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## CHAPTER 2: The Best Place to Start

The world we live in is an interconnected collection of nearly two hundred countries predominated by five cardinal cultures.

But where should we start within that group of five, if we want to learn the history of the world we live in? Can we just pick any one of them, and go in any order we want?

Not if we want to be as efficient as possible. There is a best order.

The reason is that there is one culture that did more to shape the character of the world we live in than any other. There is one central culture in history.

Although the United States is the most important country today, it is too young to be *history's* central culture.

Of the ancient cultures that still exist today (as opposed to those that are extinct, like ancient Egypt) the oldest is China. However, China was never a widely influential culture beyond the surrounding region of East Asia.

Islamic culture is not nearly as old as China, but it did play a significant role in shaping the wider world by conquering every part of the map between India and Europe, including northern Africa, and even some areas beyond. Russia is the largest country by far, and although it conquered many neighbors as well, it is younger than Islamic culture.

None of the other cardinal cultures has played anywhere near as important a role in shaping the world as Europe. To begin with, Europe colonized the Americas. The United States, Anglosphere, and Iberosphere would not even exist in their present form if not for Europe. European cultures plundered and ruled Sub-Saharan

Africa. The most powerful of them, the British Empire, ruled India, where English is now an official language and the government is a democracy based on an English model. Europe's enactment of globalization through exploration, trade, and imperialism also deeply affected the development of Russia, the Islamic world, China, Japan and others. There are no civilizations in the world that have not been significantly affected by Europe.

One consequence of the unique role that Europe has played in shaping the wider world is that European history serves as the ideal starting point for the study of history. Studying European history first even allows us to create a template that is useful for learning the history of most other cultures as well. As you will see, using such a template makes it much easier to connect different histories together and combine them all into one.

You will soon be able to hold the history of the world in the palm of your hand!

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## EUROPEAN HISTORY 1.0: THE TEMPLATE

To begin the study of European history properly, we must be able to answer one question: what is Europe today?

Seeing that clearly will lead us to the natural follow-up question: *why* is Europe like that? There is only one way to find the answer: by studying its history.

So, what is Europe, and how did it come to be that way?

In the last chapter, I wrote that most of Europe is organized into the *European Union*, a partnership of countries formed in **1993** that designed to eventually become a “United States of Europe.”

The partnership is intended to take separate nations and bring them together according to an idea called “*supranationalism*.”

To understand what that is, we need to break the concept down into its component parts. The root word of “nationalism” is, of course, “nation.” The word “nation” is more than just a synonym for “country.” A nation is a people separated from other peoples within recognized borders that has a common culture, usually including a common language, religion, history and traditions. *Nationalism*—the sense of belonging to a nation, and of feeling loyalty towards it—stems from the obvious importance that individuals attach to being a part of a community. Indeed, most people think of themselves as Chinese, Russian, French, or Canadian, etc.

The prefix “supra-” is the unusual piece in the concept “supranationalism.” It means “over and above.” A supranational way of thinking places another value *over and above* the nation. In the European Union that “greater good” is Europe as a whole.

There’s one more thing to pay attention to about the word “supranationalism.” “Supra-” is not the same as “super-”. *Supernationalism* means a stronger form or exaggerated kind of nationalism. *Supranationalism* means suppressing nationalism in favor of something broader, or “greater.”

Why does the story of European civilization now hinge on the idea of suppressing its national cultures and trying to replace them with a “greater” European identity?

The simple answer is: the *world wars*.

The long history of Europe culminates in the *world wars*—two wars fought between competing European nations and related cultures, which nearly resulted in the destruction of European civilization. The devastation of those wars between *nations* seemed to demand the reconstruction of European culture according to an idea that would prevent a similar conflict from ever happening again.

The key question of European history today is this: Why did European civilization become the kind of civilization that would nearly destroy itself in the *world wars*, causing its leaders to adopt supranationalism as a response?

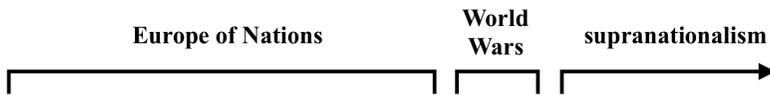
Here's how we will represent that question in the form of a diagram:



In this diagram the history of Europe is represented as three *periods*. One way to think of periods is that they are like chapters in a novel. Each one is a story within a story, all contributing to the outcome. In this kind of history, however, the story has no final chapter. It extends into the foreseeable future, which I symbolize with an arrow.

