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Any attempt to cover an entire century of European history inevitably involves a high degree of selection and compression. The present volume is very much a team effort, but its basic conception and structure are my own, and responsibility for whatever limitations they have imposed on the themes covered rests with me alone. I would like to thank all the contributors for the exemplary professionalism with which they delivered their texts within a tight schedule. Hamish Scott wrote his chapter during the tenure of a Major Research Fellowship, and wishes to record his thanks to the Leverhulme Trust. Finally, we are all indebted to Tessa Harvey, Gillian Kane, and their colleagues at Blackwell for their advice and support.

P.H.W.
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Map 3  Central Europe 1745
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Map 5  Italian states c.1690

Key
1. Duchy of Savoy
2. Duchy of Milan (Habsburgs)
3. Republic of Venice
4. Mantua
5. Parma
6. Modena
7. Republic of Genoa
8. Grand Duchy of Tuscany
9. Papal States
10. Corsica (to Genoa)
11. Kingdom of Sardinia (to Spain)
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Introduction

Peter H. Wilson

For most modern geographers, Europe is no longer a continent, but the western tip of Afroeurasia, the world’s largest land mass. There is some doubt whether historians should also still treat Europe as a distinct field. The current interest in world history questions older national and regional subdivisions as artificial constructs deriving largely from the nineteenth century, while so-called “micro-historians” encourage us to examine each community in detail and to explore individual experience. Yet eighteenth-century Europeans saw themselves as living in a distinct continent. Though influenced by physical geography, their concept of Europe was primarily cultural: a means to distinguish between themselves and other peoples. Like all such cultural constructs, definition depended on identifying boundaries often associated with the perceived character of communities rather than the physical locations they occupied. This was most problematic to the east where there was no agreed physical frontier, but even to the west, bordered by the oceans, many questioned whether the inhabitants of the British Isles or Iceland were fully fledged Europeans (Wolff, 1994).

Europeans were not unified by a single religion, despite the lingering legacy of the medieval ideal of Christendom. The eleventh-century schism between Western Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy left an indelible mark on the European consciousness, with many of the inhabitants in the Catholic west, north, and south no longer regarding the followers of the Orthodox faith to the east as part of a common civilization. Politics reinforced this division, as Russia, the primary Orthodox state, expanded eastwards into Siberia and central Asia from the sixteenth century, and only resumed a more western political orientation around 1700. The majority of the remaining Orthodox believers lived in the Balkans where they fell under the rule of the Islamic Ottoman empire between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. With possessions across North Africa and the Middle East, the Ottoman empire was a true world power that, until 1699, refused to entertain the possibility of permanent peace with any other civilization and was only gradually integrated into a common diplomatic order with European states during the eighteenth century. Yet Greece, that came to be regarded by the late eighteenth century as the cradle of European civilization, lay firmly under Ottoman rule from 1460 to 1829, apart from a brief
period of Venetian control from 1699 to 1715. Meanwhile, the sixteenth-century Reformation shattered Catholic unity and produce a variety of competing strands of Protestantism. After a century and a half of strife, Protestants and Catholics largely abandoned attempts to align religious conformity with political authority by the later seventeenth century. As a result, most states contained either a Catholic or Protestant official majority, with dissenting minorities of varying size, faith, and legal status. Throughout, Jewish communities persisted, particularly in central and east-central Europe.

While they rarely matched religious boundaries precisely, political frontiers nonetheless became more distinct across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These divisions were articulated in the language of sovereign states that gained acceptance during the seventeenth century, though it remained disputed whether such states should interact as equals, regardless of size, wealth, and form of government, or whether they should remain in some kind of hierarchical order. Seventeenth-century wars had largely resolved disputes over which states were fully sovereign, and how their governments were to be organized internally and what authority they should exercise over their own peoples. However, the eighteenth century still saw struggles over the size of individual states, with competing claims to certain provinces and even entire states leading to numerous “wars of succession,” since rulers’ legitimacy generally rested on dynastic inheritance. Such conflicts were also related to the continuing struggle over international status, with the century opening with the defeat, in the War of the Spanish Succession (1701–14), of French pretensions to occupy pole position in a hierarchical order. Subsequent conflicts saw the gradual integration of struggles for regional pre-eminence, for example over the control of the Baltic, into an overarching conception of a single system containing several major and more numerous minor powers. Prior to the re-emergence of French power after 1789, conflicts no longer centered on the pretension of one state to occupy a commanding position, but rather disputes over the relative “balance of power” between the components of this single system.

