MIDDLE AGES (476-1453)

The Early Middle Ages (ca. 476-800), 2) The High Middle Ages (ca.800-1300), and The Late Middle Ages (ca. 1300-1453). Each succeeding division had unique characteristics. The Middle Ages are sometimes referred to as the “Dark Ages” or “Medieval Times”. The term Dark Ages has fallen from use in modern times, but is applied because of a lack of written records and progress in the modern sense of the word. Simply put, The Middle Ages are a product of the end of Roman influence across the continent of Europe. This resulted in fragmentation of political, economic and military power throughout the land.

The Early Middle Ages (476-800) began with the loss of Roman influence in Europe. Various ethnic groups filled the vacuum left behind. Rather than one central authority, each group controlled a portion of the land. The social, political, and economic systems that developed were reflective of the fractured nature of the map. Local loyalty and tribal identity were the most cohesive elements in each mini-society. Individual power created wealth and a following.

The High Middle Ages (ca. 800-1300) can be viewed as a time when the fractured remains of the Western Empire began to be drawn back together in larger societies. From the tribal beginnings of the Early Middle Ages came individuals with ever increasing spheres of power. The development of feudal society began during this time.

There was a three-tiered caste system in place that left one class dependent and subordinate to the class above it. A king, who had gained control a large portion of land, was the dominant figure in the system. Lords carried out the king’s will, paid taxes, and provided soldiers when required in exchange for land of their own, which they controlled (fiefdoms). At the bottom of the ladder were peasants, who worked the land and paid similar tribute to the lord. For this the lord gave the peasants protection.

The power of the Church cannot be underestimated during this time. The High Middle Ages seemed to be a thriving period in the transition from Roman power. Populations soared as Europe enjoyed generation after generation of agriculture success during a period known as the Medieval Warm Period.

The story of the Vikings reaches its pinnacle during the High Middle Ages.

The Vikings in general hailed from:
- Scandinavian lands of Denmark
- Norway
- Sweden.
“They were never a unified group, but rather a collection of invaders who struck fear in the hearts of much of Western Europe.”

**RELIGION**

Vikings practiced a pagan, polytheistic religion. “Thor atop the hierarchy of gods.”

**ORGANIZATION**

They were a mobile band of “barbarians”, and they effectively used their shallow draft long boats to travel up rivers and attack the cities of their southern neighbors.

Once engaged in battle, the Vikings fought with a **fiery tenacity based on single combat**. Viewed by many Europeans as wild-eyed mad men, victory was often secured without much fight, as cities often paid tribute to avoid having their homes destroyed.

King Charles the Bald paid a ransom rather than have Paris overrun by the marauders. Their first impact dates to about 800 A.D. By the latter stages of the High Middle Ages the Vikings began to adopt the Christian faith of mainstream Europe. Many local kings began to espouse the new religion as a replacement to their old ways. Results of this conversion were mixed, and some see the effort to Christianize the Vikings as a political ploy intended to consolidate power through religion.

**OCCUPATION**

In addition to European conquest, the Vikings were seafaring explorers. Under the leadership of **Erik the Red**, Viking colonized Greenland. Erik’s **son, Leif Ericson**, founded a short lived colony on modern day Newfoundland. Fully five hundred years prior to the voyages of Christopher Columbus, the **Vikings were the first Europeans to “discover” the New World**. The Vikings also played an important part in one of the momentous events of European history, the Norman Conquest of Britain.

**INVASION OF ISLANDS BRITAIN**

*In 1066,* Viking leader **Harald Hardrada** attempted an invasion of the island of Britain. After early success in the campaign, the Vikings were beaten badly at the Battle of Stamford Bridge on September 25th.

The **English commander Harold Godwinson** prevented Viking conquest of the entire island, killing Harald Hardrada in the process. However, the timing of the invasion was critical. A threat to Harold Godwinson’s power arose in the form of William I (William the Conqueror). Sailing across the English Channel from Normandy, William’s troops were landing in southern England just as Harold Godwinson was defeating the Vikings. Harold’s battle weary forces had to march south the meet the new challenge. The task was too difficult, and Harold’s army was beaten at the **Battle of Hastings on October 14th, 1066**. The story of this most famous battle is retold in the Bayeux Tapestry, which glorifies the victory of William. Harold
was killed in the battle, as the tapestry graphically shows a spear penetrating his eye. Modern England dates its nationhood to the Norman Conquest, and it represents the last successful invasion of England.

