

THE EUROPEAN SCENE

A Geographic
Perspective



James R. McDonald

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Preface

This book reflects more than thirty-three years of European experience as a resident, a traveler, a researcher, and a teacher. Looking back across the years, I am conscious above all of the dramatic changes that have altered—and continue to alter—the European scene in almost every conceivable way. Yet beyond the shifting images and rushing technology of modern Europe remains a stability, a sense of continuity, a feeling of permanence that transcends the surface glitter and speaks of unchanging values. It is this, I believe, that draws me back to Europe nearly every year. The French have a term to describe those many parts of their country that linger in the past, away from the cities and off the freeways: “la France profonde” (literally, “deep France”). The phrase speaks of a slower pace of life, of a greater respect for traditions, and perhaps a more measured view of what constitutes “progress”; and the idea has its echo in every European country.

Many people—more than I can possibly name—have been helpful to me in countless ways over the years and are reflected in the pages that follow. In France, Jean Dresch and Andre Meynier were early mentors, and Philippe Pinchemel has long been a friend and advisor. In Great Britain Hugh Clout, John Tuppen, and especially Ian Thompson have been generous with both personal and professional help. Among American geographers, Anne Buttimer and Geoff Martin have provided stimulating ideas and encouragement, and the late George Kish, one of the truly great Europeanists, was both a friend and a neighbor. My colleagues in the Department of Geography and Geology, Eastern Michigan University, have been unfailingly supportive, and the historian W. D. Briggs has

reinforced my already lively interest in the historical dimensions of the European scene. Finally, I am indebted to those many generations of students in my various European geography classes whose insights, questions, and shared experiences have done much to shape my own ideas.

Financial support, without which much of my work in Europe would never have been possible, has been provided at various times by the Social Science Research Council, the National Science Foundation, the National Geographic Society, and Eastern Michigan University through its Sabbatical Leave and Faculty Research Fellowship programs. Thanks are also due to the many reviewers who have read and commented on various parts of the text. They have done their best to save me from errors of omission and commission; but I must claim responsibility for the undoubtedly numerous ones that remain.

I must also offer a word of gratitude to Prentice Hall, and especially to Dan Joraanstad and his staff for encouraging this long-held ambition to become a reality. The fine cartographic work by Alice Thiede must also be thankfully recognized, as well as the skilled production supervision of Lisa Garboski. Finally, my family, upon whom I have inflicted Europe all these years, has earned my gratitude in the most impressive possible way: by becoming European addicts themselves. Dr. Sharon McDonald has been my companion in Europe (as elsewhere) for more than thirty years, and both Christopher and Sean have gone beyond family life and independent traveling in Europe to include European research and scholarship in their respective careers. Where would I be without them all?

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Introduction

EUROPE: THE CONTINENT OF CHANGE

If Europe has had a consistent image over the years since 1945, it has been as a continent of dramatic and often unpredictable change. The heavy weight of history, the landscapes touched by and reflective of the past, the people and ideas that have in a very real sense created the modern world—all this formed the essence of a politically and economically fragmented continent entering the last half of the twentieth century. Yet, in the 1990s, how dramatically and in many ways unexpectedly this image has altered yet again. From being a footnote to contemporary events, Europe has become the continent of sudden and profound change, challenging not only its own traditions and recent history but also the familiar world order. Two major developments, each with important implications, have sparked this new era of revolution in Europe: One is concerned with destroying and reconstructing an old order, the other with building something entirely new.

What has riveted the world's attention, and made Europe a sort of day-to-day exercise in current events, has been the sudden, total, and almost universally unforeseen collapse of nearly all the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. The progressive failure of state-directed command economies to meet national objectives and consumer demands, combined with the winds of glasnost and perestroika blowing from a Soviet Union increasingly unwilling to militarily enforce its writ



Figure I-1 Destruction of the infamous Berlin Wall in 1989–90 emphasized the dramatic changes sweeping Eastern Europe. Photo courtesy of German Information Service.

across the region, changed the political environment beyond recognition in the course of a few brief months. Not surprisingly, these changes, by both their suddenness and their depth, have had a ripple effect of implications for the rest of Europe and indeed for the entire world.

Secondly, and again in sharp counterpoint to the national divisiveness and jealously guarded frontiers of a half century ago, Europe appears to be embarking seriously on a course of economic, and eventually perhaps political, union unprecedented in its entire history. The European Community, from its modest beginnings in 1957, has become a powerful institution challenging at once the established nation-state structure so characteristic of historic Europe and the international image of the continent as economically powerful but hopelessly fragmented. The Community is faced with a critical juncture as Europe takes decisive steps in 1992–93 to achieve a degree of integration that may enable it to recapture its historic positions as the motor of the world's economy and the arbiter of its political order.

