

What Do We Mean by Europe?

by J. G. A. Pocock

Europe today is a contested notion. Historians and critics debate whether it is one of those “inventions” that elites have imposed upon others in order to consolidate positions of power and authority. Statesmen, administrators, and corporate executives view Europe as, for better or worse, a very real entity, with a clear and definable past and a palpable present. A subset of this group—supporters of what has come to be called the European Union—hope that the present is prologue to an even more substantial future: a powerful supranational order bringing peace and prosperity to all member nations. An opposed group, whom we might call the Euroskeptics, hold that such a consummation is devoutly to be resisted, so fatal would it be to democratic national sovereignty and the power of citizens to determine their political destinies.

Contemporary debates about the meaning of Europe are unquestionably tied to current political, economic, and intellectual preoccupations. But they have behind them a long history of the use of language in presenting and controlling human experience. It is part of that history that I want to tell, the story of how the word “Europe” has been used and how over time it came to denote, first, a continent and, second, a civilization. I shall speak as a moderate Euroskeptic—one not so much hostile to the present project of “Europe” as doubtful that it will work.

We should note first off that the initial naming of Europe took place in a saltwater area of very limited size, namely the Aegean Sea, as that part of the Mediterranean between present-day Greece and Turkey is called. The ancient peoples who used that sea and lived around it became aware of what we call—because they did—the Bosphorus, the narrow waterway that connects the Aegean with the larger and, to them, less known, Euxine or Black Sea. They developed myths and folktales that had the effect of giving the name “Europa” to lands lying west of the Bosphorus and the name “Asia” to lands lying east of it.

At the same time, a third name, or rather a pair of names, came to denote another coast and its hinterlands lying well to the south of the Aegean. One of these, “Egypt,” was the Greek Aegean term for the peoples of the Nile valley and its delta, an ancient and literate people who could give their own accounts of who they were and how long they had existed. The other word, “Africa,” tended to move westward, away from the Egyptians, and adhere to other coastlands—also known as Libya, Mauritania, and so on—with which the Aegean Greeks and Phoenicians came in contact as their ships explored the Mediterranean basin.

Once we start talking about the movement of words from one coastland




La Vergine Europa, a symbolic map by Johannes Putsch (1592)

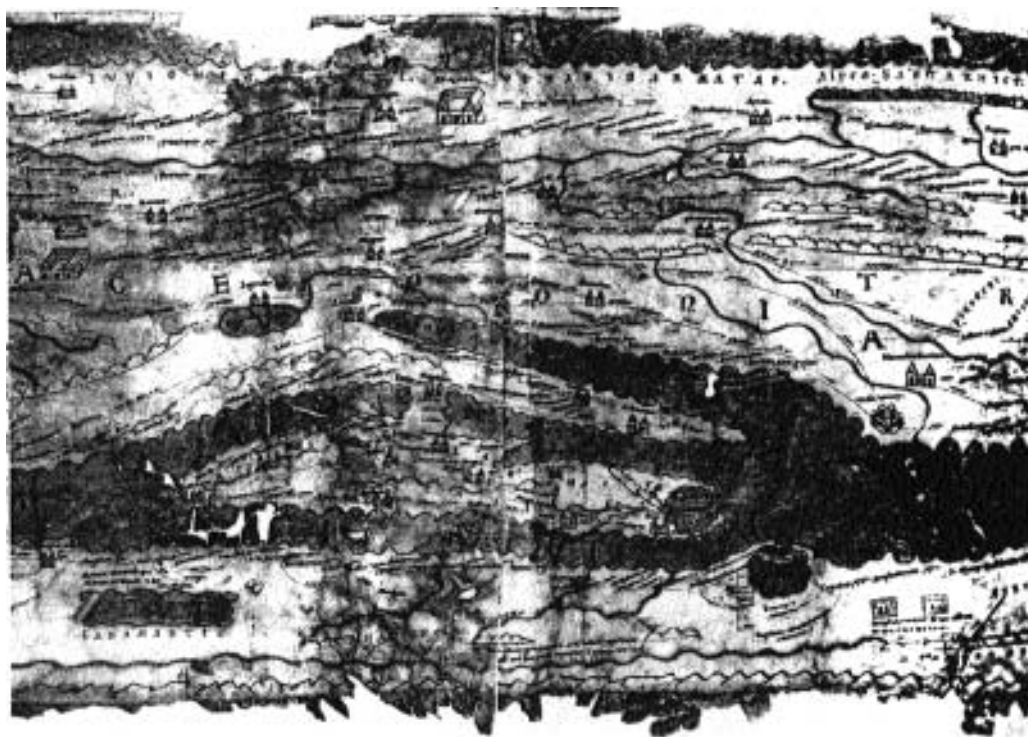
and hinterland to another, we have begun talking about geography and cartography: the description of configurations of land and water and their reduction to spoken and written words and images. Here the story is how over many centuries—perhaps more than 20 from start to finish of the mapping process—the Aegean words Europe, Asia, and Africa moved outward from the coastlines to which they had originally been applied and traveled deeper and deeper into the hinterlands behind them, until finally they became the names of what were by then called continents. By the 16th century at the latest, *continent* had come to denote a landmass of very great size, possessing a well-defined maritime perimeter, and linked to other continents either by a single isthmus—as Africa is joined to Asia and the two Americas to one another—or not at all, as in the cases of Australia and Antarctica, the two island continents in the Southern Hemisphere.