To these religious and political divisions can be added further differences in language, custom, social organization, and economic activity, separating not only sovereign states and communities of believers, but individual provinces, communities, and groups within these. The practicalities of distance in an age still reliant on horse and wind power for propulsion simply reinforced these distinctions. Nonetheless, it is clear that there existed a common sense of belonging, even if Europe’s extent and the character of its inhabitants remained matters of dispute. The French philosopher Voltaire spoke of Europe as “a kind of republic divided into several states.” Some conceived of this as a formal political order, such as the Abbé de St Pierre, who urged European sovereigns to agree a common court to arbitrate their differences as a means of guaranteeing perpetual peace. For most, however, Europe was a complex set of broadly common aspirations and beliefs, shared at least by intellectuals, those with formal education, and many of those wielding political, economic, and social power. These ideas instilled confidence, born of the conviction that Europeans possessed a unique capacity to overcome intractable problems, as well as a superior culture, inherited from ancient Greece and Rome that together were regarded as the well of human civilization. Such ideas did not go unchallenged during the eighteenth century as Europeans discovered more about the world beyond their shores.
Nonetheless, it is possible to detect a shift from faith that the Christian God would assist all who believed in him, to a conviction that Europeans already possessed innate qualities for success. This shift was related to the move away from the pessimism characterizing the previous hundred years, the “iron century” of hardship and conflict, and towards a more optimistic “age of reason.” Structural changes clearly assisted this. There was a modest improvement in long-term weather conditions after a particularly unfavorable decade around 1690. European demography progressed from simple recovery from earlier seventeenth-century losses to steadily accelerating growth around 1730. Whereas Europe’s population had grown by a modest 20 percent in the sixteenth century, and again in the seventeenth, it doubled between 1750 and 1850 and continued to increase rapidly thereafter. Crop yields that had remained largely static since the later Middle Ages, also experienced dramatic improvement, while other activities witnessed rising productivity. Many remained desperately poor, but the overall capacity to produce a surplus beyond immediate needs increased. Luxuries were no longer the preserve of a narrow governing elite, but became available to the growing and increasingly self-conscious and assertive “middle classes.”

Confidence grew with awareness of gradually improving conditions, while the sense of achievement simply reinforced feelings of superiority over non-European peoples. Alongside this, however, was a growing sense, among some Europeans at least, that they were members of a common humanity to which they bore some responsibility for their actions. Self-confidence and a sense of destiny were paradoxically reinforced by the Britain’s reluctant acceptance of the independence of its North American colonies in 1783: the first significant defeat of European imperialism in world history. While the Americans broke with Britain, they nonetheless established a state and society closely modeled on an idealized version of European civilization that appeared to confirm that European values and institutions would eventually encompass the entire globe.

If there are good reasons for us to treat Europe as a distinct field for historical research, how confident can we be in using the eighteenth century to demarcate our time frame? The division of history into discrete centuries flows naturally from our familiarity with chronological time and makes sense pedagogically by allowing us to subdivide the long human story into more manageable segments. We like our stories to have a beginning, middle, and end, as well as a plot and sense of direction. Do the dates 1700 and 1800 make sense in these terms? Historians writing before the present, self-consciously “postmodern” age were already well aware of these questions. Their studies offer the alternatives of a “short” eighteenth century, running from 1713 to the 1780s (Anderson, 1987; Black, 1999; Woloch, 1982), or a “long” one that, for British historians generally begins with the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and ends in the defeat of Napoleonic France in 1815. Those with a more “continental” perspective tend to stretch to dates back to 1648 and forward to 1789 or even 1815 (Treasure, 1985; Winks and Kaiser, 2004). This longer period is variously labeled the “age of absolutism” or the “old regime,” as defined primarily according to the prevailing political philosophy and practice of strong monarchy, justifying its authority on claims to guarantee order and social stability after a period of upheaval and religious conflict over the previous century and a half.

