

A Brief History of Europe and the Greater Mediterranean Region

By Miguel R. Corazao
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Although I am not a historian or an expert in history I am nevertheless sometimes amazed at the distorted view of world history many of us in the *Western World* hold, particularly in the U.S. This is disturbing considering how these distorted views affect our view of geopolitics and what decisions we encourage our leaders to make. Certainly histories are never unbiased and the very act of summarizing introduces distortions. Still, there is a natural tendency of every society to bias their history in favor of how they want to see themselves and others. In so-called Western nations a tendency toward prejudices that date back to the Middle Ages is still common, so much so that even many educators do not realize that they are propagating these prejudices. A specific example is the tendency to almost completely neglect the influence of the Islamic world on our culture, our technology and, in general, our history.



Europe and the greater Mediterranean.

I have chosen to write this essay as a brief summary of European and Mediterranean history hoping to clarify many common misconceptions. I hope that readers find this interesting and, hopefully, informative. Please note that I have largely ignored the histories of East Asia and pre-Columbian America which, although not unimportant, were remote enough from the Mediterranean to have had limited direct influence on its history, at least until recently.

The Birth of Civilization

Civilization is generally believed to have begun in the *fertile crescent*, a region spanning the southeastern Mediterranean coast to the northern Persian Gulf including what are now Egypt, Palestine (Canaan), and Iraq (Mesopotamia). Depending on one's definition of civilization this occurred somewhere in the neighborhood of 10,000 BCE (BCE is what used to be called BC). Mankind had spread widely around the world before this as nomads and separate civilizations would emerge later in East Asia and Central America. But the civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean world would primarily derive from the fertile-crescent civilizations. Civilization would at first consist of simple farming villages but would gradually develop into city-states such as Jericho. The influence of civilization would over time creep out of the crescent into Europe but most of the European continent (as well as most of Africa) would still remain a backwater of civilization until near the beginning of the common era (i.e. what used to be referred to as 1 AD).



Map of the fertile crescent region.

The Rise of Empires

Egypt and Mesopotamia would produce what are considered the first identifiable empires around the beginning of the 3rd millennium BCE, each conquering large areas of peoples with different cultures. Many

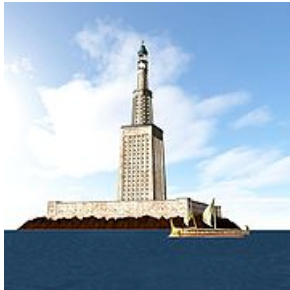
other cultures developed in the region including the Babylonians, Hittites, and others. During the 2nd millennium BCE the Phoenician civilization, a Semitic people related to the Arabs and the Hebrews, and the Ancient Greek civilization, an Indo-European people related to the Romans and the Germans, would develop and begin to spread advanced culture in pockets throughout the Mediterranean.

During the early 1st millennium BCE the first Persian Empire, centered in what is now Iran, developed gradually conquering the Phoenicians and the Greeks and almost all of the other major civilizations of the Old World outside of East Asia. This huge, multi-ethnic empire would become a model for empires around the Mediterranean for centuries to come.



Ruins of the Great Ziggurat of Sumer in ancient Mesopotamia.

During the 5th century BCE the Greek civilization in the Balkans regained its independence from the Persians and entered a period of economic and intellectual prosperity regarded by many scholars as unparalleled in the ancient world, even compared to the later Roman Empire. Greek scholars from Pythagoras to Euclid to Hippocrates made contributions in fields from mathematics to astronomy to medicine that would be the foundation for many intellectual achievements in cultures throughout Eurasia from India to Europe. Sociopolitical developments in the Greek city-states, particularly Athens and Sparta, would create models of democracy and republicanism which would inspire the emergence and re-emergence of democratic principles in the Mediterranean and Europe up through the modern age.



The lighthouse at Alexandria in Macedonian Egypt.

The 4th century BCE witnessed the most rapid imperial expansion yet seen. In the span of a decade, the nation of Macedonia, led by Philip II and then his son Alexander the Great, transformed from a small nation in the Balkans to a massive empire reaching from the eastern Mediterranean to India. This was largely accomplished by the conquest of the Persian Empire. Having conquered the culturally advanced Greeks in the Balkans the Macedonians spread Greek culture from the eastern Mediterranean to India. Although the Empire soon fragmented it established Greek as the language of scholarship and commerce throughout the Mediterranean for the next millennium and spread Greek thought throughout most of the known world.