But the anomaly in our typology of continents—an anomaly that shows how Aegean and Mediterranean concepts still dominate our thinking—consists in our habit of listing Europe as one of the seven continents, when it does not comply with the above definition at all precisely. The “continent” of Europe is a product partly of the Mediterranean need for a term to inscribe and describe the lands west of the Bosphorus, and partly of the exceptionally self-centered and world-dominating outlook developed by a civilization that evolved in those lands. The notion of a “continent” was formed in that civilization, but it applies only inexactly to “the continent of Europe.”

In the 16th century, there existed a map and image of Europe (see p. 13) described as “the first part of the earth in the form of a virgin.” It was shaped by the rule of the Hapsburg family over Spain, the Netherlands, the German Empire, and Austria, and showed “Europe” as a crowned woman, whose head was the Iberian Peninsula and whose heart was located at Prague. Her left arm was the peninsula of Denmark, and she held a scepter ruling over the Baltic and the North Sea; her right arm was the peninsula of Italy, with which she grasped the island of Sicily, as an imperial orb giving power over the Mediterranean. But the skirts of her robe floated freely over the vast and indeterminate regions between the Black Sea and the Baltic, to which the draftsman affixed such names as Scythia, Muscovy, and Tartary.

ne can see that the mapmakers pushed the Baltic as far east and the Black Sea as far north as they dared, hoping to bring them close enough to each other to justify the description of Europe as a continent. But it is not possible to link Europe to Asia by an isthmus with sea on either side. Europe is not linked to Asia so much as it is an extension of it, a peninsula or subcontinent such as India, and even then there is no huge mountain barrier like that of the Himalayas, separating the peninsula from the rest of the continent that we might call Eurasia. The skirts of the imperial robe float over an enormous plain in which there are neither seas nor mountains, nor any natural frontier at all. Subsequent-

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A section of the Tabula Peutingeriana, a 13th-century copy of a Roman map of the known world, believed to date from the first century A.D.

ly there arose the habit of terminating Europe at the Ural Mountains, which marked no important climatic or cultural or political characteristics. It is another characteristic of the Hapsburg map that it can touch only the coasts of Scandinavia north of the Baltic Sea. One might almost say that Scandinavia is a separate peninsula of the Eurasian continent and that Europe is another. When Scandinavia came to be considered part of Europe is a historical question.

The process of defining continental Europe was not quite complete when the Frenchman Voltaire, who though a great historian was not a great scholar, wrote his *History of Russia under Peter the Great*, published in 1760. Certainly, he wrote to celebrate the work of Peter and his successors in bringing Russia into the civilization Voltaire thought of as European. But at the same time he was inclined to include Sweden, Baltic Germany, Poland, and Russia in an area he called simply "the north" (*le nord*) and did not consider fully European. What is more, Voltaire remarked that if you situate yourself imaginatively about the Sea of Azov, just east of the Crimean, it becomes quite impossible to tell where Europe leaves off and Asia begins, and he said it would probably be better to abandon both terms, expanding the term *le nord* into *terres boreales* or *terres arctiques*, corresponding to the *terres australes* and *antarctiques*, terms he and his contemporaries used in speaking of the great continent they believed to exist in the Southern Hemisphere.

Very soon after Voltaire wrote this, European navigators in the Pacific dissolved the southern continent into the two island continents called Australia and Antarctica, perhaps confirming the presumption that continents must be situated in the ocean. But we have not

given up the practice of describing Europe as a seventh, or rather as the first, “continent,” though we have long known perfectly well that its eastern aspect does not separate it from Asia but establishes a continental heartland in which all frontiers, physical or cultural, are essentially indeterminate. This tells us a great deal about the civilization that has grown up in “Europe” and calls itself by that name, and it compels us to turn from the subject of “Europe” as a continent to that of “Europe” as a civilization.

The word “Europa” was in use in the Roman Empire but was not employed self-descriptively; Rome may have known that it was in Europe but did not characterize itself as European, since the word was not used that way. The reason for this was that the Roman Empire was not continental but Mediterranean. It was formed by the hegemony of a central Italian people over all three of the coastlands—Asian, African, and European—and deep into the hinterlands behind each: in Asia as far as Armenia and Mesopotamia, in Africa as far as the cataracts of the Nile and the Sahara, and in Europe by a series of conquests, first over the Iberian Peninsula, then beyond the western Alps into Gaul and Britain and the delta of the Rhine, and finally over a series of provinces along the Danube from modern Switzerland to modern Romania. The poet Ovid found himself exiled to the shore of the Black Sea, on the edge of Voltaire’s *nord*, which the poet thought of as Scythia, not as Asia. In central Germany, the Romans were closer than they knew to the vast indeterminacy of Eurasia.

