CHAPTER 4

WESTERN EUROPE

'Here the past was everywhere, an entire continent sown with memories.'

Miranda Richmond Mouillot,
A Fifty-Year Silence: Love, War, and a Ruined House in France

AT 06.00 ON 24 FEBRUARY 2022, EUROPE CHANGED. Vladimir Putin looked straight down the lens of a camera to address the Russian nation and the world. He confirmed that the invasion of Ukraine was under way – Russian troops had crossed the border on multiple fronts about two hours earlier. Dawn had yet to break, but Europe woke up. It had been asleep for decades.

Much of the intellectual and political class of opinion formers had fooled themselves, and sections of the public, into thinking that Europe had left warfare behind in the twentieth century. The end of the Cold War had paid out in the form of the 'peace dividend'. On that February morning many European policymakers were in shock, and yet time and again, going back to a speech he made in Munich in 2007, Putin had told us of his imperial plans. Now the tanks were rolling.

In a relatively stable, Western, postmodern culture it is difficult to accept that pacifism can kill. Chancellor Scholz of Germany didn't go that far in a speech three days after the invasion began, but did admit that an era had come to an end and that this was a *Zeitenwende* – a turning point in European history. Subsequent events have shown us that a new Iron Curtain is being drawn across Europe, this time from the Baltic to the Black Sea.

The Western Europeans were unprepared for the 'return of history'. But the geography hasn't changed.

The modern world, for better or worse, springs from Europe. This western outpost of the great Eurasian land mass gave birth to the Enlightenment, which led to the Industrial Revolution, which resulted in what we now see around us every day. For that we can give thanks to, or blame, Europe's location.

Geographical definitions of Europe are . . . flexible. Some say it's a continent, others regard it as a peninsula of the great Eurasian land mass. Either way, General de Gaulle's perception that Europe stretches 'from the Atlantic to the Urals' is widely shared. To the south are the Straits of Gibraltar; to the north the Arctic; to the west the Atlantic; and to the east the Ural Mountains.

The climate, fed by the Gulf Stream, blessed the region with the right amount of rainfall to cultivate crops on a large scale, and the right type of soil for them to flourish in. This allowed for population growth in an area in which, for most, work was possible all year round, even in the heights of summer. Winter adds a bonus, with temperatures warm enough to labour in but cold enough to kill off many of the germs which to this day plague huge parts of the rest of the world.

Good harvests mean surplus food that can be traded; this in turn builds up trading centres that become towns. It also allows people to think of more than just growing food and turn their attention to ideas and technology.

Western Europe has no real deserts, the frozen wastes are confined to a few areas in the far north, and earthquakes, volcanoes and massive flooding are rare. The rivers are long, flat, navigable and made for trade. As they empty into a variety of seas and oceans they flow into coastlines that are, west, north and south, abundant in natural harbours.

If you are reading this trapped in a snowstorm in the Alps or waiting for floodwaters to subside back into the Danube, then Europe's geographical blessings may not seem too apparent; but, relative to many places, blessings they are. These are among the factors that led the Europeans to create the first industrialised nation states, which in turn led them to be the first to conduct industrial-scale war.

If we take Europe as a whole we see the mountains, rivers and valleys that explain why there are so many nation states. Unlike the USA, in which one dominant language and culture pressed rapidly and violently ever westwards, creating a giant country, Europe grew organically over millennia and remains divided between its geographical and linguistic regions.

The various tribes of the Iberian Peninsula, for example, prevented from expanding north into France by the presence of the Pyrenees, gradually came together over thousands of years to form Spain and Portugal – and even Spain is not an entirely united country, with many Catalonians vocal about wanting independence. France has also been formed by natural barriers. These were defined by one of the French Revolutionary leaders, Georges Danton, in a speech in 1792: 'I say that those who wish to raise fears about extending the Republic too far do so in vain. The borders of France have been marked out by Nature. We will obtain them in all quarters, namely the ocean, the Rhine, the Alps and the Pyrenees. The boundaries of our Republic must be there.' A few years later Napoleon had a different view.

Europe's major rivers do not meet (unless you count the Sava, which drains into the Danube in Belgrade), which partly explains why there are so many countries in a relatively small space. Because they do not connect, most of the rivers act at some point as boundaries or 'hydrofrontiers', as some geographers call them. Each is a sphere of economic influence in its own right; this gave rise to at least one major urban development on the banks of each river, some of which in turn became capital cities.

Europe's second-longest river, the Danube (1,780 miles), is a case in point. It rises in Germany's Black Forest and flows south on its way to the Black Sea. In all, the Danube Basin affects eighteen countries and forms natural borders along the way, including those of Slovakia and Hungary, Croatia and Serbia, Serbia and Romania, and Romania and Bulgaria. Over 2,000 years ago it was one of the borders of the Roman Empire, which in turn helped it to become one of the great trading routes of medieval times and gave rise to the present capital cities of Vienna, Bratislava, Budapest and Belgrade. It also formed the natural border of two subsequent empires, the Austro-Hungarian and the Ottoman. As each shrank, the nations emerged again, eventually becoming nation states. However, the geography of the Danube region, especially at its southern end, helps explain why there are so many small nations there in comparison to the bigger countries in and around the North European Plain.

The Danube Basin illustrates the geographical advantages of the terrain in Europe; interconnected rivers on a flat plain provided natural borders and an easily navigable transport network that encouraged a booming trade system.

The countries of Northern Europe have been richer than those of the south for several centuries. The north industrialised earlier than the south and so has been more economically successful. As many of the northern countries comprise the heartland of Western Europe, their trade links were easier to maintain, and one wealthy neighbour could trade with another – whereas the Spanish, for example, either had to cross the Pyrenees to trade or look to the limited markets of Portugal and North Africa.

There are also unprovable theories that the domination of Catholicism in the south has held it back, whereas the Protestant work ethic propelled the northern countries to greater heights. Each time I visit the Bavarian city of Munich I reflect on this theory, and while driving past the gleaming temples of the headquarters of BMW, Allianz and Siemens have cause to doubt it. In Germany roughly 25 per cent of the population is Catholic, and Bavaria itself has a slight Catholic majority, yet their religious predilections do not appear to have influenced either their progress or their pay packets.

The contrast between Northern and Southern Europe is also at least partly attributable to the fact that the south has fewer coastal plains suitable for agriculture and has suffered more from drought and natural disasters than the north, albeit on a lesser scale than in other parts of the world. As we saw in Chapter One, the North European Plain is a corridor stretching from France to the Ural Mountains, bordered to the north by the North and Baltic seas. The land allows for successful farming on a massive scale, and the waterways enable crops and other goods to be moved easily.