From these two great events, and from their interaction, other significant changes in European realities and ideas flow. Old military and economic alliances break down or are forced to critically reexamine their rationales and future roles. Nationalities and ethnic minorities, long stifled by repressive or centralizing governments, awaken to demand a place in the new European sun, often fostering tensions and conflict as they rejoice in unaccustomed freedoms. The environmental disaster that much of Europe has become in the name of economic progress is exposed to the light, and becomes a concern of the utmost priority for the entire continent from its international organizations to its local political units and even to its individual citizens.

As the last decade of the twentieth century begins, Europe is thus in many ways the most exciting continent of all to consider. Innumerable aspects of its political, cultural, and economic geography are changing beyond recognition. Yet at the same time, there is a certain continuity to the European scene that is both reassuring and promising. The natural landscapes of the continent, with their strong component of human management, remain remarkably timeless. The vitality and creativity of Europe's peoples, that have produced the dynamism and variety that are the hallmarks of the continent, persist undiminished. The economic strength of Europe continues to have a decisive impact on the entire world.

Continuity and change, perhaps the words that best describe Europe as the 1990s begin, are also those that summarize the geographic approach to space and time. A geography of Europe, then, should attempt to encompass as many relevant variables of the modern scene as possible. But how should such a work be organized? What are the possible frameworks that should be considered?

SYSTEMATIC VERSUS REGIONAL APPROACHES

Geography studies the physical, cultural, and economic phenomena of the earth in their spatial interactions. Hardly anything is arranged either perfectly symmetrically or entirely randomly across the surface of the globe, and geography seeks to

describe and explain the patterns of distribution—often complex—and to suggest ways of seeing that might help to interpret the past, justify the present, and possibly predict the future. It seeks to offer a way of understanding the bewildering diversity all around us and, as an essentially ecological science, emphasizes the inevitable interrelationships between all the world's systems, both natural and human.

In setting about this admittedly sizable task, geographers have traditionally used two distinct approaches: the systematic and the regional. Both are useful; both are still widely employed. This book is an attempt to synthesize the two in the setting of Europe. As such, some explanation might be in order.

Classical regional studies such as appear in many books dealing with Europe tend to arrange material almost entirely by country or by major subregion (example, "northern Europe"). This approach is based on the familiar geographic concept of the "region" as the ultimate unit of synthesis of all geographic information, that is, as a unique space that can be differentiated from any other and described in terms of its particular characteristics of landforms, climate, cultures, historical evolution, economic practices, ways of life, or political outlooks. Using such an approach for Europe, we might therefore (after some brief general remarks) discuss the region on the basis of its thirty-two individual nations, proceeding either alphabetically (an extreme case!) from Albania to Yugoslavia or more logically by subregion (Germany, Switzerland, and Austria, for instance, discussed sequentially as "central Europe").

This strategy, however, has some major drawbacks, many of which have become more serious with the passage of time. Chief among these is the fact that Europe—in size a small continent—has many characteristics that inevitably cut across national boundaries: basic patterns of climate, for example, or problems of air and water pollution, or the area in which a certain language is spoken. Over the years since the 1950s, this trend has become much more marked, as European nations have developed important political and economic institutions in which many of them are grouped (the European Community is a case in point), and which are having the gradual effect of reducing the significance of national boundaries, thus blurring their effectiveness as regional limits. Many crucial decisions in Europe today are being made on the basis of multinational frameworks of one kind or another, and the significance of these can only imperfectly be explained in any traditional context of regional subdivision. Moreover, rapid advances in communications, transportation, and other aspects of the late twentieth century technological revolution have tended somewhat to "homogenize" Europe in terms of information, movement, and economic patterns and problems; this trend has been accelerated by the momentous political changes of 1989–90.

The internationalization of modern cities and the growing importance of interurban networks, which literally bypass many conventional distinctions among nations, has also played a key role in this process, as have the vast international

somewhat dated. Nonetheless, it is clearly not possible to ignore entirely those national and subregional units that are such a familiar part of the European scene, and that continue to play a key role—in reality as well as in the imagination—in the day-to-day functioning of the continent. We must surely consider these at some point.

In the other basic strategy for considering geographic information—the systematic approach—the distribution patterns of all basic phenomena that must be considered to gain some understanding of the total region under discussion (again, Europe in the present case) are observed and noted wherever they chance to occur, rather than being chopped up country by country. Landforms and their significance, population characteristics, and resource availability are thus considered on a continental, rather than national, basis. This approach has a number of advantages. First, it enables the “big picture” of various topics to emerge more clearly, which is difficult to accomplish when the relevant information is scattered at several points in the text. Second, it permits the logical grouping of distinct units that would otherwise be fragmented. For example, it makes greater sense to discuss the characteristics of the Alps as a single complex mountainous region than to divide them among separate descriptions under Austria, Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, and Yugoslavia. Finally, it diminishes the often artificial importance of political boundaries as geographic determinants and enables a more modern picture of international interactions to emerge.

In the Europe offered here, therefore, the basic approach to the presentation of geographic information will be a systematic one, with specific national or local examples used at many points to emphasize the patterns that are developed. The latter part of the book, however, consists of a number of national and subregional profiles, in which basic information about the major European nations is summarized and their main national characteristics identified. In this way it is hoped that the two traditions of geography—the systematic and the regional—can be combined to enhance understanding of this most fascinating of continents.