Today, what we call “Europe” is a civilization, rather peninsular and transalpine than Mediterranean in any comprehensive sense, created in the last group of Roman provinces after the disintegration of a unified Roman Empire. That disintegration—Edward Gibbon’s famous “decline and fall”—came about by stages. The first, most “European,” and to him for various reasons the most prominent, was the collapse of Roman control over the far western provinces, and over Italy itself, which happened when an upheaval originating in nomadic central Eurasia caused German peoples to move over the Danube and Rhine in greater numbers than the Romans could absorb.

This extinction of the empire “in the West” was Gibbon’s primary theme both because it happened first and because he was preoccupied, as a European, with the rise of the feudal kingdoms and the papal church. But it was followed, two centuries later, by an even greater event, when a religious revolution in the Fertile Crescent led to the Muslim Arab conquest of most of Roman Asia, all of Roman Africa, and Spain: the destruction of Mediterranean cultural unity, which was never quite recovered. This produced a double separation of “Europe” from the other Mediterranean hinterlands: the western provinces going their own way, and a surviving empire based on Constantinople, with one foot in ancient Asia and the other in ancient Europe, one east and the other west of the Bosphorus which had originally separated the two.

Four centuries after the appearance of Islam, Muslim Turks from central Eurasia began the conquest of Arab Asia and Egypt, and of Byzantine Asia and Europe, concluding it 400 years later. Meanwhile, the principedom of Muscovy set itself up as the Third Rome, the heir of Byzantium, thus completing a process by which the concept of “Europe” migrated irreversibly to the far western provinces, with the result that we are no longer quite sure whether the former Byzantine world (ex-Ottoman or ex-Soviet) belongs in

“Europe” or not. Another consequence is that the great indeterminacy of “Europe’s” eastern borderlands has taken on a cultural as well as a geographic significance.

What we are now beginning to consider is the important fact that as the geographical concept of “Europe” has moved west, to the point that it defines an Atlantic peninsula by calling it a continent, so the historical concept of “Europe” has similarly migrated, to the point where everything we mean when we say “the history of Europe” in fact refers to the history of the political and religious culture—the highly distinctive civilization—that arose in the far western Latin-speaking provinces of the former Roman Empire. This has become what we mean by “Europe,” and its history is what we mean by “the history of Europe.”*



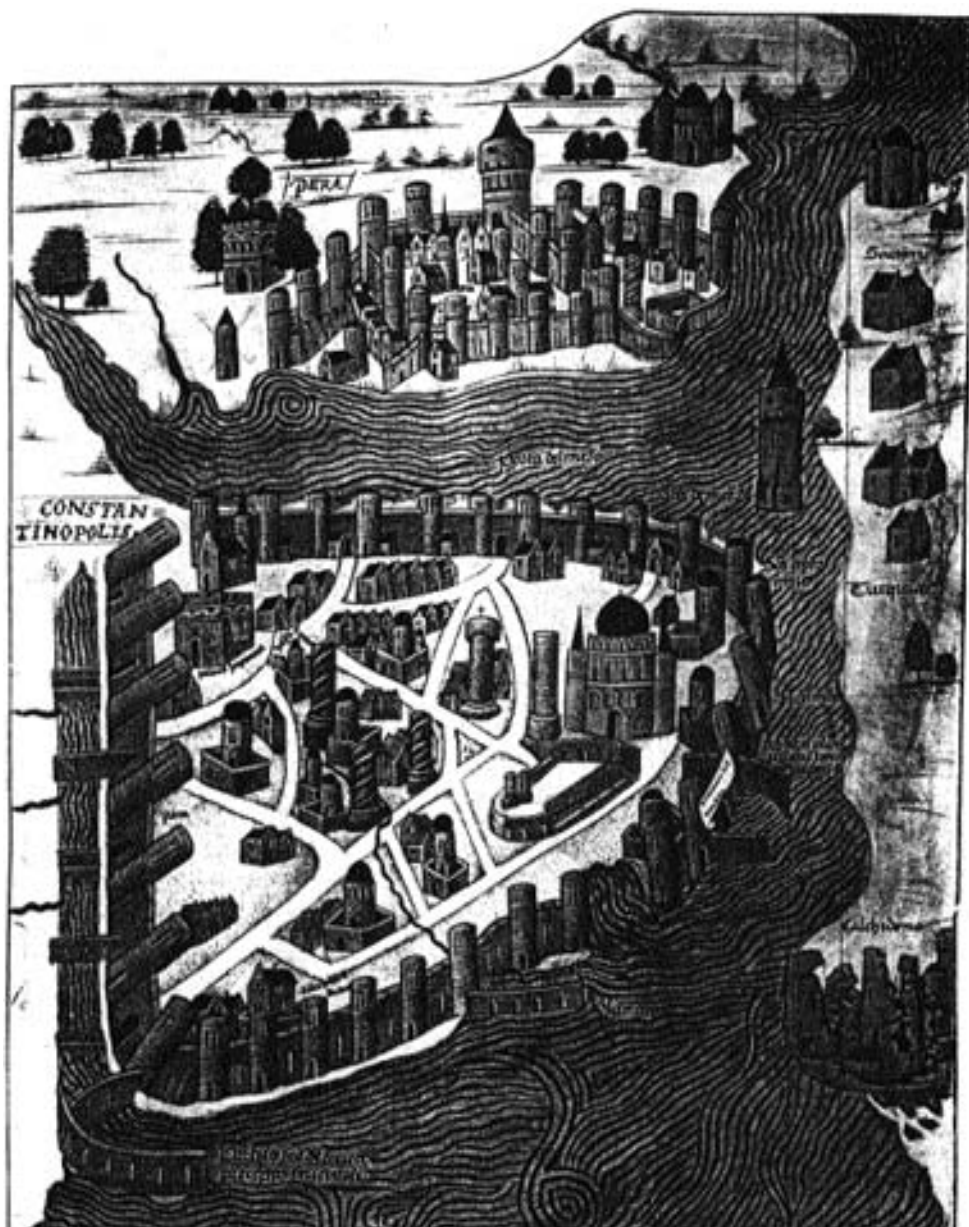
*The “Cottonian” or “Anglo-Saxon” map of the world
(c. 10th–11th century)*