Of all the countries on the plain, France was best situated to take advantage of it. It is the only European country to be both a northern and southern power. It contains the largest

expanse of fertile land in Western Europe, and some of its many slow-moving and flat rivers connect with each other; one flows west all the way to the Atlantic (the Loire), another south to the Mediterranean (the Rhône). It has a warm climate, enough rain for agriculture, and is relatively flat, especially in the north. These factors, together with, since 1539, a single official language, lent themselves to unification of regions and – especially from the time of Napoleon – centralisation of power.

France is partially protected, except in one area – the northeast, at the point where the flatland of the North European Plain becomes what is now Germany. Before Germany existed as a single country this was not a problem. France was also a considerable distance from Russia, and had the Channel between it and England, meaning that an attempt at a full-scale invasion and total occupation could probably be repulsed. In fact, France was the pre-eminent power on the continent: it could even project its strength as far as the gates of Moscow. But then Germany united.

It had been doing so for some time. There had been the 'idea' of Germany for centuries: the Eastern Frankish lands which became the Holy Roman Empire in the ninth century were sometimes called 'the Germanies', comprising as they did up to 500 Germanic mini-kingdoms. After the Holy Roman Empire was dissolved in 1806 the German Confederation of thirty-nine statelets came together in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna. This in turn led to the North German Confederation, and then the unification of Germany in 1871 after the Franco–Prussian War. Now France had a neighbour on its border that was geographically larger than itself, with a similar-sized population but a better fertility rate, and more industrialised.

Germany's unification was announced at the Palace of Versailles near Paris after the German victory. The weak spot in the French defence, the North European Plain, had been breached. It would be again, twice, in the following seventy years, after which France would use diplomacy instead of warfare to try to neutralise the threat from the east.

Germany always had bigger geographical problems than France. The flatlands of the North European Plain gave it two reasons to be fearful: to the west the Germans saw their long-unified and powerful neighbour France, and to the east the giant Russian Bear. Their ultimate fear was of a simultaneous attack by both powers across the corridor. We can never know if it would have happened, but the fear of it had catastrophic consequences.

France feared Germany, Germany feared France, and when France joined both Russia and Britain in the Triple Entente of 1907, Germany feared all three. There was now also the added dimension that the British Navy could, at a time of its choosing, blockade German access to the North Sea and the Atlantic. Its solution, twice, was to attack France first.

The dilemma of Germany's geographical position and belligerence became known as 'the German Question'. The answer, after the horrors of the Second World War, indeed after centuries of war, was the acceptance of the presence in the European lands of a single overwhelming power, the USA, which set up NATO and allowed for the eventual creation of the EU. Exhausted by war, and with safety 'guaranteed' by the American military, the Europeans embarked on an astonishing experiment. They were asked to trust each other.

What is now the EU was set up to enable France and Germany to hug each other so tightly in a loving embrace that neither could free an arm with which to punch the other. It has worked brilliantly and created a huge geographical space now encompassing one of the biggest economies in the world.

It worked particularly well for Germany, which rose from the ashes of 1945 and used to its advantage the geography it once feared. It became Europe's great manufacturer. Instead of sending armies across the flatlands it sent goods with the prestigious tag 'Made in Germany',

and these goods flowed down the Rhine and the Elbe, along the autobahns and out into Europe and the world, north, south, west and, increasingly since 1990, east.

However, what began in 1951 as the six-nation European Coal and Steel Community became the multi-nation EU with an ideological core of 'ever-closer union'. After the first major financial crisis to hit the Union, and with sharp disagreements over immigration and refugee policies, that ideology is on an uncertain footing and the ties that bind are fraying. There are signs within the EU of, as the geopolitical writer Robert Kaplan puts it, 'the revenge of geography'.

Other countries in the south and west remain in the second tier of European power, partially because of their location. The south of Italy, for example, is still well behind the north in terms of development, and although it has been a unified state (including Venice and Rome) since 1871, the strains of the rift between north and south are greater now than they have been since before the Second World War. The heavy industry, tourism and financial centres of the north have long meant a higher standard of living there, leading to the formation of political parties agitating to cut state subsidies to the south, or even break away from it.

Spain is also struggling, and has always done so because of its geography. Its narrow coastal plains have poor soil, and access to markets is hindered internally by its short rivers and the Meseta Central, a highland plateau surrounded by mountain ranges, some of which cut through it. Trade with Western Europe is hampered by the Pyrenees, and any markets to its south on the other side of the Mediterranean are in developing countries with limited income. It was left behind after the Second World War, as under the Franco dictatorship it was politically frozen out of much of modern Europe. Franco died in 1975 and the newly democratic Spain joined the EU in 1986. By the 1990s it had begun to catch up with the rest of Western Europe, but even though the first half of the 2020s saw the economy improving year on year, Spain's inherent geographical and financial weaknesses will continue to hold it back, with youth unemployment remaining a serious issue.

Water and heat are a perennial problem. Thanks to the vast Meseta plateau, Spain's average altitude is relatively high (in Europe, second only to Switzerland), but the mountains are often dry. Spain's mountain ranges mostly run from west to east, which creates natural barriers against cooler moist air from the Atlantic reaching the interior and lowering temperatures there. Parts of the south-east of the country are virtually arid and resemble scrubland deserts.

Southern Andalucía has seen almost constant drought since 2016 and the entire Mediterranean coastline has been at crisis point for all of this decade. Catalonia suffered three years without sustained rainfall between 2021 and 2024, leading to restrictions on water use. Tourists driving into Barcelona may have seen the billboards featuring a red plastic bucket and the message in Catalan '*L'aigua no cau del cel*' – 'water doesn't fall from the sky'.

Greece shares some of Spain's weaknesses due to its topography. Much of the Greek coastline is comprised of cliff-face and there are few coastal plains for agriculture. Inland are more steep cliffs, rivers that will not allow transportation, and very few wide, fertile valleys. What agricultural land there is may be of high quality, but there is too little of it to allow Greece to become a major agricultural exporter, or to develop more than a handful of major urban areas containing highly educated, highly skilled and technologically advanced populations.

The situation is further exacerbated by its location, with Athens positioned at the tip of a peninsula, almost cut off from land trade with Europe. It is reliant on the Aegean Sea for

access to maritime trade in the region – but across that sea lies Turkey, a large potential enemy. Greece fought several wars against Turkey in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and in modern times still spends a vast amount of euros, which it doesn't have, on defence. The country has a top-class military, including an air force with advanced jet fighters flown by some of the best pilots in the world who confront their Turkish counterparts over the Aegean Sea on a regular basis. In 2013 Athens was spending 2.37 per cent of the country's GDP on defence, more than most NATO countries. Since 2020 it has consistently been over 3 per cent and in 2024 went above 3.5 per cent.