**FAITH CHANGE**

While the Roman Catholic Church remained the unifying force in Europe, solidarity within the church itself began to erode during this time. In 1054, the Great Schism (split) occurred. Resulting from differences in theology and the decline of Rome’s power, the Eastern Orthodox Church was established in Constantinople. This was the first significant split in the Christian religion, and the Eastern Church is still the dominant Christian form in Eastern Europe.

Throughout the Middle Ages, Kings ruled by “Divine Right”, meaning that their place on the throne was justified by the will of God. The Catholic Church sanctioned the rule of these monarchs, and the coffers of Rome filled with tithing from this system. Social standing became hereditary, as did the ownership of fiefdoms. Perhaps the greatest example of the power of the Church is shown near the end of the time period.

**CRUSADES**

In 1096, the Christian kings of Europe launched the first of a series of Holy Crusades aimed at wresting the Holy Lands from the Muslims. Called by Pope Urban II, these monarchs responded by sending thousands of troops to the Middle East with the goal of recapturing the Holy Land and retrieving the relics of Christian heritage. There were nine (this number is sometimes in dispute) separate Crusades over a span of about 150 years which taken as a whole were a spectacular flop, but it demonstrates the power of the Church and the fact that religion was the one unifying element in Europe during this time. The Church held a monopoly on education and to the masses it seemed that the Church held the keys to the Gates of Heaven as well.

The Late Middle Ages (ca. 1300-1450) represent a troubled time in European history. It could be said that during this time period, the entire system broke down. The system seemed to work for such a long time, but faced with a series of crises, the old feudal order could not stand up to the challenges. There was a climatic shift in the early 14th Century that contributed greatly to the final collapse. The change is commonly referred to the “Little Ice Age” and it had dire consequences for the population of the continent.

**CLIMATE SHIFT/DISEASE & PLAGUE**

This climactic period lasted for centuries, coming to a close in the mid 19th Century. This wet, cool period (especially in northern Europe) caused crop failures. This led to the Great Famine (1315-1317) and killed perhaps one fourth of the population.

-severe food shortage
-intermittent famines throughout the Middle Ages in Europe

“Just one generation later,” the first of the Bubonic Plague epidemics struck Europe. A civilization weakened by malnutrition from the food shortages was ripe to be decimated by just such an affliction. In 1349, the strange disease hit London hard.

The “Black Death”, as it was also known, showed up in different places for the next couple hundred years in disparate cities of Europe.

-“disease originated in Asia” and was brought west on a trade ship. Particularly hard hit were the larger urban areas of Western Europe, where many people were crowded together and conditions were less than sanitary.

-urban centers were much more affected by both the famine and plague than were the less populated rural lands of Eastern Europe.

-The Plague killed another one third of the population of Europe. This then was another factor that weakened religious authority and the feudal system that depended on the Church for validation.

“Toward the end of the Middle Ages, modern borders began to solidify throughout Europe. There was an effort made by the English to project their power onto the continent.”

Modern Times:

The factors that separate the Middle Ages from Modern Times are primarily a result of the failure of the old system to deal with a variety of problems that faced European society at the time. Famines, plagues, and the will of individuals to gain access to a decent life placed more pressure on the church-backed feudal system than it could handle. People looked for answers elsewhere. Fundamental to the new view was the move started in the early 16th Century away from the overriding influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Without the Protestant Reformation, it seems unlikely that the whole of European culture could be so completely transformed. However, the Reformation had prerequisites as well. Without the Renaissance and the new found focus on individuality, the Reformation was probably not possible.