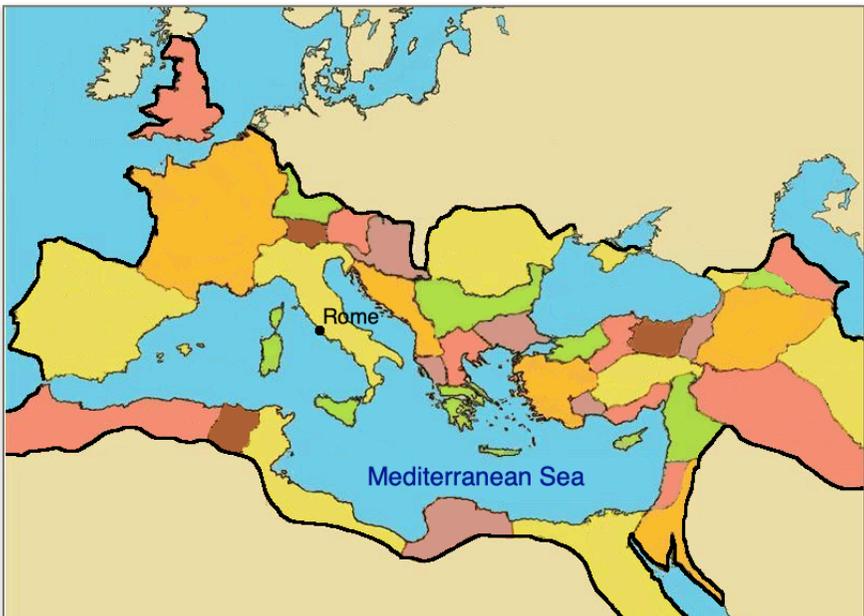
So what is the first chapter of European history, if the full story we want to know is the story of the world we live in?

It is the story of Europe's separate nations. It is the period of the *Europe of Nations*.



The rise of Europe begins with the destruction of the Roman Empire by European barbarians.

If you have studied some history already, you will surely have learned something about the earliest civilizations, such as the Egypt of the pharaohs, Sumer, Babylonia and Israel, as well later but still ancient cultures, including Greece and Rome. The Roman Empire was by far the greatest of these, in the sense that it eventually conquered all of them. It stretched from present-day Iraq all the way to the border between England and Scotland, which means it covered most of Europe.



The Roman Empire at its greatest extent stretched from England, France and Spain in the west to Mesopotamia (today Iraq) Israel, and Egypt in the east.

Stories about such ancient cultures are often a favorite part of history for younger students, because the lives of people back then were so different from ours that it appeals to the imagination.

That said, the *thousands* of years that make up the history of all the cultures that are now extinct cannot possibly be included in this history. There is a long chain of events that we must learn first that stretches from the fall of Rome—through Europe—to the *world we live in*. If we can't make that connection, studying ancient history won't help us to understand the world of today. It'll just be a bunch of facts about people that died a super long time ago!

We need to start when the Roman Empire collapsed and the new civilization of Europe began: the year **476 AD**.

In that year, the last of the emperors based in the city of Rome, Romulus Augustus, was deposed by a European tribal leader named Odovacar. In simple terms, he was kicked off the throne.

The organized civilization of Rome was replaced by a constantly shifting collection of tribes trying to claim its territory. Many of these tribes simply disappeared from history, including Odovacar's. Rome's fall was the beginning of the period known as the "Dark Ages." There were no fixed countries, and certainly no nations.

Only after centuries of wars between the tribes did one of them, the "Franks," make a lasting contribution to the story of Europe. Under their greatest leader, Charlemagne, the Franks briefly united most of Europe into a single empire.

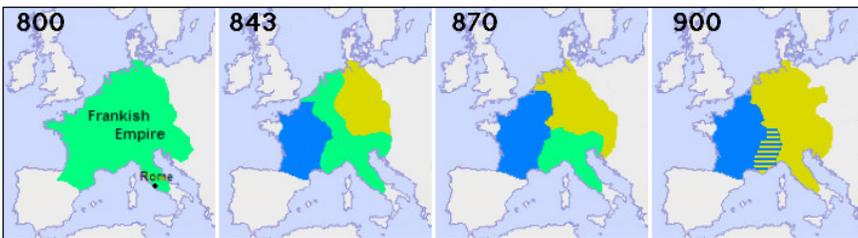
It was a hopeful time. The most important religious leader in Europe, the leader of Christianity known as the "pope," who lived in the city of Rome, believed that an alliance between this powerful ruler and the Church would help create a new, Christian

civilization. He famously granted Charlemagne the title “Emperor of the Romans” in **800 AD**.