The Rise of the Roman Empire

During the period of Persian and the Macedonian imperial expansion the more primitive Latin culture was developing on the Italian peninsula. The Latin city of Rome came to dominate all of the Latins. Rome was somewhat unique in its region in that it had developed a republican form of government expressly forbidding monarchies.

During the 3rd century BCE Rome created an empire throughout the western Mediterranean and then in the 2nd century BCE the burgeoning Roman Empire conquered the more advanced Macedonian Empire and other Greek-speaking regions of the eastern Mediterranean. This was enabled in part by the weakened state of Macedonia and Persia at this time. Having conquered the entire Mediterranean region as well as western Europe, the Romans suddenly found themselves masters of wealth and culture beyond anything they had previously known. Greek-speaking scholars and engineers from the East were imported to Rome and gradually all parts of the Empire transforming primitive Rome into the most magnificent city in the world and transforming primitive western towns into modern cities.



The ancient Colosseum in Rome.



An ancient amphitheater in Roman Alexandria, Egypt.

Their empire was effectively divided between the sophisticated, Greek-speaking urban centers of the eastern Mediterranean and the relatively primitive, culturally heterogeneous provinces of the western Mediterranean and western Europe. Roman settlements in the West would gradually spread Latin as their common language whereas Greek continued to be the dominant language in the East. Greek gradually came to be the language of the upper class even in the city of Rome itself. In spite of the dominance of Latin and Greek, the Empire was still multi-ethnic and a wide variety of other languages were spoken throughout the provinces.

The Romans brought stability and peace to the entire Mediterranean region creating an era of prosperity and progress like none seen before. Philosophers and engineers such as Ptolemy and Apollodorus pushed the frontiers of science and mathematics, as well as structural engineering to new heights.

During the 1st century BCE the revered Roman general Julius Caesar was appointed *dictator for life*, effectively becoming a monarch and ending the republican government. Caesar would be succeeded by a line of emperors who frequently entered and left power in the midst of civil war and/or assassinations. Nevertheless the Empire would continue to grow in size and power through the 2nd century CE (CE is what used to be called AD). Like the Macedonian Empire under Alexander the Roman Empire was the most powerful nation in the world.

The Spread of Judaism and Christianity

The Roman Empire encompassed many ethnic groups with many religious beliefs. Almost all were polytheistic and the religious beliefs of the different groups were generally not mutually exclusive. Roman authorities mostly allowed the provinces to worship as they pleased as long as they acknowledged the major Roman deities and paid homage to the emperor. Among the many ethnic groups were the Jews found largely in Alexandria, Egypt as well as their traditional homelands in Judea and Galilee (both later called Palestine). The Jewish religion was somewhat unique in the Empire in that it specifically prescribed a single deity and forbade the worship of others. This fact became a major source of conflict between the Jews and the Roman authorities and would eventually lead to the expulsion of virtually all Jews from Palestine. Jews would



A model of the second Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

continue to spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean and southwestern Asia, especially Babylon in the Persian Empire and Alexandria, and to some extent into Rome and the West.

During the 1st century CE a Jewish religious leader named Jesus living in Roman Galilee and Judea founded an obscure sect of Judaism which came to be known as Christianity. Following Jesus' death, and especially after the Jewish Bar Kokhba Revolt, this sect began to grow among non-Jewish groups in the Empire taking hold in the major cities of Antioch in Roman Syria and Alexandria in Roman Egypt and gradually becoming widespread in the eastern Mediterranean and Persia. The faith also gained a following in the West, including Rome, but would not become nearly so well established as in the East. Through the 3rd century, Christians, like other followers of Jewish beliefs, would be persecuted in the Roman Empire at various times. Christians themselves were extremely diverse in their faith, much more so than in the major churches today. Divisions in beliefs would gradually lead to political divisions among Christians. Additionally national divisions between Persian and Roman Christians led to an early separation of faiths. Within the Roman Empire, Alexandria and Antioch became firmly established as the centers of Christian scholarship. The Church in Rome, though, would gradually come to claim that it had ultimate authority in

the Christian Church. Although the authority of the Bishop of Rome over Christianity would gradually become established in the West, this authority was only marginally recognized in the eastern Roman Empire, and not at all outside of the Empire.

Over the course of the next millennium Abrahamic faiths (Judaism, Christianity, and later Islam) would gradually come to dominate the Mediterranean and Europe.

