

European Geography Teacher Notes

Physical Features

The European continent is located north of Africa and accounts for the westernmost portion of the **Eurasian** landmass. The continent is bordered to the west by the Atlantic Ocean, to the north by the Arctic Ocean, and to the south by the **Mediterranean Sea**. Europe's easternmost land boundary is the **Ural Mountains**, which run north to south through western Russia.

Besides the Urals, students will need to identify two other mountain ranges:

- The Pyrenees Mountains form the border between Spain and France. They serve as the natural boundary dividing the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) from mainland Europe.
- The Alps are located in Southern Europe and divide Italy and Switzerland.

Along with the Mediterranean Sea, students will need to be familiar with three other bodies of water in Europe:

- The **English Channel** is a waterway located along the northwest of the continent between France and the United Kingdom. A rail line, known colloquially as the "Chunnel" (a condensed version of "Channel Tunnel"), runs underground beneath the English Channel connecting Folkestone, Kent in the southern U.K. with Coquelles, Pas-de-Calais in northern France.
- The **Rhine River** flows northward from the Swiss Alps through Germany and empties into the North Sea off the coast of Denmark. This nearly 766-mile long river is the busiest shipping route in the world.
- The **Danube River** flows eastward from southwestern Germany, through Central and Eastern Europe, before emptying into the Black Sea off the coast of Ukraine. It is the second longest river in Europe after the Volga in Russia.

Students should also be able to locate the **European Plain**. This is the largest uninterrupted expanse of plains (i.e., mountain-free landform) on Earth.



Political Features

In southwestern Europe, making up the largest part of the Iberian Peninsula, is **Spain**. Northeast of Spain, on the other side of the Pyrenees, is **France** – one of the continent’s leading economies. Southeast of France, south of the Alps, is **Italy**. Italy is composed of a peninsula and two Mediterranean islands. All three nations are linguistically and religiously similar.

Northwest of France, across the English Channel, is the **United Kingdom**. This island nation is another of Europe’s leading economies, and is composed of four countries: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. East of France, in Central Europe, is **Germany**, the continent’s most potent economy. Both the U.K. and Germany share a common linguistic heritage.

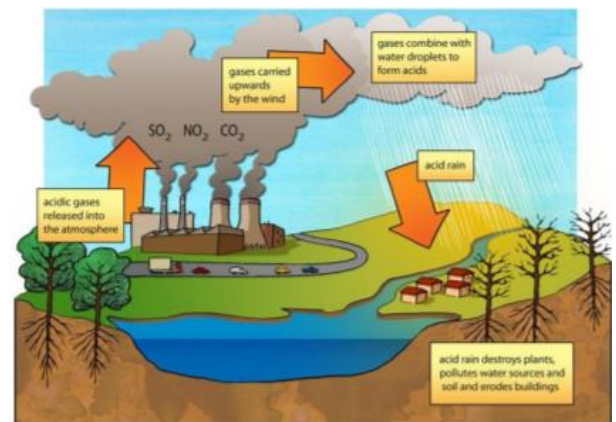
In Eastern Europe, northwest of the Black Sea, is **Ukraine**; this country was once the primary agricultural center for the Soviet Union. Northeast of Ukraine, and extending across the north of Asia beyond the Ural Mountains, is the world’s largest country in terms of total land area, **Russia**. Both Ukraine and Russia share a common linguistic and religious heritage, as well as a turbulent mutual history throughout Cold War.



Environmental Issues

Acid Rain: Germany is famous for its majestic forests and historic Gothic architecture; however, these picturesque landscapes and cities are under threat from acid rain. Acid rain results when noxious gases – such as carbon dioxide, sulfur dioxide, and nitrogen oxide – combine with water molecules in clouds. When these clouds burst, the rain released is toxic. Acid rain pollutes freshwater sources, poisons fisheries, kills forests, and even degrades architecture.

The primary cause of Germany’s acid rain is emissions from its many coal-burning power plants. The nation is taking steps to reduce its coal-dependence, though, particularly in southern Germany where hydroelectric power is emerging as an alternative energy source. Wind and solar energy are also being harnessed across the nation.



Air Pollution: London, England, the capital of the United Kingdom, has some of the worst air pollution of any major city in Europe. In fact, the term **smog** originated in London in 1905! The U.K. is one of Europe’s leading industrial powers with numerous factories across the country processing oil, natural gas, and coal. The pollutants emanating from these factories, coupled with the overcrowding and widespread use of motor vehicles in its major cities, have led to the U.K.’s air quality woes. Increased incidence rates of pneumonia and asthma have been linked to the nation’s widespread air pollution. The U.K. has taken measures to decrease air pollution, however, including tightening vehicle and factory emissions standards, encouraging public mass transportation, and promoting the use of cleaner burning coal.