The main reason that these are considered Modern Times is that the nation-states with which we are now familiar began to develop at this time. While it did happen in the blink of an eye, coming out the Middle Ages one can see how political and economic trends changed as the people of Europe learned to cope with a new set circumstances. The main engines of change at this time were the ideas of the Renaissance/Enlightenment, technological innovation, and the rise of nations and nationalism.
Middle Ages

The Middle Ages were a time in European history that separates the classical days of Greece and Rome from the modern days of Western Civilization. Historians disagree on exact dates from which to mark this time period. Some date its beginnings to the split in Rome between east and west in 395 while others set the date at the fall of 476. The ending date for the Middle Ages is just a fuzzy. Some “experts” establish the end of the Middle Ages during the mid 14th Century (the beginning of the Italian Renaissance), while other accepted dates include:

- **1453 (the Fall of Constantinople and the end of the Hundred Years War)**
- **1455 (the invention of the Printing Press by Johannes Gutenberg)**
- **1492 (Columbus’ first voyage to America and the expulsion of the Muslims from Spain)**
- **1517 (the beginning of the Protestant Reformation).**

RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance (or rebirth) began at different times in different parts of Europe and was characterized by a thirst for progress. It is best summed up as a rebirth of Classical thought and culture. There was an information explosion, as Europeans looked to science to explain their world, rather than trust the words of priests and kings.

“Philosophy, science, literature, music, and art flourished in this new environment as they reexamined the ideas first discussed in ancient Greece.”

The scientific method, which we still use today, took hold of Western thinking. Using these new ideas and the technology that went with them, Europe took the lead in world exploration. The age of discovery gave European countries great wealth as they colonized and exploited the less developed areas of the world.

The French Revolution:

July 14th, 1789 is usually given as the starting point for the Great Revolution. The mood in Paris was rebellious, as rumors swirled of French national troops converging on the city. On this day, an angry mob of approximately 1,000 Parisians stormed the bleak government armory and prison known as the Bastille. **Bastille Day** is still celebrated as the day of national independence.
The stone building represented the tyranny of divine right kingship. People believed that political dissenters were held in the old fort. After a battle of several hours, the mob had its way, crashing in and taking captive the small garrison guarding the prison. The cells housed just seven prisoners, who were released, and the arms and munitions from the Bastille were seized. The commander of the Bastille was quickly beheaded and his dismembered head was paraded down the street on a pole. The violence and mob mentality of the “Storming of the Bastille” provided a preview of what was to follow.

PEOPLE OF INFLUENCE
Notable philosophers addressing the subject included Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), who contended that man gave up all rights when he left the state of nature. On the other side of the coin were men like John Locke (1632-1704) who said man always retained his right to “life, liberty, and property”. Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) came down on the side of Locke, saying that a general will of the people existed and should be honored for the good of society.

World War I Looms-Causes:
The world was truly becoming a smaller place in the early 20th Century. Because of revolutions in transportation and communication, the great distances of the globe seemed to be, and were reduced.

Because of the transportation and communication revolution, countries really began to identify with their homeland. There was a feeling throughout the region that “we are better than you”. This nationalism was expressed through colonization, militarism, and competition in general.

SHIFT IN POWER
-Defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, the British dominated the Oceans. As “Mistress of the Sea”, London had an official policy that England’s navy would be equal in strength to the next two largest navies in the world combined. In the latter days of the 19th Century, the Germans began to build a fleet (Der Kriegsmarine) aimed at rivaling the Grand Fleet of England. A race developed between the two to out build each other. The new “ship of the line” was the dreadnought, which was soon followed by the super dreadnought. These battleships were a quantum leap greater in power than the old warships, and made all other men of war obsolete. They were steel hulled behemoths with giant guns that represented floating fortresses. These ships really were modern battleships in every sense. As fast as one side would commission new ship, the other side would as well.
NATIONS READY TO FIGHT

There were many different alliances formed (many of which were secret) between the different countries of Europe. In simple terms, the two sides stacked up like this:

The **Central Powers** were comprised of:

- Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Italy (joined later by the Ottoman Empire of Turkey)

The **Triple Entente** were comprised of “Allies”:

- England, France, and Russia which formed the. Both sides were poised for conflict in the early years of the 20th Century.

Several potential conflicts were avoided through diplomatic means, but on June 28, 1914, an event took place, which was the spark for WWI. This conflict is also known as the “Great War” or more ironically, “the war to end all wars”.

On April 6th 1917, the **United States** declared war one Germany and her allies, tipping the scales in favor of the Entente.