The disagreement over dates not only reflects the differing significance attached to particular events, but also divergence over historical approach. Both the “long”
and “short” eighteenth centuries were initially defined according to criteria developed by historians writing in the nineteenth century; in many ways the formative period of modern historical scholarship. Such writers gave preference to high politics, especially the wars and diplomacy that marked the “rise” or “decline” of Europe’s great nation-states. They also emphasized intellectual trends, especially those associated with the language of liberal constitutionalism, personal liberty, and capitalist economics. While these factors no longer feature so prominently today, other historiographical developments question the appropriateness of using the eighteenth century as a distinct phase in Europe’s past. The division of modern history into “early” and later stages tends either to subsume the eighteenth century within a longer early modern period beginning around 1450 (Cameron, 2001; Dewald, 2003; Wiesener-Hanks, 2006), or split it between these two modern epochs. The former option generally retains the French Revolution of 1789 as its end marker, but the latter pushes the start of later modernity back to around 1750. For example, the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era (until recently “Revolutionary Europe”), an influential US-based academic network, works within the rough parameters of 1750 to 1850 and interprets this as a period of fundamental transition. The same period has been identified by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck as the “saddle” (Sattelzeit) between modernity and pre-modernity (Brunner, Conze, and Koselleck, 1972–97: vol. 1, pp. xiv–xv). Such ideas have been hugely influential, not least because they chime with the interpretations advanced by social and cultural theorists working in the 1970s to 1990s. Many of these theorists are inherently hostile to the claims advanced by earlier writers for the “modernity” of the eighteenth century. This dispute over the meaning of modernity and the validity of the values ascribed to it has largely replaced the division marked by political ideology that colored much of twentieth-century historiography. These twenty-first-century differences, like those of the past, exist beyond the self-serving agendas of some participants because there are genuine problems of interpretation.

There are many good reasons for taking the 1750s as a more significant dividing point than either the 1700s or 1800s. Older scholarship already identified the mid-eighteenth century as marking a shift from a state primarily concerned with restoring order and promoting stability after earlier upheavals, to one that had greater confidence in its ability to reshape society along more efficient and productive lines. Traditionally, this has been labeled a move from the “classical absolutism” epitomized by Louis XIV in France (r. 1643–1715), to the “enlightened absolutism” exemplified by monarchs like Catherine II of Russia (r. 1762–96). Internationally, the mid-eighteenth century saw the emergence of Prussia as a fifth “great power” alongside Austria, France, Russia, and Britain, establishing a pattern that remained basically unchanged until the end of World War I. The 1750s witnessed a lasting shift in the global balance of European power as Britain triumphed over France in North America and India. Though Britain’s position in the former was diminished by American independence in 1783, its gains in India continued throughout the later eighteenth century and sustained imperial predominance into the twentieth century. Rising agricultural productivity, particularly in Britain and the Netherlands, assisted the changes customarily labeled the Industrial Revolution that started to become more apparent in some areas around 1750. Social change likewise showed signs of accelerating, fuelled by demographic growth. The rapidity as well as the
scale of these changes became manifest in more marked social differentiation,
clearer divisions of labor, and the emergence of new occupations. Culturally, the
mid-eighteenth century is perhaps less important for truly new ideas than for the
wider dissemination of more secular ways of thinking, as well as the engagement
of broader sections of the population in more freely ranging debates on human
society. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the publication of the *Encyclopédie*,
a 28-volume compendium of new knowledge edited by Denis Diderot and Jean
d’Alembert between 1751 and 1772, to which over 150 people contributed. A
further seven volumes were later added to what became a major best-selling pub-
lishing venture.