Much of that goes on its navy. The mainland is protected by mountains, but there are about 1,400 Greek islands (6,000 if you include various rocks sticking out of the Aegean) of which around 200 are inhabited. The overall coastline of Greece is longer than that of the UK or Italy. It takes a decent navy just to patrol this territory, never mind one strong enough to deter any attempt to take it over. Some of the Greek islands are just a few miles from the Turkish coastline and Turkey does not accept Greek sovereignty. In the 2020s Turkey has begun to openly use the phrase 'Blue Homeland'. Turkish maps of this homeland show half of the Aegean Sea as belonging to Turkey. Within the area shaded as Turkish waters are the Greek islands of Chios, Rhodes and Lesbos.

Countering threats by Turkey to take the islands by force results in a huge cost in military spending that Greece cannot afford. During the Cold War the Americans, and to a lesser extent the British, were content to underwrite some of the military requirements to keep the Soviet Union out of the Aegean and the Mediterranean despite strong social antipathy in Greece towards the USA. Over the past decade that traditional Greek hostility has softened. The memory of American support for the anti-communist military junta which ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974 is fading, and links to Russia, a fellow Orthodox Christian country, have been complicated by its invasion of Ukraine. The USA has shared the huge naval base on Crete with Greece for decades, but in the 2020s has been given the green light to upgrade it and granted access to another three military bases. This has hugely improved NATO's ability to rapidly move forces into Romania and Bulgaria in a crisis.

But Greece still struggles to balance the books. When the Cold War ended, so did the cheques, but Greece kept spending. And the financial crisis of 2007–8 brought the country to its knees.

Ever-closer union had led, for twenty of the EU member states, to a single currency – the euro. Apart from Denmark and the UK, all members had committed to joining if they met the criteria. What is clear now, and was to some clear at the time, is that at its launch in 1999 many countries that did join were simply not ready and went into the newly defined relationship with eyes wide shut. They were all supposed to have levels of debt, unemployment and inflation within certain limits. The problem was that some were fiddling their finances.

Athens wasn't just funding its armed forces; it was determined to retain a standard of living for its citizens to match those in Western Europe, even if that meant subsidising a state-run railway that had more employees than passengers. When Greece cooked the books to meet the financial requirements to be in the eurozone, Brussels was among the chefs. Because the euro was partially a political project, those supporting 'ever-closer union' wanted as many EU members to participate as possible, even if that meant ignoring the financial data which said the Greek economy was nowhere near ready to be in the currency union.

In 2012 the European financial bailouts began amid demands for Greek austerity measures to keep the country afloat and in the eurozone. But this allowed the geographical divide

within the EU to surface. The donors and demanders were the northern countries, the recipients and supplicants mostly southern. The EU may be supposed to be a marriage of equals, but it didn't take long for people in Germany to point out that they were working until sixty-five but paying taxes that were going to Greece so that people could retire at fifty-five. They then asked – why? And the answer, 'in sickness and in health', was unsatisfactory. The partners threw dishes at each other for several years before things calmed down.

That's because the Greek taxpayer – of whom there were not enough to sustain the country's economy – had a different view, asking: 'Why should the Germans dictate to us, when the euro benefits them more than anyone else?' In Greece and elsewhere austerity measures imposed from the north were seen as an assault on sovereignty.

The euro crisis and wider economic problems revealed the cracks in the House of Europe (notably along the old fault line of the north–south divide). The British vote to leave the Union a few years later was a symptom of a problem, not the cause. To the east the continent again saw conflict with Russia's annexation of Crimea. The politicians and intellectual classes should have realised that the European dream was going to be severely tested.

The post-Second-World-War generations had grown up with peace as the norm, and as the decades passed Europeans began to find it increasingly difficult to imagine anything different. Wars were what happened elsewhere; at worst they occurred on the 'periphery' of Europe. The trauma of two world wars, followed by seven decades of peace, as well as the collapse of the Soviet Union, persuaded many people that Europe was a 'post-conflict' region.

Military budgets were slashed as the continent's security was outsourced to the USA. Countries dug themselves deeper into reliance on Russian energy and, despite evidence to the contrary, a belief that friendly engagement with Moscow would result in a reciprocal relationship. The Germans had a phrase for this: *Wandel durch Handel* ('change through trade'). As some of the Central and Eastern Europeans already knew, this was not how Russia viewed things, and Germany's world view was about to be shattered.

The muted response to the Russo-Georgian War in 2008 had been followed by a timid reaction to the annexation of Crimea in 2014. Both confirmed Moscow's belief that the Europeans were weak, and getting weaker, but that after the experience of the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia would never be weak again. In his address on 24 February 2022, Putin explained that this experience 'has shown us that the paralysis of power and will is the first step towards complete degradation and oblivion'. We have also been reminded that Europe is unable to deter aggression in its own backyard, nor push back against it without the USA.

The scales fell from Germany's eyes as the Russian tanks advanced on Kyiv. The years of the *Wandel durch Handel* policy were shown to have encouraged Moscow not to change, but to invade a country. A month after his *Zeitenwende* ('turning point') moment Chancellor Scholz gave an interview and said: 'What frightened me is this incredible emphasis on geopolitics in the Russian president's thinking.' Perhaps he'd missed every foreign policy statement from Putin in the previous two decades.

Europe was never a 'post-conflict' region, as Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, Chechnya, Georgia, Armenia, and then Ukraine, have shown. There are similar unresolved territorial disputes across the continent that, if conditions were right, could still result in violence. These include Northern Ireland, Catalonia and even Hungary, which has a fractious relationship with Slovakia and Ukraine based on ethnic minorities. War is not about to break out in any of these examples, but they are a reminder that history never ends and there are always 'causes' that can be harnessed to realise irredentist dreams.

In 2024 a far-right Hungarian party (Our Homeland) said that if Ukraine loses the war and is dismembered, its position was that Hungary must lay claim to Transcarpathia in Ukraine where about 150,000 ethnic Hungarians live. Homeland may only have a handful of MPs in the Hungarian parliament, but things change. So do borders.

History and geographical shape-shifting haunt Europe. A prime example is Poland, even if it is currently at peace, successful and one of the bigger EU states, with a population of almost 40 million. It is also physically one of the larger members and its economy has grown ninefold since the country emerged from behind the Iron Curtain, but still, it looks to the past as it tries to secure its future.

The corridor of the North European Plain is at its narrowest between Poland's Baltic coast in the north and the beginning of the Carpathian Mountains in the south. This is where, from a Russian military perspective, the best defensive line could be placed, or, from an attacker's viewpoint, the point at which its forces would be squeezed together before breaking out towards Russia.