It didn’t work. Charlemagne’s empire was what is called a “charismatic monarchy.” It was created and held together by his “charisma,” which means “a divine or inexplicable gift of leadership.” He simply knew how to rule others.

The thing about charisma is: you can’t pass it on. Charismatic monarchies always fail. Modern systems of government succeed, because they are *systems* that are bigger than any one man or woman. Everything is carefully organized, by many people performing all the various functions of the government. When a leader steps down, the next one takes up the reigns, and the system continues to function. When Charlemagne died, there was no such system.

Charlemagne’s son, a much less able man named Louis “the Pious,” held power briefly, but then divided the empire among Charlemagne’s three grandsons in **843**. It was a tribal tradition among the Franks that all a father’s sons would get an equal share of his possessions. They each aspired to more power, however, and went to war against one another to get it. This caused the permanent breakup of Europe into two main segments: a *French* one, and a *German* one.



The breakup of the **Frankish Union (800-43 AD)** following the rule of Charlemagne created the split that has dominated European history.

Europe exists the way it does today because of the failure of the **Frankish Union (800-43)**. It is a Europe organized around the relationship between a separate France and Germany.

In both world wars the main aggressor was Germany, and the country it was vying to surpass was France. Today, France and Germany are the core members of the European Union.

In normal history books, students of history are pulled into the maze of events between **843** and the *world wars* and are fortunate if they escape with a willingness to ever look at that stuff again. In order to avoid that outcome, we are going to do something surprising. We are going to skip it all!

All that needs to be said at this point is that the main feature of that entire period was countless *wars* between Europe's separate nations. We know that a war between the Franks broke early Europe into pieces in the first place, and that its story ended with the biggest wars between them: the *world wars*. What's in between is more wars. That's enough to know—*for now*.

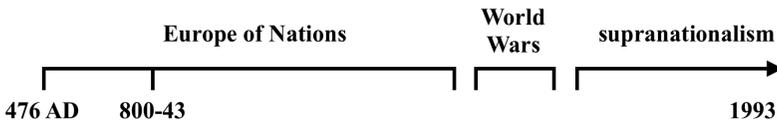
In the aftermath of the *world wars*, Europe was dominated by Russia and America, as we shall see in the coming chapters, so it took time for a new kind of Europe to be created as a supranational union.

The European Union has existed since **1993**. Obviously, therefore, it's still very young. Think of it this way: the Frankish Union was a failure after lasting from **800 to 843—forty-three** years. How long has the European Union lasted so far? When do you think we'll know if it has succeeded? Will it be during your lifetime?!

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We have what we need for our first pass through European history. We have a complete history of Europe, from start to finish, that provides a true explanation of how Europe came to be the way it is today. Any more details right now will only clutter the picture, and make it *more difficult* to understand and remember.

The diagram that represents this whole is:



## SUMMARY OF EUROPEAN HISTORY 1.0

European civilization is one of the cardinal cultures of the world we live in. It is organized as a unique *supranational* partnership called the European Union, which was formed in **1993**, in response to the catastrophic climax of the story of the *Europe of Nations*. European civilization arose when its tribal people brought about the Fall of Rome in **476 AD**, and because those same tribal people failed to build a similar empire of their own, despite the forging of the temporary Frankish Union (**800-43**). Ever since that time, European history has revolved around the relationship between France and Germany as its most important nations. Their inability to coexist almost brought about the destruction of the whole civilization in the *world wars*, leading them to try to attempt another union.

## CHAPTER 2 SELF-CHECK

1. What is *supranationalism*? Explain the concept by breaking it down into its root words, and by contrasting the meaning of “supra-” and “super-”.
2. What civilization preceded Europe? What Church continued to exist despite the fall of Rome? What title did its leader give to Charlemagne?
3. What kind of empire was the Frankish Union? Why didn’t it last? What two countries arose, which became the most important countries in Europe to this day.
4. Draw the diagram of European history from memory, labeling the periods and dates. Label it “European History 1.0.” Check it and fill in any parts you missed, so that it is complete.

[ANSWER KEY PROVIDED AT: <http://historyatourhouse.com>]