WHY EUROPE?

Of all the world's major regions, Europe is in many ways the least likely candidate for a featured role. It is, for a start, the smallest by far of the continents (if the Soviet Union is excluded), and consists largely of a collection of islands and peninsulas attached to the western extremities of the vast Eurasian landmass. In fact, the Soviet Union and Europe combined are comparable in size to the other major continents. It is only 750 miles (1200 kilometers) from the Baltic Sea to the Black Sea, and less than 250 miles (400 kilometers) from the Mediterranean Sea to the Atlantic Ocean across France. Enjoying the elaborate system of superhighways, a motorist can easily travel in four or even five countries in the course of a single day.

Figure I-3 Area and population data for European countries, 1990.

COUNTRY	AREA (THOUSAND SQ MI)	POPULATION (MILLIONS) ^b	CURRENT ANNUAL RATE OF GROWTH (%)
Albania	11.1	3.3	2.0
Andorra	(185) ^a	(45,000) ^c	1.2
Austria	32.4	7.6	0.1
Belgium	11.8	9.9	0.2
Bulgaria	42.8	8.9	0.1
Cyprus	3.6	0.7	1.0
Czechoslovakia	49.4	15.7	0.2
Denmark	16.6	5.1	0.0
Finland	130.2	5.0	0.3
France	211.2	56.4	0.4
Germany	137.8	79.5	0.0
Greece	50.9	10.1	0.2
Hungary	35.9	10.6	(-0.2)
Iceland	39.8	0.3	1.1
Ireland	27.1	3.5	0.6
Italy	116.3	57.7	0.1
Liechtenstein	(62)	(26,000) ^c	0.9
Luxembourg	(990)	0.4	0.2
Malta	(120)	0.4	0.8
Monaco	(0.50)	(25,000) ^c	0.0
Netherlands	14.4	14.9	0.4
Norway	125.2	4.2	0.3
Poland	120.7	37.8	0.6
Portugal	35.6	10.4	0.2
Romania	91.7	23.3	0.5
San Marino	(24)	(21,000) ^c	0.0
Spain	194.9	39.4	0.3
Sweden	173.7	8.5	0.2
Switzerland	15.9	6.7	0.3
United Kingdom	94.5	57.4	0.2
Vatican City	(0.1)	(1,000) ^c	0.0
Yugoslavia	98.8	23.8	0.6

^a Figures in parentheses are actual numbers.

^b Population Reference Bureau 1990 estimates.

^c 1986 United Nations estimates.

If its small size fails to interest us, we might well ask if a strong resource base is what makes Europe important (perhaps on the Middle Eastern model). Here again, the answer is negative. Europe is a continent deficient in almost all the major industrial minerals, in energy commodities, in most of the

raw materials its industries process, and even in certain agricultural products. The continent as a whole is an enormous net importer of these basic items, and only in a few countries does their production and export play an important economic role.

If in attempting to understand the importance of Europe, however, we turn to its population, the picture changes considerably. It is, in effect, the peoples of Europe—their numbers, their skills, their inventiveness, and above all their impact on the rest of the world—that have given Europe the success, the prosperity, the self-confidence, and the key role in world affairs that it still enjoys. From classical times through the Middle Ages and the Age of Exploration, down to the most recent periods of history, Europeans have left their mark on the world to a degree out of all proportion to the size and resources of their continent. This is a pattern that still persists: Many Americans know the names of (and often something about) European countries with populations of only five or ten million (Switzerland, Sweden, and the Irish Republic, for example), yet around the world other nations with populations ten times as large remain totally, and embarrassingly, unknown.

Europe not only discovered the New World in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it exercised colonial control over much of the globe at one time or another until the mid twentieth century. During the same period it also exported millions of its unwanted or undervalued citizens to populate large areas of the world. Moreover, wherever Europeans and European influence went, substantial cultural change—much of it permanent—also occurred. English and French became the languages of international communication over widespread areas of Africa and Asia (modern India could probably not function as a multiethnic nation without the “glue” of English). European ideas and philosophies often replaced older values; and European systems of legal and social organization are the general rule.

Finally, it has been the European economic model that has largely become the wonder of the world, to be envied, resented, and emulated by nearly all nations. The European system of agriculture (both crops and technologies) spread wherever Europeans settled. Elsewhere, Europeans established plantations to satisfy their own requirements; these are still a crucial element of the economies of numerous tropical and subtropical countries. It was also Europeans who controlled and profited most from long-distance trading to Asia and the Americas. Most important, the European model of industry, as articulated in the Industrial Revolution and all its continuing implications, has set the standard for the world.

Thus, Europe has a significance in the world that goes far beyond its size and internal resources. No part of the globe has altogether escaped its influence, and by taking a closer look at its geographic patterns we can, to a degree true of no other continent, begin to understand something of how the world thinks and acts.