Chernobyl: One of the worst nuclear disasters in history took place at the Chernobyl power plant in Pripyat, Ukraine – at that time, part of the Soviet Union – in 1986. It was the result of an experiment conducted by the plant’s engineers to determine whether or not Chernobyl’s cooling pump system could still function under low power if auxiliary electricity

were to ever fail. A catastrophic decision to disable Chernobyl's safety systems during this experiment resulted in the reactor exploding and releasing irradiated steam and particulate matter into the atmosphere. The fallout from Chernobyl had the greatest impact on Ukraine and Belarus, although nuclear contamination from the explosion reached as far north as the Scandinavian Peninsula and as far west as the United Kingdom. Chernobyl's reactor burned for nine days after the meltdown as well. Soil contamination resulting from the Chernobyl disaster is an ongoing concern, as is the increased incidence rate of cancer in northern Ukraine. In the wake of Chernobyl, Ukraine vowed to become a nuclear-free country. Its last nuclear reactor was shut down in 2000.

Comparing Countries

Germany, located in Central Europe, is the continent's 7th largest country in terms of total land area, its 2nd largest in terms of population, and its #1 largest economy. It is bordered to the north by Denmark, to the west by the Netherlands, Belgium, and France, to the south by Switzerland and Austria, and to the east by the Czech Republic and Poland. The **climate** of western Germany is warmer in the summer months with mild winters, while eastern Germany tends to have much colder winters and longer, hotter summers. Germany has ample **arable** land and many lush forests supporting an abundant timber industry. The nation also has large deposits of coal and iron ore, which support both its automotive and energy industries. Most of Germany's population centers are found in its **urban** areas, many of which are located in western Germany near the Rhine River; the Rhine plays a major role in transporting goods and people across the country. Germany's largest population center is Berlin, its capital, located in eastern Germany.

The United Kingdom is located off the coast of Western Europe, directly across the English Channel from France. It boasts Europe's 3rd largest population and economy, but ranks 11th in terms of total land area. The climate of the U.K., which is heavily influenced by ocean currents, is relatively mild. The nation receives frequent rainfall throughout the year, which, along with its abundant arable land, makes much of the U.K. suitable for farming and livestock grazing. The U.K. also has large deposits of coal, iron ore, natural gas, and petroleum. Like Germany, its population centers are found in its urban areas where mining and service jobs are prevalent. London, the capital of the U.K., is the nation's largest population center.

Russia, meanwhile, is located across two continents. The majority of its land area is found in northern Asia; however, nearly a quarter of the country is located west of the Ural Mountains in Europe. This western portion of Russia accounts for 77% of the nation's total population, and Russia itself has Europe's largest total land area and population. Its economy ranks 4th. The European side of Russia is bordered to the west by Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Belarus, and Ukraine. Russia's western climate varies between cool summers and harsh winters. In fact much of northern Russia's soil is permanently frozen throughout the year, a phenomenon known as permafrost. Russia has vast timber resources, and a bustling mining industry in the Ural Mountains where gold, iron ore, coal, and aluminum are present. Russia also has oil and natural gas in abundance in its northern regions, particularly on the Asian side of the country, although the cold climate in this area makes their extraction difficult. Most Russians live on the European side of Russia where the climate is comparatively more hospitable. Russia's capital, Moscow, boasts its largest population center.

Languages

There are more than forty native **Indo-European** languages spoken in Europe today. Of these, the vast majority fall into three distinct language groups: Romance, Germanic, or Slavic.

Romance languages are spoken primarily in Western and Southern Europe and include Portuguese, Spanish, French, and Italian. Languages in this group have a common linguistic progenitor, Latin, which was spoken throughout the Roman Empire; it is from the word "Roman" that the term "Romance" derives.

Germanic languages, meanwhile, derive from the various languages spoken by the early Germanic peoples of Central and Northern Europe, which is where those languages are still largely spoken on the continent today. Germanic languages include English, German, Dutch, and Norwegian.

