Chapter 1

Not So Much a Continent, More a Way of Life

In This Chapter

- Defining European culture and identity
- Identifying what European history has in common
- Tracing Europe's impact on the world

One thing that hits you very quickly about Europe is how varied it is. In some areas, you can take a two-hour drive and go through three or four different language zones, sometimes with different alphabets to write them with. General de Gaulle once said that you could not unite a nation like France that had 265 different types of cheese; it's even harder for Europe, a small continent that can't decide which language to speak, which religion to follow, which money to use, or even where exactly it begins and ends.

Where Is Europe?

Most continents have a pretty obvious land mass, but Europe's a bit different. Because Europe's part of the same land mass as Asia, you could make a case for saying that, geographically, it's not really a separate continent at all. The border between Europe and Asia is usually taken as the Ural mountains in Russia, but that line is a bit arbitrary.

The border becomes even more arbitrary in the Mediterranean region. The city of Istanbul sits officially at the meeting point between Europe and Asia, with just a narrow waterway, the Bosphorus, between them. But if you're expecting to find yourself in a different world as soon as you step off the ferry, you may be disappointed. Much of Turkey looks pretty similar to much of Greece, which is not surprising because they were both part of the same culture. Cyprus is part of 'Europe', but it has a lot more in common with 'Asian' Turkey than it has with other European islands, such as Iceland, Ireland, or the islands of the Baltic. In fact, for much of Europe's history, the

Mediterranean world has operated as a single unit, with trading ships going back and forth from one coast to another and mighty empires seeking to rule the whole area, without anyone making too much of the fact that, strictly speaking, three separate continents come together there.

How Many Europes?

Once you start looking for similarities that hold Europeans together, you end up with some unexpected results. For one thing, you soon find that more 'Europes' have existed than you may have thought.

A Christian Europe?

The idea of Europe as a Christian continent works, up to a point. However, Europe has a substantial Muslim population, and not just post-war immigrants but communities first created when the Ottoman Turks overran eastern Europe back in the 15th century. Much of Spain used to be ruled by Muslims from North Africa, who established what they called the Caliphate of Cordoba; you can still get a sense of their rich cultural legacy in the beautiful Alhambra Palace in Granada.

Christianity did spread across Europe, so much so that talk focused on *Christendom*, a sort of united Christian Europe. However Christendom split into two geographic and theological camps: the Catholic Church based at Rome and the Orthodox Church based at Constantinople.

Medieval Catholics regarded Orthodox Christians as little better than *infidels* (that is, non-believers), and in 1204, an army of western Crusaders on its way to Jerusalem decided to teach them a lesson by trashing the great Christian city of Constantinople. (You can find out more about this deplorable episode in Chapter 8.)

Fast forward three centuries, and you find Europe tearing itself in two over the religious ideas of Martin Luther and John Calvin. This period is called the *Reformation* (Chapter 11 has the details), and it divided Europe into Protestant (England, Scotland, northern Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, parts of Switzerland) and Catholic (Italy, France, Spain, Poland, Hungary, southern Germany, Ireland), not to mention eastern Orthodox (Russia, Greece, the Balkans). Christian Europe? Take your pick: there were three!

A royal Europe?

When religious leaders weren't claiming divine fiat over parts of Europe, European royals claimed – or tried to claim – their own divine right to rule.

Royal flush . . .

Does it make sense to think of Europe as a continent that, historically at any rate, relates easily to monarchy? Europe has thrown up a lot of kings who were born to rule and knew it. Among these men were:

- Medieval kings, such as St Louis IX of France or Henry II of England, who held all the lands of their kingdoms, so that everyone else, even the most mighty nobles, were their tenants.
- Holy Roman Emperors who ruled Germany and saw themselves as the leaders of Christian Europe, like Henry IV, known as 'Stupor Mundi', the 'Wonder of the World'.
- The Tsars of Russia, such as Ivan IV 'the Terrible'; autocrats of a vast empire who could expect their every word to be obeyed.
- King Philip II of Spain, who ruled a worldwide empire from a simple bedsit inside the vast bureaucratic palace he built for himself outside Madrid, *El Escorial*.
- Louis XIV of France, the 'Sun King', so called because his court at Versailles was meant to be as magnificent as the sun itself. He believed in the divine right of kings to rule – absolutely.