The Poles have seen it both ways as armies have swept east and west across it, frequently changing borders. If you take *The Times Atlas of European History* and flick through the pages quickly as if it were a flipbook, you see Poland emerge *c*.1000, then continually change shape, disappear and reappear before assuming its present form in the late twentieth century.

The location of Germany and Russia, coupled with the Poles' experience of these two countries, does not make either a natural ally for Warsaw. Like France, Poland wants to keep Germany locked inside the EU and NATO, while not-so-ancient fears of Russia have come to the fore with the crisis in Ukraine. Over the centuries the Poles have seen the Russian tide ebb and flow from and to them. After the low tide at the end of the Soviet (Russian) empire, there was only one direction it could subsequently flow – back towards them.

Relations with Britain, as a counterweight to Germany within the EU, came easily despite the betrayal of 1939, when Britain and France signed a treaty guaranteeing to come to Poland' s aid if Germany invaded. When the attack came the response to the Blitzkrieg was a 'Sitzkrieg' – both Allies sat behind the Maginot Line in France as Poland was swallowed up. Despite this, relations with the UK are strong, even if the main ally the newly liberated Poland sought out in 1989 was the USA.

The Americans embraced the Poles and vice versa: both had the Russians in mind. In 1999 Poland joined NATO, extending the Alliance's reach 400 miles closer to Moscow. By then several other former Warsaw Pact countries were also members of the Alliance and in 1999 Moscow watched helplessly as NATO went to war with its ally, Serbia. In the 1990s Russia was in no position to push back, but after the chaos of the Yeltsin years Putin stepped in on the front foot and came out swinging.

The best-known quote attributed to Henry Kissinger originated in the 1970s, when he is reported to have asked: 'If I want to phone Europe – who do I call?' The Poles had an updated question: 'If the Russians threaten, do we call Brussels or Washington?' They knew the answer and the invasion of Ukraine didn't change their minds.

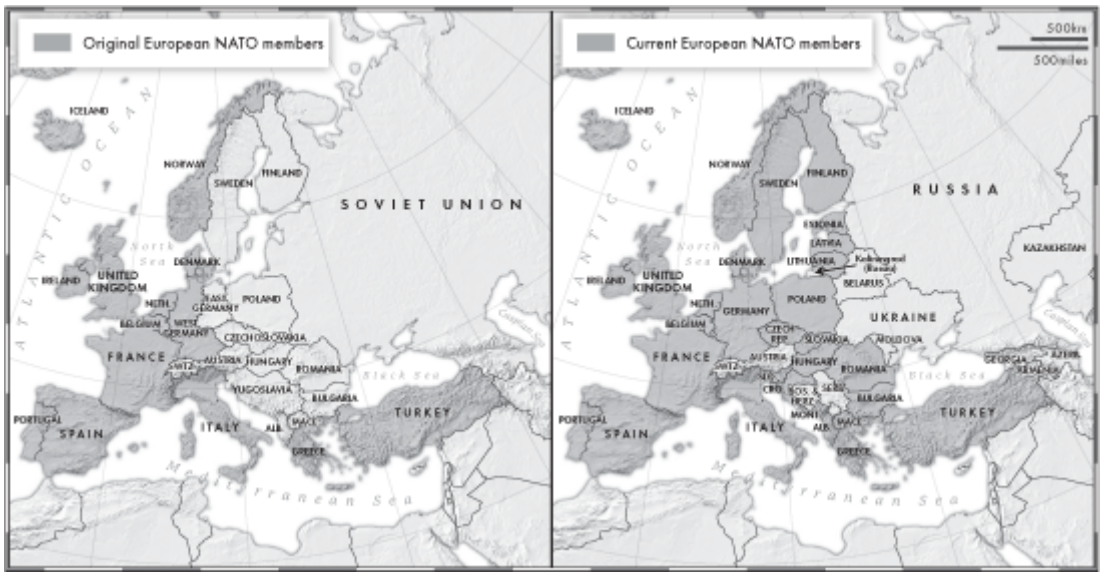
By 2019 NATO's fears of Russia had grown and discussions about building a permanent US military base in Poland were well advanced, with Warsaw offering to pay up to $2 billion towards the costs. In the summer of 2024, in an indication of the degree of trust Poland has in Russia, Warsaw announced plans to build what it dubbed the 'East Shield' – a $2.5 billion project designed to make its borders with Russia and Belarus 'impenetrable'. If completed, it will add to the existing fortifications on the border with Belarus, which were built in 2022 after Belarus began bussing migrants, who had arrived on cheap flights, to the Polish border

and pushing them across. The 250-mile-long barrier is intended to link to similar fortifications in the Baltic states. Poland's deputy prime minister, Władysław Kosiniak-Kamysz, said that the 'East Shield' was a 'grand plan for a safe Poland . . . from the invader who, over the generations and in various ways, has tried to bring destruction, hunger, death and suffering to our lands'.

Polish–American ties have grown steadily closer over the past decade, as shown by the $2.5 billion 2024 agreement for Warsaw to buy a command system from the USA to operate its Patriot missile air defence launchers. In the same year Foreign Minister Radosław Sikorski said that Poland wants 'the best possible relations with America, regardless of who is in power' – a nod towards the US election. A 2022 Pew opinion poll found that 1 per cent of Poles wanted a closer relationship with Russia while 90 per cent had a favourable view of the USA. Poland is leveraging its growing military and economic power, and NATO's 'weight' is shifting eastwards and northwards.

This shift became more pronounced with the accession to NATO of Finland in 2023, and then Sweden the following year. Both have well-equipped and well-trained high-tech militaries whose locations give NATO geographical advantages over Russia.

Finland has a strategy called 'Total Defence', which developed as a consequence of the Soviet Union's invasion of the country in 1939. It stockpiles six months' worth of food and fuel reserves, has numerous bomb shelters, and a conscription-based military reserve of 900,000 men and women. Resilience is a state of mind in Finland, and one which other European countries are now studying. The professional army has what may be Europe's best-equipped artillery forces, with more firepower than those of Germany and Poland combined. In the event of conflict this can be arrayed along the 830-mile-long land border it shares with Russia, as well as directed towards the Baltic Sea and the Gulf of Finland, which hosts some of Russia's important oil harbours and St Petersburg. The Finns are the world's leading designers of icebreakers, and the country owns nine icebreaking vessels. By comparison the USA has two and Russia has more than fifty.



Since NATO was established in 1949, many more European countries have joined, including several that were once part of the Soviet bloc.

