

CONCISE  
HISTORY  
OF THE  
MODERN  
WORLD



A HISTORY OF  
**MODERN EUROPE**

FROM 1815 TO THE PRESENT

ALBERT S. LINDEMANN

 WILEY-BLACKWELL

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# Concise History of the Modern World

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# A History of Modern Europe

## From 1815 to the Present

Albert S. Lindemann

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# Preface

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## The Dilemmas and Rewards of a Concise Historical Overview

*Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it.*

*(attributed to George Santayana)*

*We Communists have no difficulty in predicting the future – it's the past that keeps changing on us!*

*(anonymous)*

*Memory is like a crazy old woman, storing colored rags and throwing away good food.*

*(attributed to Austin O'Malley)*

In the nineteenth century, Europeans produced a dazzling civilization, a culmination of centuries that was once termed “the rise of the west.” Europe influenced the rest of the world to an extent that few, if any, previous civilizations had. Europeans were admired and imitated but also feared and hated by much of the rest of that world. The empires of individual European countries, especially those of Britain and France, ruled over hundreds of millions of non-European peoples, often with a heavy hand. Europeans came to believe in their inherent superiority to other peoples, and there was no denying their scientific discoveries, military power, and all-round creativity. Yet, driven by the demon of the extreme left and right, European civilization nearly committed suicide, pulling much of the rest of the globe into two massive conflicts termed “world” wars, resulting in the deaths of tens of millions and incalculable miseries for millions more.

A familiarity with that history is obviously desirable for any educated person in the early twenty-first century, but such a familiarity is not easily gained. The volumes of Wiley-Blackwell's Concise History of the Modern World series are designed for readers with “no prior knowledge” of the topics covered, but those volumes also have the goal of offering “vigorous interpretation” and insights from “the latest scholarship.” Any presentation of modern European history with those requirements must pay especially rigorous attention to priorities, leaving out much that would find a place in a longer volume for a different audience. In particular, any history intent on presenting penetrating analysis and provocative interpretive perspectives must be substantially different from an inclusive, fact-filled chronological narrative. At any rate, most modern historians have long since moved away from presenting “just the facts” in an “objective” way. Professional historians see their discipline as question-driven, involving debate and ambiguity, rather than simply one in which facts are accurately and objectively presented. Again, the professional historian's approach to history involves priorities, unavoidably stirring up debate about the nature of those priorities.

The above three epigrams suggest many of the challenges – and pitfalls – associated with writing a concise overview that is readable and yet avoids condescension. The first quotation is the most widely known and familiar. Attributed to George Santayana, it is a simplification of his actual words (“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to fulfill it”); the following pages will have much to say about the “lessons of history” – lessons that have often turned out to be simplistic and misleading, if not utterly false, leading to new tragedies. The second quotation, while obviously tongue-in-cheek, makes a point

about the past that is tacitly accepted by all historians – not that historical facts can be crudely ignored, as was notoriously the case under Communist rule, but rather that what interests us about the past subtly evolves. We are constantly discovering new details about the past, and partly because of that new information we continually reformulate the questions we ask about that past. This is not to assert that the past itself changes; it is rather to recognize that we look for new things, while losing interest in things that had once fascinated us.

The third of the above quotations observes how our memory tends to be attracted to the gaudy and garish, passing over “good food” – in other words, avoiding more valuable memories, especially if they are awkward ones. That quotation also touches on one of the major issues for those writing modern history: the widening gap between “popular” history and history written by professional historians, the first colorful and highly readable but also tending to be conceptually shallow, the second generally less readable but more intellectually challenging. That division has a convoluted relationship with what have been termed the “old” and “new” approaches to the writing of history. The venerable or “old” tradition in history-writing concerned itself primarily with the role of great men and with those areas in which such men predominated (politics, diplomacy, and warfare, but also scientific inquiry and economic enterprise, to name just a few). “New” history has its own honorable tradition in its concern to “revise” or radically reconceptualize how we understand the past, to achieve fresh perspectives on it – and is especially proud in announcing its move away from the earlier focus on great men.