By the same process, the lands to which the term “Europa” was originally applied—Thrace, Macedonia, Illyria, the more modern Bulgaria, Albania, Serbia, even Greece—those which the Byzantine emperors considered their European “themes” or provinces, have become in our minds only marginally European, inhabited by uncouth warring tribes whose history is not ours and whose problems are none of our business. We are no doubt very wrong in having this perception; the point, however, is that we have it, and it is important to understand how we acquired it.

In the western provinces, which were lost by the Romans to a diversity of German-speaking settlers, two things happened. The Christian Church acquired the formidable organization of papal authority, and the barbaric kingdoms acquired the formidable military might of the feudal system, complete with heavy-armored horsemen. All this happened a long way from the sophisticated urban societies of the Greeks, Arabs, and Iranians, but the consequences have been such that it has stolen the narrative of history from them.

In a recent book significantly entitled *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change, 950–1350* (1993), Robert Bartlett examines how this far western culture—feudal, papal, monastic, Latin—began in the 11th and 12th centuries to expand aggressively: westward at the expense of Celtic peoples, beyond England into Wales and Ireland;

*To say “the history of the West” is to include that of the Americas, which “Europe” desires to exclude from its history.



Constantinople, in the Liber insularum Archipelagi of Cristoforo Buondelmonte (1422)

eastward at the expense of Slavic and Finno-Ugrian peoples, beyond Saxony into the heartlands of the European peninsula, and southeastward at the expense of the Byzantine Empire and the increasingly Turk-dominated Arab Khalifat, in the far less stable and enduring enterprise of the Crusades.

It was the last expansion that led the early-12th-century Greek historian Anna Comnena to write that all “Europe” seemed to have uprooted itself and poured in on the civilized world that she inhabited.* But the fact that she also referred to the mainly Frankish and Norman crusaders as “Celts” tells us that she was using what old Greek and Latin terms she could find to describe far western phenomena, and that there was no reason why she should think of herself as either European or Asian. She was a Roman. It

**The Alexiad of Anna Comnena*, translated by E. R. A. Sewter (1969).

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had not yet happened that the new Latin civilization—to Anna Comnena purely barbaric—could claim a monopoly on the word “Europe” and a monopoly on history by calling itself by that name.

The episode of the Crusades did not last. It was the expansion of “Europe” into the Slavic heartlands, concurrently and later, that altered the historical map by creating what we think of as the problem of “Central Europe.” By this we mean that certain Catholic provinces of Latin culture were created—among Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Croats—that we can think of as sharing that “European” history which is the history of the Latin papacy and empire and their aftermath, but that these existed in proximity with other peoples—Russians, Ukrainians, Serbs, Greeks, and Turks—whose history is not Latin and whom we may think of as Europeans or not, as we choose. The point is that we have to choose and do not quite know how to choose, and that these peoples have the corresponding problem from their own perspectives.

The eastward expansion of the western Latins entered that broad zone where there is neither a maritime nor a terrestrial frontier permitting us to say where “Europe” leaves off and “Asia” begins, and in this zone—known to geopolitical theorists at the beginning of this century as the Heartland of the World Island—the Latin civilization that came to call itself “Europe” found itself without any fixed cultural, ecclesiastical, or political frontiers. To the southeast, the lands originally called “Europe” passed increasingly from Greek Orthodox to Turkish Muslim control, culminating in the temporary Ottoman conquest of Catholic-Protestant Hungary in 1526. In the indefinitely extensible heartlands between the Baltic and the Black seas and the lands to the east, the contact between Latins and Greeks was overwhelmed in the 13th century by Mongol power, which deeply affected the history we call Russian and left Poland and Lithuania vulnerable to Crimean slave raiders well into the 17th century.

Is all this history “European” or not? It depends on what we want to say, and on whether we want to decide what we want to say. History since 1989 suggests that we—whoever “we” are—would rather not have to decide. Is this the product of a prudent awareness that “Europe” has no frontiers in the east, or of some deeper weakness of will?

Let me now return to the history we all know, more or less, and describe as the history of Europe. When did it begin to be said that Europe had a history, and when did it begin to be implied that all history was the history of Europe?