Transformations of Late Antiquity

By the 3rd century Roman citizenship had been extended throughout the Roman Empire and the city of Rome was no longer considered so important in the Empire as it had once been, particularly because the eastern cities were the primary manufacturing, trading, and intellectual centers of the Empire. Emperors had ceased to use Rome as their administrative capital and began to formally establish capitals in other cities, first in Italy, and later in the Greek-speaking East. In the 4th century the emperor Constantine founded the city of Constantinople in the East as the new capital of the Empire. Constantine also became the first emperor to promote the Christian religion and permanently end the general persecution of Christians. He also led an effort to standardize the religion establishing the concept of *orthodoxy* (the true faith) and *heresy* (incorrect beliefs).

By the end of the 4th century the Roman Empire had changed in major ways. Constantine's promotion of Christianity would lead to the religion becoming the Empire's official religion. However, this did not unite the Empire's inhabitants. The *orthodox* faith promoted by Constantinople and Rome was opposed, to varying degrees, in Antioch and Alexandria, Christianity's original power centers, and in many other Christian centers both inside and outside the Empire. These divisions would plague Christianity for centuries to come. Despite this, Christianity would become firmly rooted throughout the entire Mediterranean region and beyond for centuries. Within the Roman Empire, Judaism would be granted a privileged but second-hand status while most other faiths, including the old Roman religion, would be continuously persecuted. Apart from the religious split within Christianity, a process of political division begun in the 3rd century culminated in the Empire's dividing into two separate nations by the end of the 4th century, a western Empire ruled from Italy and an eastern Empire ruled from Constantinople. Constantinople was now the largest and wealthiest city in the world and would be the most stable economic hub in the world for centuries to come.



The Great Palace and the Hippodrome in the Roman Capital of Constantinople.

During the 4th century the Persian Empire entered a period of ascendancy as it established relatively peaceful relations with the Roman Empire. The official establishment of Christianity by the Roman government led to the marginalization of Christianity within the Persian Empire and the final establishment of Zoroastrianism as the Persian Empire's official religion. While Christianity (and Judaism) continued to exist in the Persian Empire, it was the Roman Empire in which Christianity would become most firmly established. Additionally, because of the prestige enjoyed by the Roman Empire, many nations and tribes outside of the Roman and Persian Empires also adopted Christianity in various forms (e.g. Armenia, Aksum/Ethiopia, Gothic Scythia, even south India). Many others converted to Judaism viewing this as a compromise that was similar to Christianity without the potential of conflict with the Roman Church.

Shifts of Power in the Mediterranean and Europe

The upheavals of the 4th century in addition to disease outbreaks had weakened both the western and eastern Roman Empire. The economy in the East still continued to thrive but in the West the economy rapidly declined. The once disciplined, citizen army of the Roman Empire in the western Empire had

become an army of “foreign” mercenaries, primarily Latin-speaking Germanic tribes (Goths) living in the Empire but lacking citizenship (and often loyalty). The eastern Empire still maintained the traditional Roman military but during the 5th century it struggled to maintain its strength. In the West the imperial leadership became increasingly disorganized with figurehead emperors being installed by warlords who held actual power. Further east the Persian Empire was entering one of its greatest periods of success. Due to the internal problems of the Roman Empire, the Persians came to dominate most trade routes in Asia and the Indian Ocean (the *silk road*) relegating the Romans to second-class status economically. China had become a significant economic power in its own right making silk road commerce very lucrative.



Attila the Hun.

During this time the Huns, led by the Attila, rapidly established a short-lived empire covering much of eastern Europe and central Asia. This new empire directly threatened both the eastern and western Roman Empires although the Persian Empire was largely spared their wrath. Additionally its growth pressured the Goth tribes of central and eastern Europe to migrate into the Roman provinces. In the end although it damaged the Roman Empire significantly the Hunnic Empire ultimately collapsed. However the weakened western Empire was besieged by waves of attack from Goth tribes. By the middle of the 5th century Italy had lost almost all of the western provinces to Gothic conquerors and finally was conquered by its own Goth mercenaries that had once protected it. The Goths in Italy technically submitted to the rule of Constantinople thus in theory reuniting the Roman Empire. In reality, though, western Europe and northwestern Africa were now Germanic kingdoms, albeit with Roman subjects.

The East was now all that truly remained of the Roman Empire. After the collapse of the West (and the Huns) the eastern Roman Empire recovered and strengthened. Still the Persians now enjoyed economic superiority over the Romans. Additionally the Christian influence in the Roman Empire gradually led to an intellectual stagnation from which the Empire never fully emerged. Refugees from Roman persecution of secular institutions would help to advance scholarship in the Persian Empire, especially medical science.

Much further east in South Asia the Gupta Empire had entered a golden age during which Indian scholars became leaders in science and medicine. Their advances would only gradually come westward but would become important in later centuries (notably the Hindu-Arabic numeral system that virtually every society on earth uses today).