-Factors that brought America into WWI included:

1) favoring the allied (especially Great Britain’s) cause in general

2) the sinking of the Lusitania,

3) the Zimmerman Telegram.

“The U.S. Congress passed a declaration of war on April 6th, 1917, allying America with France and Great Britain.”

The Treaty of Versailles:

Europe was a mess. Not only were millions dead, Northern France lay in ruins and the very foundations of Western Civilization were shaken. Quite reasonably, the people asked; how could modern science and our leaders in whom we trusted take us down of such utter devastation? Woodrow Wilson (American President) believed so strongly in his fourteen points that he went personally to Europe to join in the negotiation process.

Germany had in fact quit so quickly because they thought that Wilson’s humane peace plan. However, the victorious powers of Europe had a different agenda. After suffering through four years of death and destruction, England and France were more interested in revenge than lasting peace. The **Treaty of Versailles** was part of the larger Paris Peace Conference.
Wilson’s plan can be divided into three parts. Points one through five dealt with the causes of the war and trying to prevent them from repeating:

1) Open covenants arrived at openly
2) Freedom of the Seas
3) Removal of economic barriers
4) Arms reduction
5) Colonial adjustments with input from the colonies themselves
6-13) Specific territorial adjustments
14) A League of Nations

Interwar Years:

During the Inter-War years, all the Great Powers pulled back from foreign affairs. England tried to hang on to her overseas empire despite damage of the continental conflict. World War I proved too many Americans that isolation was the only rational policy to pursue in dealing with the outside world.

Adolf Hitler’s rise to power in Germany would quickly threaten international security.

*****Hitler was appointed Chancellor on January 30th, 1933.

By 1938, Hitler began to look beyond Germany’s borders to extend his power. On March 13 of that year, the 3rd Reich incorporated Austria (this was the “Anschluss”) into a “Greater Germany”. While this concerned the other powers of Europe, nothing was done to stem the rise of power for the Reich. Then in 1939, Germany annexed Western Czechoslovakia.

On September 1st, 1939, Germany invaded Poland from the west after a shabby attempt to show that Poland attacked first (Russia meanwhile attacked from the east and the nation of Poland ceased to exist in just a few weeks). With the Reich’s intentions now clear, England and France declared war on Germany on September 3rd. Following about six months of “Phony War”, German divisions rolled through France in the spring of 1940 in a new tactic known as “Blitzkrieg” (Lighting War).

This new tactic incorporated air, infantry, and armor in an attack of mobility far different than the stagnant situation that developed in the trenches of WWI.

Both sides stared at each other in anticipation of an attack. This time period is known as the “Phony War” as both camps readied for battle.

This Blitzkrieg began on May 10th, and the Germans entered Paris on June 14th. France surrendered on June 22nd. The entire world was stunned by the speed with which France fell. The Nazis set up a puppet government to rule their conquered rival in the French city if Vichy.
Europe 1941-1945:

German success in the east was coming to an end. Despite early victories, the sheer expanse of Russia and its deadly winter was consuming the German forces. Both sides suffered horribly. Army Group North laid siege to St. Petersburg in September. The Russian refused to surrender and what followed was a 900 day siege that claimed the lives of approximately 750,000 Russians (estimates on the number vary). The siege lasted until January of 1944.

A second front finally opened in Europe. On June 6th, 1944, U.S., British and Canadian troops stormed the shores of Northern France at Normandy. The Germans had fortified the Atlantic Wall since overrunning France, but the skillful use of advanced paratroopers, air superiority, thousands of ships, and fresh soldiers breached the defenses.

**Operation Overlord, also known as D-Day,** was the culmination of months of planning. 156,000 men went ashore that day despite sustaining extensive losses. Still, the Allies had a foothold in Europe. After being pinned on the beaches for several weeks, these troops broke out and began their march toward Berlin.

On April 30th, Hitler faced ultimate defeat by committing suicide in his wartime bunker under the Reichstag along with his wife of one day, Eva Braun. After a week's cleanup, VE (Victory in Europe) was declared on May 8th, 1945. For the second time in as many generations, Europe lay in ruins. The new world order would soon include a much larger role for the United States.