THE MYTH OF CONTINENTS

A Critique of Metageography

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The Shifting Boundaries of East and West

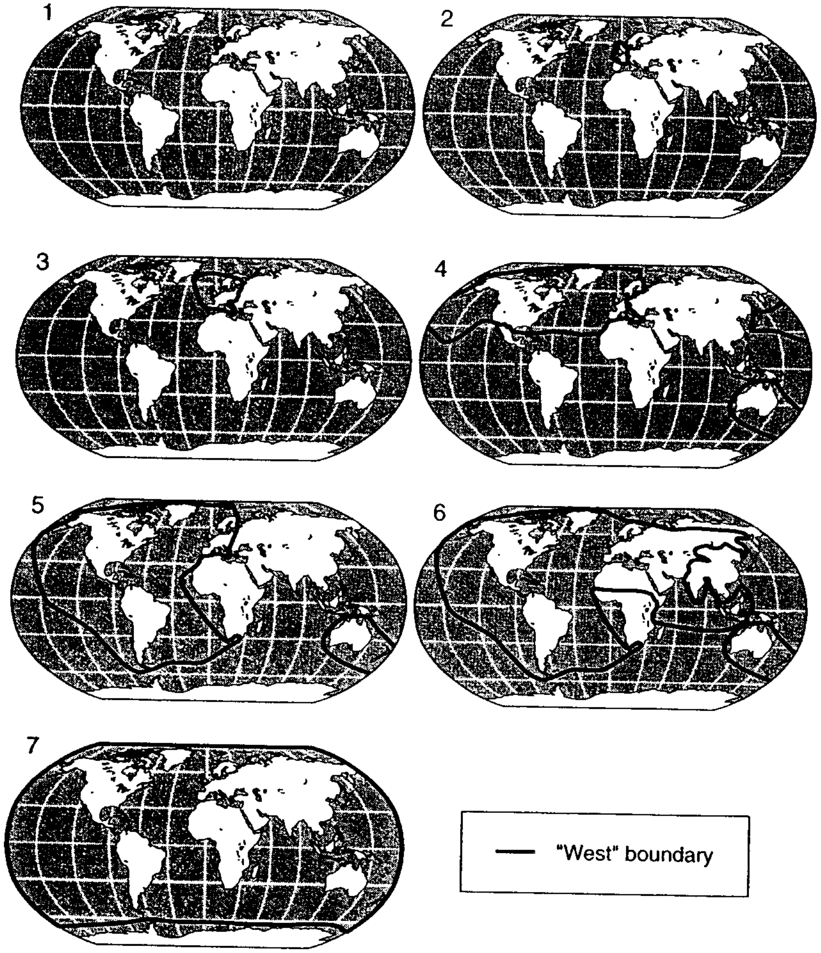
WHERE IS THE WEST?

As anyone familiar with the "canon wars" of the past decade is aware, academic opinion on Western civilization is deeply divided. Traditionalists celebrate the West as the wellspring of everything progressive in human history; critical revisionists disparage the same region as the primary font of imperialism and repression. Yet few, it would seem, doubt that the West is a legitimate conceptual category.[5] Twenty-five years ago, Stephen Hay confidently asserted that "the idea of 'the East' is all but extinct [and] the idea of 'the West' is fast following it into limbo,"[6] but such a prognostication now seems premature. The notion of a fundamental longitudinal divide severing West from East—and ultimately, the West from every other place—retains currency in the national media, in popular literature, and in academic discourse.[7]

The East-West division is many centuries old,[8] and has had at least three distinct referents. While these referents have followed each other in historical development, all remain in current use. Like other metageographical categories, the spatial designation of the West remains unstable and can be subtly shifted by different authors to fit their particular arguments (see map 3).[9]

The original and persistent core of the West has always been Latin Christendom, derived ultimately from the Western Roman Empire—with (ancient) Greece included whenever the search for origins goes deeper.[10] As the Hungarian scholar Jenö Szücs shows, the most significant historical divide across Europe was that separating the Latin church's *Europa Occidens* from the Orthodox lands of the Byzantine and Russian spheres. Since shortly after its inception in the Middle Ages, the "Western" cultural area associated with Latin Christianity has encompassed central as well as western Europe.[11] But as we will see below, central Europe's status in the West has been unstable. In particular, the far eastern frontier of church lands (i.e., Poland, Hungary, Croatia, and environs) has often been seen as a transitional zone between West and East,[12] and one can trace back to the Enlightenment the notion that all of Europe lying to the east of Germany constitutes a separate buffer zone, intermediary between Asia and the West—and between barbarism and civilization.[13]

Following the European diaspora of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries, in any case, divisions within European Christendom began to recede in importance.[14] In their stead, the idea of a supra-European West,



Map 3. *Seven Versions of the "West."* The portion of the earth denoted by the term *West* varies tremendously from author to author and from context to context (the area enclosed by a heavy black line is what has been called the West): 1) One extreme incarnation, where the West includes only England ("The Wogs begin at Calais," as an old racist, xenophobic refrain has it). 2) The standard minimal West, which is essentially Britain, France, the Low Countries, and Switzerland. As interpreted by Thomas Mann, this West is basically centered on France. 3) The historical West of medieval Christendom, circa 1250. 4) The West of the Cold War Atlantic alliance, or Europe and its "settler colonies" (with Japan often included as well). 5) The greater "cultural" West. By the criteria of language, religion, and "high culture," Latin America and the areas of concentrated European settlement in South Africa are added to the West. The Philippines is sometimes included here as well. (Those more concerned with "race," on the other hand, are inclined to add only Argentina, Uruguay, and southern Brazil.) 6) The maximum West of the eco-radical and New Age spiritual imagination. In this formulation, all areas of Christian and Islamic heritage are included. 7) The global (future?) West of modernization. See, for instance, Arnold Toynbee's cartography showing the entire globe as under Western hegemony in one form or another, whether political, "associative" (India, Iran, Ethiopia), or "in the heterodox form of Communism" (Toynbee 1934–61, volume 11 [1959], pages 192–93).