The Early Middle Ages

During the 6th century the Roman Empire continued to lose ground to the Persians with the Persian capital of Ctesiphon (near modern Baghdad) becoming the world’s largest and wealthiest city. The Roman capital of Constantinople was still a major economic hub and second only to the Persian capital. The Persian *dirhem* coin would replace the Roman *solidus* as the international currency in Asia but the *solidus* would remain the standard in the Mediterranean.



Ruins of the Persian Imperial Palace in Ctesiphon.

The city of Rome continued to function, as did the rest of the West, although its decline, which started in the 5th century, continued. During the Gothic Wars of the 6th century, Rome was destroyed and became little more than a large village interspersed among ruins. It would not again become a major population center until the second millennium. Western Europe and western Africa faded into obscurity and backwardness.

Under the emperor Justinian I the Roman Empire entered a short-lived cultural and economic resurgence exemplified by the building of the famed church Hagia Sophia in Constantinople which became the world’s largest building for the next millennium and a model for many eastern churches and mosques. Justinian would introduce many reforms including the codification of the Code of Justinian, still the basis of law



The Hagia Sophia Church of Constantinople.

today in most of Europe and many other parts of the world. Justinian also restructured the Roman Church establishing five patriarchs to lead the Church, the Patriarch of Rome in the West and those of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem in the East. Rome's status as "*first among equals*" between these five was recognized but the actual meaning of this privilege remains under contention to this day. Constantinople was becoming the de facto center of the Christian world and already its most powerful city.

Justinian also launched the Gothic Wars aimed at fully reconquering western Europe for the Roman Empire, especially Italy. Although temporarily successful these wars decimated the urban centers of the West, especially Rome, dooming any chances of substantial economic recovery in western Europe for centuries to come. Following Justinian's reign the Roman Empire lost most of its western possessions except Rome and a few other outposts. By the 7th century the Empire had entered a substantial decline, partially due to a devastating plague, and struggled to maintain its economy and territorial integrity. Additionally the Empire would finally abandon most vestiges of classical Italian culture, including abandoning the use of Latin as the court language in favor of Greek.

As the Persian Empire entered the 7th century its success faltered. Devastating military losses against the Romans would rapidly lead to weakening of the Empire. Although the Romans appeared on the poised to re-establish their position as the dominant world power both nations were substantially weakened by years of fighting and plague.

The Rise of Islam

During the 7th century an Arab religious leader named Muhammad founded a new faith, closely related to Christianity, which would come to be known as Islam. Within a few decades, most of the Arabian Peninsula, including the Christian kingdom of Yemen, had converted to Islam as Muhammad united the peninsula politically. Almost all Christians converted but a large percentage of Jews on the peninsula did not, thus maintaining a large Jewish population in Yemen that lasted until the 20th century. Muslim conversion was mostly voluntary with inhabitants in part motivated by the stability that Muhammad had brought to the peninsula.

Taking advantage of the weakened Roman and Persian armies, the Arabs rapidly expanded out of the peninsula and, by the end of the 7th century, had conquered the Persian Empire and the majority of the Roman Empire excluding the Balkans, Thrace, and Anatolia. Constantinople was the only major economic center left in Roman hands. The conquest of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and other Roman lands was facilitated by centuries of resentment in these lands against Constantinople's persecution of Christians who did not subscribe to the orthodox faith prescribed by the imperial Roman Church. In the century following the conquest the new Muslim Caliphate (i.e. the Muslim Empire) was generally extremely tolerant of Jews and Christians and most found themselves with more freedoms than under the rule of Constantinople. Notably the modern Oriental Orthodox Christian Churches originated with Middle Eastern Christian groups who opposed the official orthodox faith of the Roman Church. Most of the descendants of the former Roman Christians would adopt Islam and the Arabic language over time becoming Arabs themselves.



Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem.

In taking over the Persian Empire as well as major manufacturing and intellectual centers of the Roman Empire, the Caliphate rapidly transformed from a minor peninsular nation into a major world economic center. The Caliphate derived most of its administrative practices from the empires it conquered. Indeed in

much of this new Muslim empire Greek was the primary language of administration and Greek appeared initially on Muslim coins until gradually being replaced by Arabic.

By the middle of the 8th century the Caliphate extended from northwestern India to the Atlantic including all of North Africa and most of Spain. Its capital Baghdad was the largest city in the world (along with Chang'an, China) and it had become the most powerful nation in the world. From this point until the second millennium the Roman solidus coin and the Persian/Arab dinar would compete for dominance as the standard for international trade.

