

# Europe: A Continent of Countries or a Composite of Regions?

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She has written this article especially for this TOP-publication.

## A Continent of different countries

So what's Europe? When I grew up in London quite a long time ago, Brits who could afford it went on vacation. Europe was an exotic place where the natives spoke incomprehensible languages, ate funny food and generally behaved like the foreigners they were – but where there was an abundance of sandy beaches and the weather was reputed to be good all the time. I can remember when I had learned enough at school to point out to my parents in snooty schoolgirl fashion that since Britain – oops, Great Britain – was part of Europe, the Brits couldn't very well go there because they were there already. I can remember my Dad pondering this, and correcting himself. We're going to the Continent, he finally said.

I didn't really gain any perspective on Europe until I arrived in the U.S. There, I learned that Europe was indeed a continent made up of lots of different countries – quite definitely including my own Great Britain – all of which were *Steeped In History And Culture*. This impressed the Americans, many of whom seemed to feel that they themselves didn't have enough of either – well, I was living in Southern California. Their idea of going on vacation to Europe was not to soak up sun on a beach, but to rush around to ancient stony piles with open guide books, saying things like, 'If this is Sunday, we must be in Belgium'. But the Americans had a more differentiated view of Europe than my Dad, for example, because so many of their ancestors came from different parts of it, so at least they knew that there were *Significant Differences* between the countries.

## A Continent of permanent historical changes

Over the years, I've learned much more about Europe. Heck, I've ended up living right in the middle of it, in Germany, a country which was redesigned for the umpteenth time at around the time of my birth. I know that Europe's component countries have fought fiercely over the centuries to define, preserve, enlarge their territory. And others have fought equally fiercely not to lose theirs. And after each war, national boundaries have been redrawn so as to reward the victors and punish the losers. Not that the people directly concerned in these bandied-about territories have had much to say about which nation they wanted to belong to – they just woke up one day and read in their newspapers – Today you are part of Germany. Or France. Or Poland. Or wherever.

## Alsace between Germany and France

Take the Alsatians. They live in Alsace, 'beyond the Rhine', on the west side of it to be precise. Originally, they were a Germanic tribe, the Alemanni, which was conquered by another Germanic tribe, the Franks – and so on. These hostile takeovers were pretty common in the early Middle Ages. For centuries, Alsace was one of the many areas of Germanic Europe – there was no Germany at the time, just a whole lot of loosely connected principalities, dukedoms, independent cities and the like. At the end of the Thirty Years War, Alsace got handed over to France, where it remained for some time. The Alsatian people, sensibly, kept their language (Alemannic German), but had to learn French as well. Then along came Bismarck, who claimed the region as his after he had won the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. So Alsace became part of the new Germany (it was a good thing that the Alsatians hadn't forgotten their language). Then came WWI, which as we all know Germany lost, so Alsace was given back to France (1918). This seemed to suit most of the Alsatians, although they resented the fact that the rest of France didn't really consider them French ... and they continued to

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use their variety of the German language at least among themselves. Then along came Hitler, and in 1940, poor old Alsace was annexed to his Third Reich. This, fortunately, came to an end five years later, and – you’ve guessed it – Alsace was returned to France. Which is where it still was when I last checked yesterday ...

**The idea of the historical nation-state**

Alsace is just one example among many of European map redistribution. The point is that over the centuries, the idea of nation-state has been very strong. Whether or not the people of any given area felt all that deeply about their nation is a moot point – their leaders did. Any nationalism – the ideology that preaches that a particular nation, the nation one belongs to, is better than any other nation – has been propagated with enormous success. Since the drawing of boundaries is such an arbitrary matter, the decision as to which nation a particular chunk of Europe ‘legitimately’ belongs has been and still is the cause of horrendous wars. If Serbia or Russia unilaterally decide that Kosovo or Chechnya historically ‘belong’ to them, they can declare that any war they wage against so-called secessionists is an internal war against terrorism. It’s up to the rest of the world to buy or not to buy that argument.

**National tendencies today in Europe**

So where are we today, we Europeans? We still have nation-states, and we still have changing borders. Scotland never chose to be umbilically joined to England, and is in an advanced stage of devolution – one day, it will formally cease to be part of Great Britain. With any luck, bloodlessly. The Northern Irish too may end up outside Great Britain – the unusual thing here being that it is not the Brits that want to keep them in the fold against their will, but the Northern Irish who want to remain British. Then we have the Basques, a small handful of whom – it takes only a few fanatics – will go to almost any lengths to detach themselves from Spain and France. The northern and southern Italians have cordially disliked each other ever since they were united in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the North-

ern League, a colorful if small political party, is pushing for separation. The Belgians are such a heterogeneous bunch that the two cultural groups inhabiting the small country – the Dutch-speaking Flemish and the French-speaking Walloons – can hardly bear to communicate with each other on bad days. Czechoslovakia is a country which seemed to disappear overnight while I was on a trip somewhere – now there’s a Czech Republic and a Slovakia. And for as long as I can remember, the Spaniards and the Brits have been haggling over Gibraltar, a rock on which monkeys sit.