The distinction between old and new history is so fraught with definitional problems that the term may pose more of an obstacle to understanding than an aid to it. Those writing from an “old” perspective are also constantly in search for new interpretations, while most of those writing “new” history by no means completely ignore the more long-standing concerns. Nonetheless, the terms “old history” and “new history” are entrenched and do have some thought-provoking implications. The difference between old and new history, for example, has been described as involving a shift “from victors’ history to victims’ history” – tendentiously, no doubt, but pointing nonetheless in fruitful directions. How much should historical narratives concentrate on “elites” (the powerful, the famous, the creative) in contrast to the mass of the population (the previously neglected, powerless, mundane and inarticulate)? Does the historian properly direct most attention to an ascendant Britain or to declining Spain (in other words, to the successful model that others sought to emulate or to the failing one that others sought to avoid)? Which is it more important to understand: the personal lives of Hitler or Stalin, or the lives of the lower classes in Germany and Soviet Russia? Women constitute half of the population; should they then take up half of any general historical narrative? Elites are by definition a very small part of the population; should they then constitute a very small part of historical accounts? Anyone who believes that history should include “all of the above” cannot expect to find a concise volume that does so.

“New” history tends to favor “history from below,” dismissing “history from above” as limited and too focused on elites (which, at least for some observers, are implicitly bad, while “the people” are implicitly good). Impersonal forces are similarly seen as far more significant than the decisions of “great men”; the face of the common people, the writers of new history maintain, is more worthy of attention than previously recognized by those writing “old” history. These issues connect in a pertinent way with a major theme of the following pages; that is, how Europe over two centuries rose to such impressive heights, then fell to such appalling depths, yet then recovered to an amazing degree. Is that story best conceptualized “from above,” as one involving choice by identifiable historical actors and powerful elites (overwhelmingly males), who then are in some sense to be

considered primarily responsible for the depths into which Europe descended? Or, in contrast, should the emphasis be from below, on great impersonal forces and the “anonymous” masses, relegating those elite actors to relative insignificance, like leaves on the surface of a powerfully rushing river?

Modern Europe’s civil war of 1914 to 1945, especially the mass murder of Jews that occurred in its last years, looms as the dark star of its history, potently drawing our attention and seeming to influence our interpretation of nearly all other developments. Who (or what) was responsible for the terrible catastrophes of those years? How could so many millions have perished? How could Germany, previously considered one of Europe’s most highly civilized areas, oversee a mechanized, mercile genocide of the Jews under its power, to say nothing of the many millions of other “inferior” peoples? How could Soviet Russia, its Communist leaders claiming to represent the humane values of the Enlightenment, oversee even more murderous measures over a longer period, resulting in tens of millions of deaths of its own citizens?

Are those calamities to be presented as avoidable, if political leaders or other elites had made different choices, or were those calamities ultimately inevitable, the result of impersonal forces that overwhelmed individuals? If we dismiss the “great men” of this period – Stalin, Hitler, Churchill – as unimportant compared to the workings of the economy or the strivings of the great masses of humanity, what kind of historical narrative might result? To turn the accusing finger in a different direction, might the rise in the power of the masses – ignorant, gullible, short-sighted – be seen as fundamental to Europe’s tragedies, whereas “great” men became important only insofar as they could manipulate those masses?

Such questions have no easy answers. This volume may be seen as an exploration of the kinds of blends or syntheses of old and new history that are desirable and – let us be realistic – possible in a concise volume. There is a related question that cannot be ignored in a history of modern Europe: “Eurocentrism” is one of the many sins charged against “old” versions of history. A history of Europe is by definition centered on Europe, but what is more broadly implied in the charge of Eurocentrism is that historians of Europe (and, by extension, people of European descent) have seen the rest of the world from a blinkered perspective, failing to view non-Europeans with the proper sympathy and respect. For many, especially in the intellectual climate of recent years, sympathy and respect are absolute requirements when dealing with history’s victims – the weak, vulnerable, or previously denigrated. Similarly, any suggestion of a critical stance in regard to history’s “losers” is dismissed as mean-spirited.

