and the Chinese Grand Canal, often towing sailing vessels with full cannon batteries behind them.



A British commemoration of victory in the Opium War. The *Nemesis* is in the background on the right.

In the end, the Royal Navy forced the Chinese state to re-open their ports to the Indian opium trade, and the British obtained Hong Kong in the bargain as part of the British Empire itself. In the aftermath of the Opium War, other European states secured the legal right to carry on trade in China, administer their own taxes and laws in designated port cities, and support Christian missionary work. The authority of the ruling Chinese dynasty, the Qing, was seriously undermined in the process. (A second Opium War occurred in the late 1850s, with the British joined by the French against China – this war, too, resulted in European victory.)

Trouble for the British was brewing in India, however. In 1857, Indian soldiers in the employ of the EIC, known as sepoys, were issued new rifles whose bullet cartridges were, according to rumors that circulated among the sepoys, lubricated with both pig fat and cow fat. Since part of loading the gun was biting the cartridge open, this would entail coming into direct contact with the fat, which was totally forbidden in Islam and Hinduism (note that there is no evidence that the cartridges actually were greased with the fat of either animal – the rumors were enough). Simultaneously, European Christian missionaries were at work trying to convert both Muslims and Hindus to Christianity, sometimes very aggressively. This culminated in an explosion of anti-Christian and anti-British violence that temporarily plunged India into a civil war. The British responded to the uprising, which they dubbed “The Mutiny” by massacring whole villages, while sepoy rebels targeted any and all British they could find, including the families of British officials. Eventually, troops from Britain and loyal Sepoy forces routed the rebels and restored order.



A British depiction of the Sepoy Rebellion, attributing the uprising to greed rather than its actual causes. Note also the use of racial caricatures in depicting the sepoys.

After this Sepoy Rebellion (a term that has long since replaced “The Mutiny” among historians), the East India Company was disbanded by the British parliament and India placed under direct rule from London. India was henceforth referred to as the “British Raj,” meaning British Rulership, and Queen Victoria became Empress of India in addition to Queen of Great Britain. She promised her Indian subjects that anyone could take the civil service examinations that entitled men to positions of authority in the Indian government, and elite Indians quickly enrolled their sons in British boarding schools. The first Indian to pass the exam (in 1863) was Satyendranath Tagore, but white officials consistently refused to take orders from an Indian (even if that Indian happened to be more intelligent and competent than they were). The result was that elite Indians all too often hit a “glass ceiling” in the Raj, able to rise to positions of importance but not real leadership. In turn, resentful elite Indians became the first Indian nationalists, organizing what later became the Indian independence movement.

Africa

While India was the most important, and lucrative, part of the British Empire, it was the conquest of Africa by the European powers that stands as the highpoint of the new imperialism as a whole. Africa represents about a quarter of the land area of the entire world, and as of the 1880s it had about one-fifth of the world’s population. There were over 700 distinct societies and peoples across Africa, but Europeans knew so little about the African interior that maps generally displayed huge blank spots until well into the 1880s. Likewise, as of 1850 Europeans only controlled small territories on the coasts, many of them little more than trading posts. The most substantial European holdings consisted of Algeria, seized by France in the 1830s, and South Africa, split between British control and two territories held by the descendants

of the first Dutch settlers, the Boers. The rest of the continent was almost completely free of European dominance (although the Portuguese did maintain sparsely populated colonies in two areas).

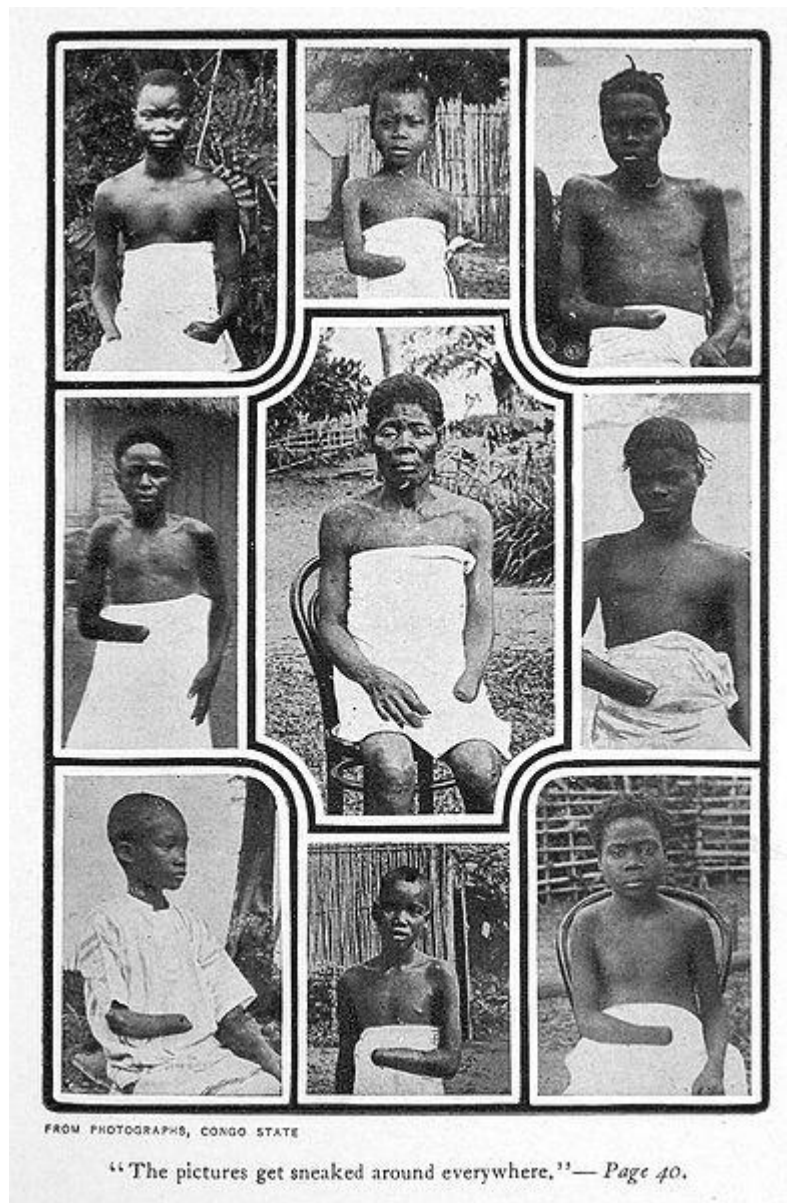
That changed in the last few decades of the nineteenth century because of the technological changes discussed above. The results were dramatic: in 1876, roughly 10% of Africa was under European control. By 1900, just over twenty years later, the figure was roughly 90%. All of the factors discussed above, of the search for profits, of raw materials, of the ongoing power struggle between the great powers, and of the “civilizing mission,” reached their collective zenith in Africa. The sheer speed of the conquest is summed up in the phrase used ever since to describe it: “the Scramble for Africa.” Even the word “imperialism” itself went from a neologism to an everyday term over the course of the 1880s.

In 1884, Otto Von Bismarck organized the Berlin Conference in order to determine what was to be done with a huge territory in central Africa called the Congo, already falling under the domination of Belgium at the time. At the Congress, the representatives of the European states, joined by the United States and the Ottoman Empire, divided up Africa into spheres of influence and conquest. No Africans were present at the meeting. Instead, the Europeans agreed on trade between their respective territories and stipulated which (European) country was to get which piece of Africa. The impetus behind the seizure of Africa had much more to do with international tension than practical economics – there were certainly profits to be had in Africa, but they were mostly theoretical at this point since no European knew for sure what those resources were or where they were to be found (again, fear of American economic power was a major factor – Europeans thought it necessary to seize more territory, regardless of what was actually in that territory). Thus, in a collective land grab, European states emerged from the Conference intent on taking over an entire continent.

The Berlin Conference was the opening salvo of the Scramble for Africa itself, the explosion of European land-grabs in the African continent. In some territories, notably French North Africa and parts of British West Africa, while colonial administrations were both racist and enormously secure in their own cultural dominance, they usually did embark on building at least some modern infrastructure and establishing educational institutions open to the “natives” (although, as in the Raj, Europeans jealously guarded their own authority everywhere). In others, however, colonization was equivalent to genocide.

Among the worst cases was that of Belgium. King Leopold II created a colony in the Congo in 1876 under the guise of exploration and philanthropy, claiming that his purpose was to protect the people of the region from the ravages of the slave trade. His acquisition was larger than England, France, Germany, Spain, and Italy combined; it was eighty times larger than Belgium itself. The Berlin Conference’s official purpose was authorizing Leopold’s already-existing control of the Congo, and at the Conference the European powers declared the territory to be the “Congo Free State,” essentially a royal fiefdom ruled, and owned, by Leopold directly, not by the government of Belgium.

Leopold’s real purpose was personal enrichment for himself and a handful of cronies, and his methods of coercing African labor were atrocious: raids, floggings, hostages, destruction of villages and fields, and murder and mutilation. (This is the setting of Joseph Conrad’s brilliant and disturbing novel, *Heart of Darkness*.) Belgian agents would enter a village and take women and children hostage, ordering men to go into the jungle and harvest a certain amount of rubber. If they failed to reach the rubber quota in time, or sometimes even if they did, the agents would hack off the arms of children, rape or murder the women, or sometimes simply murder everyone in the village outright. No attempt was made to develop the country in any way that did not bear directly on the business of extracting ivory and rubber. In a period of 25 years, the population of the region was cut in half. It took until 1908 for public outcry (after decades of dangerous and incredibly brave work by a few journalists who discovered what was happening) to prompt the Belgian Parliament to strip Leopold of the colony – it then took over direct administration.



A few of the millions of victims of Belgian imperialism in the Congo.

One comparable example was the treatment of the Herero and Nama peoples of Southwest Africa by the German army over the course of 1904 – 1905. When the Herero resisted German takeover, they were systematically rounded up and left in concentration camps to starve, with survivors stalked across the desert by the German army, the Germans poisoning or sealing wells and water holes as they went. When the Nama rose up shortly afterwards, they too were exterminated. In the end, over two-thirds of the Herero and Nama were murdered. This was the first, but not the last, genocide carried out by German soldiers in the twentieth century.

Effects

Almost without exception, the economics of imperialism can be described as “plunder economies.” This entailed three tendencies. First, colonial regimes expropriated the land from the people who lived there. This was accomplished through force, backed by pseudo-legal means: unless a given person, or group, had a legal title in the western sense to the

land they lived on, they were liable to have it seized. Likewise, traditional rights to hunt, gather material, and migrate with herds were lost. Second, colonial regimes expropriated raw materials like rubber, generally shipped back to Europe to be turned into finished products. Third, colonial regimes exploited native labor. This was sometimes in the form of outright slavery like the Congo, the Portuguese African colonies, and forced labor in French and German colonies. In other cases, it consisted of “semi-slavery” as on the island of Java where the Dutch imposed quotas of coffee and spices on villages. In other areas, like most of the territories controlled by Britain, it was in the form of subsistence-level wages paid to workers.

In addition to the forms of labor exploitation, European powers imposed “borders” where none had existed, both splitting up existing kingdoms, tribes, and cultures and lumping different ones together arbitrarily. Sometimes European powers favored certain local groups over others in order to better maintain control, such as the British policy of using the Tutsi tribe (“tribe” in this case being something of a misnomer – “class” is more accurate) to govern what would later become Rwanda over the majority Hutus. Thus, the effects of imperialism lasted long after former colonies achieved their independence in the twentieth century, since almost all of them were left with the borders originally created by the imperialists, often along with starker ethnic divisions than would have existed otherwise.

In a somewhat ironic twist, only certain specific forms and areas of exploitation ever turned a profit for Europeans, especially for European governments. Numerous private merchant companies founded to exploit colonial areas went bankrupt. The entire French colonial edifice never produced significant profits – one French politician quipped that the only French industry to benefit from imperialism was catering for banquets in Paris, since French colonial interests hosted so many conferences. Since governments generally stepped in to declare protectorates and colonies after merchant interests went under, the cost of maintaining empire grew along with the territorial claims themselves. Thus, while economic motives were always present, much of the impetus behind imperialism boiled down to jockeying for position on the world stage between the increasingly hostile great powers of Europe.

The Decline of the Ottoman Empire

While it is not always considered as part of the history of European imperialism, not least because the core of its empire was never conquered by European powers, it is still appropriate to examine the decline of the Ottoman Empire alongside more conventional expressions of European empire-building. Simply put, while the Ottoman Empire suffered from its fair share of internal problems, European imperialism played the single most significant role in undermining its sovereignty and coherence until it finally collapsed in World War I.

By the late nineteenth century Europeans casually referred to the Ottoman Empire as the “sick man of Europe” and debated “the eastern question,” namely how Ottoman territory should be divided between the great powers of Europe. That attitude was a microcosm of the attitude of Europeans toward most of the world at the time: foreign territories were prizes for the taking, the identities of the people who lived there and the states that ruled them of little consequence thanks to the (short-lived, as it turned out) superiority of European arms and technology. The great irony in the case of the Ottomans, however, was that the empire had been both a European great power in its own right and had once dominated its European rivals in war. How did it become so “sick” over time?

Some of the reasons for Ottoman decline were external, most obviously the growth in European power. The Ottomans were never able to make headway against European powers in the Indian Ocean, and as European states build their global trade empires the Ottoman economy remained largely landlocked. Likewise, the European Scientific

Revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had no analog in Ottoman lands; it took until 1727 for a state-approved printing house printing secular works and there were no significant technological breakthroughs originating in the later Ottoman Empire.

The state that proved the greatest threat to Ottoman power was Russia. Russia went from a backwards, politically fractured region to a powerful and increasingly centralized state under its Tsar Peter the Great (whose reign is described in the previous volume of this textbook). Peter launched the first major Russo-Ottoman war and, while he did not achieve all of his military objectives, he did demonstrate the growing strength of the Russian military by seizing Ottoman territory. In 1744 the empress Catherine the Great's army crushed Ottoman forces and captured the Crimean Peninsula, securing the Russian dream of warm water (i.e. it did not freeze during the winter) ports for its navy. Catherine also forced the Ottomans to agree to the building of an Orthodox cathedral in Constantinople and the "protection" of Orthodox Christians in Ottoman lands – this was a massive intrusion into Ottoman sovereignty over its own subjects.

Other issues that undermined Ottoman strength were internal. Notably, the Janissaries (who had once been elite slave-soldiers who had bested European forces during the height of Ottoman power) that had played such a key role in Ottoman victories under sultans like Selim I and Suleiman the Magnificent were nothing more than parasites living off the largess of the state by the mid-eighteenth century, concentrating their time on enrichment through commerce rather than military training. In 1793 a reforming sultan, Selim III, created a "New Force" of soldiers trained in European tactics and using up-to-date firearms, but it took until 1826 for the Janissaries to be eliminated completely (they were slaughtered by members of the New Force under the next sultan, Mahmud II).

Meanwhile, the Ottoman economy was largely in the hands of Europeans by the turn of the nineteenth century. "Capitulation Agreements" that had begun as concessions to religious minorities had been extended to European merchants over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. By the late eighteenth century, both Europeans and their local (i.e. Ottoman) agents were basically above the law in Ottoman territories and they also enjoyed freedom from most forms of taxation. The state was helpless to reimpose control over its own economy or to restrain European greed because of the superiority of European military power, and European trading companies reaped huge profits in the process.

The nineteenth century was thus an era of crisis for the empire. In 1805 the Ottoman governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, seized power and governed Egypt as an independent state despite being (on paper) an official working for the Ottoman government. In 1839 Resid Pasha, a high-ranking official serving the sultan Abd al-Macid, instituted a broad reform movement, the Tanzimat, that introduced sweeping changes to Ottoman governance and law, culminating in a liberal constitution and the first meeting of an Ottoman parliament in 1876. The same year, however, the reactionary Sultan Abdulhamit II (r. 1876 – 1909) came to power and soon did everything he could to roll back the reforms. Abdulhamit heavily emphasized the empire's Muslim identity, inviting conservative Sunni clerics from across the Islamic world to settle in the empire and playing up the Christian vs. Muslim aspect of European aggression. In the process, he moved the empire away from its traditional identity as religiously diverse and tolerant.

Part of Abdulhamit's emphasis on Muslim identity was due to a simple demographic fact, however: much of the non-Muslim territories of the empire seized their independence either before or during his reign. The Greek Revolution that began in 1821 garnered the support of European powers and ultimately succeeded in seizing Greek independence. Serbia became completely independent in 1867, Bulgaria in 1878, and Bosnia passed into Austrian hands in 1908. Simply put, the Christian-dominated Balkans that had been part of the Ottoman Empire for centuries slipped away thanks to the strength of modern nationalism and the military support they received from sympathetic European powers.

Meanwhile, while Abdulhamit hoped in vain that doubling down on his own role as sultan and caliph would somehow see the empire through its period of weakness, other Ottoman elites reached very different conclusions. High-

ranking officers in the Ottoman military educated in the (European-style) War College established during the Tanzimat formed a conspiratorial society known as the Committee for Union and Progress (CUP) in 1889. Disgusted by what they regarded as the hopelessly archaic approach of Abdulhamit, they launched a successful coup d'état in 1909 and set out to remake the empire as a modern, secular, and distinctly Turkish (rather than diverse) state. World War I, however, began in 1914 and ultimately dealt the empire its death blow as European powers both attacked the empire directly and encouraged uprisings among its ethnic and religious minorities.

When the dust settled, one of the leaders of the CUP, Mustafa Kemal, led a Turkish army to expel European forces from the geographic core of the former empire, namely Anatolia, and form a new nation in its place. Soon known as Atatürk ("Father of the Turks"), Kemal pushed through a constitution that explicitly rejected the state's Muslim identity, adhering instead to the secularism of European and American countries. It also, however, represented a nation of ethnic Turks, with minority groups either expelled or slaughtered outright. The most horrific violence of the Turkish revolution was directed at the Armenian minority, with over a million Armenians forced on death marches into deserts or murdered outright. While the state of Turkey refuses to acknowledge it to this day, historians have long recognized that the Armenian massacres amounted to a full-scale genocide.

To sum up, the Ottoman Empire was beset by external pressures in the form of growing European military might and European intrusion into its economy. It also suffered from internal issues, most notably the corruption of the Janissaries and the intransigence of reactionaries like Abdulhamit. Its reform movements culminated in the CUP revolution of 1909, but world war tore the empire apart before those reforms had time to take effect. And, while Turkey entered the world stage as a modern nation, it was a modern nation with the blood of over a million people on the hands of its leaders. In that sense, Turkey was like European imperialism in reverse: Western European states left a trail of bodies as they built empires around the globe while Turkey's genocidal crime came about during imperial collapse.

Qajar Persia

Along with the Ottoman Empire, the other major Middle Eastern power had long been Persia (Iran), a country whose ancient history stretched back to the Achaemenid dynasty begun by the legendary Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE. By the modern period, however, Persia was in many ways a shadow of its glorious past. A ruling dynasty known as the Qajars seized power in 1779 but struggled to maintain control over the various tribal groups that had long competed for power and influence. Likewise, the Qajar shahs (kings) were unable to resist the encroachment of European powers as the latter expanded their influence in Central Asia. Like the Ottoman Empire, Persia was not formally colonized by a European power, but Europeans were still able to dictate international politics in the region.

For most of the nineteenth century, Britain and Russia were the two European powers that most often competed against one another for power in Persia, with the Qajar shahs repeatedly trying and failing to play the European rivals off against each other in the name of Persian independence. Russia seized control of the Caucasus region from Persia (permanently, as it turned out) in 1813, and subsequently imposed capitulation agreements on Persia that were a direct parallel of those that so hobbled the Ottomans to the west. In the following decades succession disputes within the Qajar line were resolved by Russia and Britain choosing which heir should hold the Qajar throne, an obvious violation of Persian sovereignty. Persia was spared actual invasion largely because of what a British diplomat referred to as the "great game": the battle for influence in the region in the name of preserving the British hold on India on the one hand versus

the expansion of Russian power on the other. Neither European power would allow the other to actually take over in Persia as a result.

One effect of European domination in Persia was the growth of Iranian nationalism. The central government proved utterly incapable (and mostly uninterested) in economic development, with the fruits of industry technology arriving at a glacial pace across the country. Instead of trying to expand the country's infrastructure directly, the Qajar state handed off "concessions" to European banks, companies, and private individuals to build railroads, issue bank notes, and in one notorious case, monopolize the production and sale of tobacco. Public outcry often forced the cancellation of the concessions, but foreign meddling in the Persian economy remained a constant regardless. Reformers, some of them religious leaders from the Shia ulama (Muslim clergy), others members of the commercial classes familiar with European ideas, demanded a more effective government capable of protecting national sovereignty.

Mass protests finally forced the issue in 1905. The ruler Muzaffar al-Din Shah signed a "Fundamental Law" on his deathbed that created a parliamentary regime, and in 1907 his successor Muhammad Ali Shah signed a supplement to the law that introduced civil equality and recognition that national sovereignty is derived from the people. The period of reform was short-lived, however, with a near civil war followed by the dismissal of the parliament in 1911. The dynasty limped toward its end in the years that followed, losing practically all authority over the country until a Russian-trained military officer, Riza Khan, seized power in a coup in 1925.

In sum, the Qajar dynasty coincided with a dismal period in Persian history in which European powers called the shots both politically and economically. Reform movements did emerge around the turn of the twentieth century, but modernization did not begin in earnest until after the Qajar period finally came to an end. The dynasty that began with Riza Khan, known as the Pahlavis, sought to radically reform the very nature of governance and society in Iran, inspired by the one meaningful achievement of the attempt at reform in the late Qajar period: the idea that Iran was a nation that should assert its national identity on the world stage.

The Counter-Examples – Ethiopia and Japan

Even the (in historical hindsight, quite temporary) European and American monopoly on advanced technology did not always translate into successful conquest, as demonstrated in the cases of both Ethiopia and Japan. As the Scramble for Africa began in earnest in the 1870s, the recently-united nation of Italy sought to shore up its status as a European power by establishing its own colonies. Italian politicians targeted East Africa, specifically Eritrea and Ethiopia. In 1889, the Italians signed a treaty with the Ethiopian emperor, Menelik II, but the treaty contained different wording in Italian and Amharic (the major language of Ethiopia): the Italian version stipulated that Ethiopia would become an Italian colony, while the Amharic version simply opened diplomatic ties with Europe through Italy. Once he learned of the deception, Menelik II repudiated the treaty, simultaneously directing the resources of his government to the acquisition of modern weapons and European mercenary captains willing to train his army.

Open war broke out in the early 1890s between Italy and Ethiopia, culminating in a battle at Adwa in 1896. There, the well-trained and well-equipped Ethiopians decisively defeated the Italian army. The Italians were forced to formally recognize Ethiopian independence, and soon other European powers followed suit (as an aside, it is interesting to note that Russia was already favorably inclined toward Ethiopia, and a small contingent of Russian volunteers actually fought against the Italians at the Battle of Adwa). Thus, a non-European power could and did defeat European invaders thanks

to Menelik II's quick thinking. Nowhere else in Africa did a local ruler so successfully organize to repulse the invaders, but if circumstances had been different, they certainly could have done so.

In Asia, something comparable occurred, but at an even larger scale. In 1853, in the quintessential example of “gunboat diplomacy,” an American naval admiral, Matthew Perry, forced Japan to sign a treaty opening it to contact with the west through very thinly-veiled threats. As western powers opened diplomacy and then trade with the Japanese shogunate, a period of chaos gripped Japan as the centuries-old political order fell apart. In 1868, a new government, remembered as the Meiji Restoration, embarked on a course of rapid westernization after dismantling the old feudal privileges of the samurai class. Japanese officials and merchants were sent abroad to learn about foreign technology and practices, and European and American advisers were brought in to guide the construction of factories and train a new, modernized army and navy. The Japanese state was organized along highly authoritarian lines, with the symbolic importance of the emperor maintained, but practical power held by the cabinet and the heads of the military.

Westernization in this case not only meant economic, industrial, and military modernization, it also meant reaping the rewards of that modernization, one of which was an empire. Just as European states had industrialized and then turned to foreign conquest, the new leadership of Japan looked to the weaker states of their region as “natural” territories to be incorporated. The Japanese thus undertook a series of invasions, most importantly in Korea and the northern Chinese territory of Manchuria, and began the process of building an empire on par with that of the European great powers.

Japanese expansion, however, threatened Russian interests, ultimately leading to war in 1904. To the shock and horror of much of the western world, Japan handily defeated Russia by 1905, forcing Russia to recognize Japanese control of Manchuria, along with various disputed islands in the Pacific. Whereas Ethiopia had defended its own territory and sovereignty, Japan was now playing by the same rules and besting European powers at their own game: seizing foreign territory through force of arms.



Japanese depiction of an assault on Russian forces. Note the European-style uniforms worn by the Japanese soldiers.

Conclusion

It is easy to focus on the technologies behind the new imperialism, to marvel at its speed, and to consider the vast breadth of European empires while overlooking what lay behind it all: violence. The cases of the Congo and the genocide of the Herero and Nama are rightly remembered, and studied by historians, as iconic expressions of imperialistic violence, but they were only two of the more extreme and shocking examples of the ubiquitous violence that established and maintained all of the imperial conquests of the time. The scale of that violence on a global scale vastly exceeded any of the relatively petty squabbles that had constituted European warfare itself up to that point – the only European war that approaches the level of bloodshed caused by imperialism was probably the 30 Years' War of the seventeenth century, but imperialism's death toll was still far higher. Until 1914, Europeans exported that violence hundreds or thousands of miles away as they occupied whole continents. In 1914, however, it came home to roost in the First World War.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

[Steamer on the Congo](#)– Public Domain

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CHAPTER 7: WORLD WAR I

Those who survived it called World War I “The Great War” and “The War to End All Wars.” While they were, sadly, wrong about the latter, they were right that no war had ever been like it. It was the world’s first mechanized, “impersonal” war in which machines proved to be much stronger than human beings. It devastated enormous swaths of territory and it left the economies of the Western World either crippled or teetering. To make matters worse, the war utterly failed to resolve the issues that had caused it. The war began because of the culmination of nationalist rivalries, fears, and hatreds. It failed to resolve any of those rivalries, and furthermore it was such a traumatic experience for most Europeans that certain otherwise “normal” people were attracted to the messianic, violent rhetoric of fascism and Nazism.

Background to the War

The single most significant background factor to the war was the rivalry that existed between Europe’s “great powers” by the beginning of the twentieth century. The term “great power” meant something specific in this period of history: the great powers were those able to command large armies, to maintain significant economies and industrial bases, and to conquer and hold global empires. Their respective leaders, and many of their regular citizens, were fundamentally suspicious of one another, and the biggest worry of their political leadership was that one country would come to dominate the others. Long gone was the notion of the balance of power as a guarantor of peace. Now, the balance of power was a fragile thing, with each of the great powers seeking to supplant its rivals in the name of security and prosperity. As a result, there was an ongoing, elaborate diplomatic dance as each power tried to shore up alliances, seize territory around the globe, and outpace the others.

While no great power deliberately sought war out, all were willing to risk war in 1914. That was at least in part because no politician had an accurate idea of what a new war would actually be like. The only wars that had occurred in Europe between the great powers since the Napoleonic period were the Crimean War of the 1850s and the wars that resulted in the formation of Italy and Germany in the 1850s, 1860s, and early 1870s. While the Crimean War was quite bloody, it was limited to the Crimean region itself and it did not involve all of the great powers. Likewise, the wars of national unification were relatively short and did not involve a great deal of bloodshed (by the standards of both earlier and later wars). In other words, it had been over forty years since the great powers had any experience of a war on European soil, and as they learned all too soon, much had changed with the nature of warfare in the meantime.

In the summer of 1914, each of the great powers reached the conclusion that war was inevitable, and that trying to stay out of the immanent conflict would lead to national decline. Germany was surrounded by potential enemies in France and Russia. France had cultivated a desire for revenge against Germany ever since the Franco-Prussian War. Russia feared German power and resented Austria for threatening the interests of Slavs in the Balkans. Great Britain alone had no vested interest in war, but it was unable to stay out of the conflict once it began.



Once the war began, the Triple Entente of Russia, France, and Britain faced the Central Powers of Germany and Austria. Italy was initially allied with the Central Powers but abandoned them once the war began, switching sides to join the Entente in 1915.

In turn, the thing that inflamed jingoism and resentment among the great powers had been imperialism. The British were determined to maintain their enormous empire at any cost, and the Germans now posed a threat to the empire since Germany had lavished attention on a naval arms race since the 1880s. There was constant bickering on the world stage between the great powers over their colonies, especially since those colonies butted up against each other in Africa and Asia. Violence in the colonies, however, was almost always directed at the native peoples in those colonies, and there the balance of power was squarely on the side of Europeans. Thus, even European soldiers overseas had no experience of facing foes armed with comparable weapons.

The nature of nationalism had changed significantly over the course of the nineteenth century as well. Not only had conservative elites appropriated nationalism to shore up their own power (as in Italy and Germany), but nationalistic patriotism came to be identified with rivalry and resentment among many citizens of various political persuasions. To be a good Englishman was to resent and fear the growth of Germany. Many Germans came to despise the Russians, in part thanks to the growth of anti-Slavic racism. The lesser powers of Europe, like Italy, resented their own status and wanted to somehow seize enough power to join the ranks of the great powers. Nationalism by 1914 was nothing like the optimistic, utopian movements of the nineteenth century; it was hostile, fearful, and aggressive.

Likewise, public opinion mattered in a way it had never mattered earlier for the simple fact that every one of the great powers had at least a limited electorate and parliaments with at least some real power to make law. Even Russia, after a semi-successful revolution in 1905, saw the creation of an elected parliament, the Duma, and an open press. The fact that all of the powers had representative governments mattered, because public opinion helped fan the flames of conflict. Newspapers in this era tended to deliberately inflame jingoistic passions rather than encourage rational calculation. A very recognizably modern kind of connection was made in the press between patriotic loyalty and a willingness to fight, kill, and die for one's country. Since all of the great powers were now significantly (or somewhat, in the case of Russia) democratic, the opinions of the average citizen mattered in a way they never had before. Journalism whipped up those opinions and passions by stoking hatred, fear, and resentment, which led to a more widespread willingness to go to war.

Thanks to the nationalistic rivalry described above, the great powers sought to shore up their security and power through alliances. Those alliances were firmly in place by 1914, each of which obligated military action if any one power

should be attacked. Each great power needed the support of its allies, and was thus willing to intercede even if its own interests were not directly threatened. That willingness to go to war for the sake of alliance meant that even a relatively minor event might spark the outbreak of total war. That is precisely what happened.

In 1914, two major sets of alliances set the stage for the war. German politicians, fearing the possibility of a two-front war against France and Russia simultaneously, concluded an alliance with the Austrian Empire in 1879, only a little over a decade after the Prusso-Austrian War. In turn, France and Russia created a strong alliance in 1893 in large part to contain the ambitions of Germany, whose territory lay between them. Great Britain was generally more friendly to France than Germany, but had not entered into a formal alliance with any other power. It was, however, the traditional ally and protector of Belgium, which British politicians considered a kind of toehold on the continent. Finally, Russia grew increasingly close to the new nation of Serbia, populated as it was by a Slavic people who were part of the Eastern Orthodox branch of Christianity. The relationships between Great Britain and Russia with Belgium and Serbia, respectively, would not have mattered but for the alliance obligations that tied the great powers together.

Those alliances were now poised to mobilize armies of unprecedented size. All of the great powers now fielded forces of a million men or more. Coordinating that many troops required detailed advanced planning and a permanent staff of high-ranking officers, normally referred to as the “general staff” of a given army. In the past, political leaders had often either led troops themselves or at least had significant influence in planning and tactics. By the early twentieth century, however, war plans and tactics were entirely in the hands of the general staff of each nation, meaning political leaders would be obliged to choose from a limited set of “pre-packaged” options given to them by their generals.

Thus, when the war started, what took all of the leaders of the great powers – from the Kaiser in Germany to the Tsar in Russia – by surprise was the ultimatums they received from their own generals. According to the members of each nation’s general staff, it was all or nothing: either commit all forces to a swift and decisive victory, or suffer certain defeat. There could be no small incremental build ups or tentative skirmishes; this was about a total commitment to a massive war. An old adage has it that “generals fight the last war,” basing their tactics on what worked in previous conflicts, and in 1914 the “last war” most generals looked to was the Franco-Prussian War, which Prussia had won through swift, decisive action and overwhelming force.

The Start of the War

The immediate cause of the war was the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in 1914. Franz Ferdinand was the heir to the Habsburg throne, a respected Austrian politician who also happened to be friends with the German Kaiser. Ironically, he was also the politician in the Austrian state with the most direct control of the Austrian military, and he tended to favor peaceful diplomacy over the potential outbreak of war – it is possible that he would have been a prominent voice for peace if he had survived. Instead, he was assassinated not by Austria’s rivals Russia or France, but by a young Serbian nationalist.

Serbia was a new nation. It had fought its way to independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1878, and its political leaders envisioned a role for Serbia like that Piedmont had played in Italy: one small kingdom that came to conquer and unite a nation. In this case, the Serbs hoped to conquer and unite the Balkans in one Serbian-dominated country. Austria, however, stood in the path of Serbian ambition since Austria controlled neighboring Bosnia (in which many Serbs lived as a significant minority of the population). Thus, the last thing Austrian politicians wanted was an anti-Austrian movement launched by the ambitious Serbs.

In 1903, a military coup in Serbia killed the king and installed a fiercely nationalistic leadership. Serbian nationalists were proud of their Slavic heritage, and Russia became a powerful ally in large part because of the Slavic connection between Russians and Serbs (i.e. they spoke related languages and the Russian and Serbian Orthodox churches were part of the same branch of Christianity). Russia also supported Serbia because of Russian rivalry with Austria. Serbian nationalists believed that, with Russian support, it would be possible to create an international crisis in Austrian-controlled Bosnia and ultimately seize Bosnia itself. The Serbs did not believe that Austria would risk a full-scale war with Russia in order to hold on to Bosnia.

Among the organizers of the coup that had murdered the king and queen were a group of Serbian officers who created a terrorist group, The Black Hand. In 1914, The Black Hand trained a group of (ethnically Serbian) college students in Bosnia to assassinate an Austrian politician when the opportunity presented itself. That happened in June of 1914, when Franz Ferdinand and his wife came to visit the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. In a fantastically bungled assassination, Franz Ferdinand survived a series of attacks, with some of his would-be killers getting cold feet and running off, others injuring bystanders but missing the Archduke, and others losing track of where the Archduke's motorcade was. Finally, quite by accident, the Archduke's driver became lost and stuck in traffic outside of a cafe in which one of the assassins was eating a sandwich. The assassin, Gavrilo Princip, seized the opportunity to stride outside and shoot the Archduke and his wife to death.



The leaders of the Black Hand, the conspiracy responsible for the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and sparking the beginning of World War

Serbia's assumption that Austria would not risk war proved to be completely wrong. The Austrian government demanded that Serbia allow Austrian agents to carry out a full-scale investigation of the assassination; Serbian honor would never allow such a thing. Austrian troops started massing near the Serbian border, and the great powers of Europe started calling up their troops. Germany, believing that its own military and industrial resources were such that it would be the victor in a war against France and Russia, promised to stand by Austria regardless of what happened. Russia warned that Austrian intervention in Serbia would cause war. France assured Russia of its loyalty. Only Britain was as yet unaccounted for.

No one was completely certain that a war would actually happen (the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, left for his summer vacation as planned right in the middle of the crisis, believing no war would occur), but if it did, each of the great powers was confident that they would be victorious in the end. A desperate diplomatic scramble ensued as diplomats, parliaments, and heads of state tried at the last minute to preserve the peace, but in the end it was too late: on July 28, Austria declared war on Serbia, activating the pre-existing system of alliances, and by August 4 all of the great powers were involved.

Thanks to the fact that Germany invaded through Belgium, Great Britain declared war on Germany and its allies. In addition to Germany and the Austrian Empire, the Ottoman Empire soon joined their alliance, known as the Central Powers. Opposing them was the Triple Entente of Great Britain, France, and Russia. Smaller states like Italy and Portugal later joined the Triple Entente, as did, eventually, the United States.

The Early War

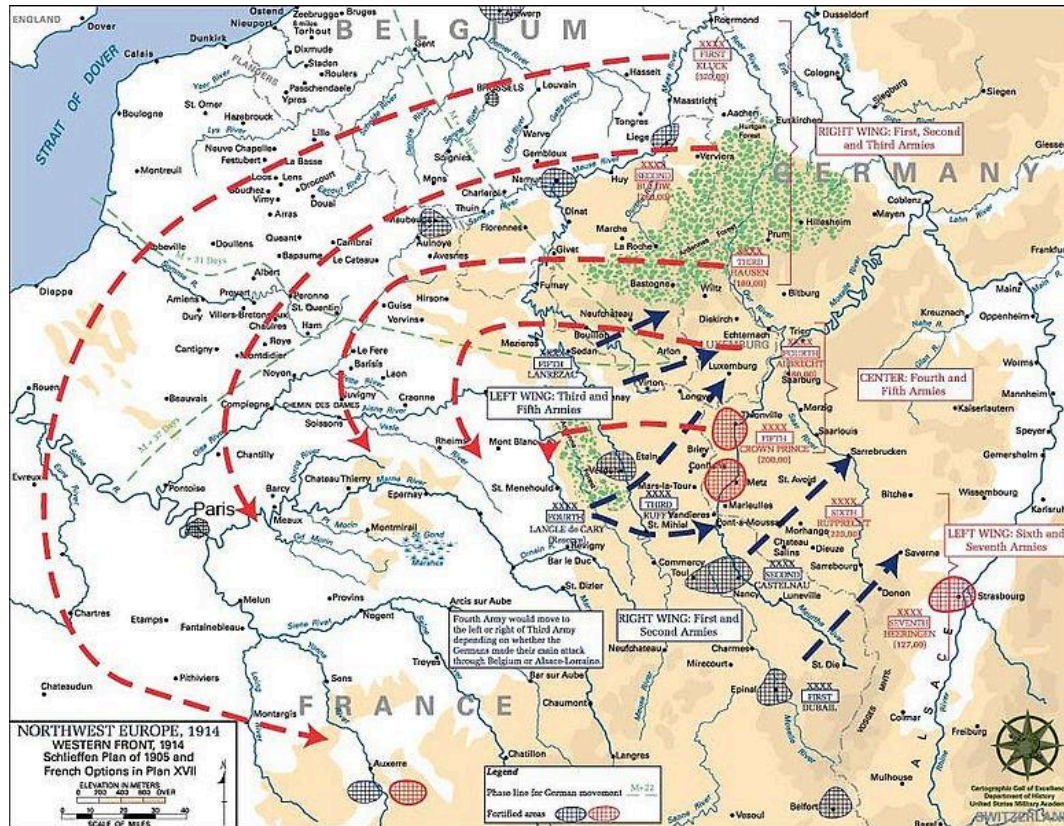
There was a mixture of apprehension and, in many cases, enthusiasm about the onset of war among civilians and soldiers alike. Many felt that the war would resolve nationalistic rivalries once and for all, and almost no one anticipated a lengthy war. Wilhelm II anticipated “a jolly little war” and it was widely thought in France and Germany that the war would be over by Christmas. 30,000 young men and women marched in Berlin before war was even declared, singing patriotic songs and gathering at the feet of statues of German and Prussian heroes. Everywhere, thousands of young men enlisted in the military of their own volition. There were some anti-war protests in July, mostly organized by the socialist parties in the name of socialist internationalism, but once the war was actually declared those protests abruptly stopped.

The most symptomatic moment of the defeat of socialism by nationalism as rival ideologies was the fact that 100% of the socialist parties of Europe supported their respective countries in the war, despite hard and fast promises before the war that, as socialists, they were committed to peace. Whereas pre-war socialists had argued vociferously that the working class of each country was a single, united class regardless of national differences, that internationalist rhetoric largely vanished once the war began. Wanting to be seen as patriots (whether French, German, or British), the major socialist parties voted to authorize the war and supported the sale of war bonds. In turn, the radical left of the socialist parties soon broke off and formed new parties that continued to oppose the war; these new parties were typically called “communists” whereas the old ones remained “socialists.”

