

### Essay 1: Is geography a defining feature of Europe?

Geography, as defined by Stanley W. Toops in the second edition of *International Studies: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Global Issues*, is “...the interaction of physical and human phenomena at individual places and of how interactions among places form patterns and organize space (p. 35).” Toops goes on to explain that not only is geography a study of the earth, but also of the activities of people (p. 35). So when given the statement “...geography is less a defining feature of Europe than culture and history...(McCormick, J., p. 43)” to what extent is this agreeable?

The issue with Europe and its border with Asia is that there is no defining border. For political reasons, the western frontier of Russia is considered to be the border between Europe and Asia (McCormick, p. 43). Because of this dilemma, the question of geography not being a defining feature of Europe is somewhat hard to argue against. With no defining border on one side of Europe, where can it be said that it really ends? Along with that, who is considered to be European and whom Asian? McCormick states that because, “Europeans are racially, culturally, and linguistically distinct from Asians...(p. 43)” this is the reason why geography does not have as much impact on whether someone is European, but rather their culture and history (p. 43).

Russia is stuck in the crossfire between Europe and Asia, putting Russia in a difficult position. Is Russia part of Europe, or is it part of Asia? In the eighteenth century, the Ural Mountains were considered to be the border between Europe and Asia, which puts three-quarters of Russia in Asia territory, with a large amount of minorities in that area

being Asian. Continuing with the Ural Mountains being the border, the other quarter of Russia is located in Europe, with large minority groups being located within the European Union, in countries such as Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (McCormick, p. 43). Therefore, the question is posed, is Russia a part of Europe or Asia? This is yet another strike against geography being a significant defining feature of Europe.

However, the second phenomenon that is analyzed in geography, as per the above stated definition, is that of human geography. Physical geography may not be a defining feature of Europe, but human geography can be. "Human geography studies the activities of people...such as industries, cities, cultures and transportation (Toops, S.W., p. 36)." To relate the study of human geography to that of Europe's geography, culture is one of the key terms. Culture is defined as a "learned system of meanings through which people orient themselves in the world so they can act in it (Peterson, M.A., p. 61)." The culture that people associate themselves with is the one they act within, and includes the activities they carry out, therefore their culture would affect their geography.

Continuing with the problematic border of Europe and Asia, 80 percent of the population of Russia are ethnic Russians, while the other 20 percent make up large minorities in the European Union (McCormick, p. 43). If the above definitions of culture and human geography were taken into consideration, would that mean that majority of Russians were in fact European? The culture of these people, the language they speak, and even their appearance is distinctly different from the Asian culture (p. 43). Therefore, geography is in fact a defining feature of Europe, at least in this instance.

As for history within Europe, this defining feature is definitely more prominent than geography. The history of Europe is incredible, having traversed centuries of wars, reformations, and in the last few centuries, modernization (Anderson, S., p. 133-39). What with the Judeo-Christian tradition introduced to Europe by the Roman Empire, the Renaissance in Italy and the Reformation in Germany in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the economic development transcending the Ottoman and Chinese empires, and the Spanish monarchy's accomplishment of sending Christopher Columbus to the New World and also destroying Europe's largest Jewish community and defeating Granada, Europe's history is colorful (p. 133-34). In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europe was relatively stable regarding its political and legal structures, armies, intellectual exchange, social policies, industrialization, technology, urbanization, and capitalization. Europeans at this time were by far the most modernized, exceeding the rest of the world with their developments.

Considering Europe so far, the influence of history has a much higher impact of defining Europe than geography does. Yet, the geography of Europe compliments its history. Because of the lack of a physical border between Russia and Europe, armies like Hitler's and Napoleon's were more easily able to march across Russia to attack. Geography affected where people migrated in the Middle Ages and provided protection from invaders. The geography of Europe was a hinder and a help to its history, helping fight wars and battles with Russia, using the seas to find new worlds, and both helping and hindering the outcome of World War I and II (*Explore More-How Europe's Geography Affected People's Lives*).

The culture of Europeans, disregarding the affect of human geography, is also a more prominent feature of Europe. It is a much more controversial topic, especially due to the many different influences of religion and language. Majority of the cultural influences in Europe come from the Mediterranean area, including the ancient civilization of Egypt, Palestine, Greece, and Rome. Regarding the religion in Europe, there was a considerably large Jewish population before the Holocaust, but today the religion of Europe is mainly Christian. Yet, due to modernization and growth as a culture, organized religion is no longer a key player in the lives of many Western Europeans. As for language, the major languages fall into three categories: Germanic, Romance, and Slavic. Language has a deeper root in Europe, especially depending on the country, and while English is becoming a more predominant language in Europe, it will not replace the national languages; at least not any time soon (Anderson, p. 135-136).

In conclusion, the extent to which geography is a defining feature of Europe or not has a variety of ways to which this can be answered. The geography of Europe is a bit problematic due to the lack of a physical barrier between Europe and Asia. This is problematic when deciding where Europe is exactly, and whether or not Russia is a part of Europe or Asia. So to address this pressing issue, culture and history must be taken into consideration. The culture of the people of Europe has an influence on Russia, with large Russian minorities being located in European countries. Yet, Asia also has an influence on Russia, with 80 percent of its landmass being located in Asia. The culture of Europe relates to human geography because both are influenced by people and their activities. The history of Europe more defines what Europe is to us today and gives us a general idea of what

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Europe is, rather than the culture of the people itself. All in all though, geography definitely does have an impact of defining Europe on a larger scale. Therefore, geography is just as much a defining feature of Europe as culture and history is.

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