

“History of Man”:

From Ape to Alexander & Beyond, a Study in World Cultures

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Introduction:

When one looks back at the history of mankind, there is a perceivable point where all major historical events begin to revolve and center on the continent of Europe. It starts with Ancient Greece, but quickly takes the majestic form of the Roman Empire which as many know, would rule over a majority of the known world for more than a thousand years.

Europe is located in the northern hemisphere, separated from Africa by the Mediterranean Sea and from the America's by the Atlantic Ocean. To the east of Europe lies the massive continent of Asia where Europe would seek trade and eventually colonize more than half of those lands.

Europe has several key features that have contributed to the events that have shaped its history. To the south of the continent, dividing present day Italy and Switzerland from the rest of Europe is where the Alps are located. This mountain range served as a natural boundary for the land mass.

The island chain, located to the North of Europe, now known as the United Kingdoms is divided from the rest of Europe by the English Channel and the North Sea. This natural sea boundary allowed the British to stay clear of many conflicts that might have otherwise burdened them; however they were still not without a considerable amount of invasion and wars with rival kingdoms.

To the south of the UK, lies present day France and Germany, while the UK has historically had a number of conflicts with France; the proximity of France and Germany to each other, in some places only divided by a river is the reason why the two cultures were so often brought into conflict.

Ultimately, it is important to understand that Europe has not come from the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution or anything of that sort; it is a product of a series of bloody conflicts that shaped the people in ways that would ultimately allow the creation of the European Union.

Historical Background

In 1618, the Holy Roman Empire entered into a conflict which would later be known as the Thirty Year War. The conflict saw a number of European powers entering into the conflict based on their religious affiliations; Catholic or Protestantism. By 1648, the conflict ended with the near disillusion of the Roman Empire along with a series of conferences and treaties which are commonly grouped under the Peace of Westphalia.

As part of the peace accords, a common understanding was established that identified the sovereign being responsible for all matters regarding the state and the religion. This understanding gave rise to the modern day concept of Sovereignty which ensures that a State has the right to decide its own practices and policies without outside interference.

With regards to the evolution of Nation-States, this paper would have to jump more than a century to 1789, specifically to the Storming of the Bastille which is the flashpoint for the French Revolution. The Revolution went through a number of phases before being considered to have concluded in 1799. The revolution brought about a number of important developments in the equation of a Nation-State. Firstly, the French people banded together under a common banner to fight against the existing Monarch, Louis XVI, this feeling of popular sovereignty allowed the people to draw up a constitution and create the First French Republic. This is key because while concepts like constituent assemblies existed as a result of Social Contracts, this was the first significant event where a populace overthrew a monarch and installed their own leaders.

The French Revolution is also credited to have given rise to Napoleon, Napoleon whom had been elected by the people, was quick to declare himself Emperor of France and with that he began a series of expansive campaigns that would fill the 19th Century.

These Napoleonic Wars are important as they provided the European communities a common enemy to rally against. This common enemy merited the creation of a national army which, in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars gave rise to the creation of the Austrian-German, Prussian empires. However, aside from these potentially adverse effects of the Napoleonic Wars, it also allowed the spread of the French Concepts of Liberalism and democracy, thus preventing European monarchs from reestablishing complete autocracy once the wars were over.

In the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, Europe was now dotted with a number of prominent empires who began to expand into Asia and Africa, establishing trading posts and eventually creating colonies. These colonies were perfect locations for the empires to send away individuals whose presence was considered adverse on society; for example: Australia was established as a prison colony and thus large numbers of British criminals were sent there.

However, the rise and spread of colonialism shifted the existing friction between European Nations to their colonies. This is seen in conflicts that revolved around resources in a particular region, trade resources, slaves, etc. Eventually, the colonies became a stage for smaller conflicts that would contribute to the triggering of the First World War.

The First World War started in 1914 and continued till 1918, it was considered to have been one of the worst conflicts that mankind has seen in history which is why until the Second World War it was commonly known as the Great War. The Great War involved a number of European empires, the key parties being grouped as the Triple Entente and the Triple Alliance. The Entente was comprised of the United Kingdom, France, and Russia (after the

withdrawal of Russia in 1917 the USA took its place), the Alliance was comprised of the Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy (which was quickly replaced by the Ottoman Empire). The conflict ended with the Treaty of Versailles which imposed strong sanctions on the Germany along with the creation of the League of Nations.

During the war, the Triple Entente took a tremendous amount of loans from the United States in order to bolster its wartime economy. This problem became compounded in 1929 with the Great Depression hitting the United States; this problem quickly spread over the Atlantic Ocean and severely affected the European economies.

Vladimir Lenin in 1917 authored a book titled 'Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism', the book spoke about the strong connection that Imperialism and Capitalism have and how the relation between the imperialist nations would eventually result in a series of violent clashes between the imperialist powers. Lenin believed that the only way for the Capitalist powers to sustain themselves would be for them to end their conflicts and to start cooperating; this thought is an amazing foresight considering the after the Second World War the groundwork for the European Union began.