War, for many people, represented a cathartic release. War did not represent real bloodshed and horror for the young men signing up – they had never fought in real wars, except for the veterans of colonial wars against much less well-armed “natives” in the colonies. War was an ideal of bravery and honor that many young men in Europe in 1914 longed for as a way to prove themselves, to prove their loyalty, and to purge their boredom and uncertainty about the future. A whole generation had absorbed tales of glory on the battlefield, of the Napoleonic Wars, the Crimean War, the Franco-Prussian War, and the conquests overseas. Depending on their nationality, they were either ashamed and angry or fiercely proud of their country’s performance in past wars. As a result, many saw a new war as a chance to settle accounts, to prove once and for all that they were citizens of a great power, and to shame their opponents into conceding defeat. France would at last get even for the Franco-Prussian War. Germany would at least prove it was the most powerful nation in Europe. Russia would prove that it was a powerful modern nation...and so on.

The war itself began with the German invasion of France through Belgium. German tactics centered on the “Schlieffen Plan,” named after its author, Field Marshal Alfred von Schlieffen, who had devised it in the first years of

the twentieth century. The Schlieffen Plan called for a rapid advance into France to knock the French forces out of the war within six weeks. Subsequently, German troops would be whisked back east via railroads in time to engage Russia, as it was believed that it would take the Russians at least that long to mobilize their armies. It not only called for rapid mobilization, but it required the German military to defeat the French military at an even more rapid pace had the Prussian forces forty years earlier in the Franco-Prussian War.



The Schlieffen Plan, in theory. In reality, while it met with initial success, French and British troops succeeded in counter-attacking and pushing back the German advance.

The first taste of the horror of the war to come was the German invasion of Belgium. Belgium was a neutral country leading up to the war, and German planners had expected Belgium to surrender swiftly as German troops advanced rapidly toward France. Instead, Belgian soldiers fiercely resisted the German invasion. In turn, German troops deliberately massacred civilians, destroyed towns, and raped Belgian women. Thousands of Belgian refugees fled to Britain, where they were (to the credit of the British government and civilians) welcomed and housed. The bloodshed shocked the sensibilities of the French and British reading public and emphasized the fact that the war might go very differently than many had first imagined. Britain swiftly declared war on Germany.

While the first few weeks of the German invasion seemed to match the ambitions of the Schlieffen Plan, they soon ground to a halt. A fierce French counter-attack stopped the Germans in Belgium and Northeastern France in late September. Simultaneously, the Russians surprised everyone by mobilizing their forces much more quickly than expected, attacking both Germany and Austria in the east in late August. In the autumn of 1914 the scale of battles grew to exceed anything Europe had witnessed since the Napoleonic Wars (which they soon dwarfed). To their shock and horror, soldiers on all sides encountered for the first time the sheer destructive power of modern weaponry. To shield themselves from the clouds of bullets belched out by machine guns, desperate soldiers dove into the craters created by artillery shells. In the process, trench warfare was invented.

The weapons that had been developed in the decades leading up to the war, from enormous new battleships known as dreadnoughts to high-explosive artillery shells and machine guns, had all seemed to the nations of Europe like strengths. The early months of the war revealed that they were indeed strong, in a sense, being far more lethal than anything created before. Unfortunately, human bodies were pitifully weak by comparison, and as the death toll mounted, the human (and financial) costs associated with modern warfare shattered the image of national strength that politicians and generals continued to cling to. Those generals in particular stuck to their favored, and outdated, tactics, sending cavalry in bright uniforms to their deaths in hopeless charges, ordering offensives that were doomed to fail, and calling up every soldier available on reserve.

That Christmas, in a well-remembered symbolic moment, a brief and unauthorized truce held on the Western Front between Entente and German forces long enough for French and German soldiers to climb out of their respective trenches and meet in the “no man’s land” between the lines, with a German barber offering shaves and haircuts to all comers. By then, both sides were well aware that the conceit that the war would “be over by Christmas” had been a ridiculous fantasy. Never again in the war would a moment of voluntary peace re-emerge; while they did not know it for certain at the time, the soldiers faced four more years of carnage to come.

The Evolution of the War

On the Western Front of the war, it was the trenches that defined almost everything in the lives of the soldiers on both sides of the conflict. An English officer and poet later wrote that “when all is said and done, this war was a matter of holes and ditches.” While they began as improvised, hastily-dug ditches, the trenches involved into vast networks of fortified rifts that stretched from the English Channel in the north to the Swiss Alps in the south. Behind the trenches lay the artillery batteries, capable of hurling enormous shells for miles, and farther back still lay the command posts of the high-ranking officers who fruitlessly conceived of new variations on a constant theme: hopeless charges against the impregnable enemy position.

The tactical problem facing both sides was due to the new technologies of war: whereas in past wars the offensive strategy was often superior to the defensive strategy, things were entirely reversed in World War I. Because of trenches, machine guns, mines, and modern rifles, it was far more effective to entrench oneself and defend a position than it was to charge and try to take the enemy’s position. It was nearly impossible to break through and gain territory or advantage; the British phrase for an attack was “going over the top,” which involved thousands of men climbing out of their trenches and charging across the no man’s land that separated them from the enemy. While they were charging, the enemy would simply open fire with impunity from their trenches, and without exception not a single offensive captured a significant amount of territory between 1915 and early 1917. As a single example, one British attack in 1915 temporarily gained 1,000 yards at the cost of 13,000 lives.

In turn, and in stark contrast to the early dreams of glory to be won on the battlefield, soldiers discovered that their own competence, even heroism, had been rendered irrelevant by the new technology of warfare. Because warfare was so heavily mechanized, the old ideal of brave, chivalric combat between equals was largely obsolete. Men regularly killed other men they never laid eyes on, and death often seemed completely arbitrary – in many cases, survival came down to sheer, dumb luck. No amount of skill or bravery mattered if an artillery shell hit the trench where a soldier happened to be standing. Likewise, if ordered to “go over the top,” all one could hope for was to survive long enough to be able to retreat.

Thus, the experience of war in the trenches for the next three years was a state of ongoing misery: men stood in

mud, sometimes over a foot deep, in the cold and rain, as shells whistled overhead and occasionally blew them up. They lived in abject terror of the prospect of having to attack the enemy line, knowing that they would all almost certainly be slaughtered. Thousands of new recruits showed up on the lines every month, many of whom would be dead in the first attack. In 1915, in a vain attempt to break the stalemate, both sides started using poison gas, which was completely horrific, burning the lungs, eyes, and skin of combatants. The survivors of poison gas attacks were considered to be the unlucky ones. By 1917, both sides had been locked in place for three years, and the soldiers of both sides were known to remark that only the dead would ever escape the trenches in the end.



Soldiers in a trench in 1915.

Individual battles in World War I sometimes claimed more lives than had entire wars in past centuries. The Battle of Verdun, an enormous German offensive that sought to break the stalemate in 1916, resulted in 540,000 casualties among the French and 430,000 among the Germans. It achieved nothing besides the carnage, with neither side winning significant territorial concessions. The most astonishing death count of the war was at the Battle of the Somme, a disastrous British offensive in 1916 in which 60,000 soldiers were killed or wounded on the first day alone – there were more British soldiers killed and wounded in the first three days of the battle of the Somme than there were Americans killed in World War I, The Korean War, and the Vietnam War combined. Ultimately, the Battle of the Somme resulted in 420,000 British casualties (meaning either dead, missing, or wounded to the point of being unable to fight), 200,000 French casualties, and 650,000 German casualties. One British poet noted afterwards that “the war had won” the battle, not countries or people.

In this context of ongoing carnage, even the most stubborn commanders were forced to recognize that their dreams of a spectacular breakthrough were probably unachievable. Instead, by 1916 many of the war’s top strategists concluded that the only way to win was to outspend the enemy, churning out more munitions and supplies, drafting more men, committing more civilians to the war effort at home, and sacrificing more soldiers than could the other side. At its worst, commanders adopted an utterly ruthless perspective regarding their own casualties: tens or even hundreds of thousands

of deaths were signs of “progress” in the war effort, because they implied that the other side must be running out of soldiers, too. This was a war of attrition on a new level, one that both soldiers and lower-ranking officers alike recognized was designed to kill them in the name of a possible eventual victory.

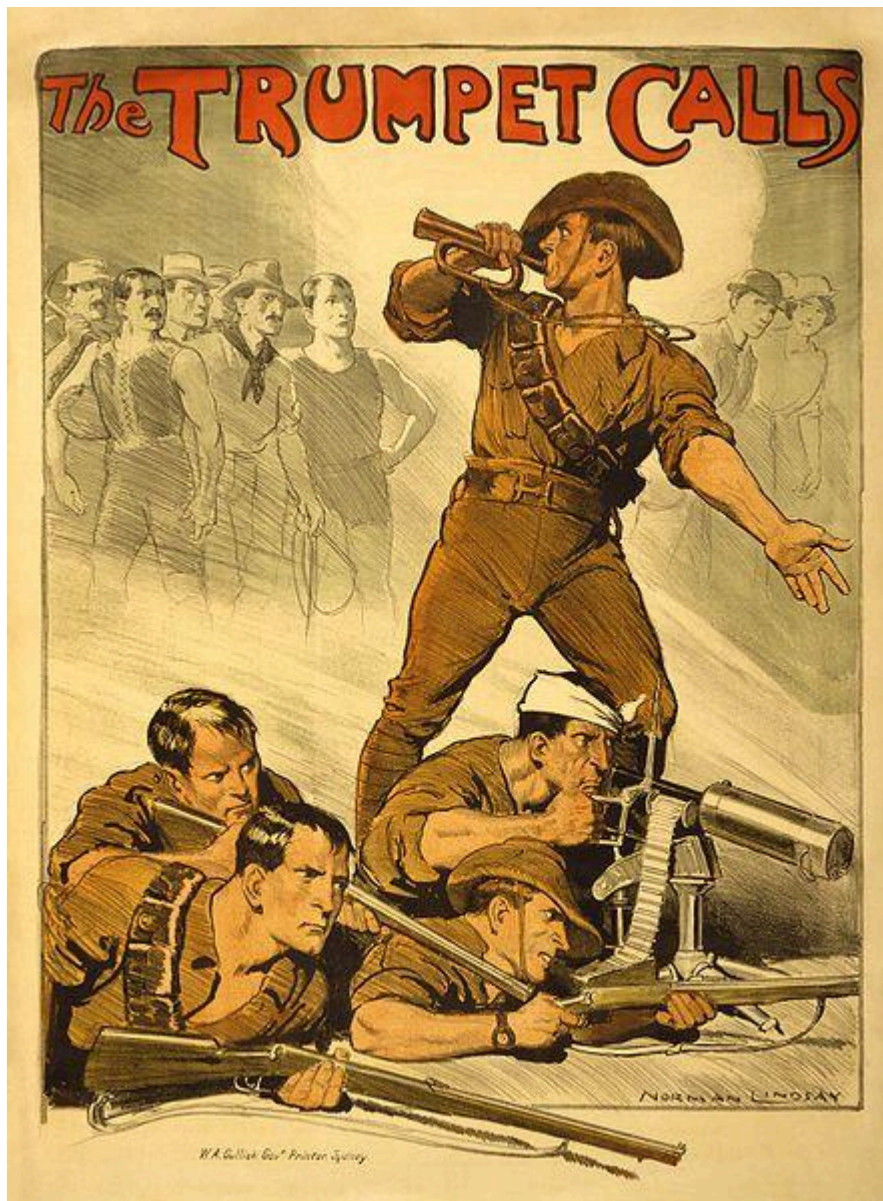
The Eastern Front and the Ottoman Empire

Things were different in the east, however. In contrast to the essentially static nature of trench warfare on the Western Front, the Russian, German, and Austrian armies in the east were highly mobile, sometimes crossing hundreds of miles in an attempt to outflank their enemies. The Russian army fought effectively in the early years of the war, especially against Austrian forces, which it consistently defeated. While Russian soldiers were also the match of Germans, however, Russia was hampered by its inadequate industrial base and by its lack of rail lines and cars. The Germans were able to outmaneuver the Russians, often surrounding Russian armies one by one and defeating them. A brilliant Russian general oversaw a major offensive in 1916 that crippled Austrian forces, but did not force Austria out of the war. In the aftermath, a lack of support and coordination from the other Russian generals ultimately checked the offensive.

By late 1916 the war had grown increasingly desperate for Russia. The Tsar’s government was teetering and morale was low. The home front was in dire straits, with serious food shortages, and there were inadequate munitions (especially for artillery) making it to the front. Thus, the German armies steadily pushed into Russian territory. A furious defense by the Russian forces checked the German advance in the winter of 1916 – 1917, but the war was deeply unpopular on the home front and increasing numbers of soldiers deserted rather than face the Germans. It was in this context of imminent defeat that a popular revolution overthrew the Tsarist state – that revolution is described in the next chapter.

Meanwhile, the Ottoman Empire, long considered the “sick man of Europe” by European politicians, proved a far more resilient enemy than expected. As described in the chapter on Imperialism, in 1909 a coup of army officers and political leaders known as the Committee of Union and Progress, but more often remembered as the “Young Turks,” seized control of the Ottoman state and embarked on a rapid program of western-style reform (including a growing obsession with Turkish “racial” identity at the expense of the Empire’s other ethnicities). With war clouds gathering over Europe in 1914, the Young Turks threw in their lot with Germany, the one European power that had never menaced Ottoman territories and which promised significant territorial gains in the event of a German – Turkish victory.

In 1915 British forces staged a full-scale invasion of Ottoman territory which rapidly turned into an outright disaster. In a poorly-planned assault on the Gallipoli Peninsula near Constantinople, hundreds of thousands of British Imperial troops (including tens of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders recruited to fight for “their” empire from half a world away) were gunned down by Turkish machine guns. In the months that followed, British forces failed to make headway against the Ottomans, with the Ottoman leadership rightly judging that the very survival of the Ottoman state was at stake in the war.



An Australian propaganda poster calling for volunteers.

In 1916, however, British forces focused their strategy on capturing the eastern stretch of the Ottoman Empire: Mesopotamia, the site of the earliest civilization in human history (which became the country of Iraq in 1939). The British made steady progress moving west from Mesopotamia while also supporting an Arab nationalist insurgency against the Ottomans from within the Ottoman borders. By 1917 Ottoman forces were in disarray and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire looked all but certain.

Even as British and French politicians began plans to divide up the Ottoman territory into protectorates (dubbed “mandates” after the war) under their control, however, the Young Turk leader Mustafa Kemal launched a major military campaign to preserve not Ottoman but Turkish independence, with the other ethnicities that had lived under Ottoman rule either pushed aside or destroyed. In one of the greatest crimes of the war, Turkish forces drove hundreds of thousands of Armenians from their homes across deserts to die of abuse, exhaustion, hunger, and thirst when they were not slaughtered outright. To this day, the Turkish government (while admitting that many Armenians died) denies what

historians have long since recognized: the Armenians were victims of a deliberate campaign of genocide, with over one million killed.

Women in the War (and Afterwards)

World War I transformed, at least during the war itself, gender roles. The total commitment to the war on the part of the belligerent nations left numerous professional positions vacant as men were dispatched to fight. Women responded by taking on jobs that they had been barred from in the past, as doctors, mid-level officials and executives in private enterprise, and in wartime production in factories. Suffrage movements temporarily suspended their agitation for the vote in favor of using their existing organizations to support the war effort in the name of patriotism. Thousands of women joined the war effort directly as nurses, in many cases serving near or even in the trenches on the Western Front. The famous scientist Marie Curie (the first woman to win a Nobel Prize – she won a second a few years later) drove an ambulance near the front lines during the war.

In many cases, the labor shortage led to breakthroughs for women that simply could not be reversed at the war's end. Having established the precedent that a woman could work perfectly well at a “man's job” (as a competent streetcar conductor, for example) certain fields remained at least partially open to women after the war concluded in 1918. Other changes were cultural in nature rather than social. For example, the cumbersome, uncomfortable angle-length dresses of the pre-war period vanished (along with corsets, the very model of impracticality and discomfort), replaced by sensible, comfortable dresses and skirts. Women cut their hair short in “bobs” for the first time both for fashion and because short hair was more practical while working full-time for the war effort. The war, in short, required gender roles to change primarily for economic reasons, but women embraced those changes as forms of liberation, not just side-effects of their new jobs.

While it was not always a straightforward case of cause-and-effect, there is no doubt that women's participation in the war effort did have a direct link to voting rights after the war. One by one, most European countries and the United States granted the vote to at least some women in the years that followed the war. One striking example is Belgium, where only women who were widowed, had lost sons, or had themselves been held captive during the war were granted the vote initially. Some countries stubbornly resisted this trend – France rejected women's suffrage entirely until after the period of Nazi occupation in World War II – but there can be no doubt that, overall, the cause of women's suffrage was aided immensely by the patriotic service of women during WWI.

The Late War

World War I was fought primarily in Europe, along the Western Front that stretched from the English Channel south along the French border to the Alps, and on the Eastern Front across Poland, Galicia (the region encompassing part of Hungary and the Ukraine) and Russia. It was a “world” war, however, for two reasons. First, hundreds of thousands of troops from around the world fought in it, the most numerous of which were citizens of the British Empire drawn from as far away as India and New Zealand. Second, military engagements occurred in the Ottoman territories of the Middle East, in Africa between European colonial armies, and in Asia (albeit at a much smaller scale). Japan even supported the Entente war effort by taking a German-controlled Chinese port, Tsingtao.

The other major power involved in the war, the United States, was a latecomer to the fighting. The United States

was dominated by “isolationist” sentiment until late in the war. Most Americans believed that the war was a European affair that should not involve American troops. America, however, was an ally of Britain and provided both military and civilian supplies to the British, along with large amounts of low-interest loans to keep the British economy afloat. In 1917, as the war dragged on and the German military leadership under the Field Marshal Paul Von Hindenburg recognized that the nation could not sustain the war much longer, the German generals decided to use their new submarines, the U-Boats, to attack any vessel suspected of carrying military supplies to the British or French. When ships carrying American civilians were sunk in 1917, American public sentiment finally shifted and the US declared war on Germany in April of 1917.

The importance of the entrance of the United States in the war was not the superiority of American troops or technology – American soldiers were as horrified as anyone when they first encountered modern, mechanized warfare. Instead, the key factor was that the US had a gigantic industrial capacity, dwarfing all of the great powers of Europe put together, and millions of fresh troops that could be called up or drafted. Germany, meanwhile, had been totally committed to the war for almost three years, and its supplies (of money, fuel, munitions, food, and people) were running very thin. Most German civilians still believed that Germany was winning, but as the carnage continued on the Western Front, the German general staff knew that they had to achieve a strategic breakthrough.

By 1918, it was clear to the German command that they were at risk of losing, despite the military resources freed up when the Bolshevik Revolution ended Russia’s commitment to the war. The Germans had been able to fight the French and British to a standstill on the Western Front, but when the US entered on the side of the British and French, it became impossible to sustain the war in the long run. The only hope appeared to be one last desperate offensive that might bring the French and British to the negotiating table. Thus, German forces staged a major campaign in the spring of 1918 that succeeded in breaking through the western lines and coming within about 40 miles of Paris, but by then German troops had outpaced their supply lines, lost cover, and were now up against the combined reserves of the French, British, and Americans. Another attempted offensive in July failed, and the Entente (and American) powers began to push the German forces back.

Back in Germany, criticism of the Kaiser appeared for the first time in the mainstream press, and hundreds of thousands of workers protested the worsening economic conditions. In late September, the head of the German General Staff, Ludendorff, advised the Kaiser to sue for peace. A month later, the Reichstag passed laws making the government’s ministers responsible to it instead of the Kaiser. Protest movements spread across Germany and the rapidly-collapsing Austro-Hungarian empire, as nationalist movements declared independence in Yugoslavia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the Balkans.

On November 11 of 1918, a voluntary commission of German politicians led by the German Socialist Party (SPD) formally sued for peace. The Kaiser, blaming socialists and Jews for “stabbing Germany in the back,” snuck away in a train to Holland, where he abdicated. The top generals of the German General Staff, Hindenburg and Ludendorff, themselves the authors of the myth of the “stab in the back,” did their best to popularize the idea that Germany “would have won” if not for sabotage perpetrated by a sinister conspiracy of foreign agents, communists, and (as with practically every shadowy conspiracy theory of the twentieth century) Jews. In fact, if the commission of German politicians had not sued for peace when they did, French, British, and American troops would have simply invaded Germany and even more people would have died.

The Aftermath

The aftermath of the war was horrendous. Over twenty million people, both soldiers and civilians, were dead. For Russia and France, of the twenty million men mobilized during the war, over 76% were casualties (either dead, wounded, or missing). A whole generation of young men was almost wiped out, which had lasting demographic consequences for both countries. For Germany, the figure was 65%, including 1.8 million dead. The British saw a casualty rate of “only” 39%, but that figure still represented the death of almost a million men, with far more wounded or missing. Even the smaller nations like Italy, which had fought fruitlessly to seize territory from Austria, lost over 450,000 men. A huge swath of Northeastern France and parts of Belgium were reduced to lifeless fields of mud and debris.

Politically, the war spelled the end of three of the most venerable, and historically powerful, empires of the early modern period: the Russian Empire, the Habsburg Empire of Austria, and the Ottoman Empire of the Middle East. The Austrian Empire was replaced by new independent nations, with Austria itself reduced to a “rump state”: the remnant of its former imperial glory. France and Great Britain busily divided up control of former Ottoman territories in new “mandates,” often creating new nations (such as Iraq) without the slightest concern for the identities of the people who actually lived there, but Turkey itself achieved independence thanks to the ferocious campaign led by Mustafa Kemal, or “Atatürk,” meaning “father of the Turks.” As noted above, revolution in Russia led to the collapse of the Tsarist state and, after a bloody civil war, the emergence of the world’s first communist nation: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. While Germany had not been a major imperial power, it also lost its overseas territories in the aftermath of the war.

The American president Woodrow Wilson, hoping to prevent future wars on the scale of World War I and, as importantly, to present an appealing anti-communist vision for a peaceful global order, helped to organize a new international body: the League of Nations. The idea behind the League was that it would work against reckless international aggression and war, coordinate diplomatic and economic relationships, and protect the “right of self-determination” of peoples around the world. Instead, the League was quickly revealed to be weak and ineffectual, consistently failing to act when nations launched wars of invasion (starting the Japanese invasion of Manchuria, in northern China, in 1931), handing out territories in Africa and the Middle East to European imperialists instead of to the people who actually lived there, and failing to attract the membership of the very country whose leader had proposed it in the first place: the United States. Instead of inspiring confidence and hope, the League appeared to many as the symbol of international dysfunction.

For surviving soldiers everywhere, the psychological damage from years of carnage and desperation left wounds as crippling as those inflicted by poison gas and artillery strikes. From the euphoria many felt at the start of the war, the survivors were left psychologically shattered. The British term for soldiers who survived but were unable to function in society was “shell shock,” a vague diagnosis for what is now known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Whereas P.T.S.D. is now understood as a grave psychological issue that requires medical and therapeutic intervention, it was considered a form of “hysteria” at the time, a deeply gendered diagnosis that compared traumatized soldiers to “hysterical” middle class women suffering from depression. While the numbers of shell shock cases were so great that they could not be ignored by the medical community at the time, the focus of treatment revolved around trying to force former soldiers to somehow “tough” their way back to normal behavior (something that is now recognized to be impossible). Some progress was made in treating shell shock cases by applying the “talking cure,” an early form of therapy related to the practices of the great early psychologist Sigmund Freud, but most of the medical community held to the assumption that trauma was just a sign of weakness.

Likewise, there was no sympathy in European (or American) culture for psychological problems. To be unable to function because of trauma was to be “weak” or “insane,” with all of the social and cultural stigma those terms invoke. Any soldier diagnosed with a psychological issue, as opposed to a physical one, was automatically disqualified from receiving a disability pension as well. Thus, many of the veterans of World War I were both pitied and looked down on for not being able to re-adjust to civilian life, in circumstances in which the soldiers were suffering massive psychological trauma. The result was a profound sense of betrayal and disillusionment among veterans.

This was the context in which Europeans dubbed the conflict “The War to End All Wars.” It was inconceivable to most that it could happen again; the costs had simply been too great to bear. The European nations were left indebted and depopulated, the maps of Europe and the Middle East were redrawn as new nations emerged from old empires, and there was a profound uncertainty about what the future held. Most hoped that, at the very least, the bloodshed was over and that the process of rebuilding might begin. Some, however, saw the war’s conclusion as deeply unsatisfying and, in a sense, incomplete: there were still scores to be settled. It was from that sense of dissatisfaction and a longing for continued violence that the most destructive political philosophy of the twentieth century emerged: fascism.

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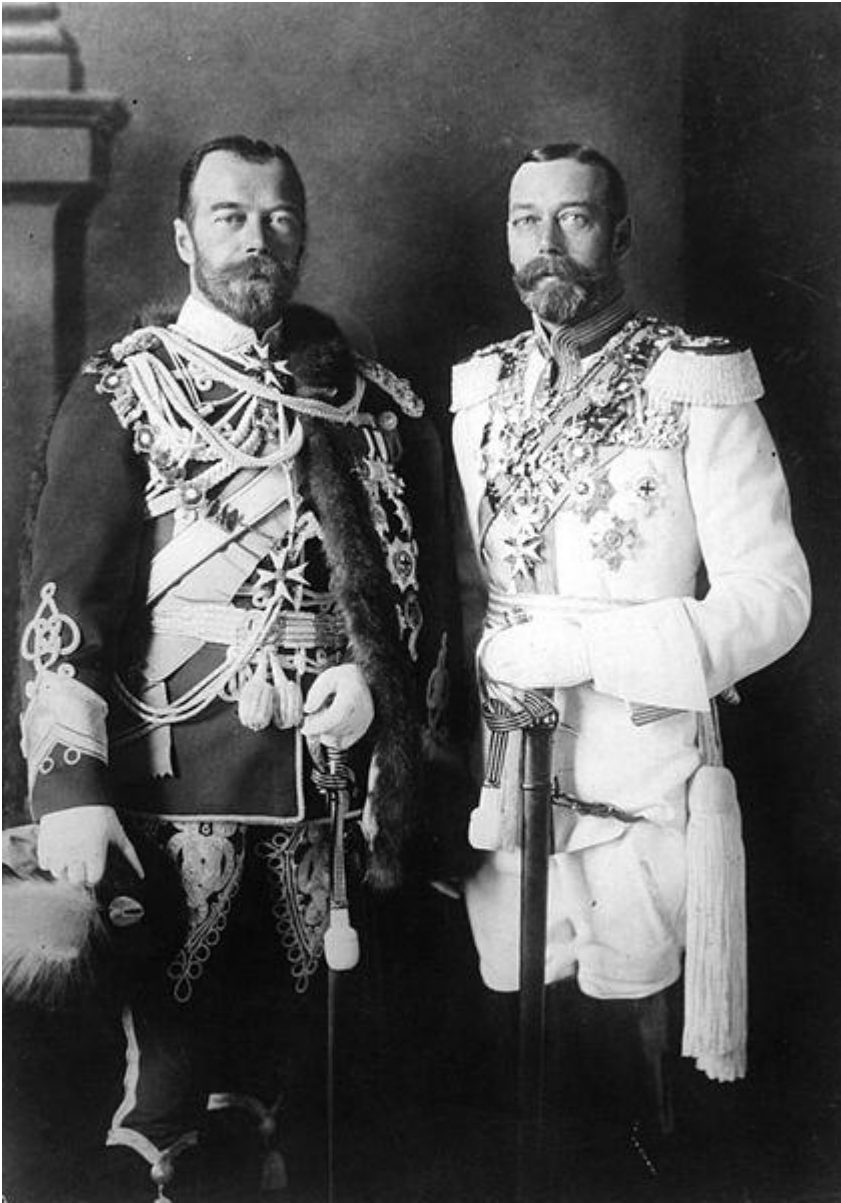
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CHAPTER 8: THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

Russian Revolutions

The last Tsar of Russia was Nikolai II (1868 – 1918). At the start of his reign in 1894, at the death of his father Alexander III, Nikolai was among the most powerful monarchs in Europe. Russia may have been technologically and socially backwards compared to the rest of Europe, but it commanded an enormous empire and boasted a powerful military. Alone among the monarchs of the great powers, the Tsars had successfully resisted most of the forces of modernity that had fundamentally changed the political structure of the rest of Europe. Nikolai ruled in much the same manner as had his father, grandfather, and great grandfather before him, holding nearly complete authority over day-to-day politics and the Russian Church.



Family resemblance:
cousins Tsar Nikolai
II (on the left) and
King George V of
Britain (on the right).

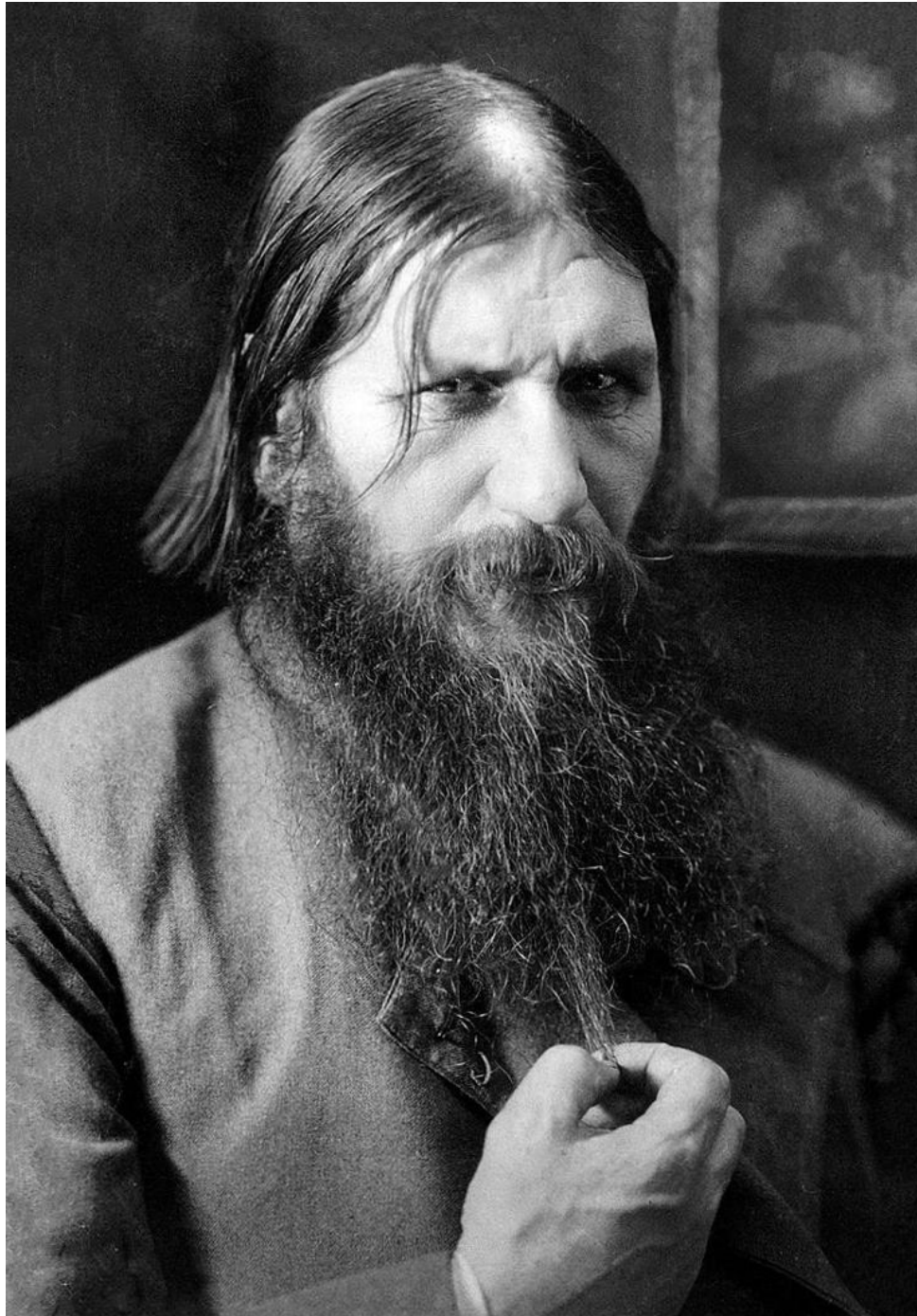
It was, however, during his reign that modernity finally caught up with Russia. The Russian state was able to control the press and punish dissent into the first years of the twentieth century, but then events outside of its immediate control undermined its ability to exercise complete control over Russian society. The immediate cause of the downfall of Nikolai's royal line, and the entire traditional order of Russian society, was war: The Russo – Japanese War of 1904 – 1905 and, ten years later, World War I.

Japan shocked the world when it handily defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War. To many Russians, the Tsar was to blame for the defeat in both allowing Russia to remain so far behind the rest of the industrialized world economically, and because he himself had proved an indecisive leader during the war. Following the Russian defeat, 100,000 workers tried to present a petition to the Tsar asking for better wages, better prices on food, and the end of official censorship. Troops fired on the crowds, which were unarmed, sparking a nationwide wave of strikes. For months, the nation was rocked by open rebellions in navy bases and cities, and radical terrorist groups managed to seize certain neighborhoods

of the major metropolises of St. Petersburg and Moscow. Nikolai finally agreed to allow a representative assembly, the Duma, to meet, and after months of fighting the army managed to regain control.

The aftermath of this (semi-)revolution saw the Tsar still in power and various newly-constituted political parties elected to the Duma. Very soon, however, it was clear that the Duma was not going to serve as a counter-balance to Tsarist power. The Tsar retained control of foreign policy and military affairs. In addition, the parties in the Duma had no experience of actually governing, and quickly fell to infighting and petty squabbles, leaving most actual decision making where it always had been: with the Tsar himself and his circle of aristocratic advisors. Still, some things did change thanks to the revolution: unions were legalized and the Tsar was not able to completely dismiss the Duma. Most importantly, the state could no longer censor the press effectively. As a result, there was an explosion of anger as various forms of anti-governmental press spread across the country.

One of Nikolai's many concerns was that his only male heir, Prince Alexei, was a hemophiliac (i.e. his blood did not clot properly when he was injured, meaning any minor scrape or cut was potentially lethal). Nikolai's wife, Tsarina Alexandra, called upon the services of a wandering, illiterate monk and faith healer named Grigorii Rasputin. Rasputin, definitely one of the most peculiar characters in modern history, was somehow able (perhaps through a kind of hypnotism) to stop Alexei's bleeding, and the Tsarina thus believed that he had been sent by God to protect the royal family. Rasputin moved in with the Tsar's family and quickly became a powerful influence, despite being the son of Siberian peasants, and despite the fact that part of his philosophy was that one was closest to God after engaging in sexual orgies and other forms of debauchery.



Grigori Rasputin in 1916, shortly before his death.

When World War I began in 1914, the already fragile political balance within the Russian state teetered on the verge of collapse. In the autumn of 1915, as Russian fortunes in the war started to worsen, Nikolai departed for the front to personally command the Russian army. In 1916 a desperate conspiracy of Russian nobles, convinced that Rasputin was the cause of Russia's problems, managed to assassinate him. By then, however, the German armies were steadily pressing towards Russian territory, and tens of thousands of Russian troops were deserting to return to their home villages. As

the social and political situation began to approach outright anarchy, one group of Russian communists steeped in the tradition of radical terrorism stood ready to take action: the Bolsheviks.

The form of radical politics that had taken root in Russia in the late nineteenth century revolved around apocalyptic revolutionary socialism. Mikhail Bakunin was the exemplary figure in this regard – Bakunin believed that the only way to create a perfect socialist future was to utterly destroy the existing political and social order, after which “natural” human tendencies of peace and altruism would manifest and create a better society for all. By the late nineteenth century, this homegrown Russian version of socialist theory was joined with Marxism, as various Russian radical thinkers tried to determine how a Marxist revolution might occur in a society like theirs that was still largely feudal.

The problem with Marxist theory faced by Russian Marxists was that, according to Marx, a revolution could only happen in an advanced industrial society. The proletariat would recognize that it had “nothing to lose but its chains” and overthrow the bourgeois order. In Russia, however, industrialization was limited to some of the major cities of western Russia, and most of the population were still poor peasants in small villages. This did not look like a promising setting for a revolution of the industrial working class.

The key figure who saw a way out of this theoretical impasse was Vladimir Lenin. Lenin was an ardent revolutionary and a major political thinker. He created the concept of the “vanguard party”: a dedicated group of revolutionaries who would lead both workers and peasants in a massive uprising. Left to their own devices, he argued, workers alone would always settle for slight improvements in their lives and working conditions (he called this “trade union consciousness”) rather than recognizing the need for a full-scale revolutionary change. The vanguard party, however, could both instruct workers and lead them in the creation of a new society. Led by the party, not only could a communist revolution succeed in a backwards state like Russia, but it could “skip” a stage of (the Marxist version of) history, jumping directly from feudalism to socialism and bypassing industrial capitalism.

In Lenin’s mind, the obvious choice of a vanguard party was his own Russian communist party, the Bolsheviks. By 1917, the Bolsheviks were a highly organized militant group of revolutionaries with contacts in the army, navy, and working classes of the major cities. When political chaos descended on the country as the possibility of full-scale defeat to Germany loomed, the Bolsheviks had their chance to seize power.

On International Women’s Day in February of 1917 (using the Eastern Orthodox calendar still in use at the time – it was March in the west), women workers in St. Petersburg demonstrated against the Tsar’s government to protest the price of food, which had skyrocketed due to the war. Within days the demands had grown to ending the war entirely and even calling for the ouster of the Tsar himself, and a general strike was called. Comparable demonstrations broke out in the other major cities in short order. The key moment, as had happened in revolutions since 1789, was when the army refused to put down the uprisings and instead joined them. The Duma demanded that the Tsar step aside and hand over control of the military. By early March, just a few weeks after it had begun, the Tsar abdicated, realizing that he had lost the support of almost the entire population.

In the aftermath of this event, power was split. The Duma appointed a provisional government that enacted important legal reforms but did not have the power to relieve the Russian army at the front or to provide food to the hungry protesters. Likewise, the Duma itself represented the interests and beliefs of the educated middle classes, still only a tiny portion of the Russian population as a whole. The members of the Duma hoped to create a democratic republic like those of France, Britain, or the United States, but they had no road map to bring it about. Likewise, the Duma had no way to enforce the new laws it passed, nor could they compel Russian peasants to fight on against the Germans. Most critically, the members of the Duma refused to sue for peace with Germany, believing that Russia still had to honor its commitment to the war despite the carnage being inflicted on Russian soldiers at the front.

Soon, in the industrial centers and in many of the army and naval bases, councils of workers and soldiers (called soviets) sprang up and declared that they had the real right to political power. There was a standoff between the provisional government, which had no police force to enforce its will, and the soviets, which could control their own areas but did not have the ability to bring the majority of the population (who wanted, in Lenin's words, "peace, land, and bread") over to their side. Many fled the cities for the countryside, peasants seized land from landowners, and soldiers deserted in droves; by 1917 fully 75% of the soldiers sent to the front against Germany deserted.

Thus, as of the late summer of 1917, there was a power vacuum created by the war and by the incompetence of the Duma. No group had power over the country as a whole, and so the Bolsheviks had their opportunity. In October the Bolsheviks took control of the most powerful soviet, that of Petrograd (former St. Petersburg). Next, the Bolsheviks seized control of the Duma, expelled the members of other political parties, and then stated their intention to pursue the goals that no other major party had been willing to: unconditional peace with Germany and land to the peasants with no compensation for landowners. In early 1918, after consolidating their control in Petrograd and Moscow, the Bolsheviks signed the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, granting Germany huge territorial concessions in return for peace (Germany would lose those new territories when it lost the war itself later that year).

Almost immediately, a counter-revolution erupted and civil war broke out. The Bolsheviks proved effective at rallying troops to their cause and leading those troops in war. Their "Red Army" engaged the "White" counter-revolutionaries all over western Russia and the Ukraine. For their part, the Whites were an ungainly coalition of former Tsarists, the liberals who had been alienated by the Bolshevik takeover of the Duma, members of ethnic minorities who wanted political independence, an anarchist peasant army in the Ukraine, and troops sent by foreign powers (including the United States), terrified of the prospect of a communist revolution in a nation as large and potentially powerful as Russia. Despite the fact that very few Russians were active supporters of communist ideology, the Red Army still proved both coherent and effective under Bolshevik leadership.



Lenin making a speech in 1920 in support of the Red Army during the civil war.