It took the shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine to end Sweden's 200 years of neutrality, which followed the Napoleonic Wars, and return it to military involvement in European

affairs. The Swedes have long experience of that. They were locked into a single sea (the Baltic) with access to the Atlantic blocked by the islands in the Skagerrak Strait, which have traditionally been controlled by the Danes. This led the Swedish Vikings to point themselves across the Baltic and sail south down the river systems of Europe. What started as Viking raids became Viking trading expeditions, which reached as far as the Caspian and Black seas and laid the foundations for Sweden's involvement in continental affairs.

As a nation state, Sweden developed a highly trained army and was able to dominate the Baltic and influence the European heartland, but by the early 1800s a series of military defeats left it a secondary power. Its subsequent neutrality, and relatively isolated location, meant that as the major Europeans continued to fight each other in the 1800s and 1900s, Sweden was left alone. In the Second World War the Germans toyed with the idea of invading and, although they decided against, the anxiety it caused in Stockholm was enough for Sweden to begin building a robust, albeit small, military.

This, and geography, is why the thirty-second NATO member is so valuable to the alliance. It is what the military calls 'a force multiplier'. Sweden's defence industry is among the world's largest and produces some of the most advanced military technology. Its air force is among the largest in Europe and in 2023 it agreed to integrate it with those of Norway, Denmark and Finland in a unified Nordic air defence system. Something else Sweden shares with Finland is that they host two of the world's top three 5G infrastructure-manufacturing companies – Ericsson and Nokia (the other is Huawei) – and this power will also benefit NATO.

Perhaps the most important addition to NATO's toolbox are Sweden's world-class submarines. The Baltic Sea is so shallow that some submariners refer to it as a 'flooded meadow'. With an average depth of about 180 feet, America's large nuclear-powered subs can't operate there, nor can most of Russia's. But Sweden's advanced diesel-electric Gotland-class submarines can. It has three of these, with another two due to come into service before 2030.

Speaking of Gotland . . . it's also a large island in the middle of the Baltic. It belongs to Sweden, it faces the Russian exclave port of Kaliningrad, which hosts Moscow's Baltic Fleet and some of its nuclear weapons, and now NATO has access to it. Kaliningrad – population 1 million – is wedged between Poland and Lithuania, with the Baltic Sea immediately to its west. To its east is the Polish–Lithuanian border, which runs for just 60 miles until it reaches Belarus. This is the Suwałki Corridor or Gap and, if travelling by road, you pass through it to get to and from the Baltic states. If Russia was to cut the corridor, it would cut off the Baltics. With Sweden in NATO, Gotland the island and Gotland the submarine are force multipliers significantly strengthening NATO's northeastern flank.

As we're in the High North we should make a quick detour across to Norway. We saw in Chapter One how NATO member Norway is upgrading the rail links across to Finland; it has also been sprucing up a rather handy cave.

Above the 69th parallel, near one of the northernmost major towns in the world (Tromsø), is a submarine base carved into a steep mountainside in one of Norway's most beautiful fjords – Ramfjorden. The Olavsvern base runs 1,120 feet into the mountain and above it is 900 feet of hard rock. At its northern tip Norway has a land and sea border with Russia. During the 1960s the existing small base in Olavsvern was developed to take Norwegian and American submarines to counter Soviet activity under the Arctic ice pack.

At the end of the Cold War Norway watched the Russian Northern Fleet rust, calculated that Russia would not pose a serious threat for the foreseeable future, and sold most of the base to commercial companies. Then the future it hadn't seen arrived. By 2014 Russia had rebuilt the fleet and invaded Ukraine. In 2020 contracts were signed to turn Olavsvern back

into a military facility, and in 2021 Dutch and US Marines were using it for winter training while refurbishment and negotiations (ongoing) were under way to allow access for American submarines.

At the other end of Europe the Balkan countries, having freed themselves from the Ottoman Empire and emerged from decades of communism, now find themselves again coming under the influence of bigger powers and this time China is a player. The mountainous terrain of most of the region led to the emergence of numerous small states as it restricted integration – despite the relatively recent best efforts of the experiment that was the Union of Southern Slavs, otherwise known as Yugoslavia.

With the wars of the 1990s behind them, most of the former Yugoslav countries look westwards, as does most of the Balkans. Croatia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Romania and Greece are all inside both the EU and NATO, with Albania, North Macedonia and Montenegro joining them in NATO. However, in Serbia the pull of the east, with its Orthodox religion and Slavic peoples, remains strong. Russia, which has yet to forgive the Western nations for the bombing of Serbia in 1999 and the separation of Kosovo, is still attempting to coax Serbia into its orbit via the gravitational pull of language, ethnicity, religion and energy deals.

China has now joined the tug of war, not on Russia's side but Beijing's. 'Xi in Serbia' doesn't quite have the ring of 'Nixon in China', and unlike the Nixon visit it won't have an opera based on it, but the Chinese leader's visit to Belgrade in 2024 was a sign of the times.

President Xi and his Serbian counterpart Aleksandar Vučić signed an agreement for a 'shared future' between China and Serbia. They were following up on a 2023 free-trade deal. This might sit uncomfortably with Serbia's application to join the EU, but it suits Beijing, which is pulling a willing Serbia away from that path. Xi got the full red-carpet treatment. The entire route from the airport to the capital was lined with Chinese flags and thousands of people chanting 'China-Serbia' were bussed in to attend the welcoming ceremony.

Chinese companies run Serbian copper mines, steel mills and factories, they build roads and have just delivered the country's first high-speed electric trains, destined to run on a modernised rail line between Budapest and Belgrade and linking all the way south to the Greek port of Piraeus. And who partially controls the port? That'll be the Chinese company COSCO.

Xi's next stop? Next door – Budapest. Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, wants Hungary to be the centre of European EV and EV battery production, Xi wants Chinese vehicles to be built inside the EU to circumvent potential tariffs on cars imported from China, and so the two agreed that China's BYD car maker can open a factory there, as can Chinese electric vehicle battery maker CATL. China wants to drive into the heart of the EU and take on the continent's car industry.

Hungary and Serbia are democratic, but flirt with authoritarianism and authoritarians such as Xi. He knows that their joint enterprise for the railway line ends in Greece, and he knows his Greek legends. Serbia and Hungary are his Trojan horses – with Chinese characteristics.

The EU and NATO countries need to present a united front to all the challenges seen above.

However, in the EU the dream of ever-closer union appears to be, at best, on hold. European unity, and the idea of a common European home with shared values, has taken further blows in the last decade. Divisions were showing in the initial response to Covid-19, when several members, such as France, refused to send Italy ventilators, face masks and medical supplies even though Italy had already paid for them. In early 2020 the sacred spirit of the free movement of goods within the EU vanished as France, Germany and others announced bans on the export of protective gear.