There is, however, this dilemma: Some of those claiming to present “new” perspectives have reproduced the tendencies of “old” history in elevating *their* favored group, and, even more, in failing to evaluate it searchingly. But surely the goal of reassuring one group or another that their members are wonderful and their enemies nasty is not consistent with the highest ideal of historical analysis. In this, as in other regards, there are obvious connections with the culture wars of recent decades and the way one approaches history.

The word “sympathy” can imply many things, but it tends to pull in different directions than critical analysis does. The ideal in these pages has been to extend sympathy to all – while also subjecting all to searching analysis. It is an ultimately unachievable ideal, of course, but nonetheless sympathetic understanding must be distinguished from rationalization or apologetics. That many Europeans of the nineteenth century considered themselves superior to non-European peoples is only too obvious, just as European elites considered themselves superior to the European lower orders. European imperialism and the struggle against it are major themes of this volume, as are the related themes

European racism and the struggle against it. In the history of other areas of the world, imperialist expansion and concepts roughly comparable to European racism were common enough, but European civilization came to have more concentrated power and a greater range of influence throughout the world than any previous civilization – and, of course, most of us have a fresher memory of it.

A key focus, then, of these pages is on the reasons for the admiration that Europeans attracted, as well as reasons for the related hatred they inspired. As noted above, the Europeans' growing sense of superiority to the rest of the world was in certain regards based on reality. Their physical power, as measured in weaponry in relation to that of non-Europeans was often overwhelming. Yet the fierce dynamism of European civilization helped to carry it to the edge of self-destruction. It grew to awe-inspiring power, characterized by unparalleled material wealth and military might. Its scientific discoveries impressed its most determined opponents, as did its music, visual art, and literature. European ideologies spread widely. But Europe descended, between 1914 and 1945, into shocking irrationality and cruelty, and the mass murder of its own peoples.

Most observers today reject the nineteenth-century belief, often termed "triumphalism," that Europeans and those of European descent were bringing higher moral values and an obviously superior level of civilization to the rest of the world. In a now-famous put-down, the Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi, when asked about European civilization, observed that "it would be a nice idea." Nonetheless, there remains the issue of whether the contrasting assertion – that the West's influence on the rest of the world was mostly destructive – is any more valid. World history is after all a story of mutual influences, but not usually of mutual benevolence. Europe's arrogance and cruelty were hardly unprecedented, though its power and world influence may well have been.

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- [Figure 18.1](#)** Adolf Hitler, September 1936. The business suit reflects his efforts at this time to appear as a respectable statesman, not a radical demagogue. *Source:* © [ullsteinbild](#) /

- [\*\*Figure 20.1\*\*](#) Hitler: “The scum of the earth, I believe?” Stalin: “The bloody assassin of the workers, I presume?” Cartoonist David Low’s “Rendezvous,” originally published in the *Evening Standard*, September 20, 1939. *Source*: British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent, [www.cartoons.ac.uk/London](http://www.cartoons.ac.uk/London) Evening Standard.
- [\*\*Figure 21.1\*\*](#) Nazis arresting Jews in Warsaw Ghetto. Frightened Jewish families surrender to Nazi soldiers at the Warsaw Ghetto in 1943. In January of that year, the residents of the ghetto rose against the Nazis and held their ground for several months, but were defeated after fierce fighting in April and May. Photo from Jürgen Stroop’s report to Heinrich Himmler from May 1943. *Source*: Wikimedia Commons.
- [\*\*Figure 21.2\*\*](#) The Big Three: Winston Churchill, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Josef Stalin at the Yalta Conference, February 4–11, 1945. *Source*: © Trinity Mirror / Mirrorpix / Alamy.
- [\*\*Figure 23.1\*\*](#) “I’m sorry, kids! It was, like, just an idea I had!” Roland Beier: Marx cartoon, 1990. *Source*: © Roland Beier.
- [\*\*Figure 24.1\*\*](#) Arriving in Palestine. A soldier of the British Parachute Regiment with newly arrived Jewish refugees at a port in the British Mandate of Palestine, 1947. *Source*: Popperfoto /Getty Images.
- [\*\*Figure 26.1\*\*](#) Willy Brandt kneeling at a monument to the Jewish dead, Warsaw, 1970. *Source*: © Interfoto / Alamy.
- [\*\*Figure 26.2\*\*](#) Still smiling after a very hectic day in the Big Apple, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev and his wife Raisa display their endurance as they attend a reception in their honor, December 8, 1987. *Source*: © Bettmann / CORBIS.