The ensuing war was brutal, ultimately killing close to ten million people (most were civilians who were massacred or starved), and lasting for four years. In the end, however, the Bolsheviks prevailed in Russia itself, Ukraine, and Central Asia. Some Eastern European countries, including Poland, Finland, and the Baltic states, did gain their independence

thanks to the war, but everywhere else in the former Russian Empire the Bolsheviks succeeded in creating a new communist empire in its place: the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

Early Twentieth-Century Cultural Change

The Bolshevik Revolution and the subsequent creation of the USSR represents perhaps the most striking political event of its time, but it occurred during a period of profound political, cultural, and intellectual instability across Europe and much of the world. The first few decades of the twentieth century revolved around World War I in many ways, but even before the war began Western society was riven with cultural and political conflict. It was an incredibly tumultuous time, one in which “Western Civilization” struggled to define itself in the face of scientific progress and social change that seemed to be speeding forward ever faster.

Part of this phenomenon was the fact that the old order of monarchy and nobility was finally, definitively destroyed, a casualty of World War I. Never again would kings and emperors and noblemen share power over European countries. At the same time, the great political project of the nineteenth century, republican democracy, seemed profoundly disappointing to many Europeans, who had watched it degenerate into partisan squabbles that were helpless to prevent the Great War and its terrible aftermath. In that aftermath there was a terrific flowering of cultural and intellectual production even as the continent struggled to recover economically. It is tempting to see these years, especially the interwar period between 1918 and 1939, as nothing more than the staging ground for World War II, but a more accurate picture reveals them as being much more than just a prequel.

Modernism

Modernism in the arts refers to a specific period starting around 1900 and coming into its own in the 1920s. It expressed a set of common attitudes and assumptions that centered on a rejection of established authority. It was a movement of skepticism directed toward the post-Victorian middle class, an overhaul of the entire legacy of comfort, security, paranoia, rigidity, and hierarchy. It rejected the premise of melodrama, namely clear moral messages in art and literature that were meant to edify and instruct. Socially, it was a reaction against the complacency of the bourgeoisie, of their willingness to start wars over empire and notions of nationalism.

Modernist art and literature sometimes openly attacked the moral values of mainstream society, but sometimes experimented with form itself and simply ignored moral issues. This was the era of

l'art pour l'art

(“art for art’s sake”), of creation disinterested from social or intellectual duty. Artists broke with the idea that art should “represent” something noble and beautiful, and instead many indulged in wild experiments and deliberately created disturbing pieces meant to provoke their audience. Sometimes, modernists were distinctly “modern” in glorifying industrialism and technology, while other times they were modern in that they were experimenting with entirely novel approaches to creation.

One of the quintessential modernist movements was Futurism. Starting in Italy before World War I, Futurism was a movement of poets, playwrights, and painters who celebrated speed, technology, violence, and chaos. Their stated goal was to destroy the remnants of past art and replace it with the art of the future, an art that reflected the modern, industrial

world. Futurism sought something new and better than what the Victorian bourgeoisie had come up with: something heroic.

In 1909, F.T. Marinetti, the movement's founder, wrote the Futurist Manifesto. In it, he thundered that the Futurists wanted to “sing the love of danger, the habit of energy and rashness,” and that “poetry must be a violent assault on the forces of the unknown.” The Manifesto went on to proclaim, ominously, that “we want to glorify war – the only cure for the world” and that the Futurists were dedicated to demolishing “museums and libraries” and sought to “fight morality, feminism, and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.” The Manifesto, in short, was a profound expression of dissatisfaction with the mainstream culture of Europe leading up to World War I, and its proponents were proud partisans of violence, elitism, and misogyny.

Futurist art itself was often bizarre and provocative – one Futurist play consisted of a curtain opening to an empty stage, the sound of a gunshot and a scream offstage, and the closing of the curtain. Futurist paintings often depicted vast clouds of dark smoke with abstract images of trains and radio towers, or sometimes just jumbles of colour. While their politics were as murky as some of their art early on, after World War I most of the Futurists embraced fascism, seeing in fascism a political movement that reflected their desire for a politics that was new, virile, and contemptuous of democracy.

The Futurists were just one branch of modernism in the visual arts. Other schools existed across Europe, including Vorticism in England, Expressionism in Austria, and Cubism in France. Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973), the major cubist painter and sculptor, was one of the quintessential modernist painters in that he portrayed objects, people, even the works of past masters, but he did so from several different perspectives at once. The English Vorticists, meanwhile, attempted to capture the impression of motion in static paintings, not least by depicting literal explosions in their art.

Among the creators of the most striking, sometimes beautiful, but other times grotesque images associated with modernism were the Austrian expressionists. The major point of expressionism was to put the artist's inner life on display through abstract, often disturbing images. The governing concept was not to depict things “as they are,” but instead to reflect the disturbing realities of the artist's mind and spirit. The greatest Austrian expressionist was Gustav Klimt (1862 – 1918), who created beautiful but haunting and often highly eroticized portraits, the most famous of which became one of the quintessential dorm room decorations of collegiate America – *The Kiss*.



Klimt's *The Kiss* from 1908.

In 1901, the University of Vienna commissioned Klimt to create paintings to celebrate the three great branches of traditional academic scholarship: philosophy, medicine, and law. In each case, Klimt created frightening images in which the nominal subject matter was somehow present, but was overshadowed by the grotesque depiction of either how it was being carried out or how it failed to adequately address its subject. Philosophy, for instance, depicts a column of naked, wretched figures clinging to one another over a starry abyss, with a sinister, translucent face visible in the backdrop. The paintings were all beautiful and skillfully rendered, but also dark and disturbing (the originals were destroyed by the Nazis during their occupation of Austria – Modernism was considered “degenerate art” by the Nazi party).



Klimt's *Philosophy*,
from 1907.

One of Klimt's students was Egon Schiele (1890 – 1918), who subverted Klimt's themes (which, although very dark, were also beautiful) and openly celebrated the ugly and threatening. His self-portraits in particular were meant to portray his own perversity and depression; he normally painted himself in the nude looking emaciated, threatening, and grim. Whereas Klimt sought to capture at least some positive or pleasurable aspects of the human spirit and the mind that existed at the unconscious level, Schiele's work almost brutally portrayed the ugliness embedded in his own psyche.

Modernism was not confined to literature and the visual arts, however. Some composers and musicians in the first decades of the twentieth century sought to shatter musical traditions, defying the expectations of their listeners by altering the very scales, notes, and tempos that western audiences were used to hearing. Some of the resulting pieces eventually became classics in their own right, while others tended to become part of the history of music more so than music very many people actually listened to.

One of the most noteworthy modernist composers was Igor Stravinsky (1882 – 1971). A Russian composer, Stravinsky's was best known for his *Rite of Spring*. The *Rite of Spring* was a ballet depicting the fertility rites of the

ancient Scythians, the nomadic people native to southern Russia in the ancient past. Staged by classical ballet dancers, the Rite of Spring completely scandalized its early audiences; at its first performance in Paris, members of the audience hissed at the dancers, and pelted the orchestra with debris, while the press described it as pornographic and barbaric. The dancers lurched about on stage, sometimes in an overtly sexual manner, and the music changed its tempo and abandoned its central theme. Within a few years, however (and following a change in its wild choreography), the Rite became part of ballet's canon of great pieces.

In contrast, the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874 – 1951) invented a form of orchestral music that remains more of an important influence to avant-garde musicians and composers than something actively listened to by mainstream audiences. Schoenberg's major innovations consisted of experiments with atonality – music without a central, binding key – and a newly-invented twelve-tone scale of his own creation. Schoenberg was among the first to defy the entire tradition of western music in his experiments. Ever since the Renaissance, western musicians had worked in basically the same set of scales. As a result, listeners were “trained” from birth to expect certain sounds and certain rhythms in music. Schoenberg deliberately subverted those expectations, inserting dissonance and unexpected notes in many of his works.

Similar in some ways to the innovations in the visual arts and music, modernist literature created out a new approach to poetry and prose. Authors like Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka, and James Joyce (whose places of origins spanned from Dublin to Prague) created a new form of literature in which the nominal plot of a story was less important than the protagonist's inner life and experience of his or her surroundings and interactions. Joyce's (incredible difficult to read) novel *Ulysses* described a single unremarkable day in the life of a man in Dublin, Ireland, focusing on the vast range of thoughts, emotions, and reactions that passed through the man's consciousness rather than on the events of the day itself. Proust and Woolf also wrote works focused on the inner life rather than the outside event, and Woolf was also a seminal feminist writer. Kafka's work brilliantly, and tragically, satirized the experience of being lost in the modern world, hemmed in by impersonal bureaucracies and disconnected from other people – his most famous story, *Metamorphosis*, describes the experience of a young man who awakens one day to discover that he has become a gigantic insect, but whose immediate concern is that he will be unable to make it in to his job.

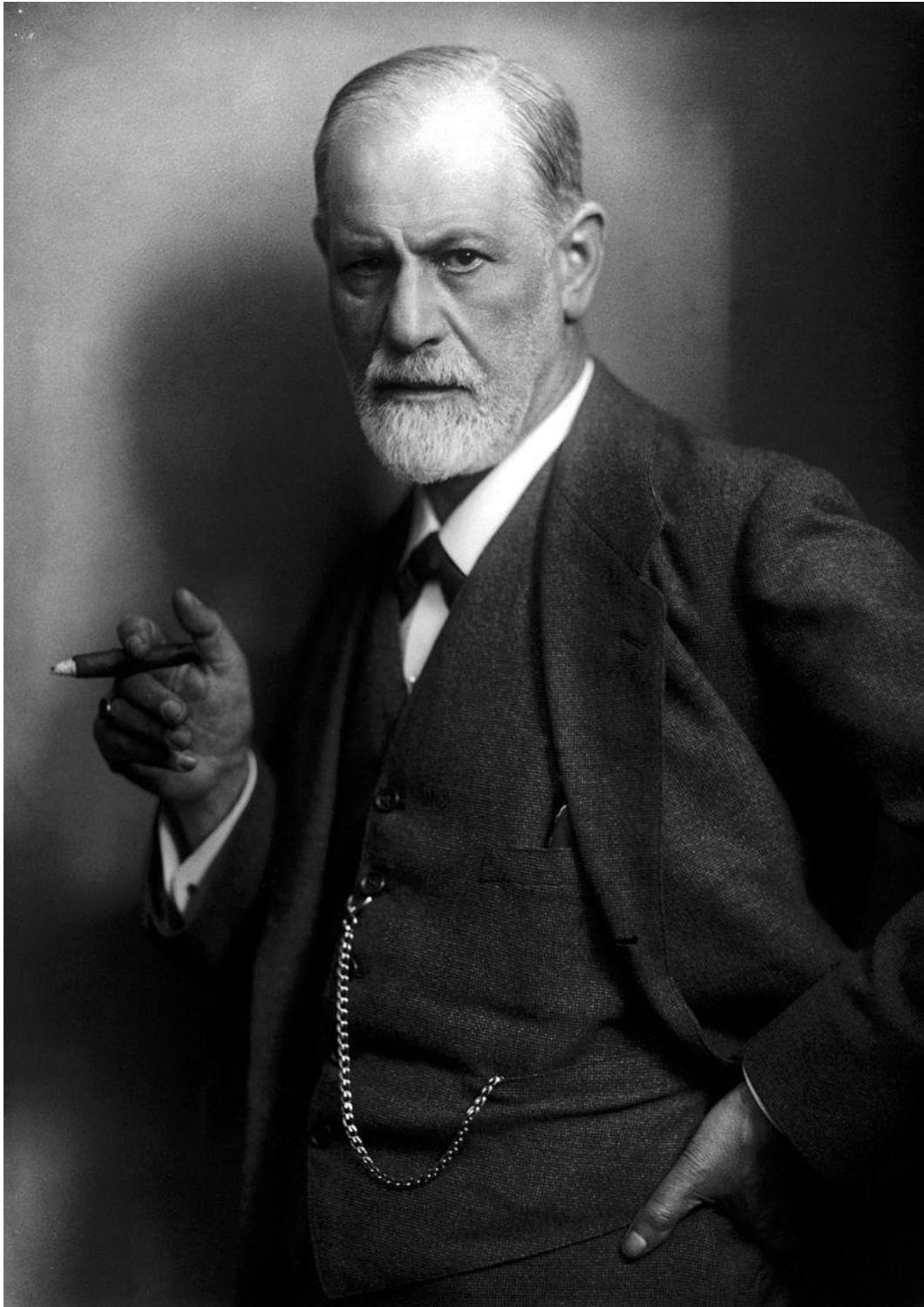
Ultimately, artistic modernism in the arts, music, and literature questioned the (post-)Victorian obsession with traditional morality, hierarchy, and control. The inner life was not straightforward – it was a complicated mess of conflicting values, urges, and drives, and traditional morality was often a smokescreen over a system of repression and violence. Certain modernist artists attacked the system, while others exposed its vacuity, its emptiness or shallowness, against the darker, more complex reality they thought lay underneath.

Freud

While not an artist himself, the great thinker of modernism was, in many ways, Sigmund Freud (1856 – 1939). Freud was one of the founders of the medical and scientific discipline of psychology. He was the forefather of the concept of modern therapy itself and his theories, while now largely rejected by psychologists in terms of their empirical accuracy, nevertheless continue to exert tremendous influence. In historical hindsight, Freud's importance derives from his work as a philosopher of the mind more so than as a “scientist” per se, although it was precisely his drive for his work to be respected as a true science that inspired his research and writing.

Freud was born in Moravia (today's Czech Republic) in 1856, and his family eventually moved to Vienna, the

capital of the Austrian Empire of which Moravia was part. Freud was Jewish, and his family underwent a generational transformation that was very common among Central European Jews in the latter part of the nineteenth century, following legal emancipation from anti-Semitic laws: his grandparents were unassimilated and poor, his parents were able to create a successful business in a major city, and Freud himself became a highly-educated professional (he received his medical degree in 1881). Many of Freud's theories were influenced by his own experience as a brilliant scholar who happened to be Jewish, living in a society rife with anti-Semitism – he sought to understand the inner psychological drives that led people to engage in irrational behavior.



The best-known portrait of Freud, dating from 1921.

Freud's greatest accomplishment was diagnosing the essential irrationality of the human mind. Influenced by modernist philosophers, by great writers like Shakespeare, and by Darwin's work on evolution, Freud came to believe that the mind itself "evolved" from childhood into adulthood in a fundamentally hostile psychic environment. The mind was forced to conform to social pressure from outside while being enslaved to its own unconscious desires (the "drives") that sought

unlimited power and pleasure. Freud wanted to be the “Darwin of the mind,” the inventor of a truescience of psychology that could explain and, he hoped, cure psychological disorders.

Freud became well known because of his work with “hysterical” patients. The word hysteria is related to the Greek *hystera*, meaning womb. Essentially, “hysteria” consisted of physical symptoms of panic, pain, and paralysis in women who had no detectable physical problems. “Hysteria” was a term invented to blame the female anatomy for physical symptoms, in the absence of other discernible causes. Freud, however, believed that hysteria was the result not of some unknown physical problem among women, but instead a physical result of psychological trauma – in almost all cases, that of what we would now describe as sexual abuse.

Freud built on the work of an earlier psychologist and employed the “talking cure” with his hysterical patients, naming his version of the talking cure “psychoanalysis.” The talking cure was the process by which the therapist and the patient recounted memories, dreams, and events, searching for a buried, suppressed idea that is causing physical symptoms. As Freud’s theories developed, he identified a series of common causes tied to childhood traumas that seemed remarkably consistent. He extrapolated those into “scientific” truths, most of which had to do with the development of sexual identity. This culminated in his 1905 *Three Essays in the Theory of Sexuality*.

The Freudian “talking cure” was verbal, inferential, and in a way speculative, since it was about the conversation between the therapist and the patient, working toward causes of mental disorder. The analyst played an active role, above and beyond the medical diagnosis of disorder. Freud believed that the human mind was almost always arrested in its progress toward mental health from childhood to adulthood. It was possible to be “healthy,” to be mostly unencumbered by mental disorders, but it was also very difficult to arrive at that position. In turn, he hoped that his theories would create “the possibility of happiness.”

Ultimately, Freud’s most important theories had to do with the nature of the unconscious mind. According to Freud, the thoughts and feelings we experience and can control are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Most thoughts and feelings are buried in the unconscious. Within the unconscious are stored repressed memories that trigger responses, verbal slips, and dreams, symptoms of their existence. It is always terribly difficult to reconcile one’s desires and the requirements of socialization (of living in a society with its own rules and laws) and that leads inevitably to inner conflict. Thus, people form defense systems that may protect their emotions in the short term, but return later in life to cause unhappiness and alienation.

According to Freud, there are three basic areas or states that exist simultaneously in the human mind. First, part of the unconscious is the “Id:” the seat of the drives for pleasure (sexual lust, power, security, food, alcohol and other drugs, etc.) and for what might be considered “obsession” – the seemingly irrational desires that have nothing to do with pleasure per se (pyromania, kleptomania, or seemingly self-destructive political activity). Freud called the drive for pleasure “eros,” the Pleasure Principle, and the obsessive and self-destructive drive “thanatos,” the Death Drive.

Next, Freud identified another area of the unconscious as the “Superego:” the social pressure to conform, the confrontation with outside authority, and the overwhelming sense of shame and inadequacy that can, and usually does, result from facing all of the pressures of living in human society. In the context of his own, deeply Victorian bourgeois society, Freud identified the Superego’s demands as having to do primarily with the suppression of the desires that arose from the Id.

Finally, the only aspect of the human psyche the mind is directly aware of is the “Ego:” the embattled conscious mind, forced to reconcile the drives of the Id and Superego with the “reality principle,” the knowledge that to give in to one’s urges completely would be to risk injury or death. In Freud’s theory, the reason most people have so many psychological

problems is that the Ego is perpetually beset by these powerful forces it is not consciously aware of. The Id bombards the Ego with an endless hunger for indulgence, while the Superego demands social conformity.

In short, Freud described the mind itself as defying control: despite the illusion of free will and autonomy, no one is capable of complete self-control. Freudian theory suggested that the life of the mind was complicated and opaque, not rational and straightforward. The great dream of the optimistic theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had been that proper education and rational politics could create a perfect society. Freud, however, cautioned that no one is completely rational, and that politics could easily follow the path of the Death Drive and plunge whole nations, even whole civilizations, into self-destruction. He lived to see at least part of his worst fears come to pass at the end of the life as he fled from the Nazi takeover of Austria in 1938.

One other major theme present in Freud's theories had to do with sexuality, which he believed to be of central importance to psychology. His theories largely revolved around sexual instincts and their repression, and he invented various specific concepts like the "Oedipus complex," the idea that young boys sexually desire their mothers and fear the authority of their fathers, and "penis envy," the claim that girls are psychologically wounded by not having male genitalia, that he claimed were fundamental to the human psyche. For all his insight, and all his clinical work with women patients, however, Freud remained convinced that women were in a sense less "evolved" than men and were biologically destined for a secondary role. He also admitted that he could not really figure out women's motivations; he famously asserted that the question that psychology could not answer was "what does a woman want?" In the end, the irony of Freud's take on gender and sexuality is that it simply reproduced age-old sexual stereotypes and double standards, however important his other theories were in exploring the unconscious. Despite the genuine changes occurring to gender in the society around him, Freud remained embedded in the assumption that a male and female physiology dictated separate and unequal destinies for men and women.

Gender Roles

Those destinies, however, were slowly changing. As noted in the discussion of World War I in the previous chapter, gender roles had been transformed both economically and culturally during (and because of) the war. Some of those changes were durable. The range of jobs available to women was certainly larger than it had been before the war. Women continued to wear more comfortable and practical clothing after the war than before it, the restrictive ankle-length dress replaced by the looser, calf-length dress or skirt. Some women continued to cut their hair short, and of course women's suffrage was finally realized (albeit with various restrictions) in most European countries and the United States over the course of the 1920s.

No sooner had the war ended, however, that men generally did everything in their power to reverse many of the changes to gender roles it had caused. Through a combination of legal restrictions and quasi-legal practices, women were forced from traditional male jobs, prevented from enrolling in universities and medical schools, and paid significantly less than men for the same work. Fascist parties (described in a following chapter) were explicitly devoted to enforcing traditional gender roles, and when some countries were overtaken by fascist rule women were often forced out of the workplace. Everywhere, most men (and many women) continued to insist that women were inherently biologically inferior to men and that it was the "natural" role of men to serve as head of the household and head of the nation-state in equal measure.

The exemplar of both the greater freedom enjoyed by women and male resentment of that freedom was the "New

Woman.” A stock figure in the media of the time, the New Woman was independent, working at her own job full time and living by herself, and able to enjoy a social life that included drinking, dancing, and even the possibility of casual sex. The famous “flappers” of the 1920s, young women in the latest fashion who danced to cutting-edge American jazz and wore scandalously short, knee-length dresses, were the ultimate expression of the New Woman. While the image of the New Woman was greatly exaggerated, both in advertising and by male misogynists, there was at least a kernel of truth to the archetype. Far more women were independent by the 1920s than in the past, fashions really had changed, and thanks to halting advances in contraception, casual sexual relationships were easier to have without fear of pregnancy. It would take at least another half-century, however, for laws against sexual discrimination to come into being in most countries, and of course the struggle for cultural equality remains unfulfilled to this day.



The American actor Alice Joyce in 1926 in an extravagant “flapper” dress. Film stars of the day were the most visible examples of the “New Woman” most people encountered outside of advertising.

The Great Depression

Modernism in the arts and modernist theory came of age before, during, and after World War I; some of the most

interesting writing and art of the modernist movement occurred during the 1920s. The political order of Europe (Russia, as usual, was an exception) and the United States during the 1920s was beset by struggle and conflict, but while the economies of the west struggled to recover from World War I, there was at least some economic growth. That growth came crashing to a halt in 1929 with the advent of the Great Depression.

The Great Depression has the dubious distinction of being the worst economic disaster in the modern era. It constituted an almost total failure of governments, businesses, and banks to anticipate or prevent economic disaster or to effectively deal with it. The Depression explains in large part the appeal of extremist politics like Nazism, in that the average person was profoundly frightened by what had happened to their world; instead of progress resulting in better standards of living, all of a sudden the hard-won gains of the recent past were completely ruined.

The background to the Depression was the financial mess left by World War I. The victorious alliance of Britain and France imposed massive reparations on Germany – 132 billion gold marks. In addition, the former members of the Triple Entente themselves owed enormous sums to the United States for the loans they had received during the war, amounting to approximately \$10 billion. Over the course of the 1920s, as the German economy struggled to recover (at one point the value of German currency collapsed completely in the process), the US government oversaw enormous loans to Germany. In the end, a “triangle” of debt and repayment locked together the economies of the United States and Europe: US loans underwrote German reparation payments to Britain and France, with Britain and France then trying to pay off their debts to the US. None of the debts were anywhere near settled by the end of the 1920s, not least because more loans were still flooding into the market.

The Depression started in the United States with a massive stock market crash on October 24, 1929. The ill-conceived cycle of debt described above had worked well enough for most of the 1920s while the American economy was stable and American banks were willing to underwrite new loans. When the stock market crashed, however, American banks demanded repayment of the European loans, from Germany and its former enemies alike. The capital to repay those loans simply did not exist. Businesses shut down, governments defaulted on the American loans, and unemployment soared. In one year, Germany’s industrial output dropped by almost 50% and millions were out of work. In turn, inspired by liberal economic theories, governments embraced policies of austerity, cutting back the already limited social programs that existed, balancing state budgets, and slashing spending. The result was that even less capital was available in the private sector. In the United States and Western Europe, the Depression would drag on for a decade (1929 – 1939), at which point World War II overshadowed economic hardship as the great crisis of the century.

Summing Up

What do Modernist art, Freudian psychology, shifts in gender, and the Great Depression have in common besides chronological coincidence? They were all, in different ways, symptoms of disruption and (often) a profound sense of unease that pervaded Western culture after World War I. European civilization was powerful and self-confident before the war, master of over 80% of the globe, and at the forefront of science and technology. That civilization emerged from four years of bloodshed economically shattered, politically disunited, and in many ways skeptical of the possibility of further progress. It was in this uncertain context that the most destructive political philosophy in modern history emerged: fascism, and its even more horrific offshoot, Nazism.

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CHAPTER 9: FASCISM

Disappointment

In many ways, World War I was what truly ended the nineteenth century. It undermined the faith in progress that had grown, despite all of its setbacks, throughout the nineteenth century among many, perhaps most, Europeans. The major political movements of the nineteenth century seemed to have succeeded: everywhere in Europe nations replaced empires (nationalism). Europe controlled more of the world in 1920 than it ever had or ever would again (imperialism). In the aftermath of the war, almost every government in Europe, even Germany, was a republican democracy based on the rule of law (liberalism). Even socialists had cause to celebrate: there was a nominally Marxist state in Russia and socialist parties were powerful and militant all across Europe. The old order of monarchs and nobles was rendered all but obsolete, with noble titles holding on as nothing more than archaic holdovers from the past in nearly every country. In addition, of course, technology continued to advance apace.

Despite the success of all of those movements, however, with all of the hopes and aspirations of their supporters over the last century, Europe had degenerated into a horrendous and costly war. The war had not purified and invigorated the great powers; they were all left reeling, weakened, and at a loss for how to prevent a future war. Science had advanced, but its most noteworthy accomplishment was the production of more effective weapons. The global empires remained, but the seeds of their dissolution were already present.

The results were bitterness and reprisals. The Treaty of Versailles that ended the war imposed harsh penalties on Germany, returning Alsace and Lorraine to France and imposing a massive indemnity on the defeated country. The Treaty also required Germany to accept the “war guilt clause,” in which it assumed full responsibility for the war having started in the first place. Simultaneously, the Austrian Empire collapsed, with Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and the new Balkan nation of Yugoslavia all becoming independent countries and Austria a short-lived republic. Almost no one would have believed that another “Great War” would occur in twenty years.

In other words, World War I did not resolve any of the problems or international tensions that had started it. Instead, it made them worse because it proved how powerful and devastating modern weapons were, and it also demonstrated that no single power was likely to be able to assert its dominance. France and Britain went out of their way in blaming Germany for the conflict, while in Germany itself, those on the right believed in the conspiracy theory in which communists and Jews had conspired to sabotage the German war effort – this was later called the “Stab in the Back” myth. Thus, many Germans felt they had been wronged twice: they had not “really” lost the war, yet they were forced to pay outrageous indemnities to the “victors.”

It was in this context of anger and disappointment that fascism and its racially-obsessed offshoot Nazism arose. World War I provided the trauma, the bloodshed, and the skepticism toward liberalism and socialism that underwrote the rise of fascism. Fascism was a modern conservatism, a conservatism that clung to its mania for order and hierarchy, but which did not seek a return to the days of feudalism and monarchy. It was a populist movement, a movement of the people by the people, but instead of petty democratic bickering, it glorified the (imagined) nation, a nation united by a movement and an ethos.

Fascism

Fascism centered on the glorification of the state, the rejection of liberal individualism, and an incredible emphasis on hierarchy and authority. Fascist movements sprung up right as the war ended. The term fascism was invented by the Italian Fascist Party itself, based on the term *fascii*: a bundle of sticks with an axe embedded in the middle. Symbolically, the sticks are weak individually but strong as a group, and the axe represented the power over life and death. In ancient Rome, the bodyguards of the Roman consuls carried *fascii* as a badge of authority over war, peace, law, and death, and that symbolism appealed to the Italian Fascists.

By the early 1920s, there were fascist movements in many European countries, all of them agitating for some kind of right-wing revolution against democracy and socialism. One place of particular note in the early history of fascism was France. There, a right-wing monarchist group called *Actione Française* had existed since the Dreyfus Affair, but it transformed itself into a French fascist group despite still clinging to monarchist and traditional Catholic ideologies. When Germany defeated France in World War II, the Nazis found a large contingent of right-wing Frenchmen who were all too happy to create a home-grown French fascist state (a fact that many in France tried their best to forget after the war). Likewise, when the Nazis seized power in various places in Eastern Europe, they often found it expedient to simply work with or appoint the already-existing local fascist groups to power.

Fascism was a twentieth-century phenomenon, but its ideological roots were firmly planted in the nineteenth century. Mostly obviously, fascism was an extreme form of nationalism. The nation was not just the home of a “people” in fascism, it was everything. The nation became a mythic entity that had existed since the ancient past, and fascists claimed that the cultural traits and patterns of the nation defined who a person was and how they regarded the world.

The confusing jumble of what defined a nation in the first place often took on explicitly racial, and racist, terms among fascist groups. Now, Germans were not just people who spoke German in Central Europe; they were the German (or “Aryan,” the term itself nothing more than a pseudo-scholarly jumble of linguistic history and racist nonsense) “race.” French fascists talked about the bloodlines of the ancient Gauls that supposedly survived despite the “pollution” of the Roman invasions in the ancient past. Likewise, Mussolini and the Italian Fascists claimed that “the Italians” were the direct descendants of the most glorious tradition of the ancient Roman Empire and were destined to create a new, even greater empire. The pseudo-sciences of race had arisen in the late nineteenth century as perverse offshoots of genuine advances in biology and the natural sciences. Fascism was, among other things, a cultural movement that found in “scientific” racism a profoundly compatible doctrine: the “scientific” proof in the rightness of the racial nation’s rise to power.

At first sight, one surprising aspect of fascism was that many fascists were former communists – Benito Mussolini, the leader of the Italian Fascist Party, had been a prominent member of the Italian Communist Party before World War I. What fascism and communism had in common was a rejection of bourgeois parliamentary democracy. They both sought transcendent political and social orders that went beyond “mere” parliamentary compromise. The major difference between them was that fascists discovered in World War I that most people were not willing to die for their social class, but they were willing to die for their nation. Fascism was, in part, a kind of collective movement that substituted nationalism for the class war. All classes would be united in the nation, fascists believed, for the greater glory of the race and movement.

Italian Fascism

As noted above, the very term “fascist” is a product of the first fascist group to seize control of a powerful country: the Italian Fascist Party. Italian Fascism was an invention of Italian army veterans. Most important among them was Benito Mussolini, a combat veteran who had welcomed the war as a cleansing, invigorating opportunity for Italy to grow into a more powerful nation. He was deeply disappointed by its lackluster aftermath. Italy, having joined with England and France against Germany and Austria in hopes of seizing territory from the Austrians, was given very little land after the war. Thus, to Mussolini and many other Italians, the war had been especially pointless.

The Fascists, who started out with a mere 100 members in the northern Italian city of Milan, grew rapidly because of the incredible social turmoil in Italy in 1919 and 1920. Italy had a powerful communist movement, one that was inspired by and linked to the Soviet Union’s recent birth and the success of the communist revolution in Russia. After the war, a huge strike wave struck Italy and many poor Italians in the countryside seized land from the semi-feudal landlords who still dominated rural society. There was genuine concern among traditional conservatives, the Church, business leaders, and the middle classes that Italy would undergo a communist revolution just as had occurred in Russia – at the time Russia was still in the midst of its civil war between the “Red” Bolsheviks and the anti-communist coalition known as the Whites. By 1920 the Reds were clearly winning.

The Fascists organized themselves into paramilitary units of thugs known as the Blackshirts (for their party-issued uniforms) and engaged in open street fighting against communists, breaking up strikes, attacking communist leaders, destroying communist newspaper offices, and intimidating voters from communist-leaning neighborhoods and communities. They were often tacitly aided by the police, who rounded up communists but ignored Fascist lawbreaking as long as it was directed against the communists. Likewise, business leaders started funding the Fascists as a kind of guarantee against further gains by communists. Fascist politicians ran for office in the Italian parliament while their gangs of thugs terrorized the opposition.

In 1922, the weak-willed King of Italy, Vittorio Emanuele III, appointed Mussolini Prime Minister, seeing in Mussolini a bulwark against the threat of communism (and caving in to the growing strength of the Fascist Party). Fascists from all over Italy converged in a famous “March on Rome,” a highly staged piece of political theater meant to demonstrate Fascist unity and strength. Mussolini then set out to destroy Italian democracy from within. From 1922 to 1926 Mussolini and the Fascists manipulated the Italian parliament, intimidated political opponents or actually had them murdered, and succeeded finally in eliminating party politics and a free press. The Fascist party became the only legal party in Italy and the police apparatus expanded dramatically. Mussolini’s official title was *Il Duce*: “The Leader,” and his authority over every political decision was absolute. The Fascist motto was “believe, obey, fight,” a distant parody of the French liberal motto (from the French Revolution) “liberty, equality, fraternity.”



Mussolini (in the center) and Fascist Blackshirts during the March on Rome in 1922.

Mussolini immediately understood the importance of appearances. The 1920s was the early age of mass media, especially radio, and an intrinsic part of fascism was public spectacle. Mussolini staged enormous public exhibitions and rallies and he carefully controlled how he was portrayed in the media – the press was forbidden to mention his age or his birthday, to give the illusion that he never aged. He was always on the move, usually in a race car, and usually accompanied by models, actresses, and socialites years his junior. He spoke about his own “animal magnetism” and often walked around without a shirt on as a kind of (would be) herculean archetype.

Officially, Italian Fascism promised to end the class conflict that lay at the heart of socialist ideology by favoring what it called “corporatism” over mere capitalism. Corporatism was supposed to be a unified decision-making system in which workers and business owners would serve on joint committees to control work. In fact, the owners derived all of the benefits; trade unions were banned and the plight of workers degenerated without representation.

What Italian Fascism did do for the Italian people was essentially ideological and, in a sense, emotional: it directed youth movements and recreational clubs and sought the involvement of all Italians. It glorified the idea of the Italian people and in turn many actual Italians did come to feel great national pride, even if they were working in difficult conditions in a stagnant economy. In turn, Fascist propaganda tried to inculcate Italian pride and Fascist identity among Italian citizens, while Fascist-led police forces targeted would-be dissidents, sentencing thousands to prison terms or internal exile in closed prison villages (not unlike some of the Russian gulags that would exemplify a different but related totalitarian system to the east).

While Mussolini was often praised in the foreign press, including in American newspapers and magazines, for accomplishments like making (a few) Italian trains run on time, in the long term the Fascist government proved to be inefficient and often outright ineffectual. Mussolini himself, convinced of his own genius, made arbitrary and often foolish decisions, especially when it came to building up and training the Italian military. The circle of Fascist leaders

around him were largely corrupt sycophants who lied to Mussolini about Italy's strength and prosperity to keep him happy. When World War II began in 1939, the Italian forces were revealed to be poorly trained, equipped, and led.

The Weimar Republic

One place in Europe during the interwar period stands out as a microcosm of the political and cultural struggles occurring elsewhere: Weimar Germany. Named after the resort town in which its constitution was written in early 1919, the Weimar Republic represented a triumphant culmination of liberalism. Its constitution guaranteed universal suffrage for men and women, fundamental human rights, and the complete rejection of the remnants of monarchism. Unfortunately, the government of the new republic was deeply unpopular among many groups, including right-wing army veterans like a young Adolf Hitler.

One great lie that poisoned the political climate of the Weimar Republic was, as mentioned above, the “stab-in-the-back” myth. Toward the end of World War I, Germany was losing. Its own General Staff informed the Kaiser of this fact; with American troops and munitions flooding in, it was simply a matter of time before the Allies were able to march in force on Germany. As defeat loomed, however, the military leaders Hindenburg and Ludendorff, along with the Kaiser himself, concocted the idea that Germany could have kept fighting, and won, but instead public commitment to the war wavered because of agitators on the home front and saboteurs who crippled military supply lines. Usually, according to the conspiracy theory, those responsible were some combination of Jews and communists (and, of course, Jewish communists). This was an outright lie, but it was a convenient lie that the political right in Germany could cling to, blaming “Jewish saboteurs” and “Bolshevik agents” for Germany's loss.

The Versailles Treaty had also required Germany to disarm – the German army went from millions of men to a mere 100,000 soldiers. It was forbidden from building heavy military equipment or having a fleet of more than a handful of warships. Given the social prestige and power associated with the German military before the war, this was an enormous blow to German pride. While the nations of Europe pledged to pursue peaceful resolutions to their problems in the future, many Germans were still left with a sense of vulnerability, particularly as the Bolsheviks cemented their control by the end of the 1920s in Russia.

Neither did the Weimar government itself inspire much confidence. Its parliament, the Reichstag, was trapped in an almost perpetual state of political deadlock. Its constitution stipulated that voting was proportional, with the popular vote translated into a corresponding number of seats for the various political parties. Unfortunately, given the vast range of political allegiances present in German society, there were fully thirty-two different parties, representing not just elements of the left – right political spectrum, but regional and religious identities as well. The most powerful parties were those of the far left, the communists, and the far right, initially monarchists and conservative Catholics, with the Nazis rising to prominence at the end of the 1920s. Thus, it was nearly impossible for the Reichstag to govern, with the various parties undermining one another's goals and coalition governments crumbling as swiftly as they formed.

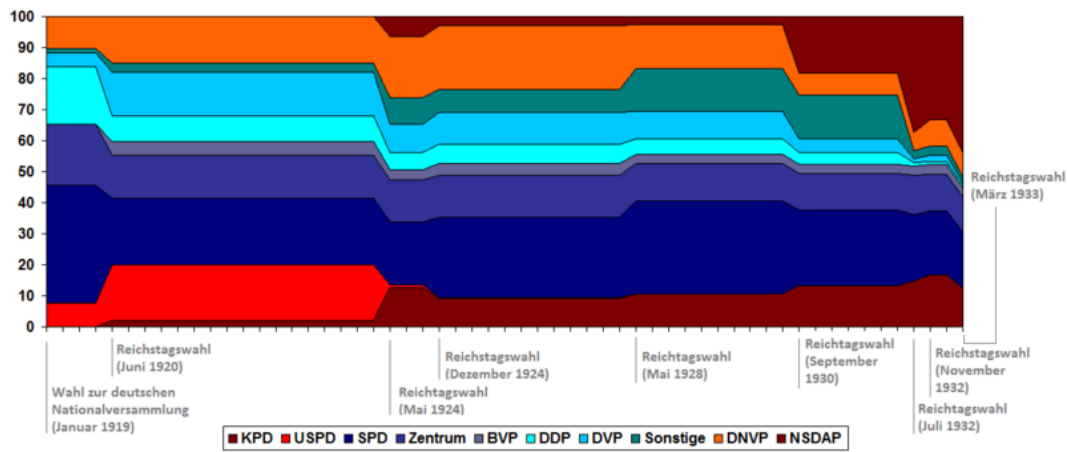


Diagram of electoral results over the course of the Weimar Republic. Note the lack of a governing party, as well as the rise of the Nazis (the NSDAP, marked in dark maroon at the top of the diagram) to prominence in the last years of the Republic.

Simultaneously, the Weimar Republic faced ongoing economic issues, which fed into the resentment of most Germans toward the terms of the Versailles Treaty and its reparation payments (set to 132 billion gold marks annually, although that amount was renegotiated and lowered over the course of the decade). The actual economic impact of those payments is still debated by historians; what is not debated is that Germans regarded them as utterly unjust, since they felt that all of the countries of Europe were responsible for World War I, not just Germany. Especially in moments of economic crisis, many otherwise “ordinary” Germans looked to political extremists for possible solutions; to cite the most important example, the electoral fortunes of the Nazi party rose and fell in an inverse relationship to the health of the German economy.

The economy of Germany underwent a severe crisis less than five years after the end of the war. In 1923, unable to make its payments, the Weimar government requested new negotiations. The French responded by seizing the mineral-rich Ruhr Valley. In order to pay striking workers, the government simply printed more money, thereby undermining its value. This, in turn, led to hyperinflation: the German Mark simply collapsed as a currency, with one American dollar being worth nearly 10,000,000,000 marks by the end of the year. Workers were paid in wheelbarrows full of cash at the start of their lunch break so they had time to buy a few groceries before inflation forced shopkeepers to raise prices by the afternoon.



Million-mark notes used as scratch paper during hyperinflation.

In the course of a year, Germans who had spent their lives carefully building up savings saw those savings rendered worthless. This inspired anger and resentment among common people who might otherwise not be attracted to extremist solutions. The situation stabilized in 1924 after emergency negotiations overseen by American banks resulted in a new stabilized currency, but for many people in Germany their experience of democracy thus far had been disastrous. It was in this context of economic instability and political dysfunction that an extreme right-wing fringe group from the southern German state of Bavaria, the National Socialist German Workers Party, began to attract attention.

The Nazis

Any discussion of the Nazis must start with Adolf Hitler. It is impossible to overstate Hitler's importance to Nazism: his own private obsessions became state policy and were used as the justification for war and genocide. His unquestionable powers of public speaking and political maneuvering transformed the Nazis from a small fringe group to a major political party, and while he was largely ineffective as a practical decision-maker, he remained central to the image of strength, vitality, and power that the Nazis associated with their state. Hitler was also one of the three "greatest" murderers of the twentieth century, along with Josef Stalin of the Soviet Union and Mao Tse-Tung of China. His obsession with a racialized, murderous vision of German power translated directly into both the Holocaust of the European Jews and World War II itself.