You could say – and some historians have said it – that all those dictators in 20th-century Europe were simply following a pattern set by their royal predecessors. Stalin sometimes gets called a Red Tsar, and Mussolini certainly saw himself as a latter-day Roman Emperor (he ended up like some of them, too).

. . . and royals flushed

But history records another Europe that has never believed in the divine right of kings and is rather proud of having kept its rulers under tight control. The English forced King John to accept Magna Carta in 1215, and by the end of the 17th century, they had cut off one king's head, kept another in exile for years, and forced a third to flee for his life. The Swiss banded together to kick out the Austrians back in the 13th century and have been fiercely proud of their republican tradition ever since. The Italians set up a series of city republics in the middle ages and were forever on their guard – not always successfully, it has to be said – against would-be rulers who might try to take them over. The Dutch and the Germans have very strong traditions of city republics, banding together to defend their independence. All these countries looked for inspiration to the city states of ancient Greece, and to the big daddy of them all, the ancient Roman Republic.

The danger, as the Romans and later the Italians were to find out to their cost, didn't come from foreign enemies but from their own successful generals. The Roman word for an army commander was *imperator*; it's no coincidence that it gave us the word *emperor*, because that's what Roman imperators turned into. (Head to Chapters 4 and 6 to find out what went wrong with the Romans' noble experiment in republican government.)

A democratic Europe?

The Council of Europe, which was set up after the Second World War, likes to promote the idea that to be properly European, you have to stand up for the ideals of democracy – and you can see why. Ancient Greece was the birthplace of democracy – even the word is Greek – Britain's 'Mother of Parliaments' is generally regarded as the model for representative government, and the French can claim, with their 1789 *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, to have given the world the first authentic statement of human rights (but see Chapter 16 before you take their word for it).

The trouble with this notion is that European democracy is a fairly recent idea, and it hasn't put down very deep roots. Greek democracy was very different from modern democracy, not least because Greek freedom rested on a class of slaves known as *helots*, and women – you just *know* what's coming, don't you? – had none of the rights that men enjoyed. Even in modern western Europe, it took years of battling to get equal democratic rights for women.

Democracy has only really flourished in European history in the period since the end of the second World War in 1945 and then – and never forget this – only in half of the continent. Eastern and central Europe did not taste democracy until the Berlin Wall came down in 1989, bringing the communist dictatorships with it. Since that time, many of these countries in *democratic transition*, as the phrase has it, have found democracy very difficult to adjust to. Plenty of Russians today look back nostalgically to the good old days of Stalin and the labour camps; at least you knew where you were then, they say. It would be nice to say that democracy somehow comes naturally to Europeans, but the evidence is against it.

Is There Such a Thing as European Civilisation?

Europeans have been very quick to promote 'their' civilisation, and to do so by scoffing at everyone else's. The Greeks used to talk of other peoples as *barbarians*, by which they meant that anyone who didn't speak Greek came out with a sort of animal bah-bah noise. Greeks used the alarm 'The barbarians are at the gates!' to mean that civilisation was in danger.

Exactly who the barbarians were changed over time: Gauls, Goths, Huns, Turks, Mongols, and, of course, Jews have all been seen as foreign threats to European civilisation, but so have European liberals, nationalists, socialists, communists, anarchists, and fascists. The 19th-century pope, Pius IX, thought that the greatest threat to Christian civilisation was posed by railways and promptly banned them from the papal states (no doubt he railroaded that law through). More recently, people have said similar things about migrants, immigrants, and asylum seekers. But what exactly is the civilisation that all these people and ideas are supposed to be threatening?