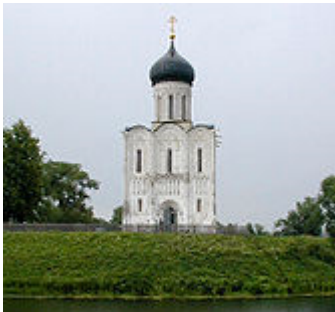
In addition to the success of the Caliphate the Bulgars had established the first major Slavic empire. Taking advantage of the period of decline in the Roman Empire the Bulgarian Empire gradually grew in strength and influence encroaching on Roman territory in Europe.

An Era of Progress

Most of Europe remained primitive with various Germanic tribes vying for control of fragmented kingdoms. Although the majority of western and central Europe was already Christian by the 6th century there had been contention between followers of orthodox faith of the imperial Roman Church and Arian Christians, descendants of Germanic Christians converted at the height of Roman power. During the 8th century the orthodox Christian Frankish kingdom, under Charlemagne, managed to conquer and unify most of central and western Europe, with the exception of Spain and the British Isles. From this point on Christian western Europe would begin a very slow revival from its *dark ages* but it would still lag the sophistication of the Muslim Caliphates and the Roman Empire for centuries more.

A practically trivial but symbolically important event occurred during this time. The Pope, whose real influence in the Roman Church had for centuries been limited in the West and negligible elsewhere, came into the 9th century with Italy largely controlled by the Franks. In 800 CE Pope Leo declared Charlemagne to be the new Roman emperor effectively denying Constantinople's role as the Roman capital and, in so doing, severing Rome's last tenuous connection to the empire to which it had given birth. This development would lead to substantial friction between the Frankish and Roman Empires and effectively separated the orthodox Roman Church into West (Roman Catholic) and East (Eastern Orthodox). A formal split, though, would not occur for two more centuries. The West would from this time forward refer to the Roman Empire as the *Empire of the Greeks* (and later, the *Byzantine Empire*) and the Romans would refer to all western Christians collectively as *Franks*.

During this same period the Caliphate, which would fragment and reorganize many times, had entered an era of progress that had not been seen since the earliest centuries of the Roman Empire. Scholars of the Caliphate, especially during the reign of Harun al-Rashid, would push the frontiers of science, economics, literature, and many other



Church of the Intercession on the Nerl in Russia.

pursuits far beyond the accomplishments of any previous civilization. Muslim scholars of the late first millennium were responsible for the invention of algebra, modern surgery, the science of optics, and many other innovations. As direct inheritors of the intellectual traditions of the Greeks, Romans, and Persians the Caliphate was uniquely able to make these leaps. Indeed volumes of ancient works written in Greek, Sanskrit, and other languages, which otherwise would have been lost to humanity, were preserved by Muslim scholars in Arabic and Persian translations.

Politically the Muslim world developed two power centers, Baghdad in Persia and Cordova in Spain. As Muslim Spain rose to dominance in the Muslim world it would gradually become a major conduit of culture and knowledge to western Europe laying the foundation for later Western accomplishments. At its height the influence of the Muslim world reached all of the population centers of



Al Khwarizmi, inventor of algebra.

Europe and Asia and a great part of Africa. With the exception of the Americas, trade could be considered truly global for the first time.

The Roman Empire would gradually stabilize and reorganize after its devastating losses of the 7th century but would continue to struggle until near the end of the millennium. The Empire continued to suffer attacks by the Muslim Arabs of the Caliphates and later the Bulgars. But shortly after the beginning of the second millennium the Romans managed to finally neutralize both threats notably conquering the Bulgarian Empire. At the end of the first millennium the Empire had begun a major cultural and economic revival. Roman academies and scholars became well respected even in the Muslim world. Roman arts and literature as well as its international trade flourished. Additionally the Romans gradually established close ties with the Slavic Rus peoples to their north (ancestors of the Russians) and started a process that would make the Slavs significant cultural and religious inheritors of the later Empire.

Changes in Power End the Golden Age

A new power arose in southwestern Asia, the Seljuq Turkish Empire at the beginning of the second millennium. In a span of a few decades the Muslim Seljuqs managed to conquer the eastern-most Muslim lands including Persia (Baghdad) and most of southwestern Asia (other than Arabia). In addition the Seljuqs conquered all of Anatolia from the Romans. The Empire was not extremely long-lived (it collapsed in the 12th century) but it helped propel a series of changes in the region.

Muslim Spain gained prominence in the Mediterranean as Baghdad's importance declined (something that had started even before the Seljuqs). Spain had entered its own golden age as a center of arts and science but this was temporary as Christian armies from northern Spain and other parts of western Europe had been slowly conquering Spain to restore Christian rule. This process would take centuries more to complete. The rest of the Muslim world had become fragmented and weakened.

