CHAPTER 31 - THE WEST AT THE DAWN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter discusses the political, spiritual, and technological forces that shaped and reshaped much of the social experience of twentieth century Europe before and after World War II. In addition, it focuses on the intellectual life of Europe during the twentieth century and assesses the political and social climate in the early twenty-first century. The chapter begins by discussing the movement of peoples during and after World War II. The displacement of 46 million people in Central and Eastern Europe as well as in the Soviet Union resulted in border changes and internal migration to Western Europe. Between 1945 and 1960, about half a million Europeans left the continent often to be replaced by non-European immigrants who entered as a result of the decolonization of European empires. French and British colonials came as “guest workers” to fill the labor needs of the growing European economies. The influx from Africa, Asia, and the Middle East became by the end of the twentieth century a source of racial and cultural antagonism that has spawned right-wing resentment and confrontation.

The chapter then discusses the establishment of the Welfare State in Western Europe during the 1950s and the economic implications of such social legislation at the end of the twentieth century. It then moves on to the changing roles of women in the work force and the development of feminism.

Since World War II, European feminism has set a new agenda of political and social equality expounded in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*. There have been notable changes in the work patterns and social expectations of women. In all social ranks, women have begun to assert larger economic and wider political roles. The number of married women in the work force has sharply risen. Marriage remains a standard association of both men and women, but the birth rate has fallen or stabilized in many industrialized countries.

The twentieth century has seen unparalleled changes in the pursuit and diffusion of knowledge. The technology of radio, television and computers caused a communications revolution, fueled, as well, by the explosion of printed matter. The sheer quantity of information now available has in itself contributed to the fragmentation of public opinion and intellectual life. At the same time, a growing number of Europeans have received a university education, including women and people from many socio-economic backgrounds. The university became for the first time since the Reformation the center of intellectual life and its major new developments. Perhaps the single intellectual movement most characteristic of the mood of twentieth-century European culture is existentialism. Typically, the existentialists have all been influenced by the revolt against reason, which began in the nineteenth century. Rather than understanding human beings in the light of reason, the existentialists have argued, they must be examined in extreme situations. For these experiences, in which human nature is laid bare, show that people must formulate their own ethical values, rather than find them in traditional religion or rational philosophy. The anguished vision of the existentialists reflected the extreme conditions in an era of world wars. With the coming of prosperity to Europe in the 1960s, existentialist thought lost much of its popularity. The major existential writers include the Germans, Martin Heidegger and Karl Jaspers, the Frenchmen, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, and the Dane, Soren Kierkegaard.

Another characteristic of twentieth-century intellectuals has been their passionate involvement in politics. After World War I, many thinkers lost faith in the values of liberalism which had neither prevented war nor established general prosperity. Some intellectuals chose Fascism, but most chose Communism. Yet, Stalin's brutality and the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary among other things alienated many intellectuals from the Soviet Union, but not from Marxism.

Christianity underwent a theological revival after World War I. Churches have raised critical questions about colonialism, nuclear weapons, human rights and other major issues. Many religious thinkers (especially Karl Barth) reemphasized the transcendence of God and the dependence of humankind upon the divine. This neo-orthodoxy rejected the nineteenth century's optimism in man's near divine nature.

The chapter continues with an assessment of the impact of calculating machines and computers on society. By the end of the twentieth century, Europe had entered a new age of technological revolution through the computer and health advances in medical care.

The last major section of the chapter focuses on the rise of radical political Islamism. This is a term used to describe a form of Islam that had significant impact in the Muslim world following the process of decolonization after 1945. Many of the ideas can be traced back to the 1930s, but for years had little impact on the politics of the Middle East. Radical Islamism arose primarily in reaction to secular Arab nationalism that believed the path to Arab independence from Western control lay in adopting and imitating Western technologies and institutions. Much of this Arab nationalism was forged by non-democratic, traditional monarchies such as those in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Egypt. Some of these monarchies controlled vast oil reserves that created wealth among the elite while an impoverished population grew disaffected. The Saudi royal family, for example, entered into agreements with local Muslim authorities by allowing adherents of a rigorist, puritanical form of Islam called Wahhabism to control the educational system while the Saudis modernized the country’s infrastructure. In other Arab countries, the plight of the poor has been championed by Islamic clerics who have been opposed to modernization and preach Muslim “reformism.” This is the belief that a reformed or pure Islam that emphasizes personal piety and religious practice must be established in the contemporary world. The chapter then details the Iranian Revolution of 1979, as well as the Russian invasion of Afghanistan and the establishment of the Taliban government and the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization.
The chapter ends with an assessment of the U. S. led “war on terrorism” that followed the attacks of September 11, 2001 and redirected American foreign policy.

KEY POINTS AND VITAL CONCEPTS

1. The New European Muslim Population: Until recently, most Europeans regarded their national culture as Christian or secular and paid little attention to Islam. But since the 1960s, a sizable Muslim population has settled in Europe as a result of the attraction of economic growth and the process of decolonization. Muslims share certain social and religious characteristics and have generally remained unassimilated and self-contained. Many in this community served as unskilled labor in the 1970s and 1980s, but as European growth slowed and these jobs disappeared, European Muslims became the target for right-wing politicians who blamed them for current problems of crime and general unemployment. It should be remembered that European Muslims are not a homogeneous group and come from different Islamic traditions. Because of the radicalization of parts of the Islamic world, European Muslims have come under increasing scrutiny and restriction by European governments.

2. A Twentieth-Century State of Mind: The intellectual life of Europe since 1914 has been a difficult period to survey because of its absence of unity and shared values. Like the preceding generation of intellectuals, Europeans after 1914 questioned traditional certainties, but to an even greater degree, and with an even greater diversity of responses. Their quest took place against a background of the most extreme social and political conditions: two bloody world wars, unprecedented political repression and slaughter, and great economic unrest. The period was a time of turmoil reminiscent of the disintegration of the later Roman Empire. In both cases, extreme conditions encouraged extreme intellectual conclusions. Many writers of the twentieth century rejected reason and science as the primary guides to life. Their search for new values was marked by anxiety, fear and even desperation. It is symptomatic of this time of uncertainty that most of its intellectual movements were very short-lived.

3. The Modern Church: In the face of political ideologies and material prosperity, the Christian churches have continued to exert considerable influence in thought and politics. Perhaps the most important religious departures have occurred within the Roman Catholic Church. Under the leadership of John XXIII and Paul VI, the second Vatican Council (1959-1965) undertook the most extensive changes to occur in Catholicism for at least a century. Among other liberal moves, the Church turned to a mass celebrated in the vernacular, established relations with other Christian denominations and shared more papal power with bishops. The papacy's continued policy of priestly celibacy and prohibition of birth control have led to international controversy and deep resentment for some. The current pope, John Paul II (1978– ) has followed in the traditions of his namesakes, but has added other dimensions to his office. He has encouraged the expansion of the church in the non-Western world and commands broad support in the church largely because of his attractive and charismatic personal qualities.

SUGGESTED FILMS

Search for Unity: A European Idea. Time-Life. 52 min.

Knowledge or Certainty. Time-Life. 52 min.

A Woman's Place. Xerox Films. 52 min.

An Essay on War. Encyclopaedia Britannica. 23 min.