encompassing European settler colonies across the Atlantic, increasingly took hold. This sense of an expanded West was greatly strengthened after World War II. The United States and Canada had long been regarded as an overseas annex of European civilization (just as Australia and New Zealand formed distant outposts), but with Europe now sundered by the Iron Curtain, the Atlantic community began to displace western Europe as the primary geographical referent of the West.[15] Leftist opponents of Euro-American neo-imperialism promoted this vision as much as Cold Warriors, shifting the value signs but retaining the category.[16] At the height of the Cold War, at least one geographer went so far as to encompass all American "allies" into the West—including South Vietnam and most of Africa—while excluding such "neutral" countries as Sweden and Switzerland.[17] At the same time, however, as David Slater notes, the vision of the West being propagated was based essentially on a "selective reading of the history of [only] the United States and Britain."[18]

Finally, a third and still broader notion of the West has arisen since the 1960s to become widespread in journalism and popular use. This version casts aside all geographical moorings to become simply a proxy for the developed world. Newspaper headlines, for example, occasionally refer to the heads of state in the G-7 forum as "Western powers"—overlooking the fact that one member, Japan, is physically and culturally rooted in what used to be considered the extreme East. The implicit contention is that

Japan has been Westernized simply by becoming rich and powerful.[19] Similar assumptions lie behind characterizations of modern technological artifacts as items of "Western culture"—as though automobiles and soft drinks were inherently of the West, wherever they might be produced or consumed. A recent newspaper story, for example, claims that "Western culture flourishes in a changed Cambodia" on the grounds that "Mercedes, Peugeots and Toyotas glide alongside trishaws and water buffalo, running almost all the Spartan Soviet-made Ladas out of town."[20] The only way to make sense of this passage is to accept a dubious definition of non-Westernness as backwardness (manifested in everything from animal-drawn carts to cars made in Russia), while glossing all things modern and sophisticated, including Japanese Toyotas, as Western.[21]

The same conceptual maneuver by which Japan is offered (honorary?) membership in the West often requires the exclusion of Latin America from the same metageographical category. When writers use the term West as a substitute for the "developed world"—contrasting it not with the East but rather with the Third World[22]—all American territory south of the Rio Grande is excluded. Yet in terms of their cultural and social background, the inhabitants of countries like Argentina and Uruguay are arguably more closely connected to western Europe than are their counterparts in such diverse societies as the United States and Canada. The position of most other Latin American countries is more ambiguous, but certainly the elite cultural traditions throughout the region are profoundly Western in inspiration. Owing to such discrepancies, George Yúdice cogently argues that the concept of the West must be reformulated to fit Latin American realities:

> It may seem odd that someone who subscribes to multiculturalism should put forth the argument that Latin America is not non-Western. In the first place, mine is not a defense of "Western Civilization" in its imperial forms. It is, however, a challenge to the monolithic straw man that has been constructed as the West, as if there were no variants in it. Not everything that forms part of Western cultures can be reduced to imperialism. I follow the thinking of those Latin Americans who . . . [advocate rather] an alternative occidentality emerging from Latin America's cultural heterogeneity.[23]

That Latin American countries are rarely counted as part of the West in contemporary discourse shows the radical extent to which economic and geopolitical indices have displaced the cultural criteria of the original formulation. The resulting conflation of the West with the modern is a long-standing Euro-American conceit—and one with a number of questionable connotations. It effectively massages the egos of western Europeans and Americans in two ways: first, by insinuating that their culture is somehow single-handedly responsible for the shape of the modern world, and second, by suggesting that the only way for other peoples of the world to attain economic, political, and even personal success is to abandon their indigenous social and cultural patterns and adopt the cultural forms prevalent in western Europe and the United States. Recent history flatly contradicts both notions. As anyone familiar with East Asian development will aver, that region's stunning economic, technological, and scientific successes in the twentieth century cannot seriously be ascribed to cultural Europeanization; nor can East Asia's role in the creation of the modern world be downplayed. As Mimi Hall Yiengpruksawan cogently argues, Japan has had an intrinsic part in the formation of modernity, and indeed, in the creation of the postmodern condition as well.[24]

Even as Westernness has shifted from a purely spatial to a quasi-temporal category, the other half of this global pair has undergone a similar transmutation, giving rise to that essentially aspatial abstraction, the Third World. This term has its own complicated history, and deserves a more extended treatment than is possible here. Our concern is rather to trace what happened to the original geographical complement of the Occident. For despite the rise of categories like the Third World, the older and more definably spatial category has never entirely disappeared. Whenever it is convenient, the term *West* is still contrasted with a supposed *East,* whether that be defined in cultural or geopolitical terms. It is to the tortured history of the latter category that our attention now turns.

EUROPE'S FIRST OTHER: THE ORIENT

Corresponding to the gradual expansion of the European West in recent centuries has been an expansion of its counterpart, the Asiatic Orient or East. As explained in chapter 2, *Asia* originally referred to a small area in what is now northwest Turkey. It was extended eastward and southward by Greek geographers to encompass the Levant, was subsequently expanded all the way to the Bering Strait, and is now in the process of being conceptually pushed out of its original range altogether and into the southeastern quadrant of the Eurasian landmass. A similar movement has occurred in the deployment of the term *Orient,* the historian's counterpart to the geographer's *Asia.* If anything, the dislocation of the Orient has been even more pronounced than that of Asia.