The Roman Empire was severely crippled by the loss of Anatolia to the Seljuq Turks. Desperate for assistance the Romans appealed to the Pope and the Christian West to help fight off the Muslim Seljuqs and restore Christian rule in the East. By this time the West had become militarily formidable and the response the Romans received (known as the *Crusades*) was overwhelming albeit not what was expected. The Western armies had no loyalty to Constantinople and instead fought their conquests in the name of the Pope (and themselves). Nevertheless these efforts did help keep the Muslim armies at bay. The Crusades would continue for centuries more. Though their conquests would not last they significantly altered the Mediterranean.



The Aljafería Palace in Muslim Spain.

A new threat came onto the scene in the 13th century. The Mongol Empire expanded into southwestern Asia and eastern Europe destroying Baghdad and other Persian cities as well as many eastern European centers in the process. Mongol presence in that part of the world was not long established but long remembered.

At the beginning of the 13th century Crusader armies from the West, initially without the sanction of the Pope, conquered Christian Constantinople and most of the Roman Empire. An exodus of Greek-speaking Romans, which had begun following the loss of Anatolia, continued, to Wallachia/Moldavia (modern Romania), Italy, and other parts of Christian Europe. The Roman Empire was, practically speaking, destroyed. Transient kingdoms ruled by Westerners existed throughout the eastern Mediterranean for decades. Constantinople would soon be reconquered by the Romans (Greek-speakers) who had remained in the region. However, the Roman Empire after that point was a shadow of its former self and, while it still retained much of its ancient culture, it had become relatively unimportant except for its symbolism.

The Renaissance

The Crusades would seriously weaken the Arab and Persian world and would fatally wound the Roman Empire in the East. Further East a new Turkish dynasty, the Ottomans, arose in the 14th century. The Muslim Ottomans would take advantage of the weakened condition of the Romans and the Muslim Caliphates. The Empire first conquered what remained of the Roman Empire in the 15th century establishing ancient Constantinople as its new capital and then grew both into the Muslim Middle East and Christian Europe. It directly incorporated the cultural sophistication of the Greek-speaking Romans and, for a time, became the most sophisticated society in the Mediterranean and beyond. Its technological sophistication, however, was relatively stagnant.

The fall of Constantinople to the Muslim Ottomans marked the end of Christian rule in southwestern Europe and Asia and paved the way for Russia's taking de facto leadership in Eastern Orthodox Christianity in later centuries. By this time, though, Rome and western Europe had redeveloped to such a degree that Rome was coming to be seen as the main center of Christianity.

Over the course of the early second millennium western Europe had become militarily powerful and its economy gradually ascendant. The Crusades had brought new wealth into western Europe through plunder and had encouraged immigration of Eastern Roman scholars fleeing the crumbling Eastern Roman state. The Holy Roman Empire had fragmented long ago and there would no longer be any single nation dominating western Europe for any extended period. Yet, because the West had long become accustomed to a spirit of unity in the western (Roman Catholic) Church, an implicit spirit of cooperation would continue to promote progress. Because for so long during the dark ages of the West virtually all literacy and scholarship was closely tied to the Church, Latin had become firmly established as the language of scholarship in all of western Europe, even those lands that had never been part of the Roman Empire.

Contact with the sophisticated Muslim scholars in Spain and other regions during earlier centuries as well the influx of Roman scholars from the East would gradually foster a new era of intellectual curiosity in the West known as the Renaissance. The influx from the East came largely to Italy, which by the 14th century had already become a populous land once again. At first this intellectual curiosity would simply mean that Europeans would become well versed in the accumulated wisdom of the Muslim world and the Roman Empire. As time progressed European scholars would begin to make their own novel contributions in fields ranging from literature to astronomy. It would not be until the 18th and 19th centuries that Europeans had fully exceeded the accomplishments of the Caliphates in all fields of science. Still by time Constantinople fell to the Turks western Europe was rapidly becoming one of the most technologically sophisticated societies in the world.



The Tempietto di San Pietro of Rome, a classic example of Renaissance architecture.

Two particularly important events occurred during this period. First was a 15th century expedition by the Spanish explorer Christopher Columbus that accidentally discovered the Americas. Although not actually the first expedition to have reached the *New World* Columbus' discovery would pave the way for large-scale exploration of the Americas by western Europe and creation of overseas empires by those nations.



Christopher Columbus.