Then the Ukraine war saw the bloc come together initially, but after two years of fighting support began to fray. Money and weapons continued to be sent to Kyiv, but increasingly member states took differing positions on how much and how often. Hungary openly obstructed the process and Germany dragged its heels. Far-right parties, hostile to helping Ukraine, gained significant ground in the 2024 EU elections, which put pressure on politicians worried about losing support in national elections. These are examples of how, despite the decades of building the Union, given the right circumstances EU unity is limited.

In the spring of 2017, the EU Commission circulated a paper laying out several options for the direction in which the EU should be going. The choice of more power for Brussels was roundly rejected in most European capitals.

President Macron of France tried again in March 2019, with an open letter to EU citizens calling for a 'European renaissance'. It was published in at least one newspaper in each of the then twenty-eight member states. He called for a 'stronger, more united continent' and a 'reset' of the open-border Schengen Area and the free movement of people. He even went so far as to suggest that workers from across the EU should receive the same pay for the same job at the same company regardless of its location in Europe. That proposition would be welcomed by, say, a Romanian worker in Bucharest employed by a German company with offices around the continent, but the German company might have a different view.

There was also talk of hastening a move towards an EU defence force. This didn't go down well, with several member states concerned about undermining NATO. Mr Macron's passionate call was debated for several days and then faded from view, but it returned in 2024 as he spoke again about 'strategic autonomy' for Europe and the need for the continent to be able to defend itself and not rely on the USA. There were at least two problems with this. European integration was built around economics, not security; and while the former on its own can supply prosperity it can't defend it, and to do so requires increased defence spending. Secondly, to his domestic audience he talked about France being the master of its own destiny; but to the other Europeans he spoke about France's independent decision-making being 'fully compatible with our unwavering solidarity with our European partners' – which is simply not going to happen given the differences between those partners. A multi-speed Europe, some countries moving ahead with more integration and others not, remains a more likely future.

Nevertheless, unity has mostly held, but challenges lie ahead. If the key relationship in the EU remains intact (France/Germany) and democracy remains valued, then the relative stability of the past eighty years will continue. If the core relationship cracks and democracy becomes unpopular, we will be back to the old Europe. The one that fights with itself.

At this point we would return to a Europe of sovereign nation states, with each state seeking military alliances in a balance of power system. The Germans would again be fearing encirclement by the Russians and French, the French would again be fearing their bigger neighbour, and we would all be back at the beginning of the twentieth century.

For the French this is a nightmare. They successfully helped tie Germany down inside the EU, only to find that after German reunification they became the junior partner in the relationship. This poses Paris a problem it does not appear to be able to solve. Unless it quietly accepts that Berlin calls the European shots, it risks further weakening the Union. But if it accepts German leadership, then its own power is diminished.

Since the earliest beginnings of what became the EU (the European Coal and Steel Community in 1951) they have seen each other as natural partners. France's Plan A was, in de Gaulle's phrase, to be the 'jockey' to the German 'horse', but the German economic miracle and reunification put paid to that. Instead, we have seen an enduring marriage featuring a

series of couples from Konrad Adenauer/Charles de Gaulle, through Helmut Kohl/François Mitterrand to Angela Merkel/Emmanuel Macron.

However, the balance of power within the relationship has shifted to Germany, and the marriage, while still holding, is not without its tensions. Merkel's successor, Scholz, had chemistry with Macron, but the sort that creates frost. The lack of warmth between them was compounded by disagreements over Ukraine, China, energy projects and several other issues. This coincided with a declining appetite in many European capitals for the idea that France and Germany are the natural leaders of the continent. The famous 'Franco-German engine' driving Europe may become a hybrid machine and include a serious boost of power from Poland and others.

Such gradual changes are a way of preventing the EU from splintering and 'the German Question' from returning. Seen through the prism of the last eight decades, suggesting that such a return is possible may seem alarmist, and Germany is among the most peaceful and democratic members of the European family; but viewed through the prism of seven centuries of European warfare, it cannot be ruled out despite currently looking unlikely.

Germany is determined to remain a good European. Germans know instinctively that if the Union fragments the old fears of Germany will reappear, especially as it is now by far the most populous and wealthy European nation, with 84 million inhabitants and, as of 2024, the world's third-biggest economy. Besides, a failed Union would also harm Germany economically: Europe's largest exporter of goods does not want to see its closest market fragment into protectionism.

The German nation state, despite being less than 160 years old, is now Europe's indispensable power. In economic affairs it is unrivalled, it speaks quietly but carries a large euro-shaped stick, and the continent listens. However, on global foreign policy it speaks quietly, sometimes not at all, and has an aversion to sticks.

The shadow of the Second World War still hangs over Germany. The Americans, and eventually the Western Europeans, were willing to accept German rearmament due to the Soviet threat, but Germany rearmed almost reluctantly and has been loath to use its limited military strength. It played a walk-on part in Kosovo and Afghanistan, chose to sit out the Libyan conflict and initially dragged its feet on sending weapons to Ukraine.

Its most serious diplomatic foray into a non-economic crisis has been Ukraine. Berlin was involved in the machinations that overthrew Ukraine's President Yanukovych in 2014 and was critical of Russia's subsequent annexation of Crimea. However, mindful of the gas pipelines, it was noticeably more restrained in its criticism and support for sanctions. Following the invasion of Ukraine, radical plans to invest in the armed forces and review trade relations with authoritarian regimes were announced, albeit with limited enthusiasm and limited subsequent action.

France is capable of an independent foreign policy – indeed, with its 'Force de frappe' nuclear deterrent, its overseas territories and its aircraft-carrier-backed armed forces it does just that – but it operates safe in the knowledge that its eastern flank is secure and it can afford to raise its eyes to the horizon, even if in some regions that horizon is shrinking. Having been kicked out of Mali and Burkina Faso in 2023, its influence in the Sahel region of Africa is vastly diminished. Another former colony, Algeria, is switching from teaching the French language in schools to English. In 2022 the Algerian government embarrassed Emmanuel Macron at a press conference in Algiers by using a sign on the French president's lectern which read 'Presidency of the Republic' instead of 'Présidence de la République'. Ooh la lingua franca!

France now seeks a role in the Indo-Pacific, but still wishes to dominate the EU. This of course requires keeping the Union intact and to do that it must maintain the partnership with Germany.

The 2016 vote in the UK to leave the EU was another psychological blow to the European dream. The UK watches EU machinations from the sidelines, sometimes involved, sometimes in 'splendid isolation', always fully engaged in trying to ensure that no power greater than itself will rise in Europe. This is as true now in the diplomatic chambers of the European capitals as it was on the battlefields of Agincourt, Waterloo or Balaclava.