The Orient began its career in the eastern Mediterranean, at a time when India was to Europeans the eastern limit of the known world and China little more than a rumor.[25] Its original referent consisted essentially of Southwest Asia. Prior to the arrival of Islam, the Orient effectively comprised the eastern variant of a common cultural and economic region centered on the Mediterranean Sea.[26] After the Arab conquests of the seventh and eighth centuries, however, the Orient took on new meaning as the alien cultural realm against which Europeanness was defined. Its physical location did not immediately change; from the Middle Ages through the Enlightenment, Orientalists were typically philologists who worked with Arabic, Syriac, Coptic, and Hebrew sources (only the more adventuresome setting their sights as far east as Persia). But as the Orient became synonymous with Islam, its referent began to expand out of the eastern Mediterranean. Only thus could Morocco, most of which lies to the west of England, be subsumed under the rubric of Oriental civilization.

It was with the expansion of European colonial networks into the Indian Ocean and South China Sea that the conceptual Orient began to push eastward. To be sure, what is now called Southwest Asia remained for a long time the primary focus of Orientalist scholarship. As recently as 1924, a book entitled *The Occident and the Orient* could discuss only Arabs, Turks, and Indians in the latter category.[27] But in the course of the 1800s, according to Raymond Schwab,[28] India gradually displaced the Levant as the primary subject of Orientalist research, with China beginning to emerge clearly on the map as well. Encompassing such a vast zone into a single regional category was seldom questioned. While many scholars differentiated the "hither" (more familiar) East of Southwest Asia and North Africa from the "farther" (more exotic) East of India and China, all such distinctions remained secondary to the opposition between the Orient as a whole and the dynamic, restless West.

Throughout these permutations, the scholarly Orient was never coincident with the Asia of conventional geography texts. Where the latter category was a continental entity, the former was always defined in cultural terms. As such, the Orient could encompass North Africa, a zone that had never been considered part of Asia; even southeastern and southern Europe could be identified as having certain Oriental traits. At the same time, large expanses of Asia—most notably Siberia[29]—ould be excluded from the scholar's Orient. Since Orientalists of the classical mode were fundamentally concerned with texts, their mental maps made no room for places lacking an indigenous literary tradition. The Orient was, by general consensus, limited to lands of non-Western "civilization."

But if scholars originally mapped their spurious historical Orient as somewhat offset from the questionable geographic entity called Asia, the two concepts have undergone a parallel eastward shift in the popular imagination until they now refer to virtually the same area. By the middle of the twentieth century, Western scholars were increasingly inclined to detach Southwest Asia and North Africa from the "Orient"; as early as 1930, René Guénon concluded that the Arabs were not fully Oriental but rather *"intermédiaires naturels"* between the Occident and the true (farther) Orient.[30] Six decades later, at least in the popular imagination, it would seem that the Sinic realm has displaced the Islamic as the quintessential Orient. For most college students, as indeed for the majority of Americans, the term *Orient* now conjures up primarily visions of China, Korea, Japan, and peninsular Southeast Asia.[31] Remarkably, this major geographical reorientation in the public imagination has gone almost unremarked in scholarly works.

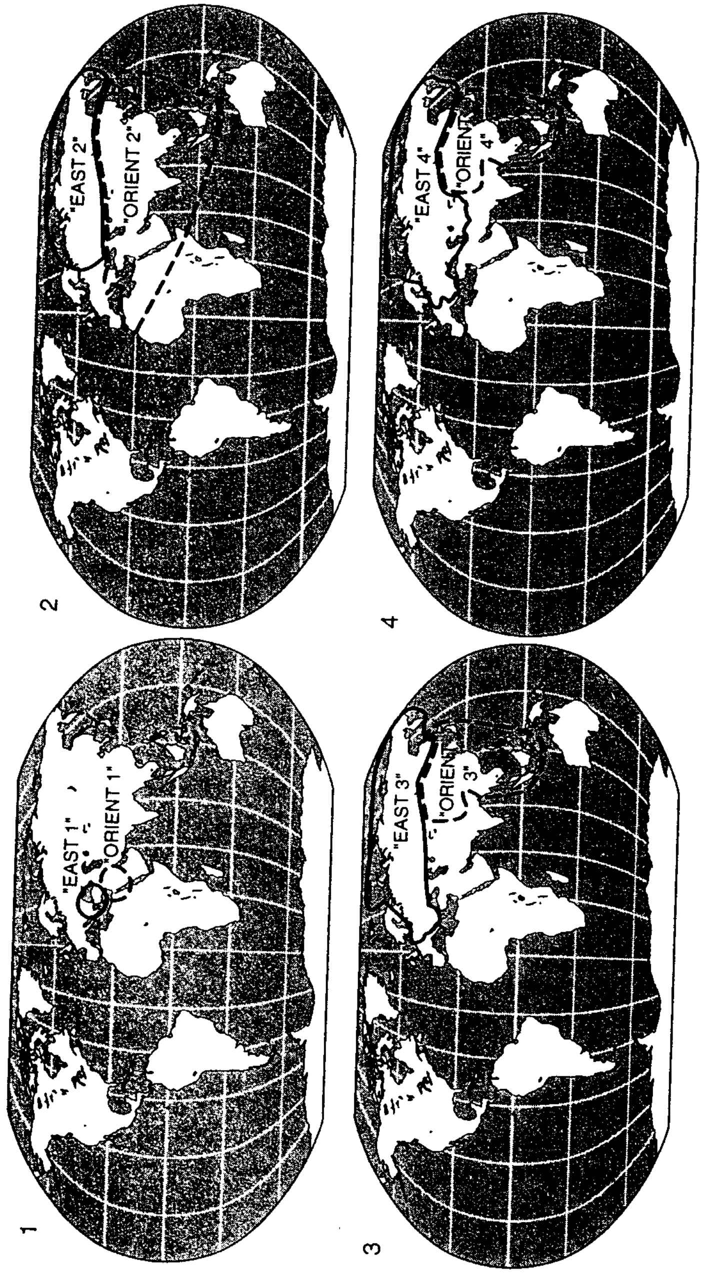
A possible cause of this eastward displacement of the Orient may be found in the rise of biological criteria as the basis for partitioning humanity. Most inhabitants of the eastern Mediterranean look more European than Chinese, and in the "racial science" of the early twentieth century, they were increasingly classified as Caucasians (although Turkish-speaking peoples occasionally appeared as "Mongolians"). Oriental peoples, by contrast, came to be defined by most lay observers as those with a single eye fold. It is perhaps on this grounds that Burma (Myanmar) continues to be thought of as Oriental, while India is usually excluded. This pseudo-racial Orient is now well entrenched in public perceptions. In consequence, the lingering scholarly tradition of referring to the area between Morocco and Iran as the Orient has come to seem quaintly archaic.