Nothing about Hitler's biography would seem to suggest his rise to power, however. Hitler was born in Austria in 1889, a citizen of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. He dreamed of being an artist as a young man, but was rejected by the Academy of Fine Arts in the Austrian capital of Vienna – many of his works survive, depicting boring, uninspired, and moderately well-executed Austrian landscapes. Listless and lazy, but convinced from adolescence of his own greatness,

Hitler invented the idea that the rejection was due not to his own lack of talent, but because of a shadowy conspiracy that sought to undermine his rise to prominence.

For several years before the outbreak of World War I, Hitler lived in Vienna in flophouses, cheap hotels for homeless men, and there he discovered right-wing politics and cultivated a growing hatred for Austria's ethnic and linguistic diversity. Hitler spent his days drifting around Vienna, absorbing the rampant anti-Semitism of Austrian society and developing his own theories about Jews and other "foreign" influences. Likewise, he read popular works of racist pseudo-scholarship that glorified a fabricated version of German history. It was in Vienna that he discovered his own talent for public speaking, as well. The first groups he held enraptured by his improvised speeches about German greatness and the Jewish (and Slavic) peril were his fellow flophouse residents.

Hitler regarded the fact that Germany and Austria were separate countries as a terrible historical error. He hated the weak Austrian government and fled to Germany rather than serve his required military service in Austria. Much to his delight, World War I broke out when he was already in Germany; he enthusiastically volunteered for the German army and served at the western front, surviving both a poison gas attack and shrapnel from an exploding shell. Unlike most veterans of the war, Hitler experienced combat and service in the trenches as exhilarating and fulfilling, and he was completely without compassion – he would later shock his own generals during World War II by his callousness in spending German lives to achieve symbolic military objectives.



Hitler, on the far right, and some of his fellow soldiers in his infantry regiment early in WWI. He trimmed his moustache to its (in)famous length during the war in order to be able to securely wear a gas mask.

After the war, he was sent by the army to the southern German city of Munich, which was full of angry, disenchanted army veterans like himself. His assignment was to investigate a small right-wing group, the German Workers Party. His

“investigation” immediately transformed into enthusiasm, finding like-minded conservatives who loathed the Weimar Republic and blamed socialism and something they called “international Jewry” for the defeat of Germany in the war. He swiftly rose in the ranks of the Nazis, becoming the Führer (“Leader”) of the party in 1921 thanks to his outstanding command of oratory and his ability to browbeat would-be political opponents – he unceremoniously ejected the party’s founder in the process. Under Hitler’s leadership, the party was renamed the National Socialist German Workers Party (“Nazi” is derived from the German word for “national”), and it adopted the swastika, long a favorite of racist pseudo-historians looking for the ancient roots of the fabricated “Aryan” race, as its symbol.

What made Nazi ideology distinct from that of their Italian Fascist counterparts was its emphasis on biology. The Nazis believed that races were biological entities, that there was something inherent in the blood of each “race” that had a direct impact on its ability to create or destroy something as vague as “true culture.” According to Nazi ideology, only the so-called Aryan race, Germans especially but also including related white northern Europeans like the Danes, the Norwegians, and the English, had ever created culture or been responsible for scientific progress. Other races, including some non-European groups like the Persians and the Japanese, were considered “culture-preserving” races who could at least enjoy the benefits of true civilization. At the bottom end of this invented hierarchy were “culture-destroying” races, most importantly Jews but also including Slavs, like Russians and Poles. In the great scheme for the Nazi new world order, Jews would be somehow pushed aside entirely and the Slavs would be enslaved as manual labor for “Aryans.”

Hitler himself invented this crude scheme of racial potential, codifying it in his autobiography *Mein Kampf* (see below). He was obsessed with the idea that the German race teetered on the brink of extinction, tricked into accepting un-German concepts like democracy or communism and foolishly interbreeding with lesser races. Behind all of this was, according to him, the Jews. Hitler claimed that the Jews were responsible for every disaster in German history; the loss of World War I was just the latest in a long string of catastrophes for which the Jews were responsible. The Jews had invented communism, capitalism, pacifism, liberalism, democracy...anything and everything that supposedly weakened Germany from Hitler’s perspective.

In 1921, under Hitler’s leadership, the Nazis organized a paramilitary wing called the Stormtroopers (SA in their German acronym). In 1923, inspired by the Italian Fascists’ success in seizing power in Italy, Hitler led his fellow Nazis in an attempt to seize the regional government of the German region of Bavaria, of which Munich is the capital. This would-be revolution is remembered as the “Beer-Hall Putsch.” It failed, but Hitler used his ensuing trial as a national stage, as the proceedings were widely reported on by the German press. The court officials, who sympathized with his politics, gave him and his followers ludicrously short sentences in minimum security prisons, a sentence Hitler spent dictating his autobiography, *Mein Kampf* (“My Struggle”), to the Nazi party’s secretary, Rudolf Hess.



The Nazi leadership on trial – note the degree to which the photo looks like a publicity stunt rather than a criminal proceeding. Hitler is joined by Erich Ludendorff, in the center, one of the top German commanders during WWI. Ludendorff flirted with Nazism early on, but abandoned the party after the Beer Hall Putsch.

When he was released in nine months (including time served and recognition of his good behavior), Hitler was a minor national celebrity on the right. The Nazis were still a fringe group, but they were now a fringe group that people had heard of. Nazi Stormtroopers harassed leftist groups and engaged in brawls with communist militants. The party created youth organizations, workers' and farmers' wings, and women's groups. They held rallies constantly, creating early versions of "interest groups" to gauge the issues that attracted the largest popular audience. Even so, they did not have mass support in the 1920s – they only won 2.6% of the national vote in 1928.

The Great Depression, however, threw the Weimar government and German society into such turmoil that extremists like the Nazis suddenly gained considerable mass appeal. Promising the complete repudiation of the Versailles Treaty, the build-up of the German military, an end to economic problems, and a restoration of German pride and power, the Nazis steadily grew in popularity: an electoral breakthrough in 1930 saw them win 18% of the seats in the Reichstag. In 1932 they won 37% of the national vote, the most they ever won in a free, legal election.

That being noted, the Nazis never came close to winning an actual majority in the Reichstag. They were essentially a strong, combative far-right minority party. Thanks to the advent of the Depression, more "ordinary Germans" than before were attracted to their message, but that message did not seem at the time to be greatly different than the messages of other right-wing parties. That said, the Nazis were masters of fine-tuning their messages for the electorate; most of their propaganda had to do with German pride, unity, and the need for social and economic order and prosperity, not the hatred of Jews or the need to launch attacks on other European nations. They offered themselves as a solution to the inefficiency of the Weimar Republic, not as a potential bloodbath.

In fact, 1932 represented both the high point and what could have been the beginning of the decline of the Nazis as a party. The presidential election that year saw Hitler lose to Hindenburg, who had served as president since 1925, despite his own contempt for democracy. The Nazis lost millions of votes in the subsequent Reichstag election, and Hitler even briefly considered suicide. Unfortunately, in January of 1933, Hindenburg was convinced by members of his cabinet led by a conservative Catholic politician, Franz von Papen, to use Hitler and the Nazis as tools to help dismantle the

Weimar state and replace it with a more authoritarian political order. Thus, Hindenburg appointed Hitler chancellor, the second-most powerful political position in the state.

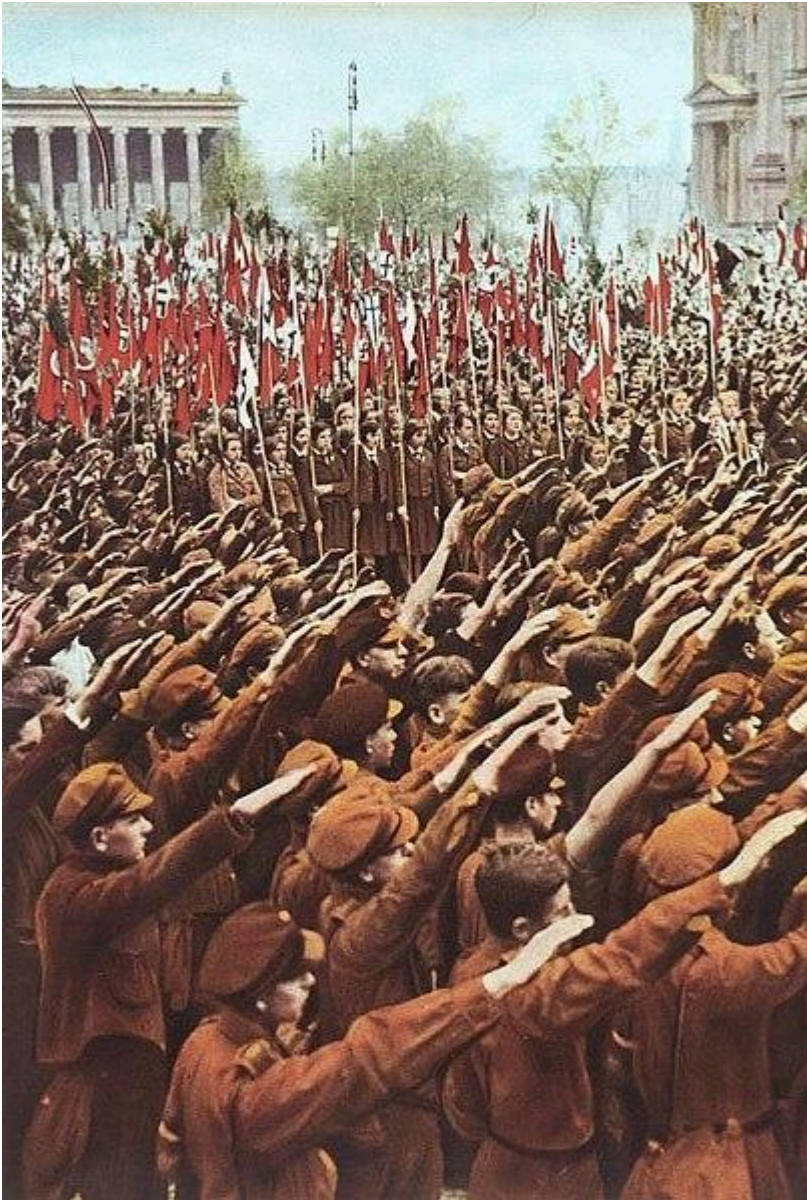
Hitler seized the opportunity to launch a full-scale takeover of the German government. The Reichstag building was set on fire by an unknown arsonist in February, and Hitler blamed the communists, pushing through an emergency measure (the “Reichstag Fire Decree”) that suspended civil rights. That allowed the state to destroy the German Communist Party, imprisoning 20,000 of its members in newly-built concentration camps. Through voter fraud and massive intimidation by the Nazi Stormtroopers, new elections saw the Nazis win 49% in the next election. Soon, with the aid of other conservative parties, the Nazis pushed through the Enabling Act, which empowered Hitler and the presidential cabinet to pass laws by decree. In July, the Nazis outlawed all parties except themselves. By the summer of 1933, the Nazis controlled the state itself, with Hindenburg (impressed by Hitler’s decisiveness) willingly signing off on their measures.

The Nazi government that followed was a mess of overlapping bureaucracies with no clear areas of control, just influence. The Weimar constitution was never officially repudiated, but the letter of laws became far less important than their interpretation according to the “spirit” of Nazism. In lieu of a rational political order, there was a kind of governing principle that one Nazi party member described as “working towards the Führer”: trying to determine the “spirit” of Nazism and abiding by it rather than following specific rules or laws. The only unshakable core principle was the personal supremacy of the Führer, who was supposed to embody Nazism itself.

Nazism was not just a governing philosophy, however. Hitler was obsessed with winning over “ordinary Germans” to the party’s outlook, and to that end the state both bombarded the population with propaganda and sought to alleviate the dismal economic situation of the early 1930s. The Nazi state poured money into a debt-based recovery from the Depression (the economics of the recovery were totally unsustainable, but the Nazi leadership gambled that war would come before the inevitable economic collapse). Employment recovered somewhat as the state funded huge public works and, after he publicly broke with the terms of the Versailles Treaty in 1935, rearmament. Even though there were still food and consumable shortages, many Germans felt that things were better than they had been. The Nazis refused to continue war reparations and soon the rapidly-rebuilding military was staging enormous public rallies.

Ultimately, the Nazi party controlled Germany from 1933 until Germany surrendered to the Allies in World War II in 1945 – that period is remembered as that of the Third Reich, the Nazis’ own term for what Hitler promised would be a “1,000 years” of German dominance. During that time, the Nazis sponsored a full-scale attempt to recreate German culture and society to correspond with their vision of a racialized, warlike, and “purified” German nation. They claimed to have launched a “national revolution” in the name of unifying all Germans in one Volksgemeinschaft: people’s community.

The Nazis targeted almost every conceivable social group with a specific propaganda campaign and encouraged (or required) German citizens to join a specific Nazi league: workers were encouraged to work hard for the good of the state, women were encouraged to produce as many healthy children as possible (and to stay out of the workplace), boys were enrolled in a paramilitary scouting organization, the Hitler Youth, and girls in the League of German Girls, trained as future mothers and domestics. All vocations and genders were united in the glorification of the military and, of course, of the Führer himself (“Heil Hitler” was the official greeting used by millions of German citizens, whether or not they ever joined the Nazi party itself). The purpose of the campaigns was to win the loyalty of the population to the regime and to Hitler personally, and nearly the entire population at least paid lip service to the new norms.



Hitler Youth and League of German Girls members at a rally in 1933.

The dark side of both the propaganda and the legal framework of the Third Reich was the suspension of civil rights and the concomitant campaigns against the so-called “enemies” of the German people. The Nazis vilified Jews, as well as other groups like people with disabilities and the Romani (better known as “Gypsies,” although the term itself is something of an ethnic slur). Starting in 1933, the state began a campaign of involuntary sterilizations of disabled and mixed-race peoples. Jewish businesses were targeted for vandalism and Jewish people were attacked. In 1935 the Nazis passed the so-called “Nuremberg Laws” which outlawed Jews from working in various professions, stripped Jews of citizenship, and made sex between Jews and non-Jews a serious crime.

Even as Germans were encouraged to identify with the Nazi state, and joining the Nazi Party itself soon became an excellent way to advance one’s career, the Nazis also held out the threat of imprisonment or death for those who dared defy them. The first concentration camp was opened within weeks of Hitler’s appointment of chancellor in 1933, and a vast web of police forces soon monitored the German population. The most important organization in Nazi Germany was the SS (Schutzstaffel, meaning “protection squadron”), an enormous force of dedicated Nazis with almost

unlimited police powers. The SS had the right to hold anyone indefinitely, without trial, in “protective custody” in a concentration camp, and the Nazi secret police, the Gestapo, were merely one part of the SS. This combination of incentives (e.g. propaganda, programs, incentives) and threats (e.g. the SS, concentration camps) helps explain why there was no significant resistance to the Nazi regime from within Germany.

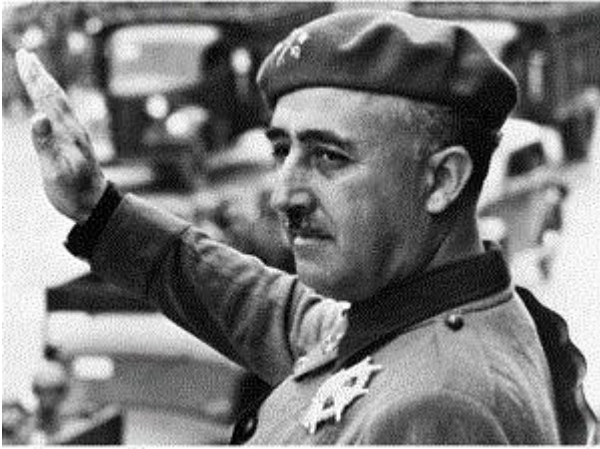
The Spanish Civil War

The first real war launched by fascist forces was not in Italy or Germany, however, but in Spain. The greatest of the European powers in the sixteenth century, Spain had long since sunk into obscurity, commercial weakness, and backwardness. Its society in 1920 was very much like it had been a century earlier: most of the country was populated by poor rural farmers and laborers, and an alliance of the army, Catholic church, and old noble families still controlled the government in Madrid. The king, Alfonso XIII, still held real power, despite his own personal ineptitude. In many ways, Spain was the last place in Europe that clung to the old order of the nineteenth century.

Socialists and liberals were increasingly militant by the early 1920s, and Catalan and Basque nationalists likewise agitated for independence from Spain. From 1923 to 1930, a general named Primo de Rivera acted as a virtual dictator (with the support of the king) trying to drag Spain into the twentieth century by building dams, roads, and sewers. He weakened what representation there was in the state by making government ministers independent of the parliament (the Cortes) and he even managed to lose support in the army by interfering in the promotion of officers.

In 1931, the king abdicated after an anti-monarchist majority took the Cortes. The result was a republic, whose parliament was dominated by liberals and moderate socialists. The parliament pushed through laws that formally separated church and state (for the first time in Spanish history) and redistributed land to the poor, seized from the enormous estates of the richest nobles. Peasants in the countryside went further, attacking churches, convents, and the estates of the nobility. Meanwhile, Spanish communists sought a Russian-style communist revolution and, even further to the left, a substantial anarchist coalition aimed at the complete abolition of government. Thus, the left-center coalition was increasingly beleaguered, as the far left gravitated away and the nobility and clergy joined with the army in an anti-parliamentarian right. Two years of anarchy resulted, from 1933 – 1935.

In 1935, as the forces of the right rallied around a general named Francisco Franco, the socialists, liberals, anarchists, and communists formed a Popular Front to fight it. More chaos ensued, with Franco’s forces growing in power and the Popular Front suffering from infighting (i.e. the anarchists, communists, liberals, and nationalist minorities did not work well together). Franco’s traditional conservative forces joined with Spanish fascists, the Falange, soon openly supported by Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. In 1936, Franco’s forces seized several key regions in Spain.



Francisco Franco

The war began in earnest in that year. It was hugely bloody; probably about 600,000 people died, of which 200,000 were “loyalists” (the blanket term for the pro-republican, or at least anti-monarchical, forces) summarily executed after being captured by the “nationalists” under Franco. Meanwhile, the loyalists carried out atrocities of their own, targeting especially members of the church. One of the iconic moments in the war was the arrival of over 20,000 foreign volunteers on the side of the loyalists, including the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the United States. Both the American writer Ernest Hemingway and the English writer George Orwell fought in defense of the republic.

While, officially, there was an international non-interventionist agreement among the governments of Europe and the US with regards to Spain, Germany and Italy blatantly violated it and provided both troops and equipment to the nationalist forces. The most effective support provided by Italy or Germany came from the German air force, the Luftwaffe, which used Spain as a training ground with real targets. The loyalists had no means to fight against planes, so they suffered consistent defeats and setbacks from German bombing raids. Overall, the Spanish Civil War allowed Italy and Germany to “try out” their new armies before committing to a larger war in Europe (Italy, however, did launch a brutal invasion of Ethiopia in 1934 as well).

The nationalists triumphed in early 1939, having cut off the pockets of loyalists off from one another. They were recognized as the legitimate government of Spain internationally, and despite their promises to the contrary, they immediately began carrying out reprisals against the now-defeated loyalists. Franco adopted the title of Caudillo, or leader, in the same manner as Mussolini and Hitler. Where Spain differed from the other fascist powers was that Franco was well aware of its relative weakness and deliberately avoided an expansionist foreign policy; Hitler once spent a fruitless day trying to convince him to join the war once World War II was underway.

Franco’s regime, which united the old nobles, the army, and the Catholic church, controlled the country until Franco’s death in 1975. Just as Spain was one of the last countries still tied to the old political order of kings and nobles after World War I, it was among the last fascistic countries long after Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy had fallen.

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CHAPTER 10: WORLD WAR II

World War II was the defining disaster of the twentieth century for millions of people across the globe. It was the culmination of the vision of total war the world had first encountered in World War I, but it was generalized to vast stretches of the planet, not just parts of Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. The promise of technology was realized in its most perverse form as the energy of advanced industrialism was unleashed in weapons of mass slaughter. World War II was also the setting for the Holocaust, the first and only incidence of industrialized mass murder in world history.

The war resulted in approximately 55 – 60 million deaths, of which 25 – 27 million were Soviets and 6 million were the Jewish victims of the Holocaust. While nationalist rivalries and international tensions certainly led to the war in some ways, as they had in World War I, the primary cause of WWII was unquestionably Adolf Hitler's personal obsession with creating a vastly expanded German empire. Europe had, in some ways, stumbled into World War I. World War II was instead a war of aggression launched by a single belligerent, Germany, supported by its allies. (Note: Germany, Italy, Japan, and their allies are referred to as "The Axis" in World War II. Britain, the US, the USSR, and their allies are referred to as "The Allies" in World War II.)

Leading up to War

The years leading up to the start of World War II (which began in September of 1939) saw a series of bold moves by Nazi leadership. Over the course of the 1930s, the Nazi government steadily broke with the provisions of the Versailles Treaty. While the (pre-Nazi) German state had already suspended reparation payments, once the Nazis were in control they simply refused to negotiate the possibility of the payments ever resuming. By 1934, in secret, Germany began the process of re-arming, and then in 1935 it openly moved toward building a military that would dwarf even its World War I equivalent.

By 1938, Hitler felt that Germany was prepared enough that it could sustain a limited war; by 1939 he felt confident that the German war machine was ready for a full-scale effort to seize the space he imagined for the new Reich. In a sense, this period consisted of Hitler "playing chicken" with the rest of Europe: he would launch a dangerous and provocative initiative, then see if the rest of Europe (meaning primarily France and Britain) would respond with the threat of force or instead back down. The political leadership of those nations did back down, repeatedly, until the invasion of Poland in September of 1939 finally proved to the world beyond a doubt that Hitler could not be stopped without war.

This is the period remembered as "appeasement." The term refers to the policy adopted by the French and British governments in giving Hitler what he wanted in hopes that he would not do it again. Pieces of foreign territory, political unions with closely related German territories, and the growth of German military power were seen by desperate British and French politicians as things that Germans might have legitimate grievances about, and thus they played along with the idea that Germany, and more to the point Hitler, might be appeased once those issues were addressed.

It was a popular critique long after the war to vilify the French and British leadership for being willing to concede so much to Hitler when a strong militarized response might have cut the rug out from under the Nazi war machine before it was ready for its full-scale assault. Arguably, one should not be too quick to write off appeasement. World War I had

been so awful that it was very difficult for most Europeans, even most Germans, to believe that Hitler could actually want to plunge Europe back into another world war. It is certain that the French and British wanted to avoid full-scale war at any cost; their civilian populations were totally opposed to war and, especially in France, their governments were unstable and unpopular as it was. Thus, British and French political leaders did not think of their concessions to Hitler as caving in: they thought of them as preserving peace.

In March of 1938, Germany annexed Austria, an event known as the Anschluss. Despite the German pseudo-invasion being poorly organized, most Austrians welcomed the German tanks that rolled into Austrian cities, and there was practically no resistance. Germans were at first apprehensive that this blatant violation of both the Versailles Treaty and the sovereignty of another nation would result in war, but instead it became a public relations boost for Hitler and the Nazis when there was no foreign response. In one fell swoop, Nazi laws and policies (most notably the entire edifice of anti-Semitic legislation) were imported to Austria, and there was a looting spree as Catholic Austrians attacked their Jewish countrymen.

In September of 1938, the threat of German intervention in the Sudetenland, a region of northwestern Czechoslovakia with a significant German minority, prompted an international crisis. The British and French governments hastily convened a conference in Munich to stave off war, and there, instead of defending Czech sovereignty (which the Czechs were demanding), the French and British agreed that Germany should annex the Sudetenland to “protect” its German population. Then, in early 1939, German troops simply occupied the rest of Czechoslovakia. The Czech lands were divided between Germany and a newly-created protectorate, while Slovakia became a puppet state under an anti-Semitic Catholic priest, Jozef Tiso.



Hitler greeting the British prime minister Neville Chamberlain at the Munich Peace Conference that agreed to the German annexation of the Sudetenland.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 148-1978-063-32.
Foto: o. Ang. 124. September 1938

Even as Germany was expanding its territories against a backdrop of international vacillation, it was forming political alliances. In May of 1939 Italy and Germany pledged alliance with one another, more or less a formality given their long-standing fascist kinship. More importantly, in August of 1939 Germany and the USSR signed a mutual non-aggression pact. This pact was absolutely crucial for the Nazis, as they could not envisage a successful war against Western

and Northern Europe unless the major eastern threat, the USSR, was neutralized. Whereas Hitler had absolutely no intention of honoring the pact in the long term, the Soviet Premier Josef Stalin did, believing both that Germany was not strong enough to threaten Soviet territory and that the future war (which he accepted as inevitable) would be a squabble among the capitalist nations that did not involve his own resolutely communist state. To sweeten the deal for the Soviets, the pact secretly included provisions to divide Poland between Germany and the USSR in the immediate future.

The Early War

It finally came to war in September of 1939. The Nazis claimed that Poles had been abusing and mistreating ethnic Germans in Poland, and Nazi propagandists fabricated a number of supposed atrocities that had been perpetrated against Germans. Using this excuse, the German army invaded in September. France and Britain finally had to face the hard truth that there was no appeasing Hitler, and they declared war on Germany. As part of the pre-war agreement with Germany, the Soviet Union invaded Poland from the east as German forces invaded from the west, with the Soviets occupying eastern Poland in the name of both territorial expansion for its own sake and to provide a buffer from Germany and the west.

The most important lesson German strategists had learned from World War I was how to overcome trench warfare. After years of stalemate, Germany had managed to break through the French and British lines on the western front right at the end of the war, before they were pushed back by the flood of American troops. Military technology advanced rapidly between the wars, equipping each of the major nations with fast-moving, heavily armored tanks and heavy bombers supported by fighter planes. It would be possible to strike much more quickly and much harder than had the ragged lines of charging soldiers “going over the top” twenty years earlier.

Likewise, as American intervention had proved in World War I, all of the combatants in the Second World War recognized the key role of industrial production itself. The winner in war would be not only the side that struck first and hardest, but the side that could continue to churn out weapons and equipment at the highest rates for the longest time. In that sense, industrial capacity was as important as fighting ability. German strategists had learned all of these lessons, and the German army – the Wehrmacht – struck with overwhelming force, backed by an industrial base designed to support a lengthy war.

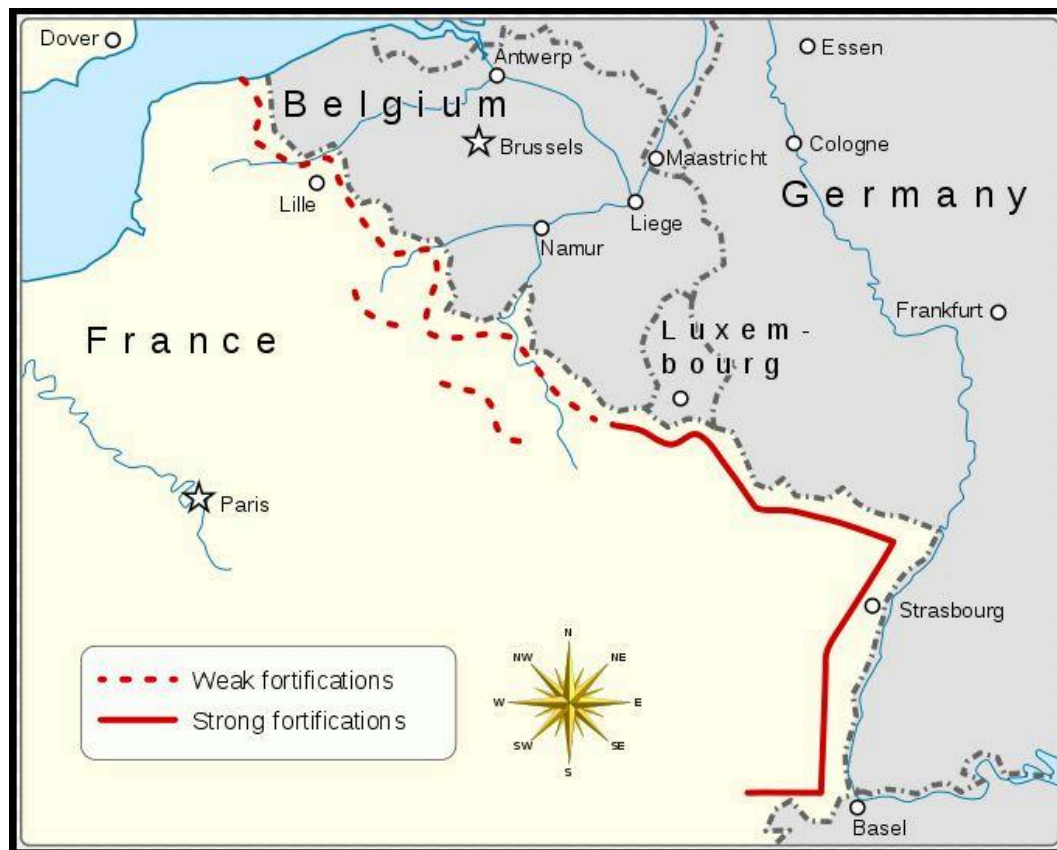
When Germany finally attacked Poland in September of 1939, the Wehrmacht unleashed (what the Allies called) Blitzkrieg, lightning war, which consisted of fast-moving armored divisions supported by overwhelming air support. Behind those armored divisions the main body of German infantry neutralized remaining resistance and, typically, succeeded in taking thousands (sometimes hundreds of thousands) of prisoners of war. Blitzkrieg had originally been conceived by a French officer, Charles de Gaulle, in a military tactical plan regarding mobile warfare. It was rejected by the French General Staff but was acquired by the Germans and implemented by the Wehrmacht. (The irony is that De Gaulle would go on to become the leader of the anti-Nazi Free French forces in the war after France itself surrendered).

The first stage of the war resulted in complete German victory. The Polish army put up a valiant defense but was swiftly crushed. Over 1,300 planes attacked Poland at once in the early stage of the invasion, and Poland capitulated in October, with its government fleeing to exile in London. While the smaller nations in the region warily watched their

own borders, most global attention shifted to the border with France, the obvious next stage in the plans for German conquest.

While France had declared war on Germany immediately in September of 1939, it did not actually attack. French plans for a future war with Germany had revolved around defense, meaning awaiting a German attack, since the end of World War I. After WWI, the French built a huge series of bunkers and fortresses along the French – German border known as the Maginot Line. There, from September of 1939 until May of 1940, the French military essentially waited for Germany to invade – this was a period the French came to refer to as the “drôle de guerre,” or “joke war” (the British called it the “phony war,” the Germans Sitzkrieg or “sitting war”). The assumption had been that Germany would be held back by the heavy fortifications and could be pushed back, and the French army simply did not have any plans, or intentions, to attack Germany in the meantime.

Instead, the Germans had the (in hindsight, not entirely surprising) idea to go around the Maginot Line. In April, German forces invaded and swiftly defeated Denmark and Norway, despite a valiant resistance by the Norwegians. Then, on the 10th of May, they attacked the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, sending the bulk of their forces through a forest on the French – Belgian border that the French had, wrongly, thought was impassable to an army. The Germans proved far more effective than the French or British at using tanks and artillery, and they immediately began driving the French and British forces back. The Maginot Line, meanwhile, went unused, with the German invasion simply bypassing it completely with the Belgian invasion.



German forces invaded France through southern Belgium, bypassing the Maginot Line's “strong fortifications” entirely.

An infamous incident occurred in late May, when over 300,000 British and French soldiers retreating from the Germans were pinned down on the coast of the English Channel near the French town of Dunkirk. There, a flotilla of navy and fishing vessels managed to evacuate them back to England while the British Royal Air Force held off the opposing

German Luftwaffe (air force). This retreat was counted as a success by the standards of the Allies at the time, although the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill reminded his countrymen that successful retreats were not how wars were won.

The defeat of France and its allied British Expeditionary Force is, in hindsight, all the more disappointing in that the combined Allied forces were more numerous than their German enemies and could have, conceivably, put up a stiff fight. Instead, the French sent their armored forces toward Holland while the Germans smashed into France itself, the British and French proved inept at working together, and Allied morale collapsed completely. The French in particular did not realize the potential of tank warfare: they treated tanks more as mobile artillery platforms than as weapons in their own right, and they had no armored divisions, just tanks interspersed with infantry divisions.

In the end, France surrendered to Germany on June 22. Germany occupied the central and northern parts of France but allowed a group of right-wing French politicians and generals to create a Nazi-allied puppet state in the south. That state became known as the Vichy Regime, named after the spa town of Vichy that served as its capital. There, the Vichy government rapidly set up a distinctly French fascist state, complete with concentration camps, anti-Semitic laws, and a state of war with Britain.

Thus, as of June of 1940, no major powers remained to oppose Germany but Britain (the United States, while far more favorable to Britain than Germany, remained neutral). Hitler had initially hoped that the British would agree to surrender the continent and negotiate while he consolidated his victory (and turned against the USSR). Instead, Britain refused to back down and handed over power to an emergency government headed by the new prime minister, Winston Churchill. Starting in July of 1940, the Luftwaffe began a campaign to utterly destroy the Royal Air Force (RAF) of Britain and to terrify the British into surrendering. German plans revolved around a naval invasion of the British Isles across the English Channel, but German strategists conceded that they would have to cripple the RAF for the invasion to be possible. The resulting months of combat in the skies came to be known as The Battle of Britain. It was the “greatest” series of air battles ever fought, lasting from July through September of 1940, with thousands of planes battling in the skies every day and night.

The British were quite well prepared. They had the newly-created technology of radar, which allowed them to anticipate German attacks. In addition to the RAF, the British had numerous batteries of anti-aircraft guns that inflicted significant losses on the Luftwaffe. Many British pilots survived crashes and were rescued, whereas German pilots who were shot down either died or were captured. Most importantly, British factories churned out twice as many new planes as did German ones over the course of the war. Thus, the RAF was able to counter German attacks with new, effective fighters and increasingly seasoned pilots. By the end of September, much to Hitler’s fury, Germany had to abandon the immediate goal of invading Britain.

Meanwhile, the United States stayed out of the war – “isolationism” was still a very popular stance among many Americans. In part because of the heroism of the British defense, however, the American Congress passed the Lend-Lease Act in March of 1941 which authorized unlimited support for Britain, mostly taking the form of food and military supplies provided on credit, “short of war.” Britain relied both on American supplies and complete governmental control of its own economy to survive in the coming years. With German blockades preventing the importation of anywhere near the pre-war amounts of food, every aspect of the British economy (especially agriculture and other forms of food production) was directed by emergency wartime ministries to keep the British population from starving.

The specific decision by Hitler and the Nazi leadership that resulted in the United States joining the Allies was the alliance between Germany and Japan. In September of 1941, Germany, Italy, and Japan signed the Tripartite Pact. The Pact stipulated that any of the three powers would declare war on a neutral country that declared war on one of the

others. Practically speaking, Germany hoped that the Pact would make American politicians think twice about joining Britain in the war effort. In hindsight, it backfired against Germany, since the Japanese attack on the United States led Germany to honor its agreement and declare war on the US as well: Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, and Germany was obliged to declare war on the US (Hitler was urged not to by his advisors, but gleefully claimed that Japan had never lost a war and now victory was assured for the Axis).



The sinking of the battleship USS Arizona during the attack on Pearl Harbour.

In the meantime, a series of events shifted the focus of the war to North Africa, Greece, and the Balkans. Mussolini had ordered in the Italian army to invade British territories in Africa (most importantly Egypt) and to attack Yugoslavia and Greece in 1940. The Italians were largely ineffective, however, and all their attack did was inspire a spirited British counter-offensive and a strong anti-Italian resistance movement in the Balkans. The Germans, however, needed supplies from the Balkans and southeastern Europe, including both foodstuffs and natural resources like oil. It would be literally unable to continue the war if the Allies managed to take over these regions.

Thus, Germany sent forces to the Balkans and Africa to support their Italian allies. By the spring of 1941 the Germans held all of southeastern Europe and had pushed the British back in Africa – yet more important victories for the Nazis but also a delay in their plans. Another setback was that Hitler's attempt to get the Spanish to join the war fell flat, when the Spanish dictator Franco indicated that Spain was simply too poor and weak, especially after its civil war, to join the Axis, despite the obvious political affinity between fascist Spain and Nazi Germany (Hitler said that he would rather have teeth extracted than endure another meeting like the one he suffered through with Franco).

The War in the East

Despite those setbacks, to many, World War II seemed like it was over within a year: Germany controlled Poland, Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark, France, and Belgium, all within nine months of the initial attack on Poland. As noted above, its forces were soon making headway in the Balkans and North Africa as well. Hitler had first conceived of the war against the USSR as something to be accomplished after defeating the rest of Europe, and thus the planned invasion of Britain was to be the final step before the Soviet invasion. The fact that Britain was not only holding out, but holding on, however, led to a change in German plans: the Soviet invasion would have to occur before Britain was defeated.

In the overall context of the war, by far the largest and most important target for Germany was the Soviet Union. The non-aggression pact signed just before the beginning of the war between the USSR and Germany had given the Nazis the time to concentrate on subduing the rest of Europe. By the spring of 1941, Hitler felt confident that an all-out attack on the USSR was certain to succeed, now that German military resources could be concentrated mostly in the east. He was spurred on by the fact that, according to his own racial ideology, the Slavs of Eastern Europe (most obviously the Russians) were so inferior to the “Aryan” Germans that they would be unable to mount an effective resistance. Thus, Hitler anticipated the conquest of the Soviet Union taking about ten weeks.

For his part, Stalin did not think Hitler would be foolish enough to try to invade Soviet Union, especially before Germany had truly “won” in the west. In 1939, Stalin reported to his advisers that “The war will be fought between two groups of capitalist states...we have nothing against it if they batter and weaken each other. It would be no bad thing if Germany were to knock the richest capitalist countries (particularly England) off their feet.” Furthermore, every European school child learned about Napoleon’s disastrous attempted invasion of Russia in 1812, and thus the sheer size of Soviet territory seemed like a logical impediment to invasion (in fact, the German invasion was deliberately timed to coincide with the 129th anniversary of Napoleon’s invasion – in the minds of the Nazis, where the French had failed, Germany would succeed). Stalin dismissed intelligence reports of the massive military buildup that preceded the invasion, remaining convinced that, at the very least, Germany would not attack while Britain remained unconquered.

While we now know that he was completely wrong about Hitler’s intentions, Stalin had good reason for not thinking that Germany would dare attack – the USSR had one-sixth of the land surface of the earth, with a population of about 170,000,000. Its standing army as of 1941 was 5.5 million strong, with 12 million in reserve. It also had a vast superiority in quantity (albeit not quality) of equipment at the start of the war. Indeed, by the end of the war, the Soviets had mobilized 30.6 million soldiers (of whom 800,000 were women: the USSR was the only nation to rely on women in front-line combat roles, at which they equaled their male countrymen in effectiveness). Given that vast strength, Stalin was astonished when the Germans attacked, reportedly spending hours in a daze before ordering an armed response.

On June 22 of 1941, Germany invaded the USSR with over 3 million troops. This invasion was codenamed Operation Barbarossa, after a medieval German king who warred with the Slavs. The first few months were a horrendous disaster for the Soviets. The Soviet air force was utterly destroyed, as were most of its armored divisions. Hundreds of thousands of Soviet soldiers were taken prisoner. Stalin had spent the late 1930s “purging” various groups within the Soviet state and the army, and his purges had already killed almost all of the experienced commanders, leaving inexperienced and sometimes inept replacements in their wake. In many areas, the locals actually welcomed the Germans as a better controlling force than the Bolsheviks had been, putting up no resistance at all. Even though Hitler himself was frustrated to discover that his ten-week estimate of conquest was inaccurate, the first months of the invasion still amounted to an astonishing success for German forces.

Despite its early success, however, the German advance halted by winter. The initial welcome German soldiers

received vanished when it was revealed that the German army and the Nazi SS were at least as bad as had been the communists, pressing people into work gangs, murdering resisters, and most importantly, shipping everything that could possibly be useful for the German war effort back to Germany, including both equipment and foodstuffs. Thus, groups of “partisans” (i.e. insurgents) mounted successful resistance movements that cost the Germans men and resources. Likewise, German forces had advanced so quickly that they were often bogged down in transit, with German supply lines stretched to the breaking point. Thus, just as had happened during Napoleon’s retreat over a hundred years earlier, guerrilla fighters were able to strand and kill the foreign invaders.



The German advance between June and December 1941 opened a front stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, representing a terrible loss of territory and life to the Soviets.