In modern times, the UK sought to insert itself into the great post-war Franco-German relationship and simultaneously forge alliances with smaller EU countries to build enough support to challenge policies with which it disagreed. For several centuries the British had tried to ensure that there was not an overwhelmingly dominant power on the continent. This policy continued during and after EU membership, with the current threat deemed as emanating from Moscow.

Geographically, the Brits remain in a good place. Good farmland, decent rivers, excellent access to the seas and their fish stocks, close enough to the European continent to trade and yet protected by dint of being an island race – there have been times when the UK gave thanks for its geography as wars and revolutions swept over its neighbours.

The British losses in, and experience of, the world wars are not to be underestimated, but they are dwarfed by what happened in continental Europe in the twentieth century and indeed before that. The Brits are at one remove from living with the historical collective memory of frequent invasions and border changes.

There is a theory that the relative security of the UK over the past few hundred years is why it has experienced more freedom and less despotism than the countries across the Channel. The theory goes that there were fewer requirements for 'strongmen' or dictators, which, starting with Magna Carta (1215) and then the Provisions of Oxford (1258), led to forms of democracy years ahead of other countries.

It is a good talking point, albeit not provable. What is undeniable is that the water around the island, the trees upon it that allowed a great navy to be built, and the economic conditions that sparked the Industrial Revolution all led to Great Britain controlling a global empire. Britain may be the biggest island in Europe, but it is not a large country. The expansion of its power across the globe in the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries is remarkable, even if its position has since declined.

The location of the UK still grants it strategic advantages, one of which is the GIUK (Greenland, Iceland and the UK) gap. This is a chokepoint in the world's sea lanes – it is hardly as important as the Strait of Hormuz or the Strait of Malacca, but it has traditionally given the UK an advantage in the North Atlantic. The alternative route for Northern European navies (including those of Belgium, the Netherlands and France) to access the Atlantic is through the English Channel, but this is narrow – only 20 miles across at the Strait of Dover – and very well defended. Any Russian naval ship coming from the Arctic also has to pass through the GIUK on its way to the Atlantic.

This strategic advantage has diminished in tandem with the reduced role and power of the Royal Navy, but in time of war it would again benefit the UK. The GIUK is one of many reasons why London flew into a panic in 2014 when, briefly, the vote on Scottish independence looked as if it might result in a Yes. The decline in power in the North Sea and North Atlantic, and probable loss of the nuclear submarine base in Scotland would have been a strategic blow and a massive dent to the prestige of whatever was left of the UK.

The concrete Great Britain left behind during the retreat from empire still gives it advantages. The military campaign to retake the Falkland Islands from Argentina in 1982 might not have been possible without access to Ascension Island, while bases in Gibraltar and Cyprus allow force projection into the Middle East and the Mediterranean. For example, in 2024, as the UK participated in the multi-nation operation against Iranian long-range missiles aimed at Israel, RAF jets took off from Akrotiri in Cyprus.

The UK remains a 'blue-water' power and has one of the top ten navies in the world, which, while suffering technical problems, has been rejuvenated by the launch of two aircraft carriers after a ten-year gap of not having any. In 2021 London used the HMS *Queen Elizabeth* carrier as a signal of post-Brexit commitment when it led a flotilla of warships from the UK, USA, Canada, Netherlands, Japan and New Zealand through the South China Sea, much to Beijing's annoyance.

Britain remains geographically within Europe and yet outside it. It is involved in regions far from the continent and, as a leading second-tier power, tries to retain influence and be agile enough to use it where it chooses.

Trade with the EU has fallen since 2016, but increased with Asia as part of an economic pivot towards the Indo-Pacific. In 2021 Britain signed trade deals with Singapore, Japan and Vietnam and welcomed Japan's suggestion that it open negotiations to join the free-trade Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. That same year the government's 'Integrated Review' referred to China as the 'biggest state-based threat to the UK' s economic security'. Against that background the UK joined the partnership in December 2024.

What the British have now is a collective memory of greatness. That memory is what persuades many people on the island that if something in the world needs to be done, then Britain should be among the countries that do it. That perhaps partially resolves the dilemma posed within the 1962 statement by former US Secretary of State Dean Acheson: 'Great Britain has lost an empire and has not yet found a role.' London's response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine underlines this. It led the way in supporting Kyiv in the early months of the war and was at the forefront in pushing the Americans to allow greater firepower to be sent to the front lines.

The Brexit vote threatened the unity of the UK as it revealed divides across the union. In particular, the majority in Scotland voted to remain in the EU, and so the overall Leave victory again raised the question of Scotland's independence; conversely the impetus towards Scottish independence slowed in the early 2020s and is further impeded by the difficulties an independent Scotland would face in trying to join the EU. Brussels made it clear to Catalonia, in response to the crisis of 2017, that if it were to leave Spain it might take more than a decade to become an EU member. If the same applied to Scotland, it would then be out of the UK and out of the EU – and for a small nation with limited resources that would be an uncomfortable position.

Catalonia is symptomatic of something that was subsumed during the heyday of the EU – the feelings of smaller nations, and even regions, within the nation states. With these areas having been ignored for decades, the nationalism on display in the Catalonian crisis took many Europeans by surprise. Catalonia does not want to leave the EU, nor does Scotland; but significant numbers of their electorates are prepared to risk that in order to leave a united Spain and a United Kingdom. The 2014 Scottish referendum on independence resulted in a 55.3 per cent vote against it, but the matter will resurface.

The two main issues that caused the British to edge towards the exit door are related: sovereignty and immigration. Anti-EU opinion was fuelled by the number and type of laws enacted by the EU, which the UK had to follow. For example, headlines were made about foreign criminals convicted of serious crimes in the UK who cannot be deported because of rulings from the European Court of Justice.

At the same time, the wave of economic migrants and refugees arriving in Europe from around the world drove anti-EU feeling as some people believed that EU countries were encouraging them to pass through their territories and get to Britain.

Prejudice against immigrants always rises during times of economic recession, such as recently suffered in Europe; the effects have been seen right across the continent and resulted in the rise of right-wing political parties, which continued through the June 2024 EU elections. This encourages nationalism and thus weakens the fabric of the EU.

The UK, where support for the far right is notably lower than on the continent, is not immune. The anti-immigration riots in the summer of 2024 were an indication that if immigration continues at its current levels, and in the absence of a vibrant economy, political extremes may take root. It is a dilemma faced across Europe. It's generally accepted that Europe needs immigration for economic reasons, but increasingly voters believe their governments have lost control of the borders and therefore of who can and cannot come to live within them.