THE AMBIGUOUS EAST

The eastward migration of the cultural Orient has been partly counterbalanced by the complex perambulations of its successor category, the East (see map 4). The term *East* has an unusually complicated history. On the one hand, it has sometimes been used to refer to an area within Christendom: the Orthodox lands of the Byzantine and Russian churches.[32] On the other hand, and perhaps just as often, *East* has been used as a synonym for *Orient,* signifying the vast and foreign realm beyond the threshold of Europe. To complicate matters further, Cold War discourse appropriated the lexicon of *East* and *West* to demarcate zones of communist and noncommunist regimes. As a result of this complicated overlay of meanings, unpacking the connotations of the term in any given usage today is no easy task.

Russian-speaking lands have long been enmeshed within the larger European cultural sphere, albeit as part of a distinctive eastern variant.[33] Yet western Europeans have usually viewed Russia as only vaguely European, and certainly not Western.[34] Justifications for this exclusion are several. Some point to Russia's distinctive history of Orthodox Christianity; others highlight its periodic isolation from the main cultural currents of Western Christendom; and still others emphasize its intimate historical contact with Turkish and Mongolian peoples. Some writers go so far as to imply that several hundred years of subjugation by the Kipchak Khanate (or Golden Horde) infected Russia with a kind of Asiatic virus.[35] But whatever its justification, the result is a tool with which western Europeans can excise much of what they find objectionable in Russian history from the story of their own civilization.[36] To place Russia into a totalized East is to imply that Russia's long experiences with autocracy and totalitarianism stem from its eastern geographical position adjacent to Asia: an instance of geographical determinism—and historical denial—pushed to an extreme.

Since labeling the residents of Moscow "Asiatic" cannot be justified within the strictures of standard continental thinking, the exclusion of Russia from Europe and its classification as a portion of the East has been expressed in other ways. In the eighteenth century, northwestern Europeans began to reposition the central axis around which they conceptualized their own civilization. In earlier periods the primary division was that between



Map 4. *Migrations of the "East" and the "Orient."* The two terms are often used synonymously; what we have attempted to do here is to abstract the more cultural connotations of the term *Orient* from the more geopolitical connotations of the term *East*. In European historiography, the Orient begins its career in Egypt, the Levant, and adjoining areas ("Orient 1"). Subsequently, the Orient expands eastward and westward to include all non-European areas of Eurasian civilization ("Orient 2"). Finally, the Orient is pushed eastward outside of its original range altogether to encompass only East Asia, Southeast Asia, and eastern Central Asia (the "pseudo-racial Orient," or "Orient 3"). The postwar Orient ("Orient 4") is virtually identical to "Orient 3," although minor adjustments have been made to reflect Japan's territorial losses.

The East, in a more geopolitical sense, originally referred to the heartland of the Eastern Roman Empire, centered on Constantinople and identified with the Eastern Orthodox faith ("East 1"). Eventually, Russia became its focus ("East 2"). "East 3" shows the westward expansion of this conceptual space; in the interwar period it commonly encompassed all of Germany. The Cold War "communist East" is depicted as "East 4."

a refined south and a rugged north, with Muscovites classified in the latter category (along with Scandinavians and often Germans as well). During the Enlightenment, however, some writers began to distinguish the civilized West of Europe from its semibarbarous East.[37] As an "Eastern" realm, the Russian empire could be easily consigned to the category Orient. This strategy grew more popular in the nineteenth century.[38] The quintessential Victorian explorer, Sir Richard Burton, for example, claimed that the Russians were the craftiest of the Orientals (craftiness being in his book a defining Oriental quality).[39] Indeed, even Poland was sometimes put in this category, occupying as it did an intermediate position within "Europe's Orient."[40] By the early twentieth century, however, the eastward shift of the term *Orient* had largely precluded that option. Its present-day replacement is the geopolitical category of the East.