The Second World War began in 1939 and once again saw Germany taking on the entirety of Europe, the German forces, under the rule of Adolf Hitler and his Nazi party sought to create and spread a Third Reich. With the blitzkrieg strategy that the German forces used, a tremendous amount of European powers were conquered with only the United Kingdom being able to hold out. The start of the Second World War is often labelled to have been due to the failure of the League of Nations which was created to prevent conflict, however due to its organizational problems; it was unable to address the problem until it had already spiraled out of control.

Once the Second World War finished, the World saw the creation of another conflict, the Cold War. This conflict saw the creation of two key power blocs, the Capitalist and Democratic United States and the Communist Soviet Union. This conflict was pinned into Europe as Germany was divided by the two blocs along with the creation of the Iron Curtain which, theoretically, divided Europe into two parts.

Around this time, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill travelled to the University of Zurich where he spoke about a greater Europe which should see the union of France and Germany into the United States of Europe. This speech and the concept behind it is popularly considered to have been stated because of the fall that European states undertook with the Cold War raging by two fronts, neither of them being European.

From Economic to Political Unity

Through the Paris Treaty of 1951; France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Luxembourg and Netherlands entered into an agreement that saw the formation of the European Coal and Steel Community, this community saw the establishment of a common trade market for Coal and Steel.

The objective of this union was to make war impossibility for the European states, in the words of Robert Schuman; the French Foreign Minister who put forth the idea of the ECSC was to “make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible”. His objective was to have regional integration which would ensure that it would be economically detrimental to have the European states engage in open conflict. The ECSC was one of the first bodies to have been established under the principles of Supranationalism.

The success of the organization eventually leads to the creation of the European Economic Community in 1957, by the Rome Treaty. This treaty established a Common Market in Europe making trade relations even easier, removing cross border tariffs and duty taxes to promote trade. While this was originally signed by the original six members, it eventually saw signatures from the periphery countries like Spain, Portugal, Greece, and UK.

Eventually, the treaties that began to be signed by the European powers began to shift from being economic and began to transition into political agreements with the Schengen Rules that made international travel in Europe easier for European Union members.

With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the reunification of Germany along with the fall of communism in a number of Eastern European States, the number of people who had signed into the European Economic Community increased tremendously.

The framework for what would eventually become the European Union finally came into being with the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. This Union had all the pillars of a modern nation state, having an executive, a legislature and a judiciary arm. This Union maintained the essential rights of nation-states to retain sovereignty; however as a requirement of joining the European Union, nation-states have a requirement to have met certain prerequisites whether it is judiciary or democratic practices.

Europe as a Collective Culture

The EU is fast on the way to becoming what Churchill called the United States of Europe. The only problem that seems to stand in its way is the lack of a collective identity in Europe. While the European Union recognizes a tremendous number of local languages and makes it a prerequisite for all member states to adopt bilingualism, i.e. to keep two languages, English

and a local language. (France would have English and French as the language for all road signs, etc.) However as a people they still have the problem of minority cultures being overshadowed by other more dominating cultures.

This lack of a collective identity was put to the test when the 2007 American Recession occurred and spread to Europe. The affected countries - Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain suffered heavily because of the crisis and sought bailout packages from the European Union. The EU considered the bailout package, however this caused incredible strain with protests breaking out in Germany as the people did not believe that they should pay for the poor decisions that the PIIGS governments had made.

Nevertheless, the EU eventually prevailed when the German Government approved a bailout package for Greece however they set down very strict and firm policies for the money to be paid back.

There is also the allure that the EU presents to non-EU States, the ability to have simplified trade and all the benefits that come from being a member-state of the EU is what caused the recent conflict in the Ukraine. The people in Ukraine protested against their government's decision to align with the Russian version of the EU. The people eventually prevailed, toppling the government, but this has brought about even more conflict as Russia has now invaded the Crimea, under grounds that the Ukrainians of Russian decent are suffering from this decision and that Russia acts in accordance of that. However, this situation is still developing and cannot be definitively commented upon.

Conclusion

The European Union is described as an experiment, and as an experiment it has been wildly successful as proof of how a modern nation-state must evolve. The collectivism that it has managed to install with regards to political functions, judicial practices are commendable to say the least. Additionally, when you examine the history of the continent, all the conflict and the strife that has been involved in it, it is remarkable that it has managed to push forward in such a manner.

With regards to whether the EU could be considered as progress, there is no doubt that it has managed to take some of the biggest problems that plague modern nations and ensure that a common platform exists for dialogue and development. However it remains an experiment and that too, an experiment that cannot be repeated anywhere else in the world; the reason for that statement is because no other part of the world has gone through the same degree of history and development that Europe has gone through.