# Acknowledgments

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Writing a book can seem a lonely undertaking. Facing a blank screen each day (or worse, a screen filled with endlessly revised previous drafts), one mutters, “How did I get into this?” In my case the answer is a simple one: I was asked by Christopher Wheeler, publisher at Wiley Blackwell, if he could interest me in writing a concise, readable history of modern Europe. In no small part due to his delicate flattery, my initial resistance was overcome. (A more complex answer is that, having taught the subject for many years, I had long contemplated writing such a book, and this was the chance to put up or shut up.)

It was not lonely, then, at the beginning. Christopher and I exchanged many emails, discovering that we were largely in agreement about the dimensions of the volume. About six months later I delivered a detailed proposal. Five scholarly readers were then asked to offer their reactions to it. These turned out to be gratifyingly supportive. Thereafter, many more readers were asked to look over the gradually emerging draft chapters. Among those readers were students in my university classes, colleagues at my university and elsewhere, non-academic friends, and last but by no means least my wife, Barbara, also a professor of History – the first and last reader of all my books and articles.

A contract was negotiated, but not long thereafter Christopher accepted a position at Oxford University Press. His successor at Wiley Blackwell, Tessa Harvey, proved gracious and professional even when progress seemed worryingly slow. I again exchanged countless emails with Tessa, Isobel Bainton, Anna Mendell, and Gillian Kane. It would be hard to imagine a more efficient, sensitive, and supportive group of editors.

The complete draft of the manuscript in its initial form was too long, so I thoroughly revised it, deleting tens of thousands of words that I had so sweated to produce, but I finally got much closer to the agreed-upon goal of a “concise” history. This draft yet again went through a rigorous vetting process, most notably by development editor Sarah Wrightman, whose sensitivity to what I was trying to accomplish gave me a welcome boost. The eagle eye of copy-editor Hazel Harris caught typos and inconsistencies, but more significantly she showed a remarkable talent for flagging unclear passages. Caroline Hensman and Charlotte Frost offered invaluable assistance with the often complex issues associated with selecting maps and illustrations.

Rather than feeling lonely, then, I had good reason to agree heartily that it “takes a village” to (raise a child or) write a book of this sort. Yet, with all these many helping hands, there did remain an undeniable solitude, for an author must be, in the immortal words of a recent American president, “the decider.” Many readers offered knowledgeable suggestions, but those suggestions often contradicted the equally knowledgeable suggestions of other readers. Not all readers could come fully to grips with the implications of that terrifying word “concise.” While it is true, then, that it takes a village, it is also the case that “too many cooks spoil the broth.” A single author’s voice is crucial to producing a readable and coherent narrative, and that author cannot avoid making decisions about what should be included, or, more painfully, what had to be excluded. Such a process, even for the most confident and experienced writer, will likely involve bouts of frustration and self-doubt – if finally also a giddy moment of satisfaction and exhaustion at wrestling the thing to the ground.

It is customary in the acknowledgments page to end by thanking everyone who helped yet at the same time firmly recognizing that any remaining errors or inadequacies are the author’s responsibility. I hope my comments above adequately convey those sentiments. But I must sincerely

declare to all those mentioned above – beyond the usual boilerplate and blarney – that it would have been inconceivable to complete it without you, and I offer you my sincerest thanks.

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