**From the European Common Market to the European Union**

So what’s new, you may be wondering. In the 1950s, some very smart people decided that Something Had To Be Done to knock some sense into the bellicose Europeans and prevent future territorial wars. And they figured that the best way to do this was to make all the countries so economically – and eventually politically – dependent on each other that they simply couldn’t afford to invade each other ever again. And indeed, this is pretty much what has happened. In fifty years, we’ve gone from a small common market to an impressive European Union which is so select that other nations have to queue up to get in – once they have met the entrance requirements, that is. Of the 36 (I think – I haven’t counted recently) countries of Europe, 15 are currently members of the exclusive club, with another 12 or so waiting in line. We – well, 12 of those members, and I’m counting myself as a German here – now have our own common money, the euro, and the countries which have adopted it (Britain hasn’t yet – typical) are now known as Euroland. And as you’ll have realized, this EU of ours is not just a vast trading block or mutual economic benefit society – no, it’s become a supranational political entity with a parliament, a vast administration, a justice system, the lot. The principle behind the whole construct is that of subsidiarity: the EU has jurisdiction only over those areas and policies which cannot be handled effectively at lower levels of government, whether national, regional or local. On the whole, it works rather well. Some European nations, and even

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states within nations – Bavaria, for example – are not happy about parting with any of their political sovereignty, and the strengthening and broadening of the political and judicial powers of the EU is a highly controversial issue which is far from resolved.

**Regions: Home territory, cultural area**

So what about the old nation-states? And what about the Europe of Regions that you may have heard about? What's happened is this: the more Europe has grown together as an economic and to a lesser extent political bloc, the more the different regions are asserting their uniqueness and independence. The more the different peoples of Europe feel threatened by a kind of homogenization – the French talk fearfully about our all becoming 'Europuddings', a breed of bland common-culture creatures with no local identity – the more they crave a feeling of belonging to a clearly defined small area. The Germans call this small area *Heimat* – home territory, where a person feels at one with his/her surroundings, familiar with the locals and their customs. *Heimat* is a return to roots. *Heimat* is happiness. Now, the Germans may have coined a word for the feeling, but almost all Europeans experience this local longing in some way or another, even the yuppie international jet set who, at the end of the long metaphorical day, need to go 'home'.

So – *Heimat* is one form of regionalism, the most personal and local. But beyond the local local (sic) community there is the larger local community which, in the case of Germany, might be a federal state or simply an area in which people share clearly identifiable culture and traditions. The Bavarians (the people who inhabit the Free State of Bavaria) are as far removed in mentality and outlook from the Rhinelanders (the people who inhabit a geographical area which spans several states along the river Rhine) as are the Swabians (people from a broad area stretching from Stuttgart down to Lake Constance) from the Saxons (Saxony, like Bavaria, being a relatively homogeneous state). And so on. Many Germans (and I'll stick to the Germans here – I could, of course, talk about the French, the Italians, the Spaniards or any other Europeans) have a

strong regional identity of this kind – in fact, since many Germans are not entirely happy about announcing to the outside world that they are Germans, they are very likely to view themselves first and foremost as Berliners, Hamburgers, Bavarians or Saxons.

**Cross-border regions**

But now comes the interesting part. In this new Europe of ours, the regions – areas in which people are tied together by common bonds – are increasingly spilling over national boundaries. This spillover is not exactly a new phenomenon, since over history, borders have changed so often that central Europeans have gotten somewhat used to having their local community divided by a national border that wasn't there when they went to bed the night before. Take the Alsatian example I mentioned above. So not surprisingly, many local communities have long felt more affinity with their neighbors across the (new) border than with other communities within their (new) country. What has changed in recent times, and what is tied to the process of globalization, is that these cross-border 'regions' are assuming ever more importance as they consolidate their *identity as a cultural and economic unit* within the far less tangible and unmanageable concept of 'Europe'. They interact closely with each other, cultivate exchanges of all kinds, and generally foster a sense of shared interests – an extended *Heimat*. In other words, geographical areas with a common history may simply ignore political boundaries. This adjacent regionalism was not encouraged in the past, when national European governments tried to prevent crossborder fraternization through deliberate resettlement policies – moving longtime natives from the interior into newly acquired territory in an attempt to squash local identity. No longer. And on a business level, the slogan has become 'think globally, act locally'. You may be running a transnational corporation (and what is Europe if not just that?), but the only way to get anything effectively done is to keep as many operations as possible on the village level.

The informal association of areas with *common economic interests* is also worth a word or two.

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This is a virtual (as opposed to adjacent) regionalism, in which people who share similarly-generated wealth but who live geographically apart in different cities, provinces or countries feel more affinity with each other than they do with fellow countrymen pursuing different economic goals – or the same economic goals but in different ways. London, Frankfurt, Paris and Milan undoubtedly have a lot in common as business and financial centers, and the highly industrialized Catalan region of Spain may well identify more with the Po Valley region of northern Italy than either area does with the rest of its own country. Here, fast transportation, modern communications and the IT revolution all minimize distance and create new regional configurations – European Sunbelts, so to speak. The same kind of economic regions are common in the U.S., but the borders they cross are usually state. Of course, there's always the Pacific North West, where the people of Vancouver feel far more closely related to their counterparts in Seattle than to fellow Canadians from Quebec. Or so I've often been told.

This then is the broad concept of regionalism – the banding together of common interest groups, whatever the interests might be, within the larger whole. And there are any number of regions and types of regions – theoretically, a person could belong to quite a few. I'm sure I do. And in my opinion, it is regionalism which makes Project Europe (my expression) feasible. For nation states as diverse as the ones that make up Europe are unwieldy enough to administer – Europe as one centralized entity would be entirely impossible. Only as a collection of component parts can Europe be managed. That these parts are not or no longer always identical with the nation-states is just another fascinating twist to the ongoing European saga. Keep your eyes peeled for the next installment!