Slavic languages are spoken throughout Eastern Europe. These languages include Russian, Polish, and Ukrainian. While Romance and Germanic languages are written, for the most part, using the **Roman alphabet**, most Slavic languages – Polish and Czech, among a few others, being notable exceptions – are written in the **Cyrillic alphabet**, which incorporates Roman and Greek characters as well as some uniquely Slavic

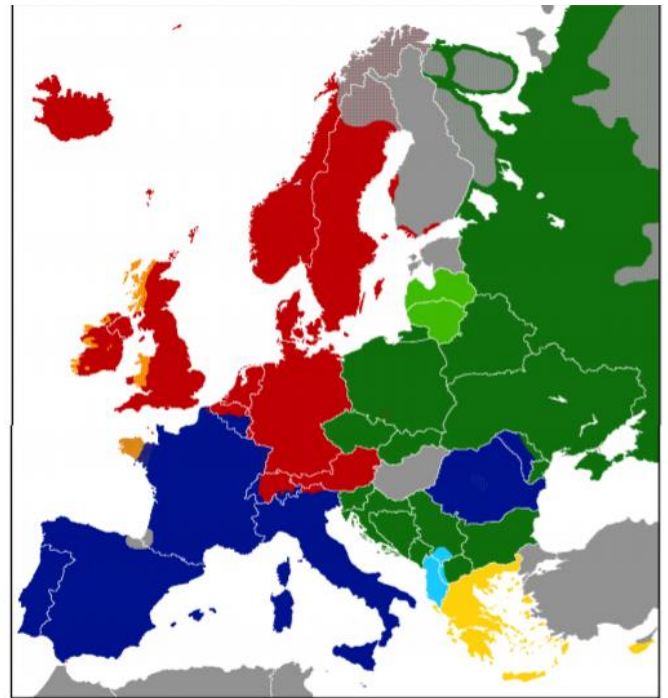
Religions

Like languages, religious practices throughout Europe are just as diverse. The vast majority of Europeans today ascribe to some branch or denomination of the three major **monotheistic** religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All three faiths believe there is only one God, and do share some common figures (i.e., Abraham), mythos, and moral/ethical positions.

Judaism, although the oldest of the three religions, is the least practiced in Europe today. European Jewry, particularly in Eastern Europe, once accounted for 60% of all the world’s Jewish population. Following the events of the Holocaust, however, this number dropped dramatically. Today only 10% of the world’s Jewish population resides in Europe. Judaism originated in the eastern Mediterranean c. 2000 BC, and made its way to Europe just prior to the rise of the Roman Empire.

Christianity is the most practiced religion in Europe today. Over 76% of Europeans self-identify with a branch or denomination of Christianity. In Western and Southern Europe, it is Roman Catholicism, which is headquartered at Vatican City in Rome, Italy. In Central and Northern Europe, Protestantism dominates; the first Protestant movements occurred in Germany. In Eastern Europe, Eastern Orthodox Christianity is the most-practiced faith. Christianity itself was founded c. 30 AD in Palestine (now Israel), but did not gain prominence in Europe until the 5th century AD.

Islam is not the largest religion in Europe, but it is one of the fastest growing faiths on the continent. Present in highest concentration in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, Muslims make up some 6% of Europe’s total population. In recent years, the U.K., France, and Germany have seen the most substantial increases in Muslim population. Founded in 610 AD in modern day Saudi Arabia, Islam first entered Europe in the 700s AD by way of the Iberian Peninsula.



Indo-European Language Map of Europe. Blue indicates Romance languages, red indicates Germanic languages, and green indicates Slavic languages. (Wikimedia Commons)

Religion:	JUDAISM	CHRISTIANITY	ISLAM
Followers:	Jews	Christians	Muslims
Sacred Text:	Tanakh (acronym for the 3 parts of the Jewish holy book: Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim)	Bible	Quran
Place of Worship:	synagogue	Church	mosque
Symbol:			

Glossary:

1. **Acid Rain** – toxic rain which results when noxious gases are released into the atmosphere and mix with water molecules
2. **Arable** – suitable for farming
3. **Chernobyl** – located in northern Ukraine, site of the worst nuclear disaster in human history
4. **Climate** – the average annual weather conditions in a given location
5. **Cyrillic alphabet** – writing system developed by the Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe, incorporating Roman and Greek characters as well as unique Slavic symbols (e.g., А Б В Г Д Е Ж)
6. **Eurasia** – the landmass which includes the continents of Europe and Asia
7. **Fallout** – the resettling of irradiated particles released into the atmosphere after a nuclear explosion
8. **Germanic** – languages deriving from the early Germanic peoples of Northern and Central Europe
9. **Indo-European** – originating from within Europe
10. **Monotheistic** – believing in and/or worshipping a single deity (i.e., one God)
11. **Permafrost** – permanently frozen soil
12. **Roman alphabet** – writing system developed by the Romans and commonly used by many Romance and Germanic languages today (e.g., A B C D E F G)
13. **Romance** – languages deriving from Latin, which was spoken during the Roman Empire
14. **Slavic** – languages deriving from the early Slavic peoples of Eastern Europe
15. **Smog** – An atmospheric phenomenon whereby vehicle exhaust and factory smoke combine with fog.
16. **Urban** – an industrialized area of a city or town