A good answer—though, like all good answers, a simplification—can be



Charles Towneley in His Gallery, by Johann Joseph Zoffany, captures the fascination of 18th-century Europeans with their classical roots.

given by fastening on the great historians of the 18th century, the age of Enlightenment: on Voltaire, Edward Gibbon, David Hume, William Robertson, and the extraordinary partnership of Guillaume-Thomas Raynal and Denis Diderot, because it was they who set about defining Europe as a secular civilization and supplying it with a secular history and an age of modernity, neither ancient and Roman nor medieval and papal.

For these historians, writing history was a weapon against the church,

Protestant as well as Catholic, and in consequence they wrote a history of the church designed to reduce it to the role of a malignant force within secular history. The weakness of the Roman Empire, for them, had coincided with the rise of the church, and there was a polemic against the history of Greek philosophy, because the Christian theology which gave the church authority had been shaped in the old Greek East, in Alexandria and Antioch and Constantinople. Islam, which the Enlightened historians rather admired, had progressively destroyed that Greek world. But in the far western provinces lost to the Franks, Saxons, and Normans, a new Latin theology had arisen, designed to buttress the universal jurisdiction of the pope. In the historians' eyes, it made the Latin church the greatest enemy ever faced by the authority of human society over itself.

Gibbon wrote that the beginnings of modern history should be sought in the eighth century A.D., when the papacy allied itself with the Frankish kingdom that became the empire of Charlemagne. Notice that he used "modern" to mean "not ancient" (and therefore Christian), and had not reached the point of using it to mean "not medieval" (and therefore no longer wholly Christian.) For all these historians there had followed a long struggle between the empire and the papacy, each created by the other, that reached a climax about 1300, when the papacy called in the French Angevins to defeat the Hohenstaufen in Italy, and the French kings defeated Pope Boniface VIII and removed the papacy from Rome to Avignon. The history written largely by French scholars and

publicists now removed its center from the Church Universal to the kingdom of France, not universal but hegemonic.

This was a history of feudal as well as clerical power, in which the Crusades figured as the ultimate lunacy of both. It was of course a wholly Latin history, dominated by an obsession with the pope. Greek Orthodox history, which we might want to call “European” on the grounds that it continued Christian and Roman history in a non-Latin way, was excluded from it once the Byzantines were driven out of Italy in the eighth and ninth centuries. Gibbon declared that he could find nothing in Byzantine history except its fall that deserved more than a summary, and that it was better to study the far more dynamic peoples—Latins and Normans in the west, Arabs and Turks in the east, Bulgars and Russians in the north—who had supplanted the Byzantines. Latin history contained its own dynamic. Its external enemies remained external, and even its critical expansions into Spain, Ireland, Scandinavia, and “Central Europe” remained peripheral to the struggle between church and civil society, which had happened nowhere else. Here is the germ of the idea that history happens only in Europe, while other peoples never change.

The Enlightenment narrative proceeded to the late 15th century, when “Europe” could be said to have become “modern” in the sense of “not medieval,” that is, to have begun emerging from the feudal and clerical, barbaric, and religious culture that had enveloped it ever since Charlemagne, or perhaps Constantine. This was partly a result of the recovery of pre-Christian classical culture—for which, significantly, “Europe” was supposed to have been indebted to the fall of Constantinople and the extinction of Byzantine civilization—but also of a series of technological innovations—gunpowder, the compass, and the printing press—unknown to the ancients. We associate these with the discovery of the New World, but it is important to realize that for Voltaire and Hume and Robertson they had a prior importance as factors in the creation of powerful military monarchies controlling their own resources, pursuing their own policies, and acting independently of the papal church. Once there were several of these monarchies, “Europe” could be said to have endowed itself with a states system, whose *raison d'état* and *jus gentium* (law of nations, or international law) took the place of the political theology of empire and papacy, and this states system, or system of international relations, began to become the definition of Europe itself.

The great Edinburgh historian William Robertson (1721–93) wrote of Europe as an entity that had pre-existed the Romans themselves, had been half-destroyed and yet half-civilized by Roman conquest, flung into barbarism half-redeemed by religion when the Roman Empire collapsed, and a millennium later was emerging into conditions under which a civilized religion could again exist. All these were events in the history of Europe, and their culmination occurred, for Robertson, with the empire of Charles V, which seemed to threaten “Europe” with a new universal empire, but in fact ushered in the age of reason, of state, and the balance of power, when the French monarchy, resisting the Hapsburg dynasty, and the English monarchy, adapting itself to this struggle, began educating “Europe” in the conduct of secular power. The balance of power was “Europe,” and “Europe” was the balance of power.

We wrongly call this the age of the nation-state, but from the Hapsburg



Europe in 1617, as depicted by Guilielmus Janssonius

to the Napoleonic empires, the European states system was the work of powerful multiple monarchies, which did not disappear until 1918. In its Renaissance and Enlightenment forms, this system of power was Spanish and French, English and Burgundian, German within the structure of the Holy Roman Empire, but never really Central European at all. Its energies were turned inward on the problems of Latin civilization, and the explosion of that civilization into Mexico and Peru belonged, said Robertson, in a history that would have to be written separately.