Just as it had thwarted Napoleon as well, the Russian winter played a key role in freezing the German invasion in its tracks. Mud initially slowed the German advance in autumn, then the bitter cold of winter set in. The Germans were not equipped for winter conditions, having set out in their summer uniforms. Despite the Wehrmacht’s mechanization, German forces still used horses extensively for the transportation of supplies, with many of the horses dying from the cold. Even machines could not stand up to the conditions; it got so cold that engines broke down and tanks and armored cars were rendered immobile. Thus, the German army, while still huge and powerful, was largely frozen in place in the winter of 1941 – 1942.

Incredibly, the Soviets were able to use this breathing room to literally dismantle their factories and transport them to the east, outside of the range of the German bombers. Whole factories, particularly in the Ukraine, were stripped of motors, turbines, and any other useful equipment that could be moved, and sent hundreds of miles away from the front lines. There, they were rebuilt and put back to work. By 1943, a year and a half after the initial invasion, the Soviets

were producing more military hardware than were the Germans. Likewise, despite the relative success of the German invasion, Germany lost over 1.4 million men as casualties in the first year.

The Home Front

World War II was unprecedented in its effects on civilian populations. Many prior wars of the modern era had largely spared civilians, with most casualties limited to the men who fought or logistically supported the fighting. The range of bombers in World War II, however, ensured that civilians were at risk even when they lived hundreds of miles from the front lines. From the Battle of Britain onward, while military targets were given priority, civilian targets were also deliberately sought out by German bombers, and when the war began to turn against Germany the Allies eagerly returned the favor by raining bombs on German cities. What Nazi strategists called the “War of Annihilation” launched by Germany against the Soviet Union was specifically aimed at destroying the Soviet population, not just its government, as is so horribly illustrated by the death tolls: some 25 million Soviets died, including approximately 17 million civilians. Likewise, the Holocaust of the European Jews (described in detail in the next chapter) murdered some 6 million Jewish civilians deliberately and systematically.

Thus, the experience of the war by civilians in the countries in or near the fighting often revolved around terror and hardship. Everyone, including those spared by the bombings or foreign occupation, had to contend with shortages of food and supplies that grew worse over time. As an example, British civilians experienced rationing immediately at the outbreak of war that grew ever more stringent as the war went on: the weekly 8 oz. (about two sticks) ration of butter per person at the start of the war was down to 2 oz. (about half a stick) by 1945. Rationing ensured that only civilian populations in actual war zones were likely to face outright famine, but hunger was widespread everywhere. British farmers were considered so important to the war effort that they were excluded from conscription and were hailed as heroes in government propaganda.

In a familiar pattern from World War I, women played an enormous role on the home front during World War II. Millions of women worked in war production in all of the Allies countries, with women almost completely replacing men in Soviet agriculture by the war’s end. Both Britain and the USSR conscripted women to work in various ways and war industries were completely dependent on women’s labor for most of the war. Propaganda hailed women’s participation in the war as a patriotic necessity, with iconic characters like the American “Rosie the Riveter” created to inspire women to contribute as much as possible to the war effort. Despite this acknowledgment, women were still paid as little as half of men’s wages for the same work almost everywhere (Winston Churchill even personally defeated an effort led by women teachers, and supported by parliament, for equal pay).

Rosie the Riveter.



In comparison to World War I, there was a major difference in how the Second World War was perceived by most civilians on the homefront: it was an existential battle for democracy and freedom for most Americans, but for most of the European nations it was a war for survival itself. One of the major factors that contributed to the loyalty of German civilians to the Nazi regime until the bitter end was the simple, pragmatic understanding that if Germany lost it would be at the mercy of the Soviet Union, a country that the German military had set out to utterly obliterate. For the Soviets, of course, only a fanatical resistance to German aggression could save their nation and their lives. Even in countries that Germany had not set out to destroy, most civilians dreaded the prospect of a German victory as being nearly equivalent.

Everywhere in occupied countries civilians desperately sought out scraps of information that might indicate that the war was finally turning against the Third Reich.

For its part, Nazi Germany persisted in the war effort by relying on a simple, ancient institution: slavery. Prisoners in concentration camps (Jews and non-Jews alike) were all, by definition, slaves of the regime, put to work in factories, quarries, forests, and workshops and “paid” in meager rations. Millions of civilians from occupied countries were either conscripted to work on behalf of Germany in their own countries or were captured and sent into the Reich as slaves, with some 8 million slaves toiling within the German borders by the end of 1944. Even when German factories were crippled by Allied bombs the war machine held together thanks to its massive reliance on slavery. In short, it was not mere “slave labor” (a phrase that weakens the horror of the institution) that powered the Third Reich, it was slavery enforced through lethal violence.

The Turn of the Tide

Despite the power of Britain, the US, and the USSR, the Axis war effort continued with amazing success well into 1942. A German army under the general Erwin Rommel (“the Desert Fox”) in North Africa pushed to within a few hundred miles of the Suez Canal in Egypt, threatening to cut the Allies off from much of their oil supply. Once the winter of 1941 – 1942 was over, the Germans continued to advance into Soviet territory, endangering the rebuilt factories and Soviet oil fields in the Caucasus. Japan, meanwhile, took advantage of the success of the Pearl Harbor attack and occupied dozens of islands across the Pacific. A series of Allied victories in 1942 and 1943, however, turned the tide of the war.

Two major naval engagements in the Pacific spelled disaster for Japan. In May of 1942, at the Battle of the Coral Sea, American forces defeated a Japanese invasion force targeting Australia and drove the Japanese fleet back. In June of 1942, at the Battle of Midway, American forces sank four Japanese aircraft carriers. The importance of Midway was not the loss itself, which was less severe than the losses the American navy had already sustained. Instead, it was the fact that the Americans had the industrial capacity to rebuild, whereas there was no way that Japan could do so. From that point on, American forces slowly but steadily “island hopped” across the Pacific, driving Japanese forces from the islands they had occupied.

In Egypt, meanwhile, British forces managed to decisively defeat and push back the Germans in October of 1942. An American army soon landed to help them, and the Allies forced the Germans to retreat by November. By July of 1943, the Allies were poised to bring the fight to Italy itself. Vichy French territories in North Africa had fallen after an ineffectual resistance earlier, in November 1942, which led Hitler to order the complete occupation of France the same month; the fascist puppet state of the Vichy Regime thus only lasted from June of 1940 to November of 1942.

The “real” turn of the tide occurred in the Soviet Union, however. In late 1942, a huge German army was dispatched against the city of Stalingrad near the Black Sea. For months, Russian and Ukrainian civilians and soldiers alike fought the Germans in brutal street battles, with the people of Stalingrad often engaging German tanks armed only with grenades, handguns, and Molotov cocktails. The Germans were held at bay until the main Soviet army was assembled. By November, the Germans were being beaten, and the German general in charge directly disobeyed Hitler and surrendered in February of 1943. Here, the Germans were not in their element – urban warfare was not the same as Blitzkrieg, and the fanatical resistance of the Soviets (who paid with over 1.1 million casualties) stopped them.

Later that year an enormous Soviet army led by 9,000 tanks defeated a German army near the city of Kursk, 500 miles south of Moscow. Kursk is often considered to be the “real” turning point in the Soviet war, since the Germans were consistently on the retreat after it. The importance of Kursk was the fact that the Germans were beaten “at their own

game” – they were able to employ Blitzkrieg tactics, but the Russians now had anti-tank military hardware and tactics that rendered it much less effective.

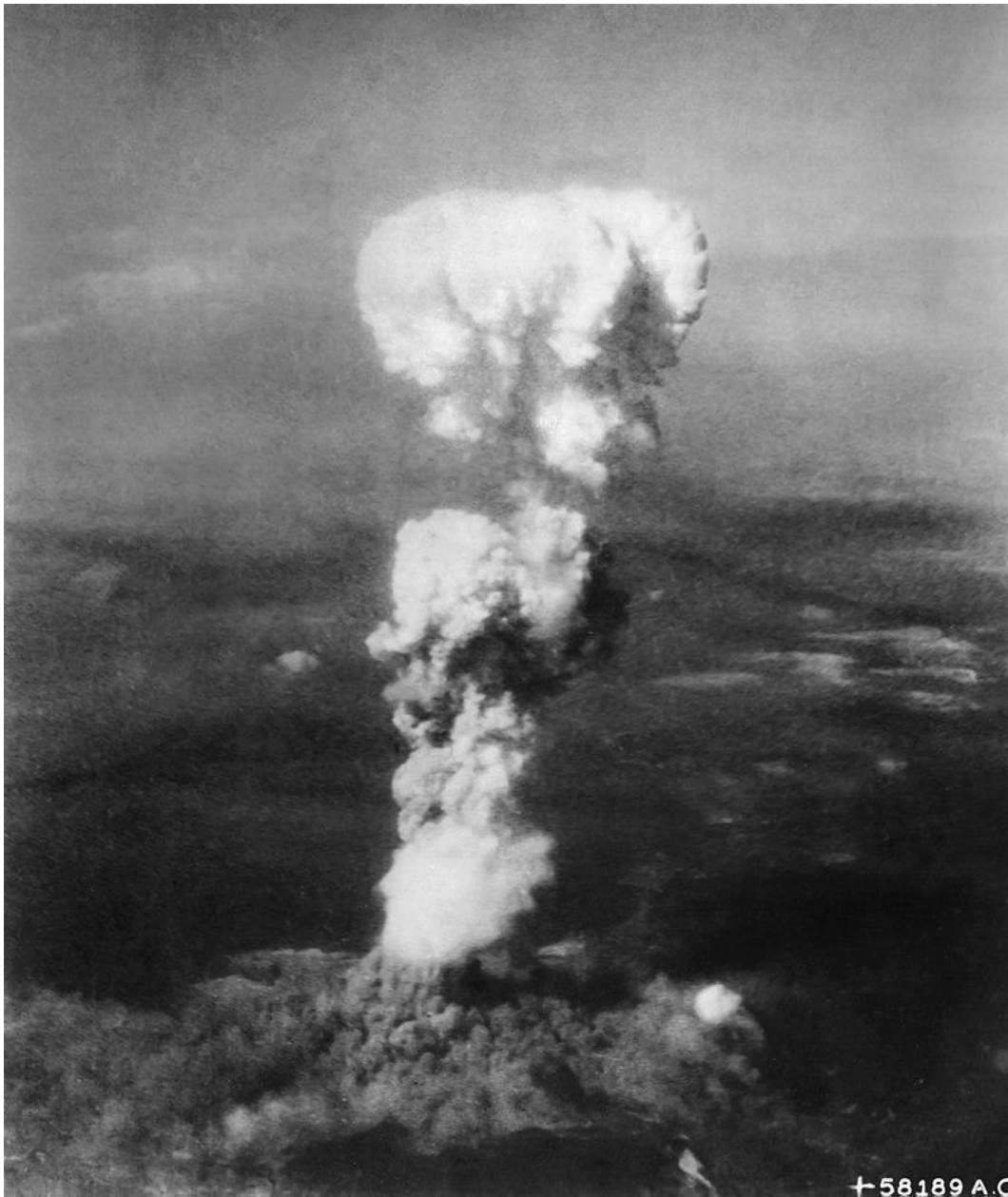
As an aside to the narrative of the war, it is worthwhile to consider the role of the Soviet Union in World War II. In its aftermath, Americans often looked on World War II as “the good war,” the war that was fought for the right reasons against countries whose leadership were truly villainous. There is a lot of truth to that idea – American troops fought as bravely as any, and US involvement was crucial in the ultimate victory of the Allies. It is important, however, to recognize that it was really the USSR that broke the back of the Nazi war machine. At the cost of at least 25,000,000 lives (some estimates are as high as thirty million), the Soviets first stopped, then pushed back, then ultimately destroyed the large majority of German military forces. By way of comparison between the war in the west and the war in the east, the Battle of Alamein in Egypt that turned the tide against German forces there involved about 300,000 troops, while Stalingrad saw over 2 million troops and hundreds of thousands of Soviet civilian combatants. Most German forces were always committed to the eastern front after the invasion of the USSR in June of 1941, and without the incredible sacrifice of the Soviet people, the US and Britain would have been forced to take on the full strength not just of Germany and Italy, but of the various German puppet states and allies (e.g. Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria) within the Axis.

Back in the west, with Italian forces in shambles and the Fascist government in disarray, the Italian king dismissed Mussolini in July of 1943. The new Italian government quickly made peace with the Allies, prompting a swift invasion of northern Italy by Germany as the Allies seized the south. For over a year, the Allies pushed north against the German forces occupying central and northern Italy. The fighting was brutal, but Allied forces made steady headway in driving German forces back toward the Reich itself.

By 1944, Germany was clearly on the defensive. British and American forces pushed north through Italy as the Soviets closed from the east. On June 6, 1944, known as D-Day, British, American, and Canadian forces launched a surprise invasion across the English Channel with hundreds of thousands of troops (over 150,000 on the first day alone). After securing the coastline, the Allies steadily pushed against the Germans, suffering serious casualties in the process as the Germans refused to give up ground without brutal fighting. By April of 1945, the Allies were within striking distance of Berlin. The western Allies agreed to let the Soviets carry out the actual invasion of Berlin, a conquest that took eleven days of hard fighting. On May 7, Germany surrendered, a week after Hitler had committed suicide in his bunker, and the following day was “V-E Day” – Victory in Europe.

Meanwhile, the fighting in the Pacific continued for months. By March of 1945, American planes could bomb Japan itself, and civilian as well as military targets were destroyed, often with incendiary bombs. One attack destroyed 40% of Tokyo in three hours; the death toll was immense. Nevertheless, Japanese forces resisted every inch taken by the Americans. It took about two months for American forces to take the island of Okinawa, resulting in about 100,000 Japanese and 65,000 American casualties. The prospect of the invasion of Japan itself was therefore extremely daunting. It seemed clear that America would ultimately prevail, but at a horrendous loss of life. This ultimately led to the deployment of the most terrible weapons ever invented by the human species: nuclear arms.

The Manhattan Project, a secret military operation housed in a former boarding school in Los Alamos, New Mexico, succeeded in creating and then detonating an atomic bomb on July 16. President Truman of the US warned Japan that it faced “prompt and utter destruction” if it did not surrender; when it did not, he authorized the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima (August 6) and Nagasaki (August 8). Hundreds of thousands, the large majority civilians, died either in the initial blasts or from radiation poisoning in the months that followed. At the behest of the Japanese emperor, negotiations began a few days later, with Japanese representatives signing an unconditional surrender on September 2.



A photograph of the infamous “mushroom cloud” following the atomic blast that destroyed Hiroshima.

The Aftermath

The death toll of the war was unprecedented, and most of the dead were civilians. Millions more were left homeless and displaced, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. As a whole, Europe was in shambles, with whole cities destroyed, and even the victorious Allied nations were economically crippled. In addition, much to the world’s growing horror, the true costs of Nazi rule were revealed in the closing months of the war and in the months to follow, as the details of what became known as the Holocaust were discovered. Simultaneously, the world was forced to grapple with the fact that human beings now had the ability to extinguish all life on earth through atomic weapons. These two traumas – the Holocaust and The Bomb – forced “Western Civilization” as a whole to rethink its own identity in the aftermath.

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CHAPTER 11: THE HOLOCAUST

The term “genocide” was adopted in the immediate aftermath of World War II out of the need to designate, to name, the most horrendous crime perpetrated by the Nazi regime: the systematic, state-run murder of the European Jews. The word itself means “murder of a people,” and while the act of genocide was not invented in the twentieth century – forms of genocide have occurred since the ancient world – never before had a government carried out a genocide that was as far-reaching, as bureaucratically-managed, or as focused as the Holocaust. While much of the Holocaust took the form of blood-soaked massacres, akin to the slaughter of the Armenians by the inchoate state of Turkey in the early 1920s or the various mass killings of Native Americans in the long, bloody colonization of the Americas by Europeans, the Holocaust was also distinct from other genocides in that much of it was industrialized: run on timetables, with the killing occurring in gas chambers built by Nazi agents or private firms contracted to do the work. In short, the Holocaust was a distinctly and horrifyingly modern genocide.

World War II would “just” be the story of a horrendously costly war if not for the Holocaust. The term itself refers to early Jewish rituals of sacrifice by fire, in which offerings were made to God and burned in the ancient Temple of Solomon (long since destroyed by the Romans) in Jerusalem. Today, the term is mostly used in the United States; the rest of the world largely uses the term Shoah, which means “catastrophe” in Hebrew. Its core definition is simple: the ideologically-motivated, brutal murder of approximately 6,000,000 Jews by the Nazi regime, representing two-thirds of Europe’s Jewish population at the time, and one-third of the entire global Jewish population. Thus, in addition to its modern character, the Holocaust stands out among the history of genocides for its shocking “success” from the perspective of the Nazi leadership: they set out to kill every Jew, theoretically in the entire world, and were horrifyingly successful at doing so in a very short time period.

In addition to the murder of the Jews, millions more were killed by the Nazis in the name of their ideology. While estimates vary, at least 250,000 Romani (“Gypsies”) were murdered. At least 6,000 male homosexuals were murdered. Many thousands of ideological “enemies,” from Jehovah’s Witnesses to various kinds of political leftists, were murdered as well. In addition, while not normally considered part of the Holocaust per se, almost 20,000,000 civilians in the Slavic nations – Poles and Russians especially – were murdered by the Nazis in large part because of Nazi racial ideology. Slavs too were “racial inferiors” and “subhumans” according to the Nazi racial hierarchy, and thus civilian populations in the Slavic countries were either killed outright or subjected to treatment tantamount to murder. Thus, while the Holocaust is, and must be, defined primarily as the genocide of the European Jews by the Nazis, it is still appropriate to consider the other victims of Nazi ideology as an aspect of Nazi mass murder as a whole.

Before the Holocaust

The Nazis implemented anti-Jewish racial laws, known as the Nuremberg Laws, in 1935. Those laws defined “full” Jews as having three or four practicing Jews as grandparents, and those with two or one as being distinct categories of “mixed” (Mischlinge) Jews, the latter of whom received some exemptions from anti-Semitic laws. Jews were deprived of their citizenship and banned from various professions. For the next four years leading up to the war, the goal of the Nazi

government was to force Jews to emigrate from the Reich, while extracting as much wealth from them as possible. The state imposed a “Reich Flight Tax,” meant to fleece fleeing Jews of as much of their wealth as possible, and in 1938, the Nazis forced all Jews to register their property, which was then expropriated in a campaign dubbed “Aryanization.”

In November of 1938 the Nazis initiated a nationwide pogrom known as the Night of Broken Glass (Kristallnacht) in which some 90 Jews were killed and 177 synagogues burned to the ground, after which 20,000 Jewish men were arrested for “disrupting the peace” and incarcerated in prison camps – this represented the first mass roundup of Jews simply for being Jewish. Hermann Göring, at the time the second most powerful Nazi leader after Hitler, then demanded one billion Marks from the German Jewish population for the damage caused by the riots. After Kristallnacht, many of the remaining German Jews desperately sought asylum outside of Germany, but were all too often rebuffed by countries which, in the midst of the Great Depression, allowed in only a trickle of immigrants each year (Jewish or otherwise). Approximately half of the 500,000 German Jews did manage to flee before the war despite the incredible difficulty of doing so at the time.



The aftermath of Kristallnacht in Munich: the gutted remains of the Ohel-Jakob Synagogue.

Bundesarchiv, Bild 146-1970-041-46
Foto: o. Ang. | November 1938

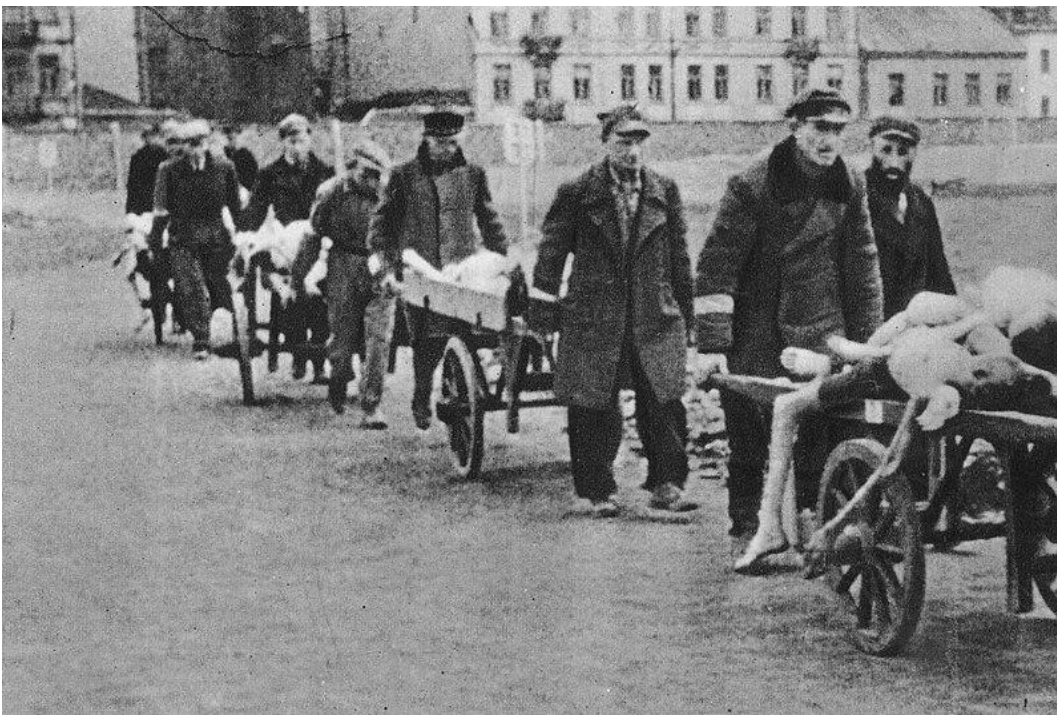
Simultaneously, high-ranking Nazi officials in the SS were exploring permanent options for ridding the Reich of Jews. Serious thought and research went into plans to create Jewish “reservations” in Poland as well as a plan to ship all of the Jews in German-held territory to the African island of Madagascar. Even after large-scale murder campaigns in Eastern Europe began in 1941, many Nazis were still looking for some way to transport and dump the Jews of Europe somewhere far from Germany. The stated goal of these schemes was to render the entire face of Europe, and possibly the world, Judenrein: “Jew-Free.” In the end, the “final solution to the Jewish question” – the Nazi’s euphemism for the Holocaust

– was decided to consist not of deportation, but of systematic murder, but that decision does not appear to have been reached until 1941.

The irony of considering the case of German (and, as of 1938, Austrian) Jews in detail is that the large majority of the victims of the Holocaust were not from Germany. The bulk of the Jewish population of Europe was in the east, concentrated in Poland, Russia, and the Ukraine. Poland alone had a Jewish population of approximately 3,000,000, 10% of the population of Poland as a whole. Unlike the Jews of Central and Western Europe, most of the Jews of Eastern Europe were largely unassimilated, living in separate communities, speaking Yiddish as their vernacular language instead of Polish or Russian, and often facing harsh anti-Semitism from their non-Jewish neighbors (which was somewhat muted in the nominally unprejudiced Soviet Union). Thus, the Jews of the east had almost nowhere to run and few who would help them once the German war machine arrived.

When the war began, even Polish Jews were not systematically murdered right away: they were beaten, humiliated, and sometimes murdered outright, but there was not yet a campaign of focused, organized murder against them. Instead, the initial task of Nazi murder squads was the elimination of the Polish “leadership class,” which came to mean intellectuals, politicians, communists, and Catholic priests. At least 50,000 Polish social, political, and intellectual elites were murdered by SS death squads or regular German soldiers in a campaign codenamed “Operation Tannenberg.”

On encountering the enormous numbers of Jews in Poland, the Nazis opted to drive them into hastily-constructed ghettos in towns and cities. Ghettos were neighborhoods of a town or city that were usually fenced-off, surrounded with barbed wire, and then filled with the Jews of the surrounding areas. The ghettos were built almost immediately, from late 1939 to early 1940, and ended up housing millions of people in areas that were meant to hold perhaps a few hundred thousand at most. The largest were in the large Polish cities of Warsaw and Lodz; the Warsaw Ghetto alone housed over 400,000 Jews at its height in late 1941. Conditions were atrocious: the official food ration “paid” to Jewish workers who worked as slave laborers for the Nazi war effort consisted of about 600 – 800 calories a day (an adult should consume about 2,000 a day to remain healthy). Potato peels were “as precious as diamonds” to ghetto inhabitants. The ghettos alone ended up costing the lives of approximately 500,000 people from starvation and disease.



Corpses being transported from the Warsaw Ghetto.

The Holocaust Begins

The Holocaust itself began with the invasion of the Soviet Union in the summer of 1941. As German armies advanced into Soviet territory, they were followed by four teams of Einsatzgruppen – mobile killing squads – charged with killing “Jews, Gypsies, and the disabled.” The Einsatzgruppen’s technique for murdering their victims consisted of marching Jews into the woods or fields and systematically shooting them. The victims would be forced to dig mass graves or ditches, to strip, and to watch as their entire community was slaughtered. Mothers would be forced to strip, then undress their children, watch their children be murdered, and then join them in the mass graves. The Einsatzgruppen and the local helpers they recruited were responsible for approximately 1 million deaths over the course of the war. The Einsatzgruppen were aided by regular Wehrmacht (German army) units and by battalions of the Order Police, a hybrid of police force and national guard mobilized for the war effort. In other words, many “regular soldiers,” not just Nazi party members, were responsible for killing innocent men, women, and children, often for days at a time and at point-blank range. This aspect of the Holocaust is today referred to as the “Holocaust by bullets,” one that was largely overlooked by historians for many decades after the war.



Members of the Einsatzgruppen about to murder the Jewish woman and child, with Jewish men digging their own graves to the right.

There were various logistical problems with this technique, however. It was hard to generalize it in urban areas already under Nazi control. Many members of the Einsatzgruppen suffered from mental breakdowns from murdering innocent people day after day. There were never very many Einsatzgruppen to begin with: four teams with about 6,000 soldiers assigned to them in total. Out of necessity, they made heavy use of auxiliary troops to do much of the actual shooting, recruited from Ukrainian, Latvian, Lithuanian, or Estonian POW camps. These auxiliaries were called “Hiwis,” an abbreviation of Hilfswilligen (“helpers”), by the Nazis. Soon, both members of the SS’s army, the Waffen SS, as well as regular soldiers of the Wehrmacht were assigned to “Jewish Actions,” the euphemism for organized massacres.

At some point between the late summer and fall of 1941, the top Nazi leadership decided to abandon earlier

experiments with forced deportations and to search instead for more efficient methods of murder. Almost immediately after the implementation of the Einsatzgruppen, the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler, ordered experiments with better means of mass murder, which resulted in Nazi technicians devising “gas vans” that killed their victims through carbon monoxide poisoning. By late fall of 1941, killing facilities were being built in the concentration camps of Majdanek and Auschwitz, both of which had been built as slave labor camps in 1940. There, the first experiments with the infamous pesticide Zyklon B were carried out on Russian POWs.

The Peak Killing Period

Based on the experiments with gas vans and temporary gas chambers at Auschwitz, SS leaders concluded that stationary killing centers would be the most efficient and (for the killers) psychologically viable form of mass murder. Thus, as of early 1942, the Nazis embarked on the most notorious project of the Holocaust: the creation of the extermination camps. Extermination camps were not the same thing as concentration camps. Concentration camps were prison camps, some of which created during the first weeks of Nazi rule in 1933. There were literally tens of thousands of concentration camps of various kinds scattered across the entire breadth of German-controlled territory. Extermination camps, however, were designed for one purpose: to kill people. There were only six of them in total, and most were very small – often about a quarter of a square mile in size. All were located in occupied Poland, near rail lines and hidden in forests away from major population centers. They were not meant to house prisoners for slave labor; new arrivals to an extermination camp were typically dead within two hours. They were, in short, “death factories,” production facilities of murder that ran on industrial timetables.

The height of the Holocaust was thus shockingly short. It lasted from early 1942, when the extermination facilities were put into operation, until the late summer of 1943, a period of just over a year that saw 50% of the Jewish victims of the Holocaust itself murdered. The major reason for that incredible speed is that the ghettos of Poland were emptied into the extermination camps. The extermination camp Treblinka alone killed at least 800,000 people, most of whom were sent from the enormous ghetto of Warsaw. The millions of Jews who had been in Poland and the Russian territories of the west were murdered at a stunning, completely unprecedented rate.

The most infamous of the camps is unquestionably Auschwitz. Auschwitz was a great exception among the extermination camps in that it did house Jewish prisoners who were not immediately killed. Instead, about 80% of new arrivals to Auschwitz were sent immediately to their deaths in the gas chambers, while the other 20% were temporarily enslaved. More is known about day-to-day life inside of a death camp from Auschwitz because a relatively large number of its victims survived the war, although “relative” in this case still means “far less than 1%.” Likewise, the infamous tattoos issued to prisoners were only performed at Auschwitz; there was no point in tattooing victims who were to be killed within hours, after all.

Within Auschwitz, not just Jews but regular criminals, enemies of the Nazi regime, Romani, and various other groups were housed in grossly overcrowded barracks. These prisoners were treated differently by German and auxiliary guards based on who they were and where they were from, and they were actively encouraged to treat each other differently based on those distinctions as well. Non-Jewish German criminals were given important positions as kapos, team leaders, who oversaw Jewish slaves in the construction of new buildings in the vast, sprawling Auschwitz camp complex (it was over 20 kilometers across, including numerous sub-camps) or working in factories designed to support the German war

effort. Of the approximately 200,000 Jews who were spared immediate murder on arrival, the large majority were either worked to death or murdered in the gas chambers after becoming too weak to work.



Three of the survivors of Buchenwald concentration camp, likely transferred from Auschwitz in the “death marches” that began in January 1945.

The five death camps besides Auschwitz operated from early 1942 until the fall or winter of 1943 (one, Majdanek, was operational until the summer of 1944). They were used primarily to murder the Jews of Poland and their total death toll was close to 2 million victims. In turn, they were never meant to be permanent: there were no large-scale slave labor facilities and only a handful of Jews were kept alive on arrival to work as slaves for the guards and to burn the bodies of their fellow victims after they were gassed (the survival rate from the three major camps besides Auschwitz was one one-thousandth of 1%, or .0001 to 1, representing the 150 people who survived and the 1.5 million who did not). Slave revolts occurred at two camps in August and October of 1943, which explains the fact that anyone survived these camps, but by then the camps had already succeeded: almost the entire Polish Jewish population was dead, starved in the ghettos or gassed in the camps. Afterwards, the SS destroyed the remains of the camps to hide the evidence of what had happened there.

Auschwitz, however, had been built to be permanent. Its gas chambers were large and made of concrete and steel (unlike the wood sheds used to murder in the other extermination camps). It was intended to be the final destination for every Jew captured by the Nazis in the years to come, and thus most Jews from the western European countries occupied by Germany were sent to die in Auschwitz. The Nazis continued to prioritize the “final solution” even as the war turned against them, shipping hundreds of thousands to Auschwitz as the Allies steadily pressed against them in the east and south.

One of the most bizarre and chilling episodes of the Holocaust was the Nazi takeover of Hungary in mid-1944. There, in what had been a staunch German ally, over 700,000 Jews had survived the war, “protected” in the sense that the Hungarian government had resisted the demands of the Germans to turn over its Jews for murder. When the Germans learned that the Hungarians were negotiating with the Soviets to switch allegiances, now that the German defeat was all but assured by early 1944, they supported a coup by Hungarian fascists under the direction of the Nazi state. That summer, at an astonishing rate, SS specialists overseeing Hungarian fascist police deported over 500,000 Hungarian Jews to Auschwitz. The vast majority were killed on arrival; in the Fall of 1944 Auschwitz was operated at its maximum capacity of killing up to 12,000 people a day. It bears emphasizing that the Holocaust was regarded by the top Nazi leadership as being a priority that was at least as high as actually fighting the war. Even after the war was evidently lost, tremendous efforts were made to kill every Jew then in German hands.

In early 1945, as the Soviet army closed from the east and the western Allies from the west, the Nazis initiated a series of death marches from the camps in Poland. Jewish prisoners that had survived up to that point, against incredible odds, were forced to march up to twenty miles through the Polish winter, then loaded into cattle cars and shipped into Germany. The western Allies – mostly Britain and the US – discovered the first evidence of the Holocaust when they liberated these German camps, discovering tens of thousands of corpses and thousands of horribly malnourished survivors. Likewise, the Soviet army liberated Auschwitz itself, discovering the gas chambers and the smattering of survivors who had been left behind when the Germans fled. Ultimately, the Holocaust ended because the war ended. The Nazis had been intent on “winning the Holocaust” even after it was self-evident that they could not win the war.

The Aftermath

The liberation of the camps was horrifying to the Allied soldiers who discovered them in the closing months of the war. Dwight Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander of the forces that had carried out the D-Day invasion, ordered that British and American troops alike document what they discovered – the huge mounds of corpses, the open graves, the emaciated survivors, and the gas chambers – lest those horrors be dismissed as “propaganda” at some point in the future. Likewise, Soviet forces preserved the evidence discovered in the eastern camps, including Auschwitz itself. As the war in Europe finally ended, Allied troops and agents immediately embarked on an enormous effort to locate, catalog, and preserve the documentation having to do with the Holocaust in German army, state, and SS offices as they prepared the groundwork for war crimes trials.



Bodies at the Gusen Concentration Camp being transported for burial by German civilians pressed into the work by Allied soldiers, in an attempt to force the Germans to confront the results of their actions.

The scope of the Holocaust shocked even battle-hardened troops who were already aware of German depredations against civilians. At the the Nuremberg Trials, organized to legally prosecute the Nazi leadership, Nazi leaders were charged with Crimes Against Humanity, a completely new category of crime designed by the victorious Allies to try to deal with the enormity of what they still called “Nazi atrocities.” Thanks to SS documentation, the Allies correctly calculated that the death toll of Jews murdered by the Third Reich amounted to roughly six million individuals, and the basic mechanisms of deportation, slavery, and gassing were also clear.

Even though Allied authorities were able to piece together the basic characteristics of the Holocaust, various aspects remained obscure for decades. Most survivors were deeply hesitant to talk about what they had been through, and even in the newly-founded Jewish state of Israel, most of the focus was on the symbolically-important acts of resistance like a famous uprising of the Jews of the Warsaw Ghetto in 1944, rather than on the millions who were killed. For decades,

most survivors tried to make new lives, often thousands of miles from their former homes, and most non-Jews were completely ignorant of the breadth, scope, and organized nature of the genocide.

The first systematic study of the Holocaust was carried out by an American Jewish historian, Raul Hilberg, who published his

The Destruction of the European Jews in 1961, containing the first highly detailed study of the number of victims, the methods used by the Nazis, and the breadth of the genocide itself. While it took years to mature, the field of Holocaust scholarship began in earnest with Hilberg's work, eventually burgeoning into a major subfield of history, political science, and sociology. Today, while the scholarship is always turning up new facts and presenting new interpretations, the essential narrative of the Holocaust is well established, based on mountains of hard evidence and meticulous research.

The event that brought the Holocaust to world attention was not scholarship, however, but the capture of the Nazi SS leader Adolf Eichmann in Argentina in 1960 by agents of the Israeli secret service, the Mossad. Eichmann was taken to Jerusalem and tried for his work in overseeing the logistics of the Holocaust. His major job during the war had been to make sure the trains carrying victims ran on time and efficiently delivered them to their deaths. Eichmann was the quintessential “desktop murderer,” a man who (apparently) never personally harmed anyone, but was still responsible for the deaths of millions through his actions. The trial was highly publicized and it began the process of transforming the Holocaust from being only a dark memory of its survivors, largely unknown or overlooked by historians and the general public, to being perhaps the most infamous event of the twentieth century.

In the 1970s and 1980s, a series of films and television programs brought the history of the Holocaust to audiences around the western world, and survivors of the Holocaust began speaking publicly about their experiences in large numbers. Part of the impetus behind the organizations of survivors was the emergence of Holocaust Denial in the 1970s: the hateful, disingenuous, and utterly false claim that the Holocaust never happened (Eichmann himself was irritated when asked by early deniers in Argentina to corroborate their claims – he was perversely proud of his role in running an efficient system of mass murder).

Holocaust memorialization had existed in Israel since the 1940s, but it became much more widespread by the 1980s. One of the most significant memorials to the victims of the Holocaust is the US Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington DC, conceived of by a commission brought together by President Jimmy Carter in 1978 and ultimately dedicated by President Bill Clinton in 1993. Certainly, by the 1990s, the Holocaust was an integral part of history taught in schools and universities almost everywhere; while it is possible not to know many of the details, even people with only a cursory understanding of modern history are usually aware that the Nazis carried out the genocide of the Jews of Europe during World War II.

Conclusion

The Holocaust was one of the great traumas associated with World War II. It forced the Western World to confront the fact that a highly advanced, “civilized” nation at the heart of Europe – Germany – had been responsible not just for initiating a horrendously bloody war, but for carrying out the systematic murder of millions of completely innocent people. The conceit that “Western Civilization” was the most just and desirable matrix of law, politics, and culture was permanently undermined in the process. Since the ancient Greeks, the proud distinction between civilization and barbarism had been upheld in the minds of the social and political elites of the “West,” and yet it was some of those very elites who perpetrated the ultimate act of barbarism in the twentieth century.

Image Citations

[Kristallnacht](#) – German Federal Archives

[Warsaw Ghetto](#) – Public Domain

[Einsatzgruppen](#) – Public Domain

[Buchenwald Survivors](#) – Public Domain

[Bodies at Gusen](#) – Public Domain

CHAPTER 12: THE SOVIET UNION AND THE COLD WAR

The Cold War

At the height of Soviet power in the late 1960s, one-third of the world's population lived in communist countries. The great communist powers of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the People's Republic of China loomed over a vast swath of Eurasia, while smaller countries occasionally erupted in revolution. Non-aligned countries like India were often as sympathetic to the "Soviet Bloc" (i.e. countries allied with or under the control of the USSR) as they were to the United States and the other major capitalist countries. Even in the capitalist countries of the West, intellectuals, students, and workers often sympathized with communism as well, despite the apparent mismatch between the Utopian promise of Marxism and the reality of a police state in the USSR.

This global split between communist and capitalist was only possible because of the vast might of the USSR. The threat of world war terrified every sane person on the planet, but beyond that, the threat of conventional military intervention by the Soviets was almost as threatening. The USSR controlled the governments of every Eastern European country, with the strange exception of Yugoslavia, and it had considerable influence almost everywhere in the globe. Its factories churned out military hardware at an enormous rate, even as its scientists proved themselves the equal of anything the west could produce and its athletes often defeated all challengers at the Olympics every four years.

Behind the façade of strength and power, however, the USSR was one of the strangest historical paradoxes of all time. It was a country whose official political ideology, Marxism-Leninism, proclaimed an end to class warfare and the stated goal of achieving true communism, a worker's state in which everyone enjoyed the fruits of science and industrialism and no one was left behind. In reality, the nation was in a perpetual state of economic stagnation, with its citizens enjoying dramatically lower standards of living than their contemporaries in the west and workers toiling harder and for fewer benefits than did many in the west. Marxism-Leninism was officially hostile to imperialism, and yet the USSR controlled the governments of most of its "allied" nations after World War II. Of all forms of government, communism was supposed to be the most genuinely democratic, responding to the will of the people instead of false representatives bought with the money of the rich, and yet decision-making rested in the hands of high-level member of the communist party, the so-called apparatchiks, or arch-bureaucrats. Finally, Marxism-Leninism was officially a political program of peace, yet nothing received so much attention or priority in the USSR as did military power.