East is a broader and vaguer term than either *Asia* or *Orient,* yet one that retains the notion of critical distance from the culture of far western Europe. Like *West* (its ontological twin), *East* has been given both positive and negative readings. On the one hand, Russian nationalists themselves have adopted the term to distinguish their homeland—a realm they characterize in terms of communal solidarity and harmony—from the individualism, violence, and competition associated with the West. Yet most have been careful not to take this line of thinking too far; in the late czarist period, anti-Westernizers insisted that "the gulf separating Russia from the Occident [was] considerably less deep than that separating it from the Orient."[41] Many Russian Slavophiles, however, insisted that Slavic-speaking peoples shared a fundamentally non-Western soul;[42] a few went so far as to allege an organic affinity uniting Russia with China and even India.[43]

This kind of thinking reflected the rise of romanticism as well as nationalism in geographical discourse. As racial ideology became increasingly linked to these concerns through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, writers from farther west, especially Germans, began likewise to expel all Slavs from the realm of Western civilization. Leopold von Ranke, for example, limited the West to the Germanic and Romance nations.[44] Shifting the East-West boundary in this way meant slighting nearly one thousand years of cultural relations in favor of a bogus appeal to national or racial spirit.[45] Nor did this go unnoticed by those Europeans who suddenly found themselves outside the pale. As Polish historian Oscar Halecki bitterly observed, "Those who call European civilization Western are inclined to decide in advance one of the most difficult and controversial questions in European history. They accept the idea of a fundamental dualism n Europe and consider only its western part really European."[46]

As the East thus advanced westward into Europe, the West correspondingly withdrew, until its core consisted of little more than Germany, France, the Low Countries, northern Italy, and Britain. Before long, some scholars had pushed the boundary still farther, dissociating even Germany from the West. Strikingly, German nationalists took the lead in this movement. Incensed by their humiliation in the First World War at the hands of Britain, France, and the United States, a number of Germans began to declare that Germany was not really a Western nation after all. In 1918 Thomas Mann argued that the war represented a continuation of the ancient struggle between Germany and an overly civilized Western realm that was originally centered on Rome and later identified primarily with France.[47] A few years later the infamous geopolitician Karl Haushofer pronounced that Germany occupied a strategic place in world history as the link between East and West—and that its mission for the future lay in "educating" the Orientals into modernity. About the same time, Asiatic affinities were discovered in German philosophy and spirituality: "Haushofer's disciples attest[ed] that German Romanticism [was] closely akin to the culture of Russia and even to that of China and India."[48]

This message was brought to the American public during the height of the war by the German refugee Hans Weigert, a staunch critic of geopolitics. Weigert inverted the moral signs of Haushofer's vision without altering its substance. As he saw it, "[I]n its depths the German soul remained closely related to the East, especially among the leading groups in which the idea of Prussianism and service to the State were a strong living force. The national socialism that the Asiatics Lenin and Stalin had brought about in Russia—it could be understood by those Germans to whom the idea of Prussian socialism was more than an adroit catchword."[49]

By the mid-twentieth century, historians across Europe were echoing the refrain that Germany was—in its "soul"—a non-Western country. Like many of his contemporaries, Douglas Jerrold (Arnold Toynbee's nemesis) viewed the two world wars, not as contests taking place primarily within a single cultural zone, but as heroic struggles in which the West (Britain, France, and the United States) rose up to defend itself against what was essentially an outside power (Germany).[50] As recently as 1987, Theodore Von Laue similarly contended that Nazism represented an external attack on the West, a region that he generally limited to France and Britain.[51] Hans Kohn, being more attentive to historical niceties, argued that Germany had at one time been "of the West," but that it had become so "alienated" that it was no longer part of that geocultural formation.

Tracing this alienation as far back as the decline of the Swabian Hohenstaufen dynasty in the thirteenth century and the subsequent rise of a "semi-German" Prussia, Kohn saw the nation's non-Westernness manifested above all in the "deviat[ion] from the main lines of western development" that marked German intellectual life during the nineteenth century.[52] No one would write a history of Western music that excluded German contributions, but many are evidently happy to redraw the boundary when it comes to the history of Western politics, especially between the rise of the Second Reich and the fall of the Third.[53]

After the Second World War, the conventional East-West division across Europe was once again reoriented, this time to correspond to Cold War geography. On the new map, East became synonymous with communism, West with capitalist democracy. Such a division proved highly useful for tidying up old ambiguities. All Slavic countries could now be cleanly assigned to the (communist) East (with Yugoslavia being allowed to form a kind of bridge), as could most areas of Orthodox Christian heritage; so too the "Asiatic" Magyars could, at long last, be unambiguously excluded from the realm of Western civilization.[54] Even the arbitrary division of Germany had its appeal. The Rhinelands could now be safely claimed for the West, while Brandenburg-Prussia—supposed locus of the dark side of a divided German spirit[55]—was consigned to the East. In this view, only upper Saxony and Thuringia presented any real inconvenience n being cast into the Eastern zone.

Such a readjustment of the East-West dividing line served to bring long-standing metageographic structures into agreement with the map of Cold War geopolitics. In the process, however, a false concordance was suggested between historical culture areas and contemporary geopolitical paterns. Nor has this vision disappeared with time. As recently as 1994, Philip Longworth argued that the Iron Curtain merely formalized a centuries-old division—the same one that once separated "Charlemagne's Europe rom the barbarian east."[56] The "civilized Europe" of the West, in a word, ould be tendentiously defined as the noncommunist realm (although in practice examinations of it rarely extended much beyond Britain, France, nd West Germany).[57] The implication was, of course, that communism was in essence an anti-European philosophy[58] to which the quasi-Orienal East had been geographically "predisposed."[59]