Strictly speaking, *civilisation* simply means people living in towns and cities, but if you think about it, this notion in itself has big implications for the way people organise themselves. Living at close quarters inevitably means a bit of give and take, with rules and regulations and residents' associations. In the 18th century, being civilised meant keeping your animal instincts in check both in everyday society (that is, be polite) and in society as a whole (that is, obey the law). Nothing scared the bewigged ladies and gentlemen of 18th-century polite society more than the thought of the *Mob*, the underclass of the destitute and unemployed whom you could see on the streets of every city – not just because they could be violent, but because they were a constant reminder that European civilisation was not as deeply rooted as they liked to think.

Why Does Europe Have So Many Languages?

If you like foreign languages, then Europe is the place for you – it can sometimes seem difficult to find two adjoining countries that actually speak the same language. The main reason for all these languages lies in the way people have moved through history, often in great tribal migrations. Most of Europe's languages are descended from an original one called Indo-European, which started off in northern India and travelled westwards with all those nomadic tribes central Asia is so good at producing; the Celtic languages, for example, are Indo-European. The Romans did their bit for linguistic harmony by conquering so much of Europe and making everyone speak Latin. The extent of the Roman Empire is why Italian, Spanish, and French are all so closely related; Celtic only really survives in the areas the Romans found hardest to control. A lot of Latin influence exists in English, but German overtook it when the Angles and Saxons invaded Britain, and later French, when the Normans came over. You can trace Europe's conquests through its languages.

Unsolved language mysteries

We haven't completely resolved the origins of all of Europe's languages. Scandinavian languages are all pretty similar until you hit Finnish, which is unlike any other language in Europe except Estonian. Quite why this corner of northern Europe should have such a different language from everyone else we just don't know. Even odder is that Finnish seems to be connected with Magyar, the language of Hungary. It may suggest that some sort of common ancestral people once existed for three nations in very different parts of Europe, but not for anyone else, though who it may have been we just don't know.

Is There a European Culture?

If you love Mozart and go ape over the Impressionists (and quite a lot of people do both, I find), then clearly you can find culture in Europe. To some extent, these 'high' artists all fed off each other, so that they collectively created a sort of unity to much of European culture. The painters of the Renaissance consciously sought inspiration from the ancient world, and they, in turn, influenced the painters who came after them. Printing and Europe's network of patrons and universities allowed ideas and techniques to spread across huge distances.

Nevertheless, acknowledging high art is a very limited way of looking at European culture. You can find just as much richness in the folk tales and tunes with which Europe's peasants kept each other amused over the centuries. Luckily, in the 19th century, there was quite a vogue for collecting examples of folk culture (it was all part of the great romantic movement, which Chapter 17 can tell you more about), so many of them have survived. The German brothers Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm amassed a huge collection of German folk tales, which, quite wrongly, have been categorised in English as *Grimms' Fairy Tales* for children – more like *Grimms' Fairy Tales* for twisted psychopaths, if you actually read them.

Cinema with style – and subtitles

One aspect of modern culture in which Europeans have carved out a very distinctive niche is cinema. Cinema began in Europe, and Europeans have never been entirely happy to leave the medium entirely to Hollywood. The French and Italians have developed a reputation for producing stylish studies of human relationships, while Sweden's Ingmar Bergman is known for his darker portraits of tormented souls. Both Hitler and Stalin placed great emphasis on the importance of cinema: The German film-maker Leni Riefenstahl and the Russian Sergei Eisenstein were both commissioned to make grand-scale propaganda films, which are still admired by film buffs today. Eisenstein employed more people in his 1927 reconstruction of the Bolshevik Revolution, *Oktober*, than had taken part in the real thing! If you want an insight into the development of 20th-century Europe, looking at the films it produced is a good way to go about it.

What of Europe Lies beyond Europe?

'What should they know of England,' wrote Rudyard Kipling, 'who only England know?' You can't really claim to know all about Europe and its history if you restrict your gaze to Europe itself – even if you have worked out exactly where Europe begins and ends.