Stalinism

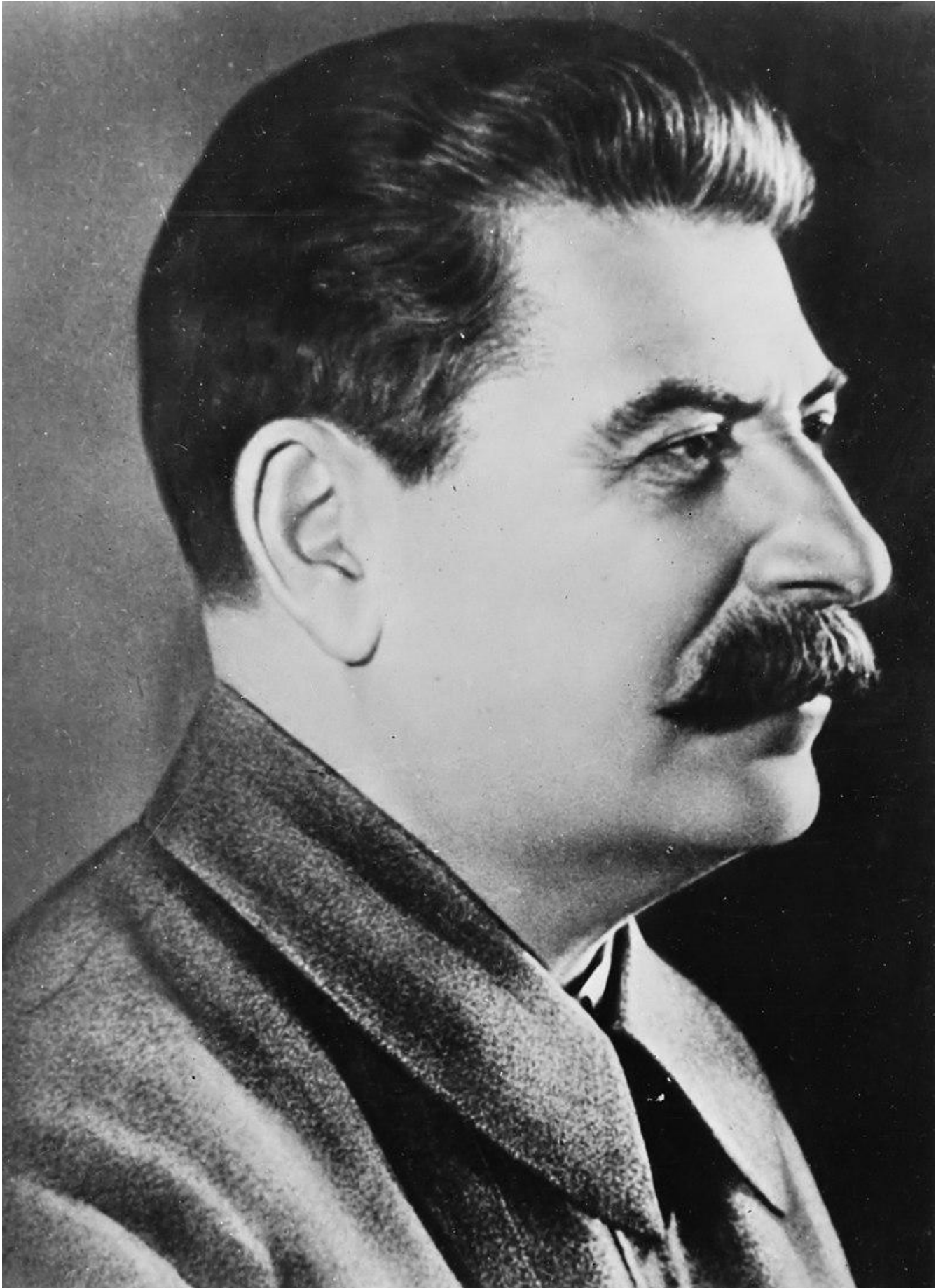
The Bolshevik party rose to power against the backdrop of the anarchy surrounding Russia's disastrous military position in the latter part of World War I. Once the Bolsheviks were firmly in power by 1922, they embarked on a fascinating and almost unprecedented series of political and social experiments. After all, no country in the history of the planet to that point had undergone a successful communist revolution, so there was no precedent for how a socialist society was

supposed to be organized. Facing a terrible economic crisis from the years of war, the Bolshevik leader Vladimir Lenin launched the New Economic Policy, which allowed limited market exchange of goods and foodstuffs, even as the state supported a renaissance in the arts and literature. For a few years, not only did standards of living rise, but there was a flowering of innovative creative energy as artists and intellectuals explored what it might mean to live in the country of the future.

Lenin had driven the revolution forward, and he oversaw the social and economic experiments that followed the war. He died in 1924, however, inaugurating a struggle within the Bolshevik leadership to succeed him. In 1927, Joseph Stalin politically defeated his enemies (most importantly the Bolshevik leaders Trotsky and Zinoviev, two of Lenin's closest allies before his death) and consolidated total control of the state. Officially, Stalin was the "Premier" of the communist party – "the first" – overseeing its central decision-making committee, the Politburo. Unofficially, Stalin's control of the top level of the party translated into pure autocracy, not hugely dissimilar in nature to the power of the Tsar before the revolution.

Before his rise to power, Stalin's position in the Russian Communist Party had been relatively innocuous; he was its secretary, a position of little direct power but enormous potential influence. In order to achieve an appointment to a given position within the party, other members of the party had to go through Stalin. He shrewdly used this fact to cement political relationships and influence, so that by Lenin's death he was well-positioned to make a power grab himself. Lenin suffered a series of strokes in the early 1920s, giving Stalin the opportunity to build up his power base without opposition, even though Lenin himself was worried about Stalin's dictatorial tendencies.

Stalin is a much more enigmatic figure than Hitler, to whom he is often compared thanks to their respective legacies of mass murder. Stalin did not write manifestos about his beliefs, nor did he leave behind many documents or letters that might help historians reconstruct his motivations. Biographers have had to rely on the accounts of people who knew Stalin rather than having access to troves of personal records. He also changed his mind frequently and did not stick to consistent patterns of behavior or decision-making, making it difficult to pin down his essential beliefs or goals. His only overarching personality trait was tremendous paranoia: he almost always felt himself surrounded by potential traitors and enemies. He once informed his underlings that "every communist is a possible hidden enemy. And because it is not easy to recognize the enemy, the goal is achieved even if only five percent of those killed are truly enemies."



Stalin

Stalin's paranoia was reflected in his ruthless policies. Starting at the end of the 1920s, Stalin forced through massive change to the Soviet economy and society while periodically killing off anyone he could imagine being a threat or enemy. Communism was "supposed" to spread around the world after an initial revolutionary outburst, but instead it was stuck in one place, "socialism in one country," in Stalin's words, which he believed necessitated a massive industrial buildup. The only thing that benefited from Stalin's oversight was the military, which grew dramatically and, for the first time since the Napoleonic Wars, achieved a level of parity with the west.

Of his many destructive policies, Stalin is perhaps best remembered for the purges. "Purging" consisted of rounding up and executing members of the communist party, the army, or even the police forces themselves. Normally, Stalin's agents would use torture to force the hapless victims to confess to outlandish charges like conspiring with Germany or (later) the United States to bring down the Soviet Union from within. His secret police force, the NKVD (its Russian acronym – it was later changed to KGB) often following direct orders from Stalin himself, eliminated uncounted thousands more. Thus, even at the highest levels of power in the USSR, no one was safe from Stalin's paranoia.

Stalin relied on the NKVD to carry out the purges, targeting better-off peasants known as kulaks, then the Old Bolsheviks (who had taken part in the revolution itself), army officers, middle-ranking communist party members, and finally, tens of thousands of regular citizens caught in the grotesque machinery of accusation and punishment that plagued the country in the second half of the 1930s. Every purge was designed to, at least in part, purge the past purgers, blaming them for "excesses" that had killed innocent people – this of course simply led to the murder of more innocents. So many people disappeared that most Soviets came to believe that the NKVD was everywhere, that everyone was an informer, and that everything was bugged. In addition to outright murder, thousands more were imprisoned in labor camps known as gulags, almost all of which were located in the frigid northern regions of Siberia. The total number of victims is estimated conservatively at 700,000, which does not count the hundreds of thousands deported to the gulags.

While emblematic of Stalin's tyranny, the purges did not result in nearly as many deaths as did his other policies. Beginning in 1928, Stalin ordered a definitive break with the limited market exchange of the New Economic Policy, announcing a "Great Turn" towards industrialization, state-controlled economics, and agricultural reorganization. Starting in 1929, the Soviet state imposed the collectivization of agriculture, forcing millions of peasants to abandon their farms and villages and move to gigantic new collective farms. Collectivization required peasants to meet state-imposed quotas, which were immediately set at unachievable levels. In the winter of 1932 – 1933 in particular, peasants across the USSR (and especially in the Ukraine) starved to death – probably around 3 million people died of starvation, and the collectivization process resulted in another 6 – 10 million deaths including those who were executed for resisting. Thus, the total deaths were probably over 10 million. Despite falling abysmally short of its production goals, where collectivization "succeeded" was in destroying the age-old bonds between the peasants and the land. In the future, Soviet peasants would be a resentful and inefficient class of farm workers rather than peasants rooted in the land who identified with traditional values.

Acknowledging the vast gap between the Soviet Union's industrial capacity and that of the west, Stalin also introduced the Five-Year Plans, in which sky-high production quotas were set for heavy industry. While those quotas were never actually met and thousands died in the frenzy of industrial buildup, the Five-Year Plans (three of which took place before World War II began) were successful as a whole in achieving near parity with the western powers in terms of industrial capacity. One of the only aspects of communist ideology that was reflected in reality in the USSR was that industrial

workers, while obliged to toil in conditions far from a “worker’s paradise,” were at least spared the worst depredations of the purges and did not face outright starvation.



Soviet propaganda consistently mythologized the supposed fervor of industrial workers. The text reads “2+2 plus the enthusiasm of the workers = 5.”

Stalin’s overriding goals were twofold: secure allies abroad against the growing power of Germany (and, to an extent, Japan), and drag the USSR into the industrial age. Despite the turmoil of his murderous campaigns, he succeeded on

both counts. While remaining deeply hostile to the western powers, the Soviet state under Stalin did end the Soviet Union's pariah status, receiving official diplomatic recognition from the US and France in 1933. The Five-Year Plans were part of the USSR's new "command economy," one in which every conceivable commodity was produced based on quotas imposed within the vast party bureaucracy in Moscow. That approach to economic planning was disastrous in the long run, but in the short run it did succeed in industrializing the USSR. On the eve of World War II, the USSR had become the third-largest industrial power in the world after the United States and Germany, and was counted among the major political powers of not just Europe, but the world.

World War II and its Aftermath

Thus, at a terrible human cost, Stalin's policies did transform the USSR into a semblance of a modern state by the eve of World War II – "just in time" as it turned out. During the war the USSR bore the brunt of German military power. More than 25 million Soviets died on the eastern front, soldiers and civilians alike, and it was through the incredible sacrifice of the Soviet people that the German army was finally broken and driven back. In the aftermath of World War II, Stalin's power was unshakable. During the war, he had played the role of the powerful, protective "uncle" of the Soviet people, and after victory was achieved he enjoyed a period of genuine popularity, especially as returning Soviet soldiers were given good positions in the bureaucracy.

During the war, the one thing that tied Britain, the US, and the USSR together in alliance was their shared enemy, Germany, not shared perspectives on a desirable postwar outcome besides German defeat. The war required them to work together, however, and that included making compromises that would in some cases haunt the postwar period. In 1943, after the tide of the war had shifted against Germany but well before the end was in sight, the "Big Three" leaders of Britain, the US, and the USSR met in Tehran to discuss the war and what would be done afterwards. There, Stalin insisted that the territory seized from Poland by the USSR in 1939 would remain in Soviet hands: Poland would thus shrink enormously. Roosevelt and Churchill, well aware of the critical role then being played by Soviet troops, were not in a position to insist otherwise.



The Tehran Conference in 1943 represented the first in-person meeting of the “Big Three.” From left: Josef Stalin, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Winston Churchill.

In 1944, a team of politicians and economists from several Allied nations met in New Hampshire and devised the basis of the postwar economic order, the Bretton Woods Agreement. That agreement fixed the dollar as the monetary reserve of the western world, created the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to stabilize the international economy, and fixed currency exchange rates. This plan initially included the Soviets, who would thus be eligible for financial support in addressing the devastation wrought by Germany (as noted below, however, the USSR pulled out in 1948, thereby driving home an economic as well as political divide between east and west).

In January of 1945, when the end was finally in sight and Soviet forces already occupied most of Eastern Europe, Stalin stipulated that the postwar governments in Eastern Europe would need to be “friendly” to the Soviet Union, an ambiguous term whose practical meaning suggested dominance by communist parties. Churchill and Roosevelt agreed on the condition that Stalin promised to support free elections, something Stalin never intended to allow. The leaders also agreed to divide Germany into different zones until such time as they could determine how to allow the Germans, purged of Nazism they hoped, to have self-government again.

In part, Britain and the US gave in to Soviet demands because of the incredible sacrifice of the Soviet people in the war; 90% of the casualties on the Allied side up to 1944 were Soviets (mostly Russians, but including millions of Ukrainians and Central Asians as well). Until 1945, Roosevelt assumed the United States would need Soviet help in bringing about the final defeat of Japan as well. Each side tried to avoid antagonizing the other, especially while the war continued, even though they privately recognized that there were incompatible visions of postwar European reorganization at stake.

Despite those incompatible ideas, many political leaders (and regular citizens) across the globe hoped that the postwar order would be fundamentally different than its prewar analog. Fundamental to that vision was the creation of an official international body whose purpose was the prevention of armed conflict and the pursuit of peaceful and productive policies around the world: the United Nations, the second attempt at an international coordinating organization after

the pitiful failure of the League of Nations in the 1920s and 1930s. The UN was founded in 1945 as a body of arbitration and, when necessary, enforcement of internationally-agreed upon policies, seeing its first major role in the Nuremberg Trials of the surviving Nazi leaders. Its Security Council was authorized to deploy military force when necessary, but its very reason to be was to prevent war from being used as a tool of political aggrandizement. The Soviet Union joined the western powers as a founding member of the UN, and there were at least some hopes that it would oversee a just and equitable postwar political order.

The Cold War

Despite the foundation of the UN, and the fact that both the US and USSR were permanent members of the Security Council, the divide between them undermined the possibility of global unity. Instead, by the late 1940s, the world was increasingly split into the two rival “camps” of the Cold War. The term itself refers to the decades-long rivalry between the two postwar “superpowers,” the United States and the Soviet Union. This was a conflict that, fortunately for the human species, never became a “hot” war. Both sides had enormous nuclear arsenals by the 1960s that would have ensured that a “hot” war would almost certainly see truly unprecedented destruction, up to and including the actual possibility of the extinction of the human species (the American government invented a memorable phrase for this known as M.A.D.: Mutually Assured Destruction). Instead, both nations had enough of a collective self-preservation instinct that the conflict worked itself out in the form of technological and scientific rivalry, an enormous and ongoing arms race, and “proxy wars” fought elsewhere that did not directly draw both sides into a larger conflict.

The open declaration of the Cold War, as it were, consisted of doctrines and plans. In 1947 the US issued the Truman Doctrine, which pledged to help people resist communism wherever it appeared – the rhetoric of the doctrine was about the defense of free people who were threatened by foreign agents, but as became very clear over the next few decades, it was more important that people were not communists than they were “free” from dictatorships. The Truman Doctrine was born out of the idea of “containment,” of keeping communism limited to the countries in which communist takeovers had already occurred. The immediate impetus for the doctrine was a conflict raging in Greece after WWII, in which the communist resistance movement that had fought the Nazis during the war sought to overthrow the right-wing, royalist government of Greece in the aftermath. Importantly, while both the British and then the US supported the Greek government, the USSR did not lend any aid to the communist rebels, rightly fearing that doing so could lead to a much larger war. Furious at what he regarded as another instance of western capitalist imperialism, however, Stalin pulled the USSR out of the Bretton Woods economic agreement in early 1948.

The Truman Doctrine was closely tied to the fear of what American policy-makers called the “Domino Theory”: if one nation “fell” to communism, it was feared, communism would spread to the surrounding countries. Thus, preventing a communist takeover anywhere, even in a comparatively small and militarily insignificant country, was essential from the perspective of American foreign policy during the entire period of the Cold War. That theory was central to American policy from the 1950s through the 1980s, deciding the course of politics, conflicts, and wars from Latin America to Southeast Asia.

Along with the Truman Doctrine, the United States introduced the Marshall Plan in 1948, named for the American secretary of state at the time. The Marshall Plan consisted of enormous American loans to European countries trying to rebuild from the war. European states also founded an intra-European economic body called the Organization of European Economic Cooperation that any country accepting loans was obliged to join. Stalin regarded the OEEC as a puppet of the US, so he banned all countries under Soviet influence from joining, and hence from accepting loans. Simultaneously, the Soviets were busy extracting wealth and materials from their new puppets in Eastern Europe to help

recover from their own war losses. The legacy of the Marshall Plan, the OEEC, and Soviet policy was to create a stark economic division: while Western Europe rapidly recovered from the war, the East remained poor and comparatively backwards.

Already by 1946, in the words of Winston Churchill, the “iron curtain” had truly fallen across Eastern Europe. Everywhere, local communist parties at first ruled along with other parties, following free elections. Then, with the aid of Soviet “advisers,” communists from Poland to Romania pushed other parties out through terror tactics and legal bans on non-communist political organizations. Soon, each of the Eastern European states was officially pledged to cooperate with the USSR. Practically speaking, this meant that every Eastern European country was controlled by a communist party that took its orders directly from Moscow – there was no independent political decision-making allowed.

The major exception was Yugoslavia. Ironically, the one state that had already been taken over by a genuine communist revolution was the one that was not a puppet of the USSR. During the war, an effective anti-German resistance was led by Yugoslav communists, and in the aftermath they succeeded in seizing power over the entire country. Tito, the communist leader of Yugoslavia, had great misgivings about the Soviet takeover of the rest of Eastern Europe, and he and Stalin angrily broke with one another after the war. Thus, Yugoslavia was a communist country, but not one controlled by the USSR.

In turn, it was Stalin’s anger that Yugoslavia was outside of his grasp that inspired the Soviets to carry out a series of purges against the communist leadership of the Eastern European countries now under Soviet domination. Soviet agents sought “Titoists” who were supposedly undermining the strength of commitment to communism. Between 1948 and 1953 more communists were killed by other communists than had died at the hands of the Nazis during the war (i.e. in terms of direct Nazi persecution of communists, not including casualties of World War II itself). Communist leaders were put on show trials, both in their own countries and sometimes after being hauled off to Moscow, where they were first tortured into confessing various made-up crimes (collaborating with western powers to overthrow communism was a popular one), then executed. It is worth noting that this period, especially the first few years of the 1950s, saw anti-Semitism become a staple of show trials and purges as well, as latent anti-Semitic sentiments came to the surface and Jewish communist leaders suffered a disproportionate number of arrests and executions, often accused of being “Zionists” secretly in league with the west.

Simultaneously, the world was dividing into the two “camps” of the Cold War. The zones of occupation of Germany controlled by the US, France, and Britain became the new nation of the Federal Republic of Germany, known as West Germany, while the Soviet-controlled zone became the German Democratic Republic, or East Germany. Nine western European countries joined the US in forming the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, NATO, whose stated purpose was the defense of each of the member states from invasion – understood to be the invasion of Western Europe by the USSR. The USSR tested its first atomic bomb in August of 1949, thereby establishing the stakes of the conflict: the total destruction of human life. And, finally, by 1955 the Soviets had formalized their own military system with the Warsaw Pact, which bound together the Soviet Bloc in a web of military alliances comparable to NATO.

In hindsight, it is somewhat surprising that the USSR was not more aggressive in the early years of the Cold War, making no overt attempts to sponsor communist takeovers outside of Eastern Europe. The one direct confrontation between the two camps took place between May of 1948 and June of 1949, when the Soviets blockaded West Berlin. The city of Berlin was in East Germany, but its western “zones” remained in the hands of the US, Britain, and France, the phenomenon a strange relic of the immediate aftermath of the war. As Cold War tensions mounted, Stalin ordered the blockade of all supplies going to the western zones. The US led a massive ongoing airlift of food and supplies for

nearly a year while both sides studiously avoided armed confrontation. In the end, the Soviets abandoned the blockade, and West Berlin became a unique pocket of the western camp in the midst of communist East Germany.



A US Air Force transport plane dropping candy (part of a morale-boosting campaign) to children during the Berlin Airlift.

It is worth considering the fact that Europe had been, scant years earlier, the most powerful region on Earth, ruling the majority of the surface of the globe. Now, it was either under the heel of one superpower or dominated by the other, unable to make large-scale international political decisions without implicating itself in the larger conflict. The rivalries that had divided the former “great powers” in the past seemed insignificant compared to the threat of a single overwhelming war initiated by foreign powers that could result in the end of history.

The USSR During the Cold War

Stalin died in 1954, leaving behind a country that was still comparatively poor, but enormously powerful. In addition, Stalin left a legacy of death and imprisonment that touched nearly every family in the USSR, with millions still trapped in the gulags of Siberia. After a power struggle between the top members of the communist party, Stalin’s successor emerged: Nikita Khrushchev, a former coal miner and engineer who rose in the ranks of the party to become its leader. Khrushchev was a “true believer” in the Soviet system, genuinely believing that the USSR would overtake the west economically and that its citizens would in turn eventually enjoy much better standards of living than those experienced in the west.

Khrushchev broke with Stalinism soon after securing power. In 1956, he gave a speech to the leaders of the communist party later dubbed the “secret speech” – it was not broadcast to the general public, but Khrushchev allowed it to leak to the state-controlled press. In it, Khrushchev blamed Stalin for bringing about a “cult of personality” that was

at variance with true communist principles, and for “excesses,” a thinly veiled acknowledgement of the Siberian prison camps and summary executions. Shortly after the speech, Khrushchev had four million prisoners released from the gulags as a practical gesture demonstrating his sincerity. This period is called “The Thaw” in Soviet history. For a brief period, there was another flowering of literary and artistic experimentation comparable to that of the early 1920s. The ubiquitous censorship was relaxed, with a few accurate accounts of the gulags making it into mainstream publication. In turn, among many, there were genuine hopes for larger political reforms of the system.

This hope of a new beginning was not limited to the Soviet Union itself. In October of 1956, a reformist faction of the Hungarian communist party inspired a mass uprising calling for not just a reformed, more humanistic communism, but the expulsion of Soviet forces and “advisers” completely. That led to a full-scale invasion by the Soviet army that killed several thousand protesters in violent clashes (primarily in the capital city of Budapest), followed by the arrests of over half a million people in the aftermath. It was clear that Khrushchev might not want to follow directly in Stalin’s footsteps, but he had no intention of allowing genuine independence in the Soviet Bloc countries of Eastern Europe.

Angered both by the events in Hungary and by the growth of outright dissent with the Soviet system in the USSR itself, Khrushchev reasserted control. A few noteworthy works of art that hinted at dissent were allowed to trickle out (until Khrushchev was ousted by hardliners in 1964, at any rate), but larger-scale change was out of the question. The state instead concentrated on wildly ambitious – sometimes astonishingly impractical – economic projects. Soviet engineers and planners drained whole river systems to irrigate fields, Soviet factories churned out thousands of tons of products and materials no one wanted, and whole regions were polluted to the point of becoming nearly uninhabitable. Over time, cynicism replaced terror as the default outlook of Soviet citizens. It was no longer as dangerous to be alive as it had been under Stalin, but people recognized that the system was not “really” about the pursuit of communism. Instead, for most, the only hope of achieving a decent standard of living and relative personal stability was forming the right connections within the enormous party bureaucracy. The USSR went from a murderous police state under Stalin to a bloated, corrupt police state under Khrushchev and the leaders who followed him.

It was also under Khrushchev that the Cold War reached its most frenzied pitch. Khrushchev himself was an explosive personality who sincerely believed in the possibility of the USSR “winning” the Cold War by outstripping the western world economically and winning over the nations of the Third World to communism politically. To that end, he continued the Stalinist focus on building up heavy industry and, especially, military hardware, but he also devoted huge energies toward science and engineering.

During Khrushchev’s tenure as premier the “space race” joined the arms race as a major centerpiece of Cold War policy. Despite the limited practical consequences of some aspects of the space race, it was symbolically important to both sides – it was a very visible demonstration of scientific superiority, and the first superpower to reach a given breakthrough in the space race had thus “won” a major symbolic victory in the eyes of the world. In addition, since the space race was based on the mastery of rocket technology, the military implications were obvious. In 1957, the Soviets launched Sputnik, the first satellite to orbit the earth, an event which was perceived as a major Soviet triumph in the Cold War. Khrushchev claimed that the USSR had also developed missiles that could strike targets on the other side of the world, and thus the west feared that the Soviets could as easily detonate a nuclear weapon in the US as in Europe.



A commemorative Soviet postage stamp depicting Sputnik's orbit.

The resulting fear and resentment between the two sides saw even greater emphasis on both the space race and the buildup of nuclear arms going into the 1960s. The American President John F Kennedy was a hard-line anti-communist, a “cold warrior,” and he believed it was important to stand up to the Soviets symbolically and, if necessary, militarily. In 1959, Cuban revolutionaries overthrew the right-wing dictator Fulgencio Batista (who had been an American ally), and fearing American intervention, eventually aligned themselves with the USSR. Thus, as Kennedy took office in 1960, he faced not only the growing technological and military power of the USSR itself, but what he regarded as a Soviet puppet on the very doorstep of US territory.

In 1962, the US Central Intelligence Agency staged an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Cuban communist leader Fidel Castro, an event known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion. In the aftermath, Castro and Khrushchev agreed to

install missile batteries in Cuba both as a deterrent against a potential invasion by the US in the future and to redress the superiority of American missile deployments. Khrushchev was eager to establish a military presence in the western hemisphere, especially since the US had already installed missile batteries in its allied nations of Italy and Turkey within striking distance of the USSR. American spy planes, however, detected the construction of the missile site in Cuba and the shipments of missiles en route to Cuba, leading to the point in history when the human race stood closest to complete extinction: the Cuban Missile Crisis.

When the US government learned of the Soviet missiles, there was serious consideration of launching a full-scale assault on Cuba, something that could have led directly to nuclear war. Many American military leaders believed at the time in the possibility of a “limited nuclear war” in which missile sites would be destroyed quickly enough to prevent the Soviets from launching counter-strikes. Instead, however, Kennedy and Khrushchev carefully engaged in behind-the-scenes diplomacy, both of them realizing the stakes of the conflict and, thankfully for world history, not wanting to destroy the world in the name of national pride. The American and Soviet navies faced off in the Atlantic while frenzied diplomacy sought an end to the crisis. After thirteen panicked days, both sides agreed to withdraw their missiles, but not before an incident in which a Soviet submarine very nearly launched nuclear torpedoes at an American ship. A single Soviet officer – Vasili Arkhipov – called off the strike that could have led directly to nuclear war.

In the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, the US and USSR agreed to create a “hotline” to ensure rapid communication in the event of future crises. The United States dropped the very idea of “limited” nuclear war from its tactical repertoire and instead recognized that any nuclear strike was the equivalent of “M.A.D.” (Mutually Assured Destruction). While the arms race between the superpowers continued, spiking again during the 1980s, both sides did enter into various treaties that limited the pace of nuclear arms production as well.

In 1964, having lost the confidence of key members of the Politburo, Khrushchev was forced out of office. He was replaced by Leonid Brezhnev, a lifelong communist bureaucrat. Brezhnev would hold power until 1982, overseeing a long period of what is usually characterized as stagnation by historians: the Soviet system, including its nominal adherence to Marxism-Leninism, would remain in place, but even elites abandoned the idea that “real” communism was achievable. Instead, life in the USSR was about trying to find a place in the system, rather than pursuing the more far-reaching goals of communist theory. The state and the economy – deeply wedded in any case – were rife with corruption and nepotism, and a deep-seated, bitter cynicism became the outlook of most Soviet citizens toward their government and their lot in life. Arguably, this pattern had already emerged under Khrushchev, but it truly came of age under Brezhnev.

During Brezhnev’s tenure as the Soviet premier, another eastern bloc nation tried unsuccessfully to break away from Soviet domination: Czechoslovakia. In the Spring of 1968, the Czech communist leader Alexander Dubcek (who had fought against the Nazis in the war and had been a staunch ally and trusted underling of the Soviets up to that point) received permission from Moscow to experiment with limited reforms. He called for “socialism with a human face,” meaning a kind of communist government that allowed freedom of speech, a liberalized outlook on human expression, and a diversified economy that could address sectors besides heavy industry. Dubcek relaxed censorship and allowed workers to organize into Soviets (councils) as they had in the early years of communist revolution in Russia. These reforms were eagerly embraced by the Czechs and Slovaks.

Predictably, the reforms proved too radical for Moscow. Brezhnev sent in the Soviet military, and all of the other Warsaw Pact countries (except Romania) also sent in troops. This reaction was regarded around the world as especially crude and disproportionate, given that the Czechs and Slovaks did not rise up in any kind of violent way (as the Hungarians had done, at least briefly, twelve years earlier). Instead, the message was clear: no meaningful reform would

be possible in the East unless the leadership in Moscow somehow underwent a fundamental change of outlook. That change did eventually come, but not until the 1980s under Mikhail Gorbachev.

Conclusion: What Went Wrong with the USSR

In historical hindsight, the paradox of a “communist” country that so profoundly failed to realize its stated goals of freedom, equality, and justice, has led many people (not just historians) to speculate about what was inherently flawed with the Soviet system. There are many theories, three of which are considered below.

One idea is that the Soviet state was trapped in impossible circumstances. It was largely cut off from the aid of the rest of the world until after World War II, and the Bolsheviks inherited control of a backwards, economically-underdeveloped nation. They did their best, however brutal their methods, to catch up with the nations of the west and to create at least the possibility of a better life for future Soviet citizens. This thesis is supported by the success of the Red Army: if Stalin had not industrialized Russia and the Ukraine by force, the theory goes, the results of World War II would have been even more awful.

Another take is that communism is somehow contrary to human nature and thus doomed to failure, no matter what the circumstances or context. Here, scholars note the incredible prevalence of corruption at every level of Soviet society: the huge black market and the nepotism and infighting present in everything from getting a job to getting an apartment in one of the major cities. Greed proved an implacable foe to communist social organization, with the party apparatchiks reaping the benefits of their positions – better food, better housing, vacations – that were never available to rank-and-file citizens.

A more subtle and sympathetic interpretation is that some kind of communism might be possible (social democracies have thrived in Europe for decades, after all), but the Soviet system went mad with trying to control everything. The Soviet economy was the ultimate expression of the idea of a command economy, with every product produced according to arcane quotas set by huge bureaucracies within the Soviet state, and every industry was beholden to equally unrealistic quotas. The most elementary laws of supply and demand in economics were ignored in favor of irrational, and indeed arbitrary, systems of production. The results were chronic shortages of goods and services people actually needed (or wanted) and equally vast surpluses of useless, shoddy junk, from ill-fitting shoes to unreliable machinery. To cite a single example (noted by the historian Tony Judt), party leaders in the Soviet republic of Kyrgyzstan told farmers to buy up grain supplies from stores in order to meet their yearly quotas; those quotas were utterly impossible to meet through actual farming.

All of these ideas have something to them. It should also be considered that there had never been anything like a democratic or liberal society in Russia. There was no tradition of what the British called the “loyal opposition” of political parties who may disagree on particulars but who are still accepted as legitimate expressions of the will and opinion of parts of the citizenry. There were no “checks and balances” to hold back corruption either, and by the Brezhnev era political connections were far more important than was any kind of heartfelt devotion to Marxist theory. Thus, the kinds of decisions made by the Soviet leadership were inspired by a pure, ruthless will to see results against a backdrop of staggering inefficiency and corruption.

In the end, perhaps the biggest problem with the Soviet system was the fact that it was more important to fit into the system than to speak the truth. The essential threat of violence and imprisonment during the Stalinist period cast a long shadow on the rest of Soviet history. Conformity, ideological dogmatism, and indifference to any notion of fairness were

all synonymous with “success” in Soviet society. Before long, competence and honesty were threats to too many people already in power to be allowed to exist – as an example, famous Russian scientists lived under house arrest for decades because they could not be disposed of, but neither could they be allowed to state their views openly.

It also bears consideration that not everything about Soviet society was, actually, a failure. After the “Thaw” in the early 1950s, almost no one was executed for simply disagreeing with the state, and prison terms were much shorter. Standards of living were mediocre, but medical care, housing, and food was either free or cheap because of state subsidies. The kind of “leveling-out” associated with communist theory did happen, in a sense, because most people lived at a similar standard of living, the perks allowed to senior members of the communist party notwithstanding. In the end, the Soviet Union represented one of the most profound, albeit often blood-soaked and inhumane, political experiments in world history.

Image Citations (Wikimedia Commons):

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CHAPTER 13: POSTWAR CONFLICT

One of the definitive transformations in global politics after World War II was the shift in the locus of power from Europe to the United States and the Soviet Union. It was American aid or Soviet power that guided the reconstruction of Europe after the war, and both superpowers proved themselves more than capable of making policy decisions for the countries within their respective spheres of influence. The Soviets directly controlled Eastern Europe and had an enormous amount of influence in the other communist countries, while the United States exercised considerable influence on the member nations of NATO.

Thus, many Europeans struggled to make sense of their own identity, with the height of European power still being a living memory. One issue of tremendous importance to most Europeans was the status of their colonies, most of which were still intact in the immediate postwar period. Many Europeans felt that, with all their flaws, colonies still somehow proved the relevance and importance of the mother countries – as an example, the former British prime minister Winston Churchill was dismayed by the prospect of Indian independence from the British commonwealth even when most Britons accepted it as inevitable. Many in France and Britain in particular thought that their colonies could somehow keep them on the same level as the superpowers in terms of global power and, in a sense, relevance.

There were a host of problems with imperialism by 1945, however, that were all too evident. Colonial troops had played vital roles in the war, with millions of Africans and Asians serving in the allied armies (well over two million troops from India alone served as part of the British military). Colonial troops fought in the name of defending democracy from fascism and tyranny, yet back in their home countries they did not have access to democratic rights. Many independence movements, such as India's, refused to aid in the war effort as a result. Once the war was over, troops returned home to societies that were still governed not only as political dependencies, but were divided starkly along racial lines. The contrast between the ostensible goals of the war and the obvious injustice in the colonies could not have been more evident.

Simultaneously, the Cold War became the overarching framework of conflict around the world, sometimes playing a primary role in domestic conflicts in countries hundreds or even thousands of miles from either of the superpowers themselves. At its worst, the Cold War led to “proxy wars” between American-led or at least American-supplied anti-communists and communist insurgents inspired by, and occasionally supported by the Soviet Union or communist (as of 1949) China. There was thus a complex matrix of conflict around the world that combined independence struggles within colonies on the one hand and proxy conflicts and wars between factions caught in the web of the Cold War on the other. Sometimes, independence movements like those of India and Ghana managed to avoid being ensnared in the Cold War. Other times, however, countries like Vietnam became battlegrounds on which the conflict between capitalism and communism erupted in enormous bloodshed.

The newly-founded United Nations generally failed to prevent the outbreak of war despite its nominal goal of arbitrating peaceful solutions for international problems. It was hamstrung by the fact that the two superpowers were among those with permanent seats on the UN Security Council, the body that was charged with authorizing the use of force when necessary. Likewise, the two “camps” of the Cold War generally remained loyal to their respective superpower leaders, ensuring that there could be no unified decision making when it came to Cold War conflicts.

In addition, while some independence movements that avoided becoming embroiled in the Cold War were able to

secure national independence peacefully, others did not. In many cases, European imperial powers reacted violently to their colonial subjects' demands for independent governance, leading both the bloodshed and grotesque violations of human rights. Here, again, the United Nations was generally unable to prevent violence, although it did at times at least provide an ethical framework by which the actions of the imperialist powers might be judged historically.

Major Cold War Conflicts

Fortunately for the human species, the Cold War never turned into a “hot” war between the two superpowers, despite close calls like that of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It did, however, lead to wars around the world that were part of the Cold War setting but also involved conflicts between colonizers and the colonized. In other words, many conflicts in the postwar era represented a combination of battles for independence from European empires and proxy wars between the two camps of the Cold War.

The first such war was in Korea. Korea had been occupied by Japan since 1910, one of the first countries to be conquered during Japan's bid to create an East Asian and Pacific empire that culminated in the Pacific theater of World War II. After the defeat of Japan, Korea was occupied by Soviet troops in the north and US troops in the south. In the midst of the confusion in the immediate postwar era, the two superpowers ignored Korean demands for independence and instead divided the country in two. In 1950, North Korean troops supported with Soviet arms and allied Chinese troops invaded the south in the name of reuniting the country under communist rule. This was a case in which both the Soviets and the Chinese directly supported an invasion in the name of spreading communism, something that would become far less common in subsequent conflicts. A United Nations force consisting mostly of American soldiers, sailors, and pilots fought alongside South Korean troops against the North Korean and Chinese forces.



Refugees fleeing south after the invasion by North Korean forces.

Meanwhile, in 1945 Vietnamese insurgents declared Vietnam's independence from France, and French forces (such as they were following the German occupation) hastily invaded in an attempt to hold on to the French colony of Indochina. When the Korean War exploded a few years later, the United States intervened to support France, convinced by the events in Korea that communism was spreading like a virus across Asia. As American involvement grew, orders for munitions and equipment from the US to Japan revitalized the Japanese economy and, ironically given the carnage of the Pacific theater of World War II, began to forge a strong political alliance between the two former enemies.

After three years of bloody fighting, including the invasion of a full-scale Chinese army in support of the northern forces, the Korean War ended in a stalemate. A demilitarized zone was established between North and South Korea in 1953, and both sides agreed to a cease fire. Technically, however, the war has never officially ended – both sides have simply remained in a tense state of truce since 1953. The war itself tore apart the country, with three million casualties (including 140,000 American casualties), and a stark ideological and economic divide between north and south that only grew stronger in the ensuing decades. As South Korea evolved to become a modern, technologically advanced and politically democratic society, the north devolved into a nominally “communist” tyranny in which poverty and even outright famine were tragic realities of life.

The Korean War energized the American obsession with preventing the spread of communism. President Truman of the US insisted, against the bitter protests of the British and French, that West Germany be allowed to rearm in order to help bolster the anti-Soviet alliance. As French forces suffered growing defeats in Indochina, the US ramped up its commitment in order to prevent another Asian nation from becoming a communist state. The American theory of the “domino effect” of the spread of communism from country to country seemed entirely plausible at the time, and across the American political spectrum there was a strong consensus that communism could only be held in check by the application of military force.

That obsession led directly to the Vietnam War (known in Vietnam as the American War). The Vietnam War is among the most infamous in modern American history (for Americans) because America lost it. In turn, American commitment to the war only makes if it is placed in its historical context, that of a Cold War conflict that appeared to American policymakers as a test of resolve in the face of the spread of communism. The conflict was, in fact, as much about colonialism and imperialism as it was communism: the essential motivation of the North Vietnamese forces was the desire to seize genuine independence from foreign powers. The war itself was an outgrowth of the conflict between the Vietnamese and their French colonial masters, one that eventually dragged in the United States.

The war “really” began with the end of World War II. During the war, the Japanese seized Vietnam from the French, but with the Japanese defeat the French tried to reassert control, putting a puppet emperor on the throne and moving their forces back into the country. Vietnamese independence leaders, principally the former Parisian college student (and former dishwasher – he worked at restaurants in Paris while a student) Ho Chi Minh, led the communist North Vietnamese forces (the Viet Minh) in a vicious guerrilla war against the beleaguered French. In a prescient moment with a French official, Ho Chi Minh once prophesied that “you will kill ten of our men, but we will kill one of yours and you will end up by wearing yourselves out.” The Soviet Union and China both provided weapons and aid to the North Vietnamese, while the US anticipated its own (later) invasion by supporting the South.



Ho Chi Minh in 1946.

The French period of the conflict reached its culminating point in 1954 when the French were soundly defeated at Dien Bien Phu, a French fortress that was overwhelmed by the Viet Minh. The French retreated, leaving Vietnam torn between the communists in the north and a corrupt but anti-communist force in the south supported by the United States. Refusing to allow the national elections that had been planned for 1956, the US instead propped up an unpopular president, Ngo Dinh Diem, who claimed authority over the entire country. An insurgency, labeled the Viet Cong (“Vietnamese communists”) by the Diem government, supported by the north erupted in 1958, leading the US to provision hundreds of millions of dollars in aid and, soon, an increasing number of military advisers to the south.

In 1964, pressured by both Soviet and Chinese advisers and with the US stepping up pressure on the Viet Cong, the Viet Minh leadership launched a full-scale invasion in the name of Vietnamese unification. American involvement skyrocketed as the South Vietnamese proved unable to contain the Viet Minh and the Viet Cong insurgents. Over time, thousands of American military “advisers,” mostly made up of what would become known as special forces, were joined by hundreds of thousands of American troops. In 1964, citing a fabricated attack on an American ship in the Gulf of Tonkin, President Lyndon Johnson called for a full-scale armed response, which opened the floodgates for a true commitment to the war (technically, war was never declared, however, with the entire conflict constituting a “police action” from the American policy perspective).