Governments are increasingly taking measures that until recently would have been seen as extreme. In September 2024, after seeing the far-right AfD gain ground in local elections, and two Islamist terror attacks, Germany announced a 'temporary reintroduction of border control' on its nine land borders. All of the neighbouring countries are members of the twenty-six-nation Schengen agreement – a supposed guarantee of the free movement of people and recognition of political asylum. But Berlin said non-Germans would be checked and if found not to have the right to be in Germany, would be turned back. The following month the French government said it would introduce a bill to allow an increase in the amount of time people could be held while awaiting deportation.

Poland then announced that it would not accept new EU laws on migration and would temporarily suspend the right to claim asylum. In 2024 more than 20,000 people tried to break through the border fence between Belarus and Poland. The Polish government says that most were from Africa and the Middle East and had been encouraged to fly into Belarus by the regime there, then pushed to the border as part of a 'hybrid attack' to destabilise Western Europe – the weaponising of migration.

The pattern began as early as 2016 when, for the first time in half a century, Sweden began checking the documents of travellers from Denmark – a direct response to the numbers of refugees and migrants flowing into Northern Europe from the wider Middle East and to the ISIS attacks on Paris in 2015. Now approximately one in five people living in Sweden were not born there and the cohesion of the country has taken a battering. Plagued by gang warfare, it has gone from being one of the safest countries in the world to having by far the highest rate of gun murders in the EU and the most explosions from bombs and grenades. A raft of measures has followed in an effort to curb the number of arrivals and to encourage people to leave. Asylum seekers often only receive temporary permits to stay, requirements for family reunification have been tightened, and deportation for drug abuse and statements threatening Swedish values has been streamlined. In 2024 payments to immigrants who want to leave were raised to $34,000. Other countries, including Denmark, Germany and France, also offer incentives to return home.

With nation states taking matters into their own hands, we have travelled a long way from the ideals of Schengen. This has an economic cost, makes travel more difficult and is both a physical and conceptual attack on 'ever-closer union'. Some analysts have begun to speak of a 'Fortress Europe' due to bids to reduce immigration levels, but this misses the fact that there is also a drift towards a 'Fortress Nation State'.

Europe's traditional white population is greying. Demographic projections predict an inverted pyramid, with older people at the top and not enough younger people to look after them or pay taxes. However, such forecasts have not made a dent in the strength of anti-immigrant feeling among sections of what was previously the indigenous population, which struggles to deal with the rapid changes to the world in which it grew up. The modern European states and the EU were built on a set of historical and cultural norms, some of which are challenged by the pace and scale of immigration, which results in anxiety.

This should not be surprising. It is a story as old as humanity and as modern as a thousand examples found across the planet. The dramatic rise in racism in, for example, Ireland has the same drivers as the systemic prejudice and violence against Bengalis in the Indian state of Assam or Nigerians in South Africa. When 'outsiders' arrive and compete for jobs, housing and medical care, significant numbers inside the established communities become anxious and resentful. There's no reason why the Brits, Irish, Germans and French should be immune from the virus of prejudices to be found in India, South Africa, Ethiopia or Tunisia. Given that the number of people on the move has probably not peaked, how these tensions are dealt with is one of the major dilemmas facing governments around the world.

The rapid demographic changes in Europe are in turn influencing the foreign policy of nation states, particularly towards the Middle East. On issues such as the Iraq War or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, for example, many European governments must, at the very least, take into account the feelings of their Muslim citizens when formulating policy.

The characters and domestic social norms of the European countries are also impacted. Debates about women's rights and the veiling of women, blasphemy laws, freedom of speech and many other issues have all been influenced by the presence of large numbers of Muslims in Europe's urban areas. Voltaire's maxim that he would defend to the death the right of a person to say something, even if he found it offensive, was once taken as a given. Now, even though many people have been killed *because* what they said was insulting, the debate has shifted. It is not uncommon to hear the idea that perhaps insulting religion should be beyond the pale, possibly even made illegal.

Whereas previously liberals would have been entirely behind Voltaire, there are now shades of relativism. The massacre of journalists at the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in 2015 was followed by widespread condemnation and revulsion; however, some liberal censure was tinged with a 'but perhaps the satirists went too far'. This is something new for Europe in the modern age and is part of its culture wars, all of which loop back into attitudes towards the European political structures.

Until the Ukraine crisis boiled over NATO was fraying at the edges, as was the EU. If the subsequent understanding of the necessity of unity is allowed to diminish again, over time both institutions may become either defunct or irrelevant.

The end of the Cold War had seen most of the continental powers reduce military budgets and cut back armed forces. Russia's actions in Georgia and Ukraine, and the potential for the USA to cut Europe adrift, reversed that policy; but even now, numerous European countries are moving at different speeds and failing to come up with a credible pan-European collective defence strategy. The Europeans have seventeen different makes of Main Battle Tank; the

Americans have one. It's a small detail, but on a larger scale a lack of interoperability due to competing domestic defence manufacturers is a big problem.

Now the Russians regularly fly missions aimed at testing European air defence systems and are busy consolidating themselves in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They maintain their links with the ethnic Russians in the Baltics, and they still have their exclave of Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea.

The Europeans have begun doing some serious recalculation on their military spending, but there isn't much money around and they face difficult decisions. While they debate those decisions the maps are being dusted down and diplomats and military strategists see that, while the threats of Charlemagne, Napoleon, Hitler and the Soviets may have vanished, the North European Plain, the Carpathians, the Baltic and the North Sea are still there. A new form of Iron Curtain has descended. Starting in Kaliningrad, it runs from the Baltic down to the Black Sea, taking in the front lines between Ukraine and Russia. The past is now the present – and the foreseeable future.

In his book *Of Paradise and Power* the historian Robert Kagan argues that Western Europeans live in paradise, but shouldn't seek to operate by the rules of paradise once they move out into the world of power. Perhaps it seems inconceivable that we could go backwards; but history tells us how much things can change in just a few decades, and geography tells us that if humans do not constantly strive to overcome its 'rules', its 'rules' will overcome us.

This is what Helmut Kohl meant when he warned, upon leaving the Chancellorship of Germany in 1998, that he was the last German leader to have lived through the Second World War and thus to have experienced the horrors it wrought. In 2012 he wrote an article for Germany's best-selling daily newspaper, *Bild*, and was clearly haunted by the possibility that the financial crisis of that year meant the current and future generation of leaders would not nurture the post-war experiment in European trust: 'For those who didn't live through this themselves and who especially now in the crisis are asking what benefits Europe's unity brings, the answer despite the unprecedented European period of peace lasting more than sixty-five years and despite the problems and difficulties we must still overcome is: peace.'