The French philosophes Raynal and Diderot had already begun to write the history of the Europeans' conquests, first, of the planetary ocean, which had brought them into contact with all the cultures in the world simultaneously, and, second, of the two American continents, which was leading to the creation of European societies beyond Europe. The discovery of America, said Hume, marked the true beginning of "modern history."

Robertson, however, confined his history to the first half of the 16th century and did not continue it through the 17th. Unlike Voltaire and Hume, he chose to avoid the history of the wars of religion, in which the Enlightenment mind saw Lutheranism, Calvinism, and anabaptism as merely the reverse side of the papacy they sought to destroy: religious fanaticism threatening civil authority in a new way. Voltaire and Hume did not see the Wars of Religion as ending at the Peace of Westphalia in 1648; they were preoccupied with their aftereffects: the wars of the Fronde in France, the Wars of the Three Kingdoms in the British Isles. These carried the story into Voltaire's *Age of Louis XIV* (1751), the first and most central of his histori-

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cal writings, in which he saw the emergence of a “Europe” modern in the sense of “not early modern,” emerging, that is, from the last phase of religious fanaticism into an age of enlightened sociability fostered by both courtly monarchy and commercial refinement.

A peripheral debate was carried on by those who held that Louis XIV had threatened “Europe” with another universal empire like that of the Romans, and that the states system constituting “Europe” had been achieved only when Louis’s adversaries brought him to terms (or he them) in the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713. But French and Scottish historians could agree that Utrecht had achieved a Europe that had outgrown barbarism, fanaticism, and conquest. It was a republic or confederation of states held together by treaties to which wars were merely auxiliary, and by a common system of civilized manners communicated everywhere by commerce—a European economic community, in fact, but one composed of states whose sovereignty was the precondition of their capacity for commerce.

This was the “Europe”—the civilization of states, commerce, and manners—that we so misleadingly call the *ancien régime* (it was totally and self-consciously modern), and that Edmund Burke, writing in the 1790s, declared had been destroyed by two disastrously regressive events: the French Revolution and the partition of Poland. The first occurred in the very heart of Enlightenment “Europe” and was disastrous because it restored the climate of fanaticism and returned “Europe” to the atmosphere of the Wars of Religion, with ideology taking the place of theology. The second occurred closer to the periphery, in what we have been calling “Central Europe,” and to understand its meaning to Burke, it may help to recall that the great Enlightenment histories were written mostly around the time of the Seven Years’ War (the French and Indian War in America) of 1756–63, which enlarged a “European” war into a global struggle, and in the process modified the concept of “Europe” itself.

The system founded on the Treaty of Utrecht was in essence an Anglo-French condominium, with Spain, the Netherlands, and Austrian-dominated Germany and northern Italy as auxiliaries, but the Seven Years’ War transformed it in two ways. West of the Atlantic, it became so far-reaching a struggle for empire in North America and the Caribbean that Raynal and Diderot could propose that wars for power in “Europe” were now dominated by wars for oceanic commerce and empire. They set out to write the first history of the world system created by “European” conquest of the ocean, arguing that Europeans were still barbarians who had not fully escaped from the Middle Ages and asking whether even an enlightened system of global free trade could improve them. This is the first history whose authors endeavor to view “Europe” in its global setting, but it is still the maritime far west of the peninsula they are looking at. France, they declare, is “at the center of Europe” because it lies between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.



Frederico de Wit's 1670 map of Europe

East of, let us say, the river Elbe, the other face of the Seven Years' War enlarged the limited warfare of the system founded on Utrecht into a struggle between three military empires, the Austrian, the Prussian, and the Russian. The Central European space in which their war went on merged into the vaster space in which "Europe" and "Asia" can no longer be told apart—Voltaire's *nord*, created by such far-reaching processes as the decline of the Ottoman Empire and the transformation of the Russian state by Peter the Great and his successors. Voltaire's *History of Russia*, which I referred to earlier, is the major response of Enlightened historiography to all this. Voltaire sees Peter as creating a "European" state fit to take part in the treaties and commerce of "Europe," and even imagines that contacts between Russia and the Ch'ing emperors will induce China to take part in this system. He believes that Russia and China between them will domesticate the Central Asian steppe and end that phase in world history when Huns or Mongols might dominate or destroy the settled civilizations around them.

This is to imagine "Europe" as "tomorrow, the world." Voltaire was enraged by Rousseau's insistence that Peter did too much damage to the customs of his subjects, so that sooner or later the Europeanized Russian state would collapse and the Tartars would return to Europe. But if the far western imagination did not travel all the way to China and Kamchatka, it might at least stop on its own doorstep. Gibbon, having carried his history to the fall of Constantinople in 1453, could in

principle have gone on to the greatness and decline of the Ottoman Empire and the politics of its Austrian and Russian successors. But there is no Enlightenment history of Central and Eastern Europe, none which tends toward or offers to explain the partition of Poland by the three monarchies of Central and Eastern Europe. Gibbon chose instead to return to his starting point amid the ruins of the Capitol and write three chapters on the city of Rome under the popes as far as the Renaissance. The imagination of Catholic-Protestant-Enlightenment “Europe” always came home, to its deeply critical concern with itself.