Shortly after Columbus' expedition a Roman Catholic German priest named Martin Luther, inspired by growing dissatisfaction with the Roman Catholic Church in western Europe, founded a new Christian sect that split from the Church. This sect would be the inspiration for numerous new sects in western Europe which are collectively referred to as Protestantism. This Protestant Reformation would profoundly affect western Christianity and would alter European politics for

centuries to come.

The Age of Global Empires

The Ottoman Empire would continue to grow such that by the 17th century the empire covered all of southeastern Europe, Anatolia, and virtually the entire Middle East region. For a time it was the single most powerful nation in Europe and the Mediterranean region with only China possessing comparable size and power. In spite of the Ottoman power as a single nation, Roman Catholic western Europe as a whole would prove to be more powerful. The fragmented nature of western Europe, unified by Latin as its common language of scholarship, actually became an advantage by fostering competition.



The Ottoman Empire.

The colonization of the Americas by western Europe would begin an era of global imperialism. Spain and Portugal would become the first of major worldwide empires with Spain taking the lead. During the 16th and 17th centuries the Spanish Empire would cover more than half of the Americas and span the globe from colonies in Africa, Asia, and Oceania to occupied regions of Europe. Spain exploited the resources of its colonies to build unparalleled wealth. However, the Spanish and the Portuguese would have difficulty managing their successes. Other European nations would build their empires more slowly but their growth would gradually weaken Spain and Portugal. By the 19th century France and Britain had major worldwide empires in their own right. These European empires would be responsible for spreading western European culture and western Christianity, Roman Catholic and Protestant, around the world, especially in the Americas.



The Old Castle of Madrid, headquarters for the Spanish Empire.

In Russia, Peter the Great rapidly modernized his nation starting the growth of the Russian Empire which would come to control a vast territory from eastern Europe throughout northern Asia and into the Alaskan Peninsula of North America. In terms of cultural significance Russia had become by far the largest and most important eastern Christian power in the world with the Russian czars seeing themselves as successors of the Roman imperial legacy.

In Asia the Qing dynasty would create a new Chinese Empire over the course of the 17th century. This empire would dominate eastern Asia until the 19th century when the European powers and Japan would encroach on and colonize the Asian mainland weakening China in the process. Always a relatively closed society China's influence never extended much beyond Asia. Further south, the Turkish/Mongol Mughal dynasty from Persia conquered most of India creating a Muslim empire that would last until the 19th century. This empire would also be viewed as colonial in nature by many Indians who were largely non-Muslim. The Empire would gradually give way to various other states until India was incorporated into the British Empire.

An Age of Revolution

Although the British colonies in America had never produced the vast mineral resources that the Spanish American colonies had, the more independent British American colonies had become lucrative business ventures on which the British economy heavily depended. Through most of their history the British colonies had enjoyed protection, access to international trade routes, and a high degree of autonomy over their internal affairs. The British crown had unintentionally sowed the seeds of limited government and popular sovereignty in the colonies. In the mid 18th century, following costly wars with the French to protect the colonies, the British began to impose substantial new taxes on the colonists to help repay the

costs. After substantial friction the thirteen main colonies revolted and, following a brief war, secured their independence from Britain thus establishing the new United States of America.

This successful revolution would help to set off a wave of revolutionary spirit, first in the Americas and western Europe but then spreading around the world lasting into the 20th century. The American Revolution was not the first, but its success and serious impact on a major colonial power was unique at the time. The French Revolution would follow ending the rule of the aristocracy in France. Then, taking advantage of the Napoleonic occupation of Spain, a series of revolutions throughout Spanish America would wrench away Spanish control from most of its American empire.

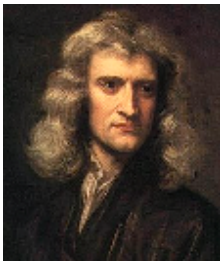
Within the Ottoman Empire, the Eastern Orthodox Christian subjects, most of whom saw themselves as descendants of the former Roman Empire and many of whom were natively Greek-speaking, launched a war of independence finally establishing the new Christian state of Greece in the Balkans. The new state both benefited from and suffered from heavy interference from the major powers of western Europe.

During the 19th century the once mighty Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, Ottoman, and Mughal empires fell apart. The Holy Roman Empire which had long been more theoretical than actual was finally dissolved. The Napoleonic wars between Britain and France established the British Empire as the world's leading power.



Palace of Westminster, the headquarters of the British parliament.

Scientific progress in western Europe by the 19th century far exceeded the accomplishments of all other previous civilizations in history. Perhaps most significantly, the late 18th century saw the birth of the Industrial Revolution in Britain which rapidly spread around the world over the next century. This revolution would launch a new era of progress that, aside from creating new technologies and making life simpler for industrialized populations, changed the nature of the world's economies. It would also help lift the economies of the United States and Japan to the point that they were becoming major world economies at the outset of the 20th century.