Ultimately, Ho Chi Minh was proven right in his predictions about the war. American and South Vietnamese forces were fought to a standstill by the Viet Minh and Viet Cong, with neither side winning a definitive victory. All the while, however, the war was becoming more and more unpopular in America itself and in its allied countries. As the years went by, journalists catalogued much of the horrific carnage unleashed by American forces, with jungles leveled by chemical agents and napalm and, notoriously, civilians massacred. The United States resorted to a lottery system tied to conscription – “the draft” – in 1969, which led to tens of thousands of American soldiers sent against their will to fight

in jungles thousands of miles from home. Despite the vast military commitment, US and South Korean forces started to lose ground by 1970.

The entire youth movement of the 1960s and 1970s was deeply embedded in the anti-war stance caused by the mendacious press campaigns about the war carried on by the US government, by atrocities committed against Vietnamese civilians, and by the deep unpopularity of the draft. In 1973, with American approval for the war hovering at 30%, President Richard Nixon oversaw the withdrawal of American troops and the end of support for the South Vietnamese. The Viet Minh finally seized the capital of Saigon and ended the war in 1975. The human cost was immense: over a million Vietnamese died, along with some 60,000 American troops.



A Pulitzer-Prize winning photo from 1972 depicting the aftermath of a napalm attack on a South Vietnamese village suspected of harboring Viet Cong forces. The girl, Phan Thi Kim Phuc, is naked after stripping off her burning clothes. She survived and ultimately became a peace activist as an adult. Images like the above helped to inspire fervent anti-war sentiments in the United States and Europe.

In historical hindsight, one of the striking aspects of the Vietnam War was the relative restraint of the Soviet Union. The USSR provided both military supplies and financial aid to North Vietnamese forces, but it fell far short of any kind of sustained intervention along the American model in the south. Likewise, the People's Republic of China supported the Viet Minh, but it did so in direct competition with the USSR (following a historic break between the two countries in 1956). Nevertheless, whereas the US regarded Vietnam as a crucial bulwark against the spread of communism, and subsequently engaged in a full-scale war as a result, the USSR remained circumspect, focusing on maintaining power and control in the eastern bloc and avoiding direct military commitment in Vietnam.

That being noted, not all Cold War conflicts were so lopsided in terms of superpower involvement. As described in the last chapter, Cuba was caught at the center of the single most dangerous nuclear standoff in history in part because the USSR was willing to confront American interests directly. Something comparable occurred across the world in Egypt even earlier, representing another case of an independence movement that became embedded in Cold War politics. There, unlike in Vietnam, both superpowers played a major role in determining the future of a nation emerging from imperial control, although (fortunately) neither committed itself to a war in doing so.

Egypt had been part of the British empire since 1882 when it was seized during the Scramble for Africa. It achieved

a degree of independence after World War I, but remained squarely under British control in terms of its foreign policy. Likewise, the Suez Canal – the crucially important link between the Mediterranean and Red Sea completed in 1869 – was under the direct control of a Canal Company dominated by the British and French. In 1952 the Egyptian general Gamal Abdel Nasser overthrew the British-supported regime and asserted complete Egyptian independence. The United States initially sought to bring him into the American camp by offering funds for a massive new dam on the Nile, but then Nasser made an arms deal with (communist) Czechoslovakia. The funds were denied, and Nasser announced that he would instead seize the Suez Canal (which flowed directly through Egyptian territory) to pay for the dam instead.

Thus, in the summer of 1956 Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. Henceforth, all of the traffic going through the vitally important canal would be regulated by Egypt directly. Stung by the nationalization, Britain and France plotted to reassert control. The British and French were joined by Israeli politicians who saw Nasser's bold move as a direct threat to Israeli security (sharing as they did an important border). A few months of frenzied behind-the-scenes diplomacy and planning ensued, and in October Israeli, British, and French forces invaded Egypt.

Despite being a legacy of imperialism, the “Suez Crisis” swiftly became a Cold War conflict as well. Concerned both at the imperial posturing of Britain and France and at the prospect of the invasion sparking Soviet involvement, US President Dwight Eisenhower forcefully demanded that the Israelis, French, and British withdraw, threatening economic boycotts (all while attempting to reduce the volatility with the Soviets). Days later Khrushchev threatened nuclear strikes if the French, Israeli, and British forces did not pull back. Cowed, the Israeli, French, and British forces retreated. The Suez Crisis demonstrated that the US dominated the policy decisions of its allies almost as completely as did the Soviets theirs. The US might not run its allied governments as puppet states, but it could directly shape their foreign policy.

In the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, Egypt's control of the canal was assured. While generally closer to the USSR than the US in its foreign policy, it also tried to initiate a genuine “third way” between the two superpowers, and Egyptian leaders called for Arab nationalism and unity in the Middle East as a way to stay independent of the Cold War. Despite that intention, however, the Suez Crisis saw both superpowers take a more active interest in maintaining client, or at least friendly, states in the region, regardless of the ideological commitments of those states. This led to the strange spectacle of the United States, nominal champion of democracy, forming a close alliance with the autocratic monarchy of Saudi Arabia and other states resolutely uncommitted to representative government or even basic human rights.

Independence Movements and Decolonization

Despite the enormous pressure exerted by the superpowers, some independence movements did manage to avoid becoming a proxy conflict within the Cold War. For the most part, the simplest way in which an independence movement might avoid superpower involvement was to steer clear of communist rhetoric or nationalized industries. From Asia to Latin America, independence movements and rebel groups that adopted communist ideology were targeted by the US, whereas those that avoided it rarely drew the ire of either superpower. The exceptions were countries like Iran that tried to nationalize domestic industries – the US sponsored a coup to overthrow the prime minister Mohammed Mosadeq in 1953 for trying to assert Iranian ownership of its own oil fields, replacing him with a corrupt king, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was beholden to American interests. Still, in general it was possible for a country to fight for its independence and still stay in the good graces of the USSR (as with Egypt) without openly embracing communism, whereas it was impossible for a country to embrace socialism and stay out of the crosshairs

of the US thanks to the Truman Doctrine, which committed the United States to armed intervention in the case of a communist-backed uprising.

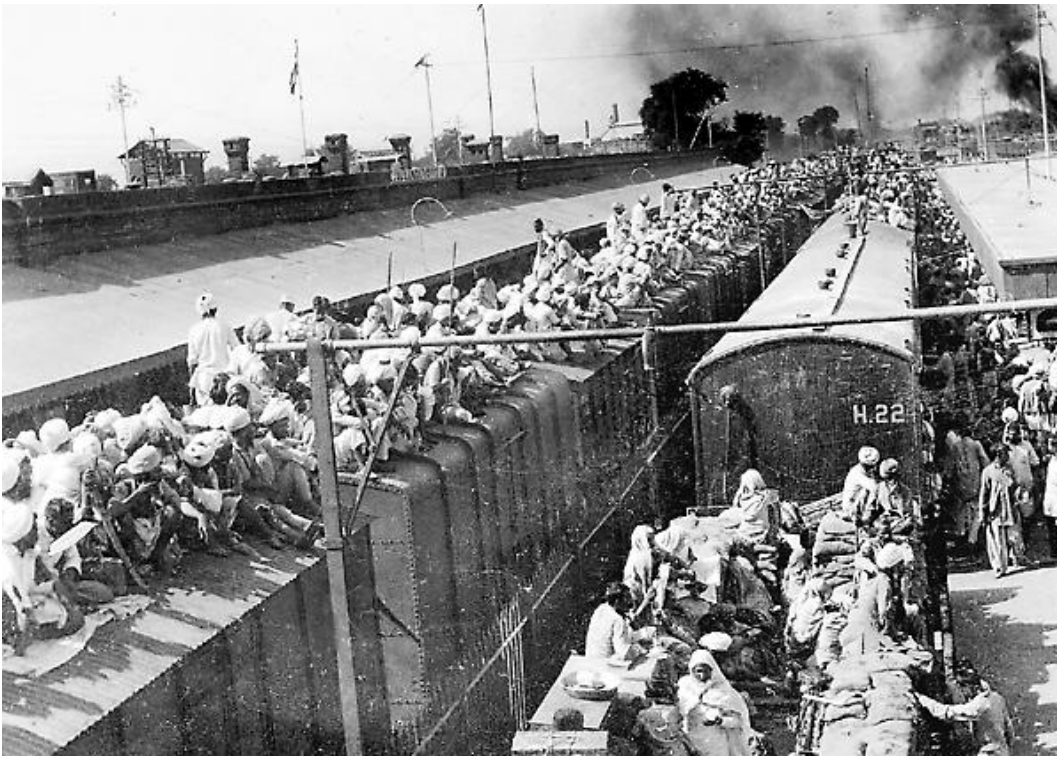
Thus, while there were only a handful of true proxy wars over the course of the Cold War, there were dozens of successful movements of independence. As quickly as European empires had grown in the second half of the nineteenth century, they collapsed in the decades following World War II in a phenomenon known as decolonization. In the inverse of the Scramble for Africa, nearly the entire continent of Africa remained colonized by European powers as of World War II but nearly all of it was independent by the end of the 1960s. Likewise, European possessions in Asia all but vanished in the postwar era.

Given the rapidity with which the empires collapsed it is tempting to imagine that the European states simply acknowledged the moral bankruptcy of imperialism after World War II and peacefully relinquished their possessions. Instead, however, decolonization was often as bloody and inhumane as had been the establishment of empire in the first place. In some cases, such as Dutch control of Indonesia and French sovereignty in Indochina, European powers clung desperately to colonies in the name of retaining their geopolitical relevance. In others, such as the British in Kenya and the French in Algeria, large numbers of white settlers refused to be “abandoned” by the European metropole, leading to sometimes staggering levels of violence. That being noted, there were also major (soon to be former) colonies that achieved independence without the need for violent insurrection against their imperial masters. (Note: given the very large number of countries that achieved independence during the period of decolonization, this chapter concentrates on some of the particularly consequential cases in terms of their geopolitical impact at the time and since).

The case of India is iconic in that regard. Long the “jewel in the crown of the British empire,” India was both an economic powerhouse and a massive symbol of British prestige. By World War II, however, the Indian National Congress had agitated for independence for almost sixty years. An astonishing 2.5 million Indian troops served the British Empire during World War II despite the growth in nationalist sentiment, but returned after victory in Europe was achieved to find a social and political system still designed to keep Indians from positions of importance in the Indian administration. Peaceful protests before the war grew in intensity during it, and in the aftermath (in part because of the financial devastation of the war), a critical mass of British politicians finally conceded that India would have to be granted independence in the near future. The British state established the date of independence as July 18, 1947.

The British government, however, made it clear that the actual logistics of independence and of organizing a new government were to be left to the Indians. A conflict exploded between the Indian Muslim League and the Hindu-dominated Congress Party, with the former demanding an independent Muslim state. The British came to support the idea and finally the Congress Party conceded to it despite the vociferous resistance of the independence leader Mahatma Gandhi. When independence became a reality, India was divided between a non-contiguous Muslim state, Pakistan, and a majority-Hindu state, India.

This event is referred to as “The Partition.” Millions of Muslims were driven from India and millions of Hindus and Sikhs were driven from Pakistan, leading to countless acts of violence during the expulsion of both Muslims and Hindus from what had been their homes. Hundreds of thousands, and possibly more than a million people died, and the states of Pakistan and India remain at loggerheads to the present. Gandhi himself, who bitterly opposed the Partition, was murdered by a Hindu extremist in 1948.



Refugees during the Partition.

Religious (and ethnic) divides within former colonies were not unique to India. Many countries that sought independence were products of imperialism in the first place – the “national” borders of states like Iraq, Ghana, and Rwanda had been arbitrarily created by the imperial powers decades earlier with complete disregard for the religious and ethnic differences of the people who lived within the borders. In the Iraqi example, both Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christian Arabs (the Assyrians, many of whom claim a direct line of descent from ancient Assyria), different Arab ethnicities, and Kurds all lived side-by-side. Its very existence was due to a hairbrained scheme by Winston Churchill, foreign secretary of the British governments after World War I, to lump together different oil-producing regions in one convenient state under British domination. Iraq’s ethnic and religious diversity did not guarantee violent conflict, of course, but when circumstances arose that inspired conflict, violence could, and often did, result.

The current ongoing crisis of Israel – Palestine is both a result of arbitrary borders drawn up by former imperial powers as well as a unique case of a nationalist movement achieving its goals for a ethnic-religious homeland. The British had held the “mandate” (political governorship) of the territory of Palestine before WWII, having seized it after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Thousands of European Jews had been immigrating to Palestine since around the turn of the century, fleeing anti-Semitism in Europe and hoping to create a Jewish state as part of the Zionist movement founded during the Dreyfus Affair in France.

During World War I, the British had both promised to support the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine while also assuring various Arab leaders that Britain would aid them in creating independent states in the aftermath of the Ottoman Empire’s expected demise. Even the official British declaration that offered support for a Jewish homeland – the Balfour Declaration of 1917 – specifically included language that promised the Arabs of Palestine (both Muslim and Christian) support in ensuring their own “civil and religious rights.” In other words, the dominant European power in the area at the time, and the one that was to directly rule it from 1920 – 1947, tried to appease both sides with vague assurances.

After World War I, however, the British established control over a large swath of territory that included the future state of Israel, frustrating Arab hopes for their own independence. Countries like Iraq, Transjordan, and the Nadj (forerunner to today's Saudi Arabia) were simply invented by British politicians, often with compliant Arab leaders dropped onto newly-invented thrones in the process. Meanwhile, between 1918 and 1939, the Jewish population of Palestine went from roughly 60,000 to 650,000 as Jews attracted to Zionism moved to the area. The entire period was replete with riots and growing hostility between the Arab and Jewish populations, with the British trying (and generally failing) to keep the peace. As war loomed in 1939 the British even tried to restrict Jewish immigration to avoid alienating the region's Arab majority.

After World War II, the British proved unable and unwilling to try to manage the volatile region, turning the territory over to the newly-created United Nations in April of 1947. The UN's plan to divide the territory into two states – one for Arabs and one for Jews – was rejected by all of the countries in the region, and Israel's creation as a formal state in May of 1948 saw nine months of war between the Jews of the newly-created state of Israel and a coalition of the surrounding Arab states: Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, along with small numbers of volunteers from other Arab countries. Israel consistently fielded larger, better-trained and better-equipped armies in the ensuing war, as the Arab states were in their infancy as well, and Jewish settlers in Palestine had spent years organizing their own militias. When the dust settled, there were nearly a million Palestinian refugees and a state that promised to be the center of conflict in the region for decades to come.

Since the creation of Israel, there have been three more full-scale regional wars: the 1956 Suez War (noted above in the discussion of Egypt), which had no lasting consequences besides adding fuel to future conflicts, the Six-Day War of 1967, that resulted in great territorial gains for Israel, and the Yom Kippur War of 1973 that undid some of those gains. In addition to the actual wars, there have been ongoing explosions of violence between Palestinians and Israelis that continue to the present.

Africa

While the cases of India and Israel were, and are, of tremendous geopolitical significance, the most striking case of decolonization at the time was the wave of independence movements across Africa in the 1950s and 1960s. Africa had been the main target of the European imperialism of the late nineteenth century. The Scramble for Africa was both astonishingly quick (lasting from the 1880s until about 1900) and amazingly complete, with all of Africa but Liberia and Ethiopia taken over by one European state or another. In the postwar era, almost every African country secured independence just as quickly; the whole edifice of European empire in Africa collapsed as rapidly as it had arisen a bit over a half century earlier. In turn, in some places this process was peaceful, but in many it was extremely violent.

In West Africa, the former colony of the Gold Coast became well known for its charismatic independence leader Kwame Nkrumah. Nkrumah not only successfully led Ghana to independence in 1957 after a peaceful independence movement and negotiations with the British, but founded a movement called Pan-Africanism in which, he hoped, the nations of Africa might join together in a “United States of Africa” that would achieve parity with the other great powers of the world to the betterment of Africans everywhere. His vision was of a united African league, possibly even a single nation, whose collective power, wealth, and influence would ensure that outside powers would never again dominate Africans. While that vision did not come to pass, the concept of pan-Africanism was still vitally important as an inspiration for other African independence movements at the time.

In Kenya, in contrast, hundreds of thousands of white colonists were not interested in independence from Britain. By

1952, a complex web of nationalist rebels, impoverished villagers and farmers, and counter-insurgent fighters plunged the country into a civil war. The British and native white Kenyans reacted to the uprising by creating concentration camps, imprisoning rebels and slowly starving them to death in the hills. The rebels, disparagingly referred to as “Mau Maus” (meaning something like “hill savages”), in turn, attacked white civilians, in many cases murdering them outright. Finally, after 11 years of war, Kenya was granted its independence and elected a former insurgent leader as its first president. Ironically, while British forces were in a dominant position militarily, the British state was financially over-extended. Thus, Britain granted Kenyan independence in 1963.

While most former colonies adopted official policies of racial equality, and for the first time since the Scramble black Africans achieved political power almost everywhere, there was one striking exception: South Africa. South Africa had always been an unusual British colony. 21% of the South African population was white, divided between the descendents of British settlers and the older Dutch colony of Afrikaners who had been conquered and then incorporated by the British at the end of the nineteenth century. The Afrikaners in particular were virulently racist and intransigent, unwilling to share power with the black majority. As early as 1950 white South Africans (British and Afrikaner alike) emphatically insisted on the continuation of a policy known as Apartheid: the legal separation of whites and blacks and the complete subordination of the latter to the former.

South Africa became independent from Britain in 1961, but Apartheid remained as the backbone of the South African legal system, systematically repressing and oppressing the majority black population. Even as overtly racist laws were repealed elsewhere – not least in the United States as a result of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s – Apartheid remained resolutely intact. That system would remain in place until 1991, when the system finally collapsed and the long-imprisoned anti-Apartheid activist leader Nelson Mandela was released, soon becoming South Africa’s first black president.

British colonies were not alone in struggling to achieve independence, nor in the legacy of racial division that remained from the period of colonization. One of the most violent struggles for independence of the period of decolonization in Africa occurred in the French territory of Algeria. The struggles surrounding Algerian independence, which began in 1952, were among the bloodiest wars of decolonization. Hundreds of thousands of Algerians died, along with tens of thousands of French and *pieds-noires* (“black feet,” the pejorative term invented by the French for the white residents of Algeria). The heart of the conflict had to do with a concept of French identity: particularly on the political right, many French citizens felt that France’s remaining colonies were vital to its status as an important geopolitical power. Likewise, many in France were ashamed of the French defeat and occupation in World War II and refused to simply give up France’s empire without a struggle. This sentiment was felt particularly acutely by the French officer corps, with many French officers having only ever been on the losing side of wars (World War II and Indochina). They were thus determined to hold on to Algeria at all costs.

On the other hand, many French citizens realized all too well that the values the Fourth French Republic supposedly stood for – liberty, equality, and fraternity – were precisely what had been denied the native people of Algeria since it was first conquered by France during the restored monarchy under the Bourbons in the early nineteenth century. In fact, “native” Algerians were divided legally along racial and religious lines: Muslim Arab and Berber Algerians were denied access to political power and usually worked in lower-paying jobs, while white, Catholic Algerians (descendents of both French and Italian settlers) were fully enfranchised French citizens. In 1954, a National Liberation Front (FLN) composed of Arab and Berber Algerians demanded independence from France and launched a campaign of attacks on

both French officials and, soon, pieds-noires civilians.

The French response was brutal. French troops, many fresh from the defeat in Indochina, responded to the National Liberation Front with complete disregard for human rights, the legal conduct of soldiers in relation to civilians, or concern for the guilt or innocence of those suspected of supporting the rebellion. Infamously, the army resorted almost immediately to a systematic campaign of torture against captured rebels and those suspected of having information that could aid the French. Algerian civilians were often caught in the middle of the fighting, with the French army targeting the civilian populace when it saw fit. While the torture campaign was kept out of the press, rumors of its prevalence soon spread to continental France, inspiring an enormous debate as to the necessity and value of holding on to Algeria. The war grew in Algeria even as France itself was increasingly torn apart by the conflict.



French soldiers next to the bodies of Algerian insurgents.

Within a few years, as the anti-war protest campaign grew in France itself, many soldiers both in Algeria and in other parts of France and French territories grew disgusted with what they regarded as the weak-kneed vacillation on the part of republican politicians. Those soldiers created ultra-rightist terrorist groups, launching attacks on prominent intellectuals who spoke out against the war (the most prominent French philosopher at the time, Jean-Paul Sartre, had his apartment in Paris destroyed in a bomb attack). Troops launched an attempted coup in Algeria in 1958 and briefly succeeded in seizing control of the French-held island of Corsica as well.

It was in this context of near-civil war, with the government of the Fourth Republic paralyzed and the prospect of a new right-wing military dictatorship all too real, that the leader of the Free French forces in World War II, Charles de Gaulle, volunteered to “rescue” France from its predicament, with the support of the army. He placated the army temporarily, but when it became clear he intended to pull France out of Algeria, a paramilitary terrorist group twice tried to assassinate him. De Gaulle narrowly survived the assassination attempts and forced through a new constitution that

vested considerable new powers in the office of the president. De Gaulle opened negotiations with the FLN in 1960, leading to the ratification of Algerian independence in 1962 by a large majority of French voters. Despite being an ardent believer in the French need for “greatness,” De Gaulle was perceptive enough to know that the battle for Algeria was lost before it had begun.

In the aftermath of the Algerian War, millions of white Algerians moved to France, many of them feeling betrayed and embittered. They became the core of a new French political far-right, openly racist and opposed to immigration from France’s former colonies. Many members of that resurgent right wing coalesced in the first openly fascist party in France since the end of World War II: the Front National. Racist, anti-Semitic, and obsessed with a notion of French identity embedded in the culture of the Vichy Regime (i.e. the French fascist puppet state under Nazi occupation), the National Front remains a powerful force in French politics to this day.

The Non-Aligned Movement and Immigration

In the context of the Cold War, many struggles over decolonization were tied closely to the attitudes and involvement of the US and USSR. Vietnam provides perhaps the most iconic example. What was “really” a struggle for independence became a global conflict because of the socialist ideology espoused by the Viet Minh nationalists. Many leaders of formerly-colonized countries, however, rejected the idea that they had to choose sides in the Cold War and instead sought a truly independent course. The dream of many political elites in countries in the process of emerging from colonial domination was that former colonies around the world, but especially those in Africa and Asia, might create a new “superpower” through their alliance. The result was the birth of the Nonaligned Movement.

The beginning of the Nonaligned Movement was the Bandung Conference of 1955. In the Indonesian city of Bandung, leaders from countries in Africa, Asia, and South America met to discuss the possibility of forming a coalition that might push back against superpower dominance. This was the high point of the Pan-Africanism championed by Kwame Nkrumah described above, and in turn non-aligned countries earnestly hoped that their collective strength could compensate for their individual weakness vis-à-vis the superpowers. A French journalist at the conference created the term “third world” to describe the bloc of nations: neither the first world of the US and western Europe, nor the second world of the USSR and its satellites, but the allied bloc of former colonies.

While the somewhat utopian goal of a truly united third world proved as elusive as a United States of Africa, the real, meaningful effect of the conference (and the continued meetings of the nonaligned movement) was at the United Nations. The Nonaligned Movement ended up with over 100 member nations, wielding considerable power in the General Assembly of the UN and successfully directing policies and aid money to poorer nations. During the crucial decades of decolonization itself, the Nonaligned Movement also served as inspiration for millions around the world who sought not only independence for its own sake, but in the name of creating a more peaceful and prosperous world for all.

The irony of decolonization is that even as former European colonies were achieving formal political independence, millions of former colonized peoples were flocking to Europe for work. A postwar economic boom in Europe (described in the next chapter) created a huge market for labor, especially in fields of unskilled labor. Thus, Africans, Caribbeans, Asians, and people from the Middle East from former colonies all came in droves to work at jobs Europeans did not want, because those jobs still paid more than even skilled work did in the former colonies.

Initially, most immigrant laborers were single men, “guest workers” in the parlance of the time, who were expected to work for a time, send money home, then return to their places of origin. By the mid-1960s, however, families followed,

demographically transforming the formerly almost all-white Europe into a genuinely multi-ethnic society. For the first time, many European societies grew ethnically and racially diverse, and within a few decades, a whole generation of non-white people were native-born citizens of European countries.

The result was an ongoing struggle over national and cultural identity. Particularly in places like Britain, France, and postwar West Germany, the official stance of governments and most people alike was that European culture was colorblind, and that anyone who culturally assimilated could be a productive part of society. The problem was that it was far easier to maintain that attitude before many people not born in Europe made their homes there; as soon as significant minority populations became residents of European countries, there was an explosion of anti-immigrant racism among whites. In addition, in cases like France, former colonists who had fled to the metropole were often hardened racists who openly called for exclusionary practices and laws. Europeans were forced to grapple with the idea of cultural and racial diversity in a way that was entirely new to them (in contrast to countries like the United States, which has always been highly racially diverse following the European invasions of the early modern period).

One group of British Marxist scholars, many of whom were immigrants or the children of immigrants, described this phenomenon as “the empire strikes back”: having seized most of the world’s territory by force, Europeans were now left with a legacy of racial and cultural diversity that many of them did not want. In turn, the universalist aspirations of “Western Civilization” were challenged as never before.

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CHAPTER 14: POSTWAR SOCIETY

Once the Cold War began in 1947, Europe was just one of the stages on which it was played out around the world. Cold War divisions were perhaps stronger in Europe than anywhere else, however, because the European subcontinent was geographically divided along the lines of the Cold War: in the west the prevailing political and economic pattern was a combination of democracy and a regulated market capitalism, while in the east it was of Soviet-dominated communist rule and command economies. The contrast was all the more striking in that both sides of the Cold War divide began in similar circumstances – devastated by World War II – yet within a decade the west was in the midst of an unprecedented economic boom while the east remained in relative economic stagnation.

Social Democracy

In the aftermath of the war, the most important and noticeable political change in the west was the nearly universal triumph of democratic forms of government. Whereas the democratic experiments of the interwar period had all too often ended in the disaster of fascism, stable democratic governments emerged in the postwar era that are still present today, albeit in modified forms in some cases like that of France. All of the governments of Western Europe except Spain and Portugal granted the right to vote to all adult citizens after the war. And, for the first time, this included women almost everywhere. (Although one bizarre holdout was Switzerland, where women did not get the vote until 1971.)

There was a concomitant embrace of a specific form of democratic politics and market economics: “social democracy,” the commitment on the part of government to ensure not just the legal rights of its citizens, but a base minimum standard of living and access to employment opportunities as well. Social democracy was born of the experience of the war. The people of Europe had simply fought too hard in World War II to return to the conditions of the Great Depression or the bitter class struggles of the prewar period. Thus, one of the plans anticipated by wartime governments in the west was recompense for the people who had endured and suffered through the war – this phenomenon is sometimes referred to as the “postwar compromise” between governments and elites on the one hand and working people on the other.

It was within the commitment to social democracy that the modern welfare state came into being. The principle behind the welfare state is that it is impossible to be happy and productive without certain basic needs being met. Among the most important of those needs are adequate healthcare and education, both priorities that the governments of postwar Western Europe embraced. By the end of the 1950s, 37% of the income of Western European families was indirect, subsidies “paid” to them by their governments in the form of housing subsidies, food subsidies, health care, and education. European governments devoted four times more income to social services in 1957 than they had in 1930.

The results of state investment in citizen welfare were striking. By the end of the 1960s, most Western European states provided free high-quality medical care, free education from primary school through university, and various subsidies and pensions. In part because of the strength of postwar leftist (both communist and socialist) parties, trade unions won considerable rights as well, with workers entitled to pensions, time off, and regulated working conditions. Thus, as the economies of the Western European states expanded after the end of the war, their citizens enjoyed standards of living

higher than any generation before them, in large part because wealth was distributed much more evenly than it had ever been.

The welfare state was paid for by progressive taxation schemes and a very large reduction in military spending; one of the benefits of western Europe's alliance with the US, and European commitment to the UN, was that it was politically feasible to greatly reduce the size of each country's military, with the understanding that it was the US that would lead the way in keeping the threat of a Soviet invasion in check. For instance, even as military spending skyrocketed for the US and the Soviet Union, it dropped to less than 10% of the GDP of the UK by the early 1960s and steadily declined from there in the following years. Likewise, with the long-term trend of decolonization, there was no longer a need for large imperial armies to control colonies. Instead, "control" shifted to a model of economic relationships between the former colonial masters and their former colonial possessions.

Also in stark contrast to the political situation of the interwar years was the power of the political center. Simply put, the far right had been completely compromised by the disastrous triumph of fascism. Just about all major far-right parties had either been fascistic themselves or allied with fascism before the war, and in the war's aftermath far-right politicians were forced into political silence by the shameful debacle that had resulted in their prewar success. Fascistic parties did not re-emerge in earnest until the 1960s, and even then they remained fringe groups until the 1990s.

In turn, the far left, namely communists, were inextricably tied to the Soviet Union. This was a blessing for communist parties in the immediate aftermath of the war, but became a burden when the injustices of Soviet society became increasingly well known in the west. The problem for western communists was that communist parties were forced to publicly support the policies of the Soviet Union. In the immediate postwar period that was not a problem, since the USSR was widely admired for having defeated the Nazis on the eastern front at tremendous cost to its people. In the postwar period, however, the USSR quickly came to represent nothing more than the threat of tyranny to most people in the west, especially as it came to dominate the countries of the eastern bloc. The existence of Soviet gulags became increasingly well known, although the details were often unclear, and thus western communist parties struggled to appeal to anyone beyond their base in the working class. Around 30% of the electorate in France and Italy voted communist in the immediate aftermath of the war, but that percentage shrank steadily in the following decades.

Thus, with the right compromised by fascism and the left by communism, the parties in power were variations on the center-left and center-right, usually parties that fell under the categories of "Socialists" (or, in Britain, Labour) and "Christian Democrats." In turn, at least for the thirty years following the war, neither side deviated significantly from support for social democracy and the welfare state. The ideological divisions between these two major party categories had to do with social and cultural issues, of support or opposition to women's issues and feminism, of the stance toward decolonization, of the proper content of the state-run universities, and so on, rather than the desirability of the welfare state.

The "socialists" in this case were only socialistic in their firm commitment to fair treatment of workers. In some cases, socialist parties held onto the traditional Marxist rhetoric of revolution as late as the early 1970s, but it was increasingly obvious to observers that revolution was not in fact a practical goal that the parties were pursuing. Instead, socialists tended to champion a more diffuse, and prosaic, set of goals: workers' rights and protections, support for the independence of former colonies, and eventually, sympathy and support for cultural issues surrounding feminism and sexuality.

In turn, Christian Democracy was an amalgam of social conservatism with a now-anachronistic willingness to provide welfare state provisions. Christian Democrats (or, in the case of Britain, the Conservative "Tory" Party) tended to oppose the dissolution of empire, at least until decolonization was in full swing by the 1960s. While willing to support the

welfare state in general, Christian Democrats were staunchly opposed to the more far-reaching demands of labor unions. Against the cultural tumult of the 1960s, Christian Democrats also emphasized what they identified as traditional cultural and social values. Arguably, the most important political innovation associated with Christian Democracy was that the European political right wing accepted liberal democracy as a legitimate political system for the first time. There were no further mainstream political parties or movements that attempted to create authoritarian forms of government; fascism and the war had simply been too traumatic.

The Postwar Boom and Cultural Change

With the governments of Western Europe sharing these fundamental characteristics, they sought to ease trade across their borders, forming federalist bodies meant to make economic cooperation easier. In 1957, the governments of central continental Europe came together and founded the European Economic Community (EEC), also known as the Common Market. They created a free trade zone and coordinated economic policies in such a manner that trade between them increased fivefold in the years that followed. Britain opted not to join, and tellingly its growth rates lagged significantly.

Regardless, Britain joined the other western European countries in achieving unprecedented affluence by the mid-1950s. While the memory of immediate postwar rationing and penury was still fresh, fueled by coordinated government action and Marshall Plan loans the Western European countries were able to vault to higher and higher levels of wealth and productivity less than a decade after the end of the war. Real Wages grew in England by 80% from 1950 to 1970, French industrial output doubled between 1938 and 1959, and West Germany's exports grew by 600% in one decade: the 1950s. The years between 1945 and 1975 were described by a French economist as the *trente glorieuses*: the thirty glorious years. It was a time in which regular working people experienced an enormous, ongoing growth in their buying power and standard of living.

With the welfare state in place, many people were willing to spend on non-essentials, buying on credit and indulging in the host of new consumer items like cars, appliances, and fashion. In short, the postwar boom represented the birth of the modern consumer society in Europe, the parallel of that of the United States at the same time. Increasingly, only the very poor were not able to buy consumer goods that they did not need for survival. Most people were able to buy clothes that followed fashion trends, middle-class families could afford creature comforts like electric appliances and televisions, and increasingly working families could even afford a car, something that would have been unheard of before World War II.

Part of this phenomenon was the baby boom. While not as extreme in Europe as in the US, the generation of children born in the first ten years after WWII was very large, pushing Europe's population from 264 million in 1940 to 320 million by the early 1970s. A child born in 1946 was a teenager by the early 1960s, in turn fueling the massive explosion of popular music that resulted in the most iconic musical expression of youth culture: rock n' roll. The "boomers" were eager consumers as well, fueling the demand for fashion, music, and leisure activities.

Meanwhile, the sciences saw breakthroughs of comparable importance to those of the second half of the nineteenth century. Scientists identified the basic structure of DNA in 1953. Terrible diseases were treated with vaccines for the first time, including measles and polio. Organ transplants became a reality in the 1950s. Thus, life itself could be extended in ways hitherto unimaginable. Along with the growth of consumer society, postwar Europeans and Americans alike had cause to believe in the possibility of indefinite, ongoing progress and improvement.

One stark contrast between American and European culture at this time was the dramatic differences in church attendance. American religious culture was not significantly impacted by consumerism, while consumerism (in a way) replaced religiosity in Europe. The postwar period saw church attendance decline across the board in Europe, hovering around 5% by the 1970s. In an effort to combat this decline, Pope John XXIII called a council in 1958 that stretched on for five years. Known as “Vatican II,” this council revolutionized Catholic practices in an effort to modernize the church and appeal to more people. One of the noteworthy changes that came out of Vatican II was that the Mass was conducted in vernacular languages instead of in Latin – over four centuries after that practice had first emerged during the Protestant Reformation.

Philosophy and Art

Ironically, some of the major intellectual movements of the postwar period focused not on the promise of a better future, but on the premise that life was and probably would remain alienating and unjust. Despite the real, tangible improvements in the quality of life for most people in Western Europe between 1945 – 1975, there was a marked insecurity and pessimism that was reflected in postwar art and philosophy. Major factors behind this pessimism were the devastation of the war itself, the threat of nuclear war between the superpowers, and the declining power of Europe on the world stage. New cultural struggles emerged against the backdrop not of economic uncertainty and conventional warfare, but of economic prosperity and the threat of nuclear war.

The postwar era began in the shadow of the war and the fascist nightmare that had preceded it; the British writer George Orwell noted that “since about 1930, the world had given no reason for optimism whatsoever. Nothing in sight except a welter of lies, cruelty, hatred, and ignorance.” Some of the most important changes in art and philosophy in the postwar era emerged from the moral exhaustion that was the result of the war, something that lingered over Europe for years and grew with the discovery of the extent of the Holocaust. There was also the simple fact that the world itself could not survive another world war; once the Cold War began in earnest in the late 1940s, the world was just a few decisions away from devastation, if not outright destruction.

The quintessential postwar philosophy was existentialism. The great figures of existentialism were the French writers and philosophers Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus. Sartre and Beauvoir had played minor roles in the French Resistance against the Nazis during the war, while Camus had played a more significant role in that he wrote and edited a clandestine anti-Nazi paper, *Combat*. Sartre and Beauvoir were products of the most elite schools and universities in France, while Camus was an Algerian-born French citizen who took pride in his “provincial” background. Even before the war, Sartre was famous for his philosophical work and for his novel *Nausea*, which depicted a “hero” who tried unsuccessfully to find meaning in life after realizing that his actions were all ultimately pointless.



Lifelong companions
and fellow
philosophers
Beauvoir and Sartre.

While existentialism is a flowery word, its essential arguments are straightforward. First, there is no inherent meaning to life. Humans just exist: they are born, they do things while alive, then they die. During life, however, people are forced to constantly make choices – Sartre wrote that humans “are condemned to be free.” Most people find this process of always having to make choices frightening and difficult, so they pretend that something greater and more important provides the essential answers: religion, political ideologies, the pursuit of wealth, and so on. Sartre and Beauvoir called this “bad faith,” the pretense that individual decisions are dictated by an imaginary higher power or higher calling.

There was no salvation in existentialism, but there was at least the possibility of embracing the human condition, of accepting the heroic act of choosing one’s actions and projects in life without hope of heaven, immortality, or even being remembered after death. The existentialists called living in this manner “authenticity” – a kind of courageous defiance of the despair of being alive without a higher purpose or meaning. Increasingly, the major existential philosophers argued

that authenticity could also be found as part of a shared project with others, but only if that project did not succumb to ideological or religious dogmatism.

A large part of the impetus behind not just the actual theories of the existentialists, but its popular reception, was the widespread desire for a better, more “authentic” social existence after the carnage of the war. Appropriately, existentialism had its heyday from 1945 until about 1960. It enjoyed mainstream press coverage and even inspired self-styled “existentialists” in popular culture who imitated their intellectual heroes by frequenting cafes and jazz clubs on the Left Bank of the Seine River in Paris. While the existentialists themselves continued to write, debate, and involve themselves in politics (most became Marxist intellectuals and supporters of third-world uprisings against colonialism), existential philosophy eventually went out of fashion in favor of various kinds of theory that were eventually loosely grouped together as “postmodernism.”

The idea of postmodernism is complex; it is a term that has been used to describe many different things and it often lacks a core definition or even basic coherence. That noted, the basis of postmodernism is the rejection of big stories, or “meta-narratives,” about life, history, and society. Whereas in the past intellectuals tried to define the “meaning” of history, or Western Civilization, or of “mankind,” postmodern thinkers exposed all of the ways in which those “meanings” had been constructed, usually in order to support the desires of the people doing the storytelling. In other words, to claim that history led inevitably to greater freedom or plenty or happiness had almost always been an excuse for domination and some kind of conquest.

For instance, during the highpoint of European imperialism, high-minded notions of the civilizing mission, the culmination of the liberal and nationalist political aspirations of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of truly modern science all coincided with the blood-soaked plundering of overseas territories. The postmodern historical critique of imperialism was more than just an attack on Western hypocrisy, however, instead arguing that the very notion of history moving “forward” to a better future was obviously incorrect. History, from the postmodern perspective, has no overarching narrative – things simply change, with those changes generally revolving around the deployment of social and economic power.

Perhaps the most famous and important postmodern philosopher was the Frenchman Michel Foucault. Foucault’s work analyzed the history of culture in the West, covering everything from the concept of insanity to state power, and from crime to sexuality, demonstrating the ways that ideas about society and culture had always been shaped to serve power. Foucault’s most evocative analyses had to do with how the definition of crime and the practices of punishment had changed in the modern world to justify a huge surveillance apparatus, one set to monitor all behavior. In this model, “criminality” was an invention of the social and political system itself that justified the system’s police apparatus.

Postmodernism came under fire at the time, and since, for sometimes going so far as to question the very possibility of meaning in any context. Theorists like Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida (both, again, French) argued that authorial intent in writing was meaningless, because the text became entirely separate from the author at the moment of being written down. Likewise, both worked to demonstrate that texts themselves were nothing more or less than elaborate word games, with any implied “meaning” simply an illusion in the mind of a reader. At its most extreme, postmodernism went a step beyond existentialism: not only was life inherently meaningless, but even a person’s intentions and actions (the only source of meaning from the existential perspective) amounted to nothing.

That being noted, much of postmodern theory was not itself pessimistic or dour. Instead, there was often a joyful, irreverent play of ideas and words at work in postmodern thought, even if it was largely indecipherable outside of the halls of academia. That joyful irreverence translated directly into postmodern art, which often both satirized and embraced the breakdown between mainstream culture and self-understood “avant-gardes.” Especially during the

Modernist period in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century, artists and writers had often staged their work in opposition to the mainstream culture and beliefs of their societies, but artists in the postmodern era could play with the stuff of the mainstream without rejecting or breaking from it.

In turn, the iconic example of postmodern art was pop art. The most famous pop artist was the New York-based Andy Warhol. Pop art consisted of taking images from popular culture – in Warhol’s case, everything from portraits of Marilyn Monroe to the Campbell’s Soup can – and making it into “fine art.” In fact, much of pop art consisted of blurring the line between commercial advertising and fine art; Warhol transformed advertising images into massive silk-screened posters, satirizing consumer society while at the same time celebrating it.