In the wake of the 1989 revolutions, this particular yardstick has lost most of its salience, and the postwar division between East and West has ecome problematic once again.[60] As yet, it is unclear what new concepon will displace it. One popular gambit in recent years has been to fudge the issue by reviving the concept of a Central or Middle Europe. Not surprisingly, this concept has proven to be both spatially slippery and ideologically charged. While the geographical core of Central Europe is usually seen as including Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, the actual boundaries of the region vary tremendously from one context to the next.[61] Moreover, some writers question whether this old idea retains currency in the postwar era, since it was primarily the presence of German and Jewish populations that gave the region its distinctive character in the first place. When those minorities were all but routed from Poland, Hungary, and Bohemia, many argue, Central Europe (particularly its eastern half) lost its regional identity.[62]

Compounding such problems is the fact that the concept of Central Europe remains offensive to many residents of the alleged region. Some fear that the concept of a *Mitteleuropa* might again become a pretext for German domination of Hungary and the western Slavic lands.[63] Others reject the implication that Central Europeans are somehow less than full participants in Western civilization. "The present government in Prague," Eric Hobsbawm tells us, "does not wish to be called Central-European for fear of being contaminated by contact with the East. It insists that it belongs exclusively to the West."[64] In other places and contexts, however, eastern Europeans find the concept useful. For example, many Bulgarian scholars—whose homeland is seldom classified within Central Europe by outsiders—embrace the concept as a means of reassuming an unambiguously European identity.[65] Writers from the former Eastern bloc who have adopted the Central European label often still insist that Russia does not belong to Europe at all, giving rise to "the bizarre situation . . . of a continent with a west and a centre, but no east."[66]

Perhaps most striking in this brief account of the shifting East-West boundary across Europe is the credulity with which an evanescent political feature, the Iron Curtain, was assumed to reflect long-standing cultural divisions. To view a region like Bohemia or upper Saxony as part of "Eastern Europe" in anything but a narrow political-economic sense was naive enough. Viewing it as part of a grand and mythologized East, a zone of inherent despotism and oppression, was never anything but self-serving. Yet on the very eve of the 1989 revolution, a prominent scholar could still contend that the geopolitically defined region of Eastern Europe—including areas of both Catholic and Orthodox heritage—formed a coherent, historically constituted entity, replete with its own "tradition and value system," and identifiable as the transitional zone between a Western realm of democracy and progress and an Eastern zone of stagnation and despotism.[67] The time has come to abandon such notions for good. Let us hope that James Joll was not entirely mistaken in his 1980 prediction that "if the Iron Curtain were to be torn down, then we would again begin to realize how much eastern Europe, and even Russia itself shared a common European tradition and how it does not really make sense, historically at least, to talk of a Europe which does not include Königsberg and Cracow, Breslau and Budapest, or even for that matter Goethe's Weimar."[68]

Between East and West: The Birth of the Middle East

As the foregoing discussion shows, the concept of the East has taken two simultaneous, yet contradictory, historical trajectories. In the realm of cultural discourse, the East has migrated steadily eastward, from the Levant to India and now to China. When an American speaks today of Eastern cultures, Eastern societies, or Eastern peoples, the referent is usually monsoon Asia, if not (still more narrowly) Asia's far eastern fringe.[69] Meanwhile, however, the East of political economy has migrated westward, to encompass Russia, eastern Europe, and even (in some incarnations) part or all of Germany. As a result, the East-West divide has acquired a peculiar duality. In some contexts, East still means Asia; in other contexts, it is virtually synonymous with Russia. Thus an East-West Trade Center might be concerned either with United States–Japan exchanges or with trade between western and eastern Europe.[70] While the "West" has at least kept a stable core, these are very different Easts indeed.

These opposite conceptual displacements in the end serve complementary functions. On the one hand, the eastward march of the cultural East has allowed maximal difference to be maintained between Europe and the Orient's supposed core, now located in the far east of the Eurasian landmass. This preserves the sense of "Western" European distinctiveness from a safely distant, enticingly exotic Other. At the same time, however, the advance of a geopolitical East into eastern and central Europe has allowed Europeans west of that boundary to disown the uglier episodes in what is in fact a shared political history. Just as Spain in its predemocratic days could be dismissed as lying south of the real Europe (the French often quipping that Africa begins at the Pyrenees),[71] so the totalitarian Soviet regime and its satellites could be conveniently dismissed as lying outside Europe to the east. By drawing a major global boundary between their own culture and that which gave birth to Lenin, Stalin, and even Hitler, and by insisting that this boundary is not merely an artifact of modern political life but a deep historical rift, members of the new Atlantic-centered West have effectively insulated themselves from the doubts that would otherwise arise about the perverse potentials within their own ("Western") civilization.

Yet in solving one problem, the new geographical categories created another: what was to be done with the original Orient, Southwest Asia? As the land of Islam, it had to be kept at a conceptual distance from the West, yet as part of the "Caucasian" world it could not be included in the new racially defined Orient. So how exactly were the societies of the eastern and southern Mediterranean to be accommodated in the new global map? The most popular solution has been to designate a new entity, the Middle East, and to give it quasi-continental status as an interstitial area linking Europe, Asia, and Africa.[72]

A CONTRADICTORY LOCATION

The notion that the area bracketed by Persia and Egypt constitutes a transitional zone between East and West goes back many years, to the beginning of European explorations in the Indian Ocean. By the early nineteenth century, as reflected in the geographical writings of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, it was well established. Hegel divided the Oriental realm into four distinct worlds: China and India, which together formed the "farther" East, and Persia and Egypt, together comprising the "hither" East. While he regarded all four civilizations as Eastern in their lack of freedom and fundamental stagnation, he nonetheless considered societies of the hither East to approach European conditions far more closely than did their counterparts in the farther East. In Hegel's reification of direction, the farther east one traveled across Eurasia, the more fully one would encounter an Oriental essence. "The European who goes from Persia to India," he wrote, will observe "a prodigious contrast. Whereas in the former country he finds himself still somewhat at home, and meets with European dispositions, human virtues and human passions—as soon as he crosses the Indus . . . he encounters the most repellent characteristics, pervading every single feature of society."[73] This contrast was reflected in Hegel's conception of the history of the two realms as well: "With the Persian Empire we first enter on continuous History. . . . While China and India remained stationary, and perpetuate a natural vegetative existence even to the present time, this land has been subject to those developments and revolutions, which alone manifest a historical condition."[74]