Enlightened “Europe”—the states system of the Treaty of Utrecht—has been principally a set of political and cultural arrangements imposed by the maritime states of the Atlantic coastlands. It was brought to an end—if we follow Burke’s analysis—by two series of events: first, the occurrence of revolution in the maritime states themselves—France, the Netherlands, perhaps Ireland, but never Britain—and in those states’ extension beyond the Atlantic to English, French, and Spanish America, a world which Burke’s *Annual Register* (a journal he edited) included under the heading “History of Europe” but which Raynal and Diderot showed was hard to fit into European notions of history; second, the growth of military empires in the great spaces where Europe shades into Eurasia, which, by partitioning Poland, indicated their power to redefine the states system which

“Europe” recognized as part of itself but which existed in a world Western Europeans found very hard to recognize or understand.

In a recent book, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), Larry Wolff describes how 18th-century Europeans, as they traveled beyond Germany into Catholic Poland, Orthodox Russia, and the still-Ottoman Balkan Peninsula, felt themselves to have suddenly entered an alien and archaic world of vast distances, enserfed peasantries, and brutal petty officials—a world that corresponded all too easily to their received notions of “oriental despotism.” This last concept was not exclusively an invention of maritime imperialism, though of



The borders of Europe’s nation-states as they appeared on the brink of World War I.

course it was that. It also reflects the encounter of “Europe” on its open eastern frontier with forms of government derived from the Ottoman or Mongol empires or shaped by these as they withdrew. (It was a problem for the British in India whether they were going to join the family of military despotisms or attempt something different.)

The indeterminacy of Europe in the east, however, may help explain the rather strange way in which Larry Wolff’s pages are pervaded by the notion that Western Europeans ought not to have evaluated Central and Eastern “Europe” as they did, that it is not for “Europeans” to decide who is “European” and who is not. This belief reflects the deeply confused way in which we now think about cultural identity, but it also reflects the fact that the decision about it is difficult both to make and to avoid. We don’t know whether to say that the affairs of the former Yugoslavia ought to be arranged by “Europe” because the erstwhile Yugoslavians are part of it, or whether to say that this area is a barbaric frontier, or rather a collision of archaic frontiers in a world still barbaric, which it is better to avoid trying to control. Should an empire seek to assimilate its barbarians or to exclude them? If we reply that it should not have defined them as barbarians in the first place, the question arises of the terms in which it ought to have understood them. The lands originally called “Europa” are those in which “Europe” experiences a continuing problem in culture contact, and discovers that to define oneself is also to define others.

But this is to anticipate the history of “Europe” since the end of the Enlightened settlement. That was succeeded by the transitory if spectacular Napoleonic interlude, when the revolutionary empire of France over Latin Europe proved itself very nearly capable of dominating the three military monarchies of Europe’s eastward expansion. But the resistance of Austria, Russia, and the maritime empire of Britain over the Atlantic and Mediterranean led the French empire to overreach itself, collapse, and be succeeded by an attempt to restore that “Europe” of several states linked by treaty and trade in which Enlightenment thinkers had seen the security of civilization itself.

To work, though, this Concert of Europe, heir to the early-modern states system, had to be guaranteed by, and therefore had to include, the eastward military monarchies themselves: Prussia, Austria, Russia (but not the Turkish empire, seen as barbaric, oriental, decadent, and on the way to relegation to the colonial world over which “Europe” ruled). The technology of industrialism transformed the old empires and republics into formidably unified military states, capable of conscripting their entirely willing citizenries into great national armies, and an era of great states, great wars, and great revolutions that can be said to have lasted, rather neatly, from 1789 to 1989, and the United States and Japan to have played their parts in it.

In the history of “Europe,” we take as cardinal the two world wars of the 20th century, in which the German empire-state twice proved itself capable of simultaneously threatening to dominate both the Rhenish Netherlands, thus provoking war with France and Britain on the ancient battle-grounds of historic “Europe,” and Poland and Ukraine, thus provoking war with Russia in and about that great debatable land which geopoliticians used to proclaim the Heartland, declaring that whoever ruled it ruled the world. Both the world wars were so destructive to “Europe” as to produce huge systemic collapses and the intervention of both the continental super-

states created by European settlements beyond “Europe”: the United States of America and the Eurasian empire of Russia. After 1945, and for the greater part of my adult lifetime, it was a commonplace among the most trendy historians to say that the European age had ended, and that “Europe” itself had been partitioned by the intercontinental superpowers. But we now know that assessment to be false, and something calling itself “Europe” has emerged and claimed a powerful role in its own affairs and those of others.

The European Economic Community, Community, and Union—to list the names by which it has successively called itself—seems to display a series of characteristics.