From the Holy Land

Although geographically part of western Asia, the Middle East – and especially the seaboard lands of modern-day Israel, Syria, Lebanon, and Egypt – has always been built into Europe's pattern of development. European civilisation can trace its origins to the development of cities in Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Jordan, and the corn lands of Egypt kept the Roman Empire supplied with bread.

Christianity bound Europe even more closely to what Europeans called 'the Holy Land'. Every year thousands of Europeans went on pilgrimage on foot all the way to Jerusalem. When the region fell to the Turks, it was a huge blow, and young men from all over Christendom volunteered to go off on crusade. The crusaders even set up European kingdoms in the Holy Land, and although they eventually fell to the Turks, the Europeans never quite forgot them. (If you don't want to forget these kingdoms either, have a look at Chapter 7.)

In 1798, Napoleon led a French army into Egypt, in 1917, the British General Allenby entered Jerusalem, and it was the Jews from Europe who set up the state of Israel in 1948. People sometimes wonder why Israel competes in the Eurovision Song Contest, but it's a sign that, in this part of the world at least, 'Europe' extends far beyond its geographical boundaries.

Back to Africa

Humankind began in Africa, and in the 19th century, Europeans went back to their roots in a big way – though that's not how they saw it, of course. In the space of 20 years, the Europeans virtually wiped the vast tribal continent of Africa off the map and replaced it with a continent of colonies with borders and capital cities and railways and roads; in short, they turned Africa into an extension of Europe.

In some of the most tragic cases, the borders drawn for these African countries by European administrators – with straight rulers – caused terrible trouble. The Nigerian province of Biafra and the Congolese province of Katanga were both scenes of ghastly civil wars in the 1960s, prompted by artificial boundaries drawn by Europeans. The bloodbath that erupted in Rwanda in the 1990s was also caused originally by European meddling with the local balance of power.

Europe's presence in Africa has not been a happy story (look ahead to Chapter 24 to find out just how unhappy), but it has left its legacy, and modern Africa is very much a part of the story of modern Europe.

To a new world

When Europeans spoke of a New World across the Atlantic, they really meant it. America wasn't just another land mass that Europeans had stumbled upon; it was an *empty* land – give or take the thousands and thousands of native peoples – where they could start all over again. This dream of a new life is why the settlers named so many places after places back home, and they often put the word 'new' in front of them: New Orleans, New Amsterdam (later New York, though named after the Duke of York rather than the city), New Hampshire, New Jersey, Nova Scotia (that is, New Scotland), and, of course, New England. All these place names meant 'new *and* improved'.

In South and Central America, the Spanish and Portuguese did a pretty good job of re-creating the society and structures of their homelands. The first permanent stone building that Spanish settlers erected in the New World was a church. New Spain looked an awful lot like the old one, with nobles overseeing large *haciendas* (estates) just as they did at home. Even the climate and terrain felt familiar, though when the native peoples fled attempts to enslave them for work in the gold and silver mines, the Spanish and Portuguese began the process of importing large numbers of Africans as slave labourers instead, thus changing the demography of America forever.

Europeans transported

America's most famous symbol, the Statue of Liberty, is such an icon of America that it's easy to forget that it was actually French, a gift from the French Republic to the American one in 1886. Thousands of immigrants who came into America from all over Europe gazed at the statue hopefully as they arrived in New York seeking a new life. This scene has been captured on film many times, including Charlie Chaplin's *The Immigrant* and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part II*.

The American West was full of European immigrants, and you would have heard plenty of British and German accents out on the range (you just had to listen out for the occasional cry of 'Tally ho!' while everyone else was hollering 'Yee haw!'). But Europeans didn't just head for the States. They took boats for South America, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. Missionaries headed for China and India. By the 20th century, Europeans had established outposts of Europe all over the world, not just colonies ruled under European flags but places where Europeans tried to re-create the feel and the look of the lands they had left behind. European history is obviously not world history, but Europeans are part of the history of just about everywhere in the world.