Already in Hegel we thus find an important inversion of traditional European conceptions of Southwest Asia. Whereas this area had once been Europe's primary oppositional cultural sphere, it was now recast as an interstitial zone, mediating the differences between Europe and the still more exotic reaches of Asia (India and the "quite peculiarly oriental" China).[75]

The Middle East of our contemporary geographical imagination retains this liminal position, along with a certain ambivalence about the proper taxonomic level to which this region belongs. On the one hand, as suggested by the label *Southwest Asia,* it is sometimes seen as one among several Asian macroregions, on a par with East, South, or Southeast Asia (see chapter 6). On the other hand, it is sometimes seen as a "culture continent," more distinct and in some ways more important than these other Asian regions. In other words, there is a tendency to put the Middle East *as a cultural zone* on a par with Europe and Asia. As conceptual space, then, the Middle East occupies two different positions: at once a subset of Asia (with a North African annex) and a semiautonomous transitional zone on the Europe-Asia frontier. While this ambiguous position allows the region to be either included in Asia or excluded from it at will,[76] it is almost always seen as more Asian than European.

Indeed, by most textbook definitions, the Middle East lies essentially within Asia, with the important exception that it also includes a portion of northeastern Africa (Egypt and Libya). (Indeed, Egypt for some writers is virtually synonymous with the Middle East.)[77] Lands to the west of Libya in northwest Africa (historically and indigenously designated the *Mahgreb*), by contrast, are only informally linked to the region. According to Islamicists Bernard Lewis and P. M. Holt, "as used at the present time, the term Middle East includes Turkey, Persia, and perhaps Afghanistan, the Fertile Crescent, Arabia and north-east Africa, with a rather vague extension southwards and westwards from Egypt into Arabic-speaking Africa."[78]

The exclusion of the Mahgreb from the Middle East is logical in strict locational terms, since the phrase suggests that the region ought to lie somewhere east of Western Europe. Since northwest Africa lies *south* of Europe but not east (as noted, all of Morocco is west of London), it hardly fits this spatial conception. For just this reason, prominent British and American geographers of the 1940s inveighed against the careless and "uninformed" application of the term *Middle East* to denote lands west of Egypt.[79] Yet as we have seen, geographical labels have a tendency to slide about the map, whether following sociocultural groupings, political boundaries, or simple prejudice. In practice, the designation *Middle East* is not always confined to the territories identified by Lewis and Holt; it is also used in a broader sense to denote a significantly larger cultural region. Just as the Orient at one time encompassed Morocco because of that region's historical and cultural ties to the Levant, so the Middle East of popular usage has been readily extended westward as far as the Atlantic.

MIDDLE EAST AND NEAR EAST

In contrast to both of its modern connotations, however, this metageographical concept formerly had a different meaning altogether. As originally conceived, the Middle East was not a cultural or historical region but an arena of strategic operations. The term itself was coined in 1902 by the military theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan to refer to the area surrounding the Persian Gulf.[80] To the geopolitical strategist, the problems of this zone were distinct from those of the Near East (the Mediterranean borderlands), as well as those of the Far East (an area stretching in the imagination of the time from India to Japan). Other writers soon began to use the term in similar contexts, although the area they had in mind did not remain constant.[81] Valentine Chirol, for example, conceived of the Middle East in terms of India's vulnerable borderlands, focusing his attention on Persia but including Nepal and Tibet as well.[82] Indeed, growing anxiety over their South Asian empire prompted some British strategists by 1914 to shift the label *Middle East* to India and its adjacent territories.[83] While this usage never gained acceptance, even today a few writers conceptualize the Middle East primarily in terms of Britain's earlier defense of its South Asian empire.[84]

World War II brought a major reconfiguration of the conceptual Middle East, in which once again military considerations were paramount. A key change had occurred in 1932, when the Royal Air Force merged two formerly separate commands, the Middle Eastern (headquartered in Iraq) and the Near Eastern (in Egypt), referring to both henceforth as Middle Eastern. By 1939 the British army followed suit.[85] The newly enlarged Middle East to which this gave rise included sizable areas of tropical Africa, both in southern Sudan and in Somalia.[86] By the end of the war, popular imagination in both Britain and the United States had seized on this new use of the term and now regarded the Middle East as a zone extending from Libya to Afghanistan. After the war, this same area was recast as a cultural and historical region, although this again required some mutations in its borders. Somalia, for example, was now usually deleted (to be appended instead to sub-Saharan Africa), while Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia (regarded in 1947 by the geographer W. B. Fisher as a "purely African unit")[87] were often grafted on.[88]

This reformulated Middle East was partly a replacement for another recent coinage, "Near East." The notion of a distinct Near East had emerged in diplomatic circles only in the late nineteenth century.[89] By the early twentieth century, however, the term had gained wide currency, usually designating the lands of the Ottoman Empire in both southwestern Asia and southeastern Europe.[90] One plausible reason for the popularity of this category was that it conceptually Easternized Greece and the Balkans. Western chauvinists had long held that both had been corrupted centuries ago by Oriental influences (a trend some traced as far back as Alexander's days), and by placing these lands within the same region as Syria and Egypt, they could effectively excise them from Europe altogether.[91]