First, it was, and has remained, a Franco-German consortium, a series of arrangements designed to ensure that France and Germany will not again go to war by inducing them to merge their institutions and economies to a point where armed conflict ceases to be possible. This laudable aim could not be pursued without drawing in adjacent populations in Italy and the Low Countries, and so forth. The economic benefits of German industrial recovery were such that many were willing to join in the enterprise. But because it was recognized from the start that the enterprise entailed inducing democracies to give up their sovereignty—which is to say their capacity for self-government—the strategy adopted from the start was that which a Quebec statesman more than a year ago unwisely described as tempting lobsters into the pot, inducing them to take the first step and then revealing to them that it was irrevocable, so that no way remained but forward.

There is no more liberally employed phrase in the rhetoric of Europeanism than “we (or you) have no other choice”—language I was interested to hear reused in the United States when the North American Free Trade Agreement was being debated. When, therefore, I hear it said, as I do all the time, that the separate histories, Irish or British, French or Spanish, German or Swedish—but not yet Polish or Hungarian, and certainly not, for the foreseeable future, Russian—merge in the history of something called “Europe,” which has not been written yet, I wonder what this indeterminacy means, and I think we had better set about writing the history of “Europe” and seeing how it comes out when we do. There are numerous ways of writing it.

Second, the institutionalization, and the creation of a mystique, which went with the idea of a union to be called “Europe,” went on in



Land without borders: Europe as seen from space

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the era of the Cold War, the Iron Curtain, and the partition of Europe. This partition, by which the Soviet Union hoped to protect its domination of the Heartland and its own unity, ran well west of the indeterminacies of that region and cut deep into Latin and Enlightenment "Europe." It separated Lutheran East Germany from Catholic West Germany, and Catholic Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia from the Western Europe of which they might be considered extensions. In the era of partition, "Europe" was far from clear about what it intended to do about the Central and Eastern "Europes," apparently lost to Soviet domination. Its ideology was never in practice what it was in principle: an affirmation of Catholic-Protestant-Enlightened Europe against the Orthodox and Muslim Europes and a "Eurasia" now ruled by a semi-Enlightened Russia.

Turned westward, the ideology of "Europe" became the instrument of a dispute with its other protector: France and Germany, the losers in World War II, against the United States as the principal victor, and also against Britain, while that state continued to belong to the maritime world of the British Commonwealth and the "special relationship." It was a sense of defeat in that set of relationships which led the United Kingdom to accede to "Europe," and as "Europe" has not allayed that sense of defeat, the British relationship to it remains deeply ambivalent. I speak as a citizen of the former Commonwealth, but I do so without hesitation. "Europe" must see itself as a new Norman Conquest, the Channel Tunnel as a revival of the camp at Boulogne in 1805; the power of the Napoleonic and German bureaucracies, now serving the international market, seeks to extend itself over the British Isles.

But if "Europe" was a product of the partition of "Europe," it has had to survive the end of that partition and the downfall of the Soviet Union and may even have to survive in the future the downfall of the Russian state created by Peter and Catherine and their successors. This means that the door is open wider than at any time in recent history toward those areas in which "Europe" has no frontiers, and any attempt to withdraw them or extend them must be equally arbitrary—toward the old Heartland where Catholic-Protestant-Enlightened "Europe" shades into Orthodox-Muslim-Communist Eurasia, and toward the ancient original "Europa" now known as the Balkan Peninsula, whose problems are still those created by the expansion and contraction of the Ottoman Empire. Amid the innumerable alarming possibilities of this situation—in which the possible disappearance and the possible renewal of Russian great-power capacity appear equally threatening—occurs the thought that "Europe" may now be what "Germany" formerly was: an imperial power secure in the Atlantic coastlands but obliged to attempt imperial control in one or both of the great marchlands to the east. In times gone by, this role entailed great-power

rivalries and world wars. Unless a Russian great power revives, these may not occur again, but the history of European and American dealings with the former Yugoslavia brings to light one more characteristic of contemporary “Europe.”

We have considered two eras in which “Europe” was defined largely as an economic entity, in order to put an end to periods of destructive war. The first was the era of Enlightenment, from 1713 to 1789, when “Europe” was presented as a republic of states held together by commerce, after the end of the Wars of Religion and the threat of universal monarchy. The second era is our own. But whereas the Enlightenment theorists invented “Europe” as a system of states in which the partnership of civil sovereignty and civil society was necessary to commerce and the spread of manners, we find ourselves apparently committed to the submergence of the state and its sovereignty, not in some pan-European or universal confederation but in a postmodern arrangement in which the global market demands the subjugation of the political community and perhaps of the ethnic and cultural community also; we are to give up being citizens and behave exclusively as consumers.

This is why the European Union is ineffective as an empire. An organization designed to break the will of the state to govern itself necessarily reduces its own will to use military power to police its own frontiers, notably when these are drawn in parts of the world in which only a strong and clear political will can establish where these frontiers lie. “Europe” is a set of arrangements designed to ensure that peoples will not again define themselves as states, and will surrender both the power to make war and the power to control the movements of market forces. The question for the new century is whether Europeans will retain any capacity to govern themselves by political means—a question not yet, perhaps, confronting the United States. Unfortunately, the power to decide on the use of military force cannot be detached from the retention of the former capacity as completely as we should like. Europe, the cradle of the state, may be about to discover what it is like to do without it.