These debates over the significance of particular trends, and how best to study
them, inform the contributions to this volume that is nonetheless based on a
chronological division roughly from 1700 to 1800. While not suggesting that either
year marks a dramatic turning point, there are valid reasons to frame the eighteenth
century as a distinct period in Europe’s history. Many developments certainly began
much earlier, while others continued far beyond 1800, as the subsequent chapters
make clear. However, when the perspective is widened beyond Europe to examine
Europeans’ impact on the world, the eighteenth century emerges more distinctly.
Again, individual chapters will explore this in greater depth, but some important
aspects can be noted here. Britain and Russia emerged around 1700 as countries
with political, social, and economic systems of global importance. Both had been
rather peripheral powers till that point, but were confirmed as major world powers
by 1800. Perhaps more fundamentally, the eighteenth century saw the culmination
of long-term trends that were to shape world history for the next 200 years and
beyond. Europe now achieved a unique global position as a concentration of
technological (especially maritime), economic, and military power, supported by
sophisticated state infrastructures with the ability to project their influence well
beyond their own frontiers. Individual elements of this unique mix were not
unknown elsewhere, nor had Europeans achieved this combination unaided or
without borrowing ideas and practices from other peoples. The different strands
had their roots far in the past, while their development accelerated from the fi-
fteenth century, but it was only in the eighteenth that they fully came together
and made a more significant impact outside Europe. In doing so, they also trans-
formed Europe, providing the basis for European global predominance (at least
economic and military).

This fusion produced a set of institutions, best defined broadly as cultural practices
and assumptions, both formal and informal. In short, they were a way of doing things,
coordinating activities, setting priorities, and allocating resources. Individual elements
were not unique, but their combination was distinctly European. Seen in a broader
time frame, these institutions provide perhaps a better definition of modernity than
either the French or Industrial revolutions that have traditionally served as markers.
More importantly, these institutions, such as state structures and forms of education,
were present across Europe and not merely in those countries engaged in overseas
deal or conquest.

Some explanation of the structure and approach of the volume is required before
proceeding further. Recent scholarship gives particular emphasis to certain
approaches that have added greatly to our understanding of the eighteenth century.
One is the interest in the connections between Europe and other parts of the world that urges greater sensitivity towards the non-European elements in European history. Another has been the emergence of new forms of cultural history that move beyond the largely quantitative methods used before to study society and economy by utilizing previously under-used sources that shed light on individual experience and perception through an examination of aspects like “discourse,” gender, identity, and non-elite cultural practices. Such approaches nonetheless need to be balanced with other perspectives, including those whose accepted status as “traditional” should not blind us to their continued utility. There is a danger that current fashions impose their own boundaries on the past – however unintended – thereby unduly diminishing the significance attached to other topics. One example is the current paradigm of the “Atlantic World” that preferences Europe’s transatlantic links (especially with North America) over connections to other parts of the globe. This is undoubtedly related to the predominance of English-language work in published history, and the relatively generous research resources of British and US academic institutions compared to those elsewhere. The emphasis on shared cultural connections also unwittingly threatens to revive the older Cold War Atlantic paradigm that trumpeted common western European-American democratic values (Palmer, 1959).

Similarly, the new cultural history has concentrated so far primarily on developments associated with information exchange through the “public sphere,” and the emergence of leisure and consumerism. Such topics were largely overlooked previously, but provide valuable insight into the lives of women as well as men, children as well as adults. They have also left rich seams of written and visual sources, and represent trends that not only spread geographically and socially after 1700, but helped to distinguish the eighteenth century from those that preceded it. These topics appeal to us also because they appear closer, and thus more accessible, to our own experience. However, with the exception of consumerism, only a fraction of those living in eighteenth-century Europe were affected directly by them. The new cultural history reinforces the tendency inherent in the Atlantic approach to reduce European history to that of the continent’s north-western corner and to concentrate on the “swelling” urban middle classes engaged in commerce.

There is a need to look beyond the Atlantic seaboard and at the majority of Europeans for whom life was often very different. It is also important in this present age of closer political integration and means of rapid communication to remember that eighteenth-century Europe was divided into many different states and hundreds of thousands of communities varying considerably in size and internal stratification. This is a substantial volume, but even here it is impossible to do justice to the myriad of local distinctions. A measure of this can nevertheless be conveyed by presenting essays on individual countries and regions. This should not be misconstrued as a return to more distinctly nationalist perspectives, but as a reflection of Europe’s fragmented character at a time when the local and particular loomed large in everyday experience. Concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” can be found in eighteenth-century discourse, but their grip on the popular imagination lay in the future, nor were they synonymous with later nineteenth-century definitions. As the contributions to this volume make clear, most European states were still “composite” or dynastic ones, patchworks of different regions bound together by complex webs of political,