Sir Isaac Newton, one of history's greatest scientists.

A relatively insignificant trend began during this time that would have major consequences in the next century. Within the western European Jewish community a *Zionist* movement developed gradually leading many Jews to immigrate to what they considered their ancient homeland in what was then Ottoman Palestine. Although a Jewish revolution would not actually occur until the mid 20th century conflicts with Palestinian Muslims as well as the Ottoman authorities had already begun in the 19th century.

Modern Times

The first half of the 20th century would see two world wars, both devastating, and eventually involving to one degree or another nearly all corners of the planet. The two wars would change the geopolitical landscape of the world far more rapidly than at any other time in history.

Following World War I, the Ottoman Empire was dissolved creating new colonies for the European powers. The old Eastern Orthodox monarchy of Russia fell to atheistic communists during the Russian Revolution creating the new Soviet Union. Communism, a philosophy created by the 19th century philosopher Karl Marx preaching in favor of equality and against the accumulation of wealth, rapidly gained adherents throughout the world with many nations following Russia's example, in some cases from Soviet Union's intervention. A competing philosophy, known as Fascism, advocating the notion of superiority of some ethnic groups over others, would become popular in parts of Europe, most notably Germany where a dictator known as Adolf Hitler created the most powerful military force in the world.

Racial and ethnic hatred in Europe and Asia intensified partially in response to a major worldwide economic depression and partially as a justification for imperial ambitions.

World War II was a catastrophe unlike anything ever imagined. The economies of virtually every major industrial and military power in the world, with the exception of the United States and the Soviet Union, were devastated. Military technology would take a giant leap forward, most notably rocket technology and the invention of the first nuclear weapon, which was used by the United States to end the war. The death toll of the war was by far the highest of any event in world history.

Following the second war the Soviet Union and the United States were the unquestioned military powers. These former allies suddenly became enemies in a race for influence around the world. For a time many observers were certain that a nuclear war between the two powers was inevitable, one that could conceivably destroy the planet. But fortunately, both sides recognized the futility of such a war. Instead a *cold war* was waged involving several minor proxy wars around the globe and interference in political affairs of many nations, especially in the Middle East and eastern Asia. Many of the other nations of the world would gradually recover with the assistance of these two powers. Japan would gradually become one of the most powerful economic powers on the planet. Much of Europe would gradually unify forming the European Union, a major economic power in its own right.



The world's first nuclear attack at Hiroshima, Japan.

The aftermath of the wars would also lead to the end of colonization with most colonial powers giving up their possessions in final waves of independence. India and China would rise out of this aftermath so that, by the end of the 20th century, they were becoming major economic powers in spite of their colonial past. The newly independent nations of sub-Saharan Africa unfortunately fared much worse with many suffering devastating poverty and recurring civil wars. Many parts of South and Central America would fare only somewhat better in the mid 20th century although most found stability by the end of the century. A major exception to decolonization through most of the century was the Soviet Union, which controlled nations from eastern Europe to central Asia. This Union would finally collapse in the latter part of the century freeing most of its ethnically distinct possessions but some distinct nations remained part of Russia, the core of the Soviet Union, notably Muslim Chechnya.

In the (mostly Muslim) Middle East and central Asia, Arab and Muslim nationalism in newly independent nations became major driving forces, partially incited by the European powers during the *Cold War*. Arabs had seen the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the decline of European colonization as an opportunity to restore Arab sovereignty in the Middle East. A major complication resulted when the Jewish people in British Palestine declared the independence of the new Jewish State of Israel. Because this state was created to a great degree by European Jews and was specifically created to support a non-Muslim religion



The headquarters of the United Nations in the United States.

many Arabs perceived it as yet another attempt at foreign colonization of their lands, like the Ottomans, French, and British before them. Wars between Israel and neighboring Muslim Arab states would result in a stalemate condition in the region. The existence of the Israeli state and the status of the Arabs living within became a major source of intense friction between the Muslim nations of the Middle East and the major powers of Europe and North America who either supported Israel or were seen as supporting a colonial agenda.

In spite of the complex world politics of the 20th century it was also an era of unparalleled economic progress in the world. International trade became for the first time truly global and, following the world wars, the world economy gained a level of stability and growth that had never before existed. Wealth was both more widely distributed and more unevenly distributed than ever before. Institutions such as the United Nations fostered worldwide cooperation and created new opportunities for many nations.

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