Divided Europe or United Europe?

When you hit the 20th century, understanding European history becomes urgent. This period is when Europe tore itself apart in two disastrous wars that spread around the world. However, the 20th century is also when Europeans made their greatest efforts to pull the continent together and unite it as it had never been united since the days of the Romans. So, is Europe naturally divided or united?

Long division

Historians may tell you, rightly enough, that the First World War had many causes, and I deal with them properly in Chapter 20. But for now, the important cause to get hold of is *nationalism*.

Nationalism was always rather more than just patriotism. Nationalism came out of the French Revolution, which had conceived the idea of the nation as a sort of mystical union of the people all clothed in liberty and equality rather than being downtrodden subjects of a king. Nationalism caught on, and by the end of the 19th century, proud nationalists were fighting for their nations' rights all over Europe, especially where their nation was ruled by another one.

No surprise then, that the First World War actually began as a nationalist conflict between the Serbs and the Austrians, and that it spread as a nationalist conflict between all the Great Powers of Europe – France wanted her land back off the Germans; the Russians stood by their fellow Slavs, the Serbs; the Germans wanted their nation's right to an empire; and so on. Result: Division and disaster.

If you think about the causes of the Second World War, you can understand that it started for almost exactly the same reasons as the First World War: the Germans were claiming lands – Austria, the Sudetenland, the Polish Corridor – that they said had been German and should be again. But just like other nationalists before him, Hitler didn't stop there and started taking over rather large chunks of all his other neighbours' lands, too. Result: More disaster and division.

After the Second World War, Europe was divided in a rather different way. In 1945, two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States, effectively divided Europe from the outside along ideological lines: the Capitalist West versus the Communist East. (Chapter 24 gives you the low-down.) The division was particularly keenly felt in Germany, which was divided down the middle (though it's not the only European country to have been divided in the 20th century: Ireland, France, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Cyprus have all experienced it). The Iron Curtain made it difficult for westerners to visit the East, and virtually impossible for east Europeans to visit the West. Right across Europe the post-war generations grew up with the idea that a divided Europe, even a divided Germany, was the natural order of things and never expected to see it change.

Europe united?

Of course Europe did change, and very quickly, in 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down. Immediately, talk turned to reuniting Germany. Next, the European Union really began pushing ahead with its plans for a closer political union.

The idea of a united Europe isn't quite as new-fangled as it may seem. The Romans had united the continent, or as much of it as they could conquer, under Roman law. Napoleon had attempted to unite the continent under the principles of liberty established by the French Revolution – or at least that was what he said he was doing. Even the great European nationalist leaders had dreamed of a united Europe of nation states all living in perfect harmony (dream on, my friends), and Hitler actively promoted the idea of a united Europe standing firm against Communism – not (as German leaders were often at pains to point out) so *very* different from the post-war American idea.

So, is Europe really a united continent that only gets divided by accident? History doesn't really support that idea. All the attempts at union I mention involved using a degree of force. The exception is the European Union, but the evidence by the start of the 21st century was that the ordinary people of Europe were much less happy about uniting than their leaders. And in the end, if you haven't united the people, you haven't united anything.

This Must Never Happen Again!

European history is full of moments, normally after wars, when people have drawn breath and said something along the lines of 'This must never happen again!'. People said it in 1648 after the Thirty Years' War (*thirty years* of war – just think about it! Better still, turn to Chapter 13 and read about it). And people said it again in 1815 after Napoleon was finally defeated and the nations of Europe decided to set up regular summit meetings, known as Congresses, to solve problems without going to war. People said it after the First World War ('the war to end all wars'), when they set up the League of Nations, and again after the Second World War, when they set up the United Nations. The line was repeated after the Holocaust, and then again after the genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda: 'This must never happen again!' War and atrocity always do happen again, though. This books shows you why.