Warhol's Campbell's
Soup, 1968

The Youth Movement and Cultural Revolution

What existentialism and postmodernism had in common was that, in very different ways, they critiqued many aspects of western culture, from the progressive narrative of history to traditional religious beliefs. There is some irony in that forms of philosophy that were often radical in their orientation flourished in the midst of the growing affluence of postwar consumer society: discontentment with popular values and a demand for greater social freedom grew along with, even in spite of, the expansion of economic opportunity for many people. Part of the explanation for the fertile reception of radical thought – very much including Marxism, which remained highly influential – was a straightforward generational clash between the members of the generation that had survived World War II and that generation’s children: the baby boomers.

Much more significant in terms of its cultural and social impact than postwar philosophy was the global youth movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The baby boom generation came of age in the 1960s, with unprecedented numbers of young people reaching adolescence right at the height of postwar prosperity. Enormous numbers of young people from middle-class or even working-class backgrounds became the first in their families to ever attend universities, and the

contentious political climate of the Cold War and decolonization contributed to an explosion of discontent that reached its height in the late 1960s.

There were essentially two distinct, but closely related, manifestations of the youth movement of the 1960s: a largely apolitical counterculture of so-called “hippies” (a term of disparagement invented by the mainstream press; the contemporary analog is “hipsters”), and an active protest movement against various forms of perceived injustice. Of course, many young people were active in both aspects, listening to folk music or rock n’ roll, experimenting with the various drugs that became increasingly common and available, but also joining in the anti-war movement, the second-wave feminist movement, or other forms of protest.



The album cover from The Beatles' Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, 1967. An iconic expression of the youth culture of the day, the individuals pictured behind the band members include everyone from their fellow musical pioneer Bob Dylan to the “godfather of the beat generation,” William S. Burroughs, to the Beatles' younger selves (on the left).

Western society faced an unprecedented problem as of the 1960s: there were more highly-educated young people than ever before. As late as the middle of the twentieth century, the purpose of higher education was essentially to reinforce class divisions: a small elite attended university and were therefore credentialed representatives of their class interests. In the relative social mobility brought about by the postwar economic boom, however, far more young people from non-elite backgrounds completed secondary schools and enrolled in universities. In turn, it was often college students who formed the core of the politicized youth movement of the time: taught to think critically, globally aware, and well informed, many students subjected the values of their own society to a withering critique.

There was much to critique. The Cold War, thanks to nuclear weapons, threatened the human species with annihilation. The wars associated both with it and with the decolonization process provided an ongoing litany of human rights violations and bloodshed. The American-led alliance in the Cold War claimed to represent the side of freedom and prosperity, but it seemed to many young people in the West that American policy abroad was as unjust and violent as was Soviet policy in Eastern Europe. On the domestic front, many young people also chafed at what they regarded as outdated rules, laws, and traditions, especially those having to do with sexuality.

A key factor in the youth movement was the American war in Vietnam. Despite Soviet control of the Eastern Bloc, the American government was a much more visible oppressor than was the Soviet Union to the more radical members of the youth movement. American atrocities in Vietnam were perceived as visible proof of the inherently oppressive nature

of capitalism and imperialism, especially because the Viet Minh was such a relatively weak force in comparison to the American military juggernaut. Vietnam thus served as a symbolic rallying point for the youth movement the world over, not just in the United States itself.

The focus of the youth movement, and a radical philosophical movement called the New Left associated with it, was on the life of individuals in the midst of prosperity. Leftist thinkers came to reject both the obvious injustices of Soviet-style communism as well as the injustices of their own capitalist societies. The key term for many New Left theorists, as well as rank-and-file members of the youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s, was “liberation” – sexual, social, and cultural. Liberation was meant to break down social mores as much as effect political change. For example, the idea that it was perfectly acceptable to live with a romantic partner before marriage went from being a marginalized, “bohemian” concept to one that enjoyed widespread acceptance.

Likewise, elements of the youth movement and the New Left came to champion aspects of social justice that had often been neglected by earlier radical thinkers. In the United States, many members of the youth movement (black and white alike) campaigned for the end of both racist laws and the inherent racism of American culture in general. A new feminist movement (considered in more detail below) emerged to champion not just women’s rights before the law, but the idea that the objectification and oppression of women was unjust, destructive, and unacceptable in supposedly democratic societies. In addition, for the first time, a movement emerged championing the idea that homosexuality was a legitimate sexual identity, not a mental illness or a “perverse” threat to the social order.

The youth movement reached its zenith in May of 1968. From Europe to Mexico, enormous uprisings led mostly by college students temporarily paralyzed universities, infrastructure, and even whole countries. What was to become the most iconic uprising against authority by the European youth movement began in a grungy suburb of Paris called Nanterre. There, the newly-opened and poorly-designed university faced student protests over a policy forbidding male students to visit female dormitories. When a student leader was arrested, sympathetic students in Paris occupied the oldest university in France: the Sorbonne. Soon, the entire Latin Quarter of Paris was taken over by thousands of student radicals (many of whom flocked from outside of Paris to join the protest), wallpapering buildings with posters calling for revolution and engaging in street battles with riot police. Workers in French industry instituted a general strike in solidarity with the students, occupying their factories and in some cases kidnapping their supervisors and managers. Students traveled to meet with workers and offer support. At its height, French infrastructure itself was largely paralyzed.



Leftist workers outside of their occupied factory during the Events of May.

The student movement had extremely radical, and sometimes very unrealistic, goals for itself, including everything from student-run universities to a Marxist revolution of students and workers. The French public sympathized with the students at first, especially since it was well known that French schools and universities were highly authoritarian and often unfair, but as the strikes and occupations dragged on, public opinion drifting away from the uprisings. The movement ebbed by late June, with workers accepting significant concessions from business owners in return for calling off the strike. The students finally agreed to leave the occupied universities. In the aftermath, however, major changes did come to French universities and high schools; this was the beginning of the (relative) democratization of education itself, with students having the right to meet with professors, to question grading policies, and to demand quality education in general. Likewise, and not just in France, the more stultifying rules and policies associated with gender and sexuality within schools and universities were slowly relaxed over time.

The “Events of May” (as they became known in France) were the emblematic high point of the European youth movement itself, at least in its most radical manifestation. The “thirty glorious years” of the postwar economic boom ended in the early 1970s, and the optimism of the youth movement tended to ebb along with it. Likewise, the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, while understandably welcomed by the youth movement, did rob the movement of its most significant cause: opposition to the war.

That being noted, the youth movement’s legacy was profound. While no country in the Western world witnessed a genuine political revolution along the lines imagined by radicals at the time, there is no question that Western culture as a whole became much more accepting of personal freedoms, especially regarding sexuality, and less puritanical and rigid in general. Likewise, the youth movement’s focus on social justice would acquire momentum in the following decades, leading to the flourishing of second-wave feminism, anti-racist movements, and a broad (though far from universal) acceptance of multiculturalism and blended cultures.

Second-Wave Feminism

One movement of particular importance to emerge from the protest culture of the late 1960s was second-wave feminism (the first was that of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries). In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir, one of the seminal existentialist philosophers mentioned above, wrote an enormous (over 1,000 pages long) book about the status of women in Western societies. Titled

The Second Sex, the book argued that throughout the entire history of Western Civilization, women had been the social and cultural “other,” always the secondary and exceptional variety of person compared to the default: men. In other words, when men wrote about “human history” they were actually writing about the history of men, with women lurking somewhere in the background, having babies and providing domestic labor (in English, consider phrases like “since the dawn of mankind” or “man’s relationship with nature” – the implication is that men are the species). Likewise, historically, every state, empire, and nation in history had been controlled by men, and women were legal and political non-entities until the twentieth century.

Thus, as described by Beauvoir, it was not just that men dominated, patronized, and often violently abused women, it was that to be a woman was to be the exception to every kind of political theory, philosophy, and history ever conceived of. Women were, in a sense, not really part of history. Beauvoir critiqued that non-status in *Second Sex*, writing from an existential perspective in which everyone’s freedom and choice was at the heart of human existence. While she did not set out to start a political movement per se – her political involvement in the 1950s and early 1960s was focused on decolonization and a kinship with Marxism – *The Second Sex* would go on to be the founding document of the second wave of feminism later in the decade.

From the end of World War II until the late 1960s, there were only small feminist movements in most western countries. While women had won the vote after the war (with some exceptions such as Switzerland), and most of the other legal goals of first-wave feminism had been achieved as well, the postwar social order still operated under the assumption that women were to focus on domestic roles. Women were taught as girls that the world of politics and paid work was for men, and that only in motherhood and marriage could a woman find fulfillment. In the process, women as a social category were largely cut off from the sense of political solidarity that had sustained first-wave feminism a generation earlier.

The problem for women in the postwar period, however, was widespread dissatisfaction and unhappiness with the social role into which they were forced, along with both overtly sexist laws and oppressive cultural codes. To cite a few examples, it was perfectly legal (and commonplace) for men to discriminate in hiring and workplace practices based on a woman’s appearance – flight attendants (“stewardesses” in the parlance of the time) were routinely fired at age 30 for being too old to maintain the standards of attractiveness enforced by airlines. Pregnancy was also grounds for termination, and unmarried women were generally paid far less than men since it was assumed they would eventually marry and quit their jobs. White women in the United States made 60% of the earnings of men doing the same work, with black women earning a mere 42%. Rape charges were routinely dismissed if a victim had “asked for it” by being alone at night or being “inappropriately” dressed, and there was no legal concept of marital rape. Domestic violence remained commonplace, and husbands were generally only held accountable by the law if the violence seemed excessive from the perspective of police and judges. In short, while the first-wave feminist movement had succeeded in winning key legal battles, a vast web of sexist laws and cultural codes ensured that women were held in precisely the “secondary” position identified by Beauvoir.

In response, starting in the mid-1960s, the second-wave feminist movement came into existence to combat precisely these forms of both legal and cultural oppression and discrimination. Most of the women who joined the new movement were inspired by the broader anti-establishment counter culture described above, but they arrived at feminism in part because most male “rebels” were just as sexist and repressive as the conservative politicians they detested (e.g. women at gatherings of self-proclaimed revolutionaries were expected to do the dishes and clean up after the men). Beauvoir herself joined the French Women’s Liberation Movement, joining many women who were one-third of her age at that point. Likewise, in the United States, second-wave feminism was often referred to as the “Women’s Lib” movement, with comparable movements emerging across the Western world.



Members of the (American) Women’s Liberation Movement marching in 1970.

Everywhere that second-wave feminism emerged as a movement, its goals were the creation of laws that expressly forbid sexual discrimination in the workplace and schools and a broader cultural shift that saw women treated as true social equals of men. This latter focus on equitable culture distinguished it from first-wave feminism, which while certainly cognizant of sexist cultural norms, had focused on overcoming the most serious legal restrictions on women rather than cultural shifts. For second-wave feminists, the movement was not simply about women having access to the same forms of employment and equal wages as men (although those were obviously very important goals), but about attacking the sexual objectification and sexual double standards to which women were held. For instance, why were promiscuous women the subject of shaming and mockery, while promiscuous men were celebrated for their virility? The essential injustice of sexual double standards was a key issue that second-wave feminists raised.

The demand for sexual liberation was part of the Youth Movement in general, and members of the counterculture fought against the idea that sexuality was inherently sinful and “dirty” (an attitude that had only come of age in earnest in the nineteenth century, incidentally). Second-wave feminists took the demand for liberation a step further and advocated for reliable, legal contraception and legalized abortion. Both were illegal almost everywhere in the western world through the 1950s, and even in countries like Britain and the Netherlands where contraception was legally available, it was difficult to come by and associated with promiscuity. Aided by major advances in related fields of medicine – the birth control pill was approved for contraceptive use in the United States in 1960, for example – second-wave feminists fought a successful campaign for the legalization of contraceptives and abortion by the end of the 1970s, although abortion rights remain a highly charged political issue in countries like the US.

While the battle for sexual equality is obviously far from over, second-wave feminism did achieve many important goals. Legally, many countries adopted laws banning discrimination based on gender itself, as well as age and appearance.

Laws pertaining to both sexual assault and domestic violence were often strengthened and more stringently enforced. Culturally, sexual double-standards, the objectification of women, and prescribed female social roles were all called into question. As with racism, the numerous forms of sexism embedded in Western culture all too frequently weathered these feminist assaults, but arguably they did weaken as compared to the past.

Conclusion

It cannot be overstated how much cultural change occurred in the decades following World War II. Perhaps the most important changes had to do with the extension of liberal democratic ideas to their logical conclusion: everyone in a democracy was supposed to have equal rights, to be treated with essential dignity, and to possess the right to protest the conditions of their education, employment, or even their simple existence (in the case of women facing misogyny and harassment, for example). The legacy of the cultural revolution that began with the youth movement of the 1960s remains strong to the present day.

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CHAPTER 15: TOWARD THE PRESENT

In 1991 the Soviet Union collapsed. Like the proverbial sorcerer's apprentice who unleashed an enchantment he cannot control, the (last, as it turned out) Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev had begun a series of reforms in 1986 that ultimately resulted in the dismantling of the Soviet state. In 1989, the communist regimes of the Eastern Bloc crumbled as it became clear that the USSR would not intervene militarily to prop them up as it had in the past. Nationalist independence movements exploded across the USSR and, finally, the entire system fell apart to be replaced by sovereign nations. In 1991, Russia itself reemerged as a distinct country in the process rather than just the most powerful part of a larger union.

In 1992, following the Soviet collapse, the American political theorist Francis Fukuyama published a book entitled *The End of History and the Last Man*. Put briefly, *The End of History's* central argument is that humanity was entering into a new stage in which the essential political and economic questions of the past had been resolved. Henceforth, market capitalism and liberal democracy would be conjoined in a symbiotic relationship. Human rights would be guaranteed by the political system that also provided the legal framework for a prosperous capitalist economy. All of the alternatives had already been tried and failed, after all, from the old order of monarchy and nobility to modern fascism and, as of 1991, Soviet communism. Thus, former dictatorships would (if they had not already) join the fold of American-style democracy and capitalism soon enough.

As it turned out, Fukuyama's predictions were true for some of the former members of the Eastern Bloc: East and West Germany were reunited, and the countries of Eastern Europe in general, from Romania to newly-independent and separate Slovakia and the Czech Republic, elected democratic governments and sought to join the capitalist western economies. So, too, did Russia initially, although almost immediately its economy foundered in the face of the "shock therapy" led by western advisors: the rapid imposition of a market economy and the dismantling of the social safety net that had been the one meaningful benefit of the former Soviet system for ordinary citizens.

In the long run, however, countries all over the globe in the post-Soviet era were as likely to embrace an economic and political system unanticipated by Fukuyama in 1992: authoritarian capitalism. To the surprise of many at the time, there is nothing about market economics that requires a democratic government. So long as an authoritarian state was willing to oversee the legal framework, and occasional economic interventions, necessary for capitalism to function, a capitalist economy could thrive despite the absence of civil and political rights. This pattern was (and remains) true even of those states that remain nominally "communist," the People's Republic of China most importantly. Likewise, starting with the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000, Russia would soon adopt the model of authoritarian capitalism, with a single political party controlling the state and exercising enormous influence, if not outright control, of the press. Meanwhile, in the countries of Central and Western Europe in which battles over economics and politics had finally been resolved in favor of the democracy/capitalism hybrid in the postwar era, social and cultural problems developed by the 1970s that remain largely unresolved in the present.

The End of the Postwar Compromise

Contemporary Europe struggles with the legacies of the postwar era. The incredible economic boom of the postwar decades came to a screeching halt in the early 1970s, when OPEC, the international consortium of oil-producing nations, instituted an embargo of oil in protest of western support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Gas prices skyrocketed, and the incredible economic growth of the postwar era simply stopped, never to regain the momentum it had from 1945 – 1973. Those critical decades of the baby boom and economic boom had left their mark in several ways, however, resulting in social democracy, large immigrant populations, and high standards of living. Contemporary European politics have grappled with each of those factors in turn.

Politically and socially, one of the most difficult legacies of the postwar years has been immigration. While racism was always a factor in Europe, during the boom years immigrants were generally regarded as at the very least “useful” for European countries and their economies. They did the jobs that Europeans did not want and formed a vital part of the economy of Western Europe as a whole. When the economic boom ended, however, they were rapidly castigated for their supposed laziness, penchant for criminality, and failure to assimilate – in a word, they were the scapegoats for everything going wrong with economics and social issues in the post-boom era. Thus, the far right in Europe was reborn, a generation after the defeat of fascism, in the form of harshly anti-immigrant political parties, often with a smattering of fascist and anti-Semitic rhetoric mixed in (France’s National Front was the first, and remains a powerful force in French politics).

The new European far right called for extremely limited quotas for immigration, laws banning the expression of non-Christian religious traditions (most importantly, those associated with Islam), and a broader cultural shift rejecting the tolerance and cosmopolitanism of mainstream European culture after the war. They also attacked non-white citizens of European countries, citizens born in Europe to immigrant parents. In other words, citizens of immigrant ancestry were legally the same as any other citizen, but the far right capitalized on a latent racist definition of British or French or Swiss or German, as white. This racially-based definition and understanding of European identity was simply factually wrong by the 1960s and 1970s: there were hundreds of thousands of Europeans of color who had been born and raised in the countries to which their parents or grandparents had immigrated, but it remained the basis of the appeal of far right politics to millions of white Europeans.

While the far right has gained strength in many European countries over time, of greater overall impact was the changed identity of mainstream center-right conservatism. This form of conservatism is often called “neoconservatism” to differentiate it from the earlier form of postwar center-right politics. By far the most important change within neoconservatism was that the center-right belatedly came to reject the welfare state. The compromise between left and right that had seen a broad endorsement of nationalized industry, free health care and education, subsidies for housing, and strong unions definitively collapsed starting in the mid-1970s. Neoconservatives blamed the welfare state and unions for exacerbating the economic crisis of the 1970s, arguing that the state was always inefficient and bloated compared to private industry, and they promised to do away with unneeded and counterproductive regulation in favor of unchecked market exchange.

The iconic neo-conservative politician was the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who held office from 1979 to 1990. Thatcher acquired the nickname “the Iron Lady” for her blunt manner of speaking and her refusal to compromise. While prime minister, Thatcher privatized a number of industries in Britain, most importantly the railways. She took a hard line with unions, shutting down northern English coal mines rather than giving in to the

demands of the coal miners' union (the English mining industry simply shut down as a result – it has never recovered). She slashed government subsidies for various industries, resulting in an explosion of unemployment in manufacturing areas.



Margaret Thatcher in 1977.

The sectors of the British economy that benefited from Thatcherite policies were financial in nature: banks in particular thrived as regulations were dropped and banks were legally allowed to pursue vast profits through financial speculation. Britain began its transition toward what it is in the present: the dynamic, wealthy financial and commercial center that is London surrounded by an economically stagnant and often politically resentful nation. Thatcher herself was a polarizing figure in British society – while she was reviled by her opponents, millions of Britons adored her for her British pride, her hard-nosed refusal to compromise, and her unapologetic, Social Darwinist contempt for the poor – she once advised the English that they ought to “glory in inequality” because it was symptomatic of the strong and smart succeeding.

The British economy began to recover as a whole in the early 1980s, but the major reason that Thatcher stayed in power was her success in selling an image of strength and trenchant opposition to British unions, which had reached the height of their influence in the mid-1970s. A brief war over the (strategically and economically unimportant) Falkland Islands in the Pacific between Argentina and Britain in 1982 also buoyed her popularity with patriotic citizens. Finally, the British Labour party was in disarray, split between its still genuinely socialist left wing and a new more moderate reform movement that wanted to abandon socialist rhetoric in favor of straightforward liberalism. Thus, Thatcher

remained in power until 1990, when her own party decided she was no longer palatable to the electorate and replaced her with a somewhat forgettable English politician named John Major.

Outside of Britain, the essential characteristics of Western European politics were in place by the 1980s that remain to this day. Center-right parties from Italy to Germany and from France to Britain correspond to the Thatcherite neo-conservative model, embracing the free market and trying to limit the extent of the welfare state (although none of these parties advocate getting rid of the welfare state entirely; generations of Europeans, including people who vote for center right parties, expect free health care, education, and social benefits). Most center-right parties outside of Britain have been less willing to truly gut the welfare state than was Thatcher and her conservatives, but the general focus on the market remains their defining characteristic overall.

On the other side of the political spectrum, the major change within left-wing parties was the final and definitive abandonment of Marxist ideology. Again, Britain provides the iconic example: the triumph within the Labour Party of a centrist faction that created “New Labour,” a political philosophy that supports the welfare state but also accepts the position that the free market is the essential motor of economic growth. The iconic figure of New Labour was the prime minister Tony Blair, who held office from 1997 – 2007. Even in countries whose major leftist parties had the word “socialist” in their titles – France’s Socialist Party, for example – the whole notion of revolution was gone by the 1990s. Instead, the center-left parties came to be the custodians of the welfare state while belatedly joining the center-right in favoring market economics in the private sector.

Broadly speaking, the defining argument between mainstream leftist and mainstream rightist parties leading up to the present is about how much free market deregulation to embrace. Many Europeans have become attracted to the far-right parties mentioned above as much because the two sides of mainstream politics are almost indistinguishable; to many Europeans, the far-right seems like the only “real” alternative. In turn, with revolution off the agenda, the far left in Europe is represented now by the Green parties. Green parties (the strongest of which is Germany’s) are very strong supporters of environmental legislation and are the most hostile to free market deregulation of any political faction, but they remain limited in their electoral impact.

Eastern Europe

While the politics and economics of Western Europe underwent a number of changes in the decades following World War II, they nevertheless represent an essential continuity (i.e. market economies, welfare states, democratic politics) in many ways right up to the present. The opposite is true of Eastern Europe: while the postwar order of command economy communism and single-party, authoritarian rule held true almost through the 1980s, that entire system imploded in the end, with lasting consequences for the region and for the world.

As of the 1970s, the economic stagnation of the east was far worse than that of the west. Real growth rates were lost in a haze of fudged statistics, and technology had failed to keep up with western standards. By the 1980s the only profitable industries in Russia were oil and vodka, and then oil prices began a decade-long decline. Politically, Eastern European governments were so corrupt that it was basically pointless to distinguish between normal “politics” and “corruption” – every political decision was governed by personal networks of corrupt politicians who traded political favors and controlled access to creature comforts (like the coveted dachas – vacation cottages – in the USSR). The USSR’s politburo, the apex of political power in which decisions of real consequence were made, was staffed by aging apparatchiks who had spent their entire lives working within this system.

Then, the old men of the order simply started dying off. Brezhnev died in 1982, then the next two leaders of the Soviet communist party died one after the other in 1984 and 1985. Mikhail Gorbachev, who took power in 1985, was a full generation younger, and he brought with him a profoundly different outlook on the best path forward for the USSR and its “allies.” Unlike the men of the older generation, Gorbachev was convinced that the status quo was increasingly untenable – the Soviet economy staggered along with meager or no growth, the entire educational system was predicated on propaganda masquerading as fact, and the state could barely keep up its spending on the arms race with the United States (especially after the American president Ronald Reagan came to office in 1980 and poured resources into the American military).

Gorbachev was convinced that the only way for the Soviet system to survive was through real, meaningful reforms – the kinds flirted with by Khrushchev in the 1950s but swiftly abandoned. To that end, Gorbachev introduced two reformist state policies: Glasnost and Perestroika. Glasnost means “openness” or “transparency” in information. It represented the relaxation of censorship within the Soviet system, one that was most dramatically demonstrated in 1986 when Gorbachev allowed an accurate appraisal in the press of a horrific nuclear accident at the Chernobyl nuclear plant. The idea behind Glasnost was to allow frank and honest discussion, to end the ban on truth, in an effort to win back the hearts and minds of Soviet people to their own government and social system.

Simultaneously, Gorbachev introduced Perestroika, meaning “restructuring.” This program was meant to reform the economy, mostly by modernizing industry and allowing limited market exchange. The two policies – openness and restructuring – were meant to work in tandem to improve the economy and create a dynamic, truthful political and social system. What Gorbachev had not anticipated, however, was that once Soviet citizens realized that they could publish views critical of the state, an explosion of pent-up anger and resentment swept across Soviet society. From merely reforming the structures of Soviet society, Glasnost in particular led to open calls to move away from Marxism-Leninism as the state’s official doctrine, for truly free and democratic elections, and for the national minorities to be able to assert their independence.

Mikhail Gorbachev in 1987.



Meanwhile, the Soviet economy continued to spiral downwards. Soviet finances were in such disarray by the second half of the 1980s that Gorbachev simply ended the arms race with the United States, conceding the USSR could not match the US's gigantic arsenal. Starting cautiously in 1988, he also announced to the governments of Eastern Europe

that they would be “allowed to go their own way” without Soviet interference. Never again would columns of tanks respond to protests against communism. This development caused considerable dismay to hard-line Communist leaders in countries like East Germany, where the threat of Soviet intervention had always been the bulwark against the threat of reform. When Gorbachev made good on his promises and protest movements against the communist states started to grow, it was the beginning of the end for the entire Soviet Bloc.

The result was a landslide of change across Eastern Europe. Over the course of 1989, one country after another held free elections and communists were expelled from governments. Rapidly, new constitutions were drawn up. The Berlin Wall fell in November of 1989 and Germany was reunified less than a year later. Likewise, the USSR itself fell apart by 1991, torn apart by nationalist movements within its borders as Latvians, Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Kazakhs, and other national minorities of the USSR demanded their independence from Russian dominance. An attempted counter-revolution led by Soviet hardliners failed in the face of mass protest in Moscow, and the first free elections since the February Revolution of 1917 were held in Russia.

Since the collapse of the USSR, some Eastern European countries (e.g. the Czech Republic, Poland) have enjoyed at least some success in modernizing their economies and keeping political corruption at bay. In Russia itself, the 1990s were an unmitigated economic and social disaster as the entire country tried to lurch into a market economy without the slightest bit of planning or oversight. Western consultants, generally associated with international banking firms, convinced Russian politicians in the infancy of its new democracy to institute “shock therapy,” dismantling social programs and government services. While foreign loans accompanied these steps, new industries did not suddenly materialize to fill the enormous gaps in the Russian economy that had been played by state agencies. Unemployment skyrocketed and the distinctions between legitimate business and illegal or extra-legal trade all but vanished.

The result was an economy that was often synonymous with the black market, gigantic and powerful organized crime syndicates, and the rise of a small number of “oligarchs” to stratospheric levels of wealth and power. One shocking statistic is that fewer than forty individuals controlled about 25% of the Russian economy by the late 1990s. Just as networks of contacts among the Soviet apparatchiks had once been the means of securing a job or accessing state resources, it now became imperative for regular Russian citizens to make connections with either the oligarch-controlled companies or organized crime organizations.

Stability only began to return because of a new political strongman. Vladimir Putin, a former agent of the Soviet secret police force (the KGB), was elected president of Russia in 2000. Since that time, Putin has proved a brilliant political strategist, playing on anti-western resentment and Russian nationalism to buoy popular support for his regime, run by “his” political party, United Russia. While opposition political parties are not illegal, and indeed consistently try to make headway in elections, United Russia has been in firm control of the entire Russian political apparatus since shortly after Putin’s election. Opposition figures are regularly harassed or imprisoned, and many opposition figures have also been murdered (although the state itself maintains a plausible deniability in cases of outright assassination). Some of the most egregious excesses of the oligarchs of the 1990s were also reined in, while some oligarchs were instead incorporated into the United Russia power structure.

Unlike many of the authoritarian rulers of Russia in the past, Putin was (and remains) hugely popular among Russians. Media control has played a large part in that popularity, of course, but much of Putin’s popularity is also tied to the wealth that flooded into Russia after 2000 as oil prices rose. While most of that wealth went to enrich the existing Russian elites (along with some of Putin’s personal friends, who made fortunes in businesses tied to the state), it also served as a source of pride for many Russians who saw little direct benefit. Further boosts to his popularity came from Russia’s invasion of the small republic of Georgia in 2008 and, especially, its invasion and subsequent annexation

of the Crimean Peninsula from the Ukraine in 2014. While the latter prompted western sanctions and protests, it was successful in supporting Putin's power in Russia itself.

The European Union

At the start of the postwar boom, most of the nations of western Europe entered into various international groups that sought to improve economic relations and trade between the member nations. Those culminated in the creation of the European Community (EC) in 1967, essentially an economic alliance and trade zone between most of the nations of non-communist Europe. Despite various setbacks, not the least the enmity between French and British politicians that achieved almost comic levels at times, the EC steadily added new members into the 1980s. Its leadership also began to discuss the possibility of moving toward an even more inclusive model for Europe, one in which not just trade but currency, law, and policy might be more closely aligned between countries. That vision of a united Europe was originally conceived in large part in hopes of creating a power-bloc to rival the two superpowers of the Cold War, but it also encompassed a moral vision of an advanced, rational economic and political system, in contrast to the conflicts that had so often characterized Europe in the past.

The EC officially became the European Union in 1993, and various member nations of the former EC voted (sometimes barely) to join in the following years. Over time, passport controls at borders between the member states of the EU were eliminated entirely. The member nations agreed to policies meant to ensure civil rights throughout the Union, as well as economic stipulations (e.g. limitations on national debt) meant to foster overall prosperity. Most spectacularly, at the start of 2002, the Euro became the official currency of the entire EU except for Great Britain, which clung tenaciously to the venerable British Pound.

The period between 2002 and 2008 was one of relative success for the architects of the EU. The economies of Eastern European countries in particular accelerated, along with a few unexpected western countries like Ireland (called the "Celtic Tiger" at the time for its success in bringing in outside investment by slashing corporate tax rates). Loans from wealthier members to poorer ones, the latter generally clustered along the Mediterranean, meant that none of the countries of the "Eurozone" lagged too far behind. While the end of passport controls at borders worried some, there was no general immigration crisis to speak of.



The European Union in 2016. As of early 2020, Britain is no longer a member.

Unfortunately, especially since the financial crisis of 2008, the EU has been fraught with economic problems. The major issue is that the member nations cannot control their own economies past a certain point – they cannot devalue currency to deal with inflation, they are nominally prevented from allowing their own national debts to exceed a certain level of their Gross Domestic Product (3%, at least in theory), and so on. The result is that it is terrifically difficult for countries with weaker economies such as Spain, Italy, or Greece, to maintain or restore economic stability. Instead, Germany ended up serving as the EU’s banker and also its inadvertent political overlord, issuing loan after loan to other EU states while dictating economic and even political policy to them. This led to the surprising success of far-left political parties like Greece’s Syriza, which rose to power by promising to buck German demands for austerity and by threatening to leave the Eurozone altogether (it later backpedaled, however).

In the most shocking development to undermine the coherence and stability of the EU as a whole, Great Britain narrowly voted to leave the Union entirely in 2016. In what analysts largely interpreted as a protest vote against not just the EU itself, but of complacent British politicians whose interests seemed squarely focused on London’s welfare over that of the rest of the country, a slim majority of Britons voted to end their country’s membership in the Union. Years of bitter political struggle ensued, but the country finally left in early 2020. The political and economic consequences remain unclear: the British economy has been deeply enmeshed with that of the EU nations since the end of World War II, and it is simply unknown what effect its “Brexit” will have in the long run.

The Middle East

The Middle East has been one of the most conflicted regions in the world in the last century, following the collapse of

the Ottoman Empire in World War I. In the recent past, much of that instability has revolved around three interrelated factors: the Middle East's role in global politics, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the vast oil reserves of the region. In turn, the United States played an outsized role in shaping the region's politics and conflicts.

During the Cold War the Middle East was constantly implicated in American policies directed to curtail the (often imaginary) threat of Soviet expansion. The US government tended to support political regimes that could serve as reliable clients regardless of the political orientation of the regime in question or that regime's relationship with its neighbors. First and foremost, the US drew close to Israel because of Israel's antipathy to the Soviet Union and its own powerful military. Israel's crushing victory in the 1967 Six-Day War demonstrated to American politicians that it was a powerhouse worth cultivating, and in the decades that followed the governing assumption of American – Israeli relations was that Israel was the most reliable powerful partner supporting American interests. Part of that sympathy was also born out of respect for the fact that Israel's government is democratic and that it has a thriving civil society.

Simultaneously, however, the US supported Arab and Persian regimes that were anything but democratic. The Iranian regime under the Pahlavi dynasty was restored to power through an American-sponsored coup in 1953, with the democratically-elected prime minister Muhammad Mosaddegh expelled from office. The Iranian Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi ruled Iran as a loyal American client for the next 26 years while suppressing dissent through a brutal secret police force. The Iranian regime purchased enormous quantities of American arms (50% of American arms sales were to Iran in the mid-1970s) and kept the oil flowing to the global market. Iranian society was highly educated and its economy thrived, but its government was an oppressive autocracy.

Likewise, the equally autocratic monarchy of Saudi Arabia emerged as the third “pillar” in the US's Middle Eastern clientage system. Despite its religious policy being based on Wahhabism, the most puritanical and rigid interpretation of Islam in the Sunni world, Saudi Arabia was welcomed by American politicians as another useful foothold in the region that happened to produce a vast quantity of oil. Clearly, opposition to Soviet communism and access to oil proved far more important from a US policy perspective than did the lack of representative government or civil rights among its clients.

This status quo was torn apart in 1979 by the Iranian Revolution. What began as a coalition of intellectuals, students, workers, and clerics opposed to the oppressive regime of the Shah was overtaken by the most fanatical branch of the Iranian Shia clergy under the leadership of the Ayatollah (“eye of God”) Ruhollah Khomeini. When the dust settled from the revolution, the Ayatollah had become the official head of state and Iran had become a hybrid democratic-theological nation: the Islamic Republic of Iran. The new government featured an elected parliament and equality before the law (significantly, women enjoy full political rights in Iran, unlike in some other Middle Eastern nations like Saudi Arabia), but the Ayatollah had final say in directing politics, intervening when he felt that Shia principles were threatened. Deep-seated resentment among Iranians toward the US for the latter's long support of the Shah's regime became official policy in the new state, and in turn the US was swift to vilify the new regime.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a botched Israeli invasion of Lebanon, an ongoing military debacle for the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, and a full-scale war between the new Islamic Republic of Iran and its neighbor, Iraq. Ruled by a secular nationalist faction, the Ba'ath Party, since 1968, Iraq represented yet another form of autocracy in the region. Saddam Hussein, the military leader at the head of the Ba'ath Party, launched the Iran-Iraq War as a straightforward territorial grab. The United States supported

both sides during the war at different points despite its avowed opposition to the Iranian regime. In the end, the war sputtered to a bloody stalemate in 1988 after over a million people had lost their lives.

Just two years later, Iraq invaded the neighboring country of Kuwait and the United States (fearing the threat to oil

supplies and now regarding Hussein's regime as dangerously unpredictable) led a coalition of United Nations forces to expel it. The subsequent Gulf War was an easy victory for the US and its allies, even as the USSR spiralled toward its messy demise as communism collapsed in Eastern Europe. The early 1990s thus saw the United States in a position of unparalleled power and influence in the Middle East, with every country either its client and ally (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Israel) or hostile but impotent to threaten US interests (e.g. Iran, Iraq). American elites subscribed to what President George Bush described as the "New World Order": America would henceforth be the world's policeman, overseeing a global market economy and holding rogue states in check with the vast strength of American military power.

Instead, the world was shocked when fundamentalist Muslim terrorists, not agents of a nation, hijacked and crashed airliners into the World Trade Center towers in New York City and into the Pentagon (the headquarters of the American military) on September 11, 2001. Fueled by hatred toward the US for its ongoing support of Israel against the Palestinian demand for sovereignty and for the decades of US meddling in Middle Eastern politics, the terrorist group Al Qaeda succeeded in the most audacious and destructive terrorist attacks in modern history. President George W. Bush (son of the first President Bush) vowed a global "War on Terror" that has, almost two decades later, no apparent end in sight. The American military swiftly invaded Afghanistan, ruled by an extremist Sunni Muslim faction known as the Taliban, for sheltering Al Qaeda. American forces easily toppled the Taliban but failed to destroy it or Al Qaeda.

In a fateful decision with continuing reverberations in the present, the W. Bush presidency used the War on Terror as an excuse to settle "unfinished business" in Iraq as well. Despite the complete lack of ties between Hussein's regime and Al Qaeda, and despite the absence of the "weapons of mass destruction" used as the official excuse for war, the US launched a full scale invasion in 2002 to topple Hussein. That much was easily accomplished, as once again the Iraqi military proved completely unable to hold back American forces. Within months, however, Iraq devolved into a state of murderous anarchy as former leaders of the Ba'ath Party (thrown out of office by American forces), local Islamic clerics, and members of different tribal or ethnic groups led rival insurgencies against both the occupying American military and their own Iraqi rivals. The Iraq War thus became a costly military occupation rather than an easy regime change, and in the following years the internecine violence and American attempts to suppress Iraqi insurgents led to well over a million deaths (estimates are notoriously difficult to verify, but the death toll might actually be over two million). A 2018 US Army analysis of the war glumly concluded that the closest thing to a winner to emerge from the Iraq War was, ironically, Iran, which used the anarchic aftermath of the invasion to exert tremendous influence in the region.

Toward the Present

While Europe has suffered from economic and, to a lesser extent, political instability since the 1980s, that instability pales in comparison to the instability of other world regions. In particular, the Middle East entered into a period of outright bloodshed and chaos as the twenty-first century began. In turn, the shock waves of Middle Eastern conflict have reverberated around the globe, inspiring the growth of international terrorist groups on the one hand and racist and Islamophobic political parties on the other.

To cite just the most important examples, the US invasion of Iraq in 2002 inadvertently prompted a massive increase in recruitment for anti-western terrorist organizations (many of which drew from disaffected EU citizens of Middle Eastern and North African ancestry). The Arab Spring of 2010 led to a brief moment of hope that new democracies might take the place of military dictatorships in countries like Libya, Egypt, and Syria, only to see authoritarian regimes or parties reassert control. Syria in particular spiraled into a horrendously bloody civil war in 2010, prompting millions of

Syrian civilians to flee the country. Turkey, one of the most venerable democracies in the region since its foundation as a modern state in the aftermath of World War I, has seen its president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan steadily assert greater authority over the press and the judiciary. The two other regional powers, Iran and Saudi Arabia, carry on a proxy war in Yemen and fund rival paramilitary (often considered terrorist) groups across the region. Israel, meanwhile, continues to face both regional hostility and internal threats from desperate Palestinian insurgents, responding by tightening its control over the nominally autonomous Palestinian regions of the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In Europe, fleeing Middle Eastern (and to a lesser extent, African) refugees seeking the infinitely greater stability and opportunity available to them abroad have brought about a resurgence of far-right and, in many cases, openly neo-fascist politics. While fascistic parties like France's National Front have existed since the 1960s, they remained basically marginal and demonized for most of their history. Since 2010, far right parties have grown steadily in importance, seeing their share of each country's electorate increase as worries about the impact of immigration drives voters to embrace nativist, crypto-racist political messages. Even some citizens who do not harbor openly racist views have come to be attracted to the new right, since mainstream political parties often seem to represent only the interests of out-of-touch social elites (again, Brexit serves as the starkest demonstration of voter resentment translating into a shocking political result).

While interpretations of events since the start of the twenty-first century will necessarily vary, what seems clear is that both the postwar consensus between center-left and center-right politics is all but a dead letter. Likewise, fascism can no longer be considered a terrible historical error that is, fortunately, now dead and gone; it has lurched back onto the world stage. A widespread sense of anger, disillusionment, and resentment haunts politics not just in Europe, but in much of the world.

That being noted, there are also indications that the center still holds. In France, the National Front's presidential candidate in 2017, Marine Le Pen, was decisively defeated by the resolutely centrist Emmanuel Macron. Contemporary far-right parties have yet to enjoy the kind of electoral breakthrough that set the stage for (to cite one obvious example) the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. Even those countries that have proved most willing to use military force in the name of their ideological and economic agendas, namely Russia and the United States, have not launched further wars on the scale of the disastrous American invasion of Iraq in 2002.

Predicting the future is a fool's errand, and one that historians in particular are generally loathe to engage in. That said, if nothing else, history provides both examples and counterexamples of things that have happened in the past that can, and should, serve as warnings for the present. As this text has demonstrated, much of history has been governed by greed, indifference to human suffering, and the lust for power. It can be hoped that studying the consequences of those factors and the actions inspired by them might prove to be an antidote to their appeal, and hopefully to their purported legitimacy as political motivations.

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