With the demise of the Ottoman empire, however, this broad usage of the term *Near East* began to disappear from the public vocabulary.[92] Certain geographers were happy to see it go, taking up the new category of Middle East in its stead. W. B. Fisher, for example, objected to the idea of a Near East both because it lacked environmental unity and because "too much confusion now attaches to the term."[93] As it happened, Fisher was not able to demonstrate any greater environmental unity in the Middle East—a region whose delineation likewise created considerable confusion. But while a few scholars attempted to revive the old distinction between the Near and Middle East in the 1950s, most acquiesced in the new formulation, either in deference to military usage and popular opinion or perhaps because they simply dismissed the issue of nomenclature as trivial.[94]

The term *Near East* nonetheless persists in three related areas of scholarly endeavor: philology, ancient history, and antiquarianism. The farther back in time the period under consideration (and the more recondite the study), the more likely the geographical frame will be labeled the Near rather than the Middle East. A recent Yale University Press catalog, for example, contains one section on "The Middle East" and another called "Ancient Near East"; the area in question is essentially the same, only the temporal boundaries have changed.[95] Similarly, several Ivy League universities retain departments of Near Eastern Studies, which focus on the same territory now commonly called the Middle East but concern themselves primarily with ancient texts and archaeological excavations. It might be asked why the term *Near East* continues to be employed in this way. The answer, presumably, is that in the ancient world, the West was synonymous with Greece—prior, that is, to its corrupting "Orientalization" during the Hellenistic period, when the torch of Western civilization supposedly passed to Rome. From the standpoint of Athens (if not that of London), Asia Minor and the Levant can be nothing but the "near" East.

Even from a contemporary perspective, Near East would seem a more accurate spatial designation for Southwest Asia than Middle East. If France occupies the center of the West and coastal China the heart of the East, then the Fertile Crescent is surely in the near portion of the Oriental zone to a European (and of course the European vantage point is the only one from which official definitions of Eastern lands have ever been made). By this sort of objective locational logic, the Middle East would presumably encompass such areas as India, Tibet, the Tarim Basin, the Tien Shan Mountains, and the Yenisey River Valley. In practice, however, the term *Middle East* has only rarely been extended east of Afghanistan.[96]

IMPLICATIONS OF AN INTERMEDIATE EAST-WEST ZONE

If there is one constant principle in our narrative so far, it is that viewing the world from the perspective of Europe's Atlantic seaboard results in severe spatial distortions. In the myopic worldview we have inherited, the farther east one looks, the less significant geographical divisions become, and the more readily disparate areas may be conveniently lumped together. The continuing use of the terms *Near, Middle,* and *Far East* only highlights the intellectual inertia in our metageographies. All three are well ensconced in the American imagination, and few scholars or lay people have given them much thought. Like continents themselves, the division of the Afro-Eurasian landmass into relative degrees of Easternness has generally been taken for granted, viewed as merely a matter of convenient designation rather than an issue of any intellectual import.

We would argue, by contrast, that these habits of global regionalization subconsciously guide our geographical imagination along some rather twisted pathways. Consider carefully the exact geographical denotations of the terms used. The term *Middle East* may well be appealing because it deemphasizes proximity to the West in favor of distance, suggesting that the region lies at the middle, rather than the edge, of the non-European world. If, from the standpoint of London, Turkey[97] lies in the middle portion of the East, then where might one find its "near" extent? The only possible answer is southeastern Europe. Although this region is seldom called the Near East in popular American publications today, its designation under that term was formalized in the 1920s by no less an organization than Britain's Royal Geographical Society, which resolved that "henceforth, the 'Near East' should denote only the Balkans."[98] Such a move proved convenient for a Far West anxious to dissociate itself from any parts of Europe not as prosperous as itself. While few openly agreed with Metternich that Asia begins at the gates of Vienna, many were only too happy to declare that all regions ever ruled by the Turks had thereby become more Eastern than Western.

This "de-Europification" of southeastern Europe is not merely an old gambit of Western jingoists, but one that continues to be deployed with vigor. As in the case of Russia, the Balkans' Eastern heritage can be blamed for any problems in the region. A classic recent statement of this view can be found in George Kennan's 1993 article on the "Balkan crisis," published in the *New York Review of Books:* "What we are up against is the sad fact that developments of those earlier ages, not only those of the Turkish domination but of earlier ones as well, had the effect of *thrusting into the southeastern reaches of the European continent a salient of non-European civilization* which has continued to the present day to preserve many of its non-European characteristics, including some that fit even less with the world of today than they did with the world of eighty years ago."[99]

Although Turkish and Islamic influences are certainly powerful in many Balkan areas, it is a serious geographical blunder to imply that a country like Serbia has more in common, culturally and historically, with Eastern regions, be they near, middle, or far, than it does with the rest of Europe. For Croatia, a country of Latin Christendom that was never fully in Ottoman hands, the notion is more absurd yet. More disturbing than its sheer inaccuracy, however, is the way this geographical error rewrites Europe's history. To view such modern horrors as "ethnic cleansing" as a product of alien Eastern influences violating an otherwise virtuous Europe requires a tremendously selective memory of the recent European past. The game Kennan is playing is the same as that involved in turning Nazism and Stalinism into Oriental creeds, and it leads to a comparable denial of historical responsibility. Our flawed metageography has become a vehicle for displacing the sins of Western civilization onto an intrusive non-European Other in our midst.

Appropriations of East-West Rhetoric Outside Europe

As the foregoing discussion shows, the binary division of the world into an immense Eastern and an exiguous Western section is