THE STRAITS OF EUROPE: 
HISTORY AT THE MARGINS OF A CONTINENT 
26TH ANNUAL LECTURE OF THE GHI, WASHINGTON DC, NOVEMBER 8, 2012

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Writing a history of Europe requires placing a story in time and space. The time chosen here is the nineteenth century and more specifically its second half, the period between the European revolutions of 1848 and the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. While there are interesting debates about the character of this period and its position in what has been called the long nineteenth century, this article will focus on the other dimension of history; it will seek to describe Europe in terms of space.1

For historians, it is always appropriate to begin by asking what contemporaries thought about the issue at hand. In this case, however, the sources from the past are not very helpful. The experts of the time, the geographers, who were just establishing their discipline at universities, were divided on the question of where and what exactly Europe was, geographically speaking.2 Coming from different scholarly backgrounds, geographers defined Europe in a variety of ways: in terms of its geology and physical or biological features; in terms of its ethnic, cultural, or economic geography; and in terms of combinations of determining factors. Moreover, contemporary experts could not agree whether Europe was a continent in its own right or a mere appendix of Asia. The exact borders of Europe always remained an issue, particularly its borders in the east. Some even adhered to an expansive notion by speaking of a “Greater Europe” that included white settler colonies and by pointing toward Europe’s part in integrating world trade.3 What they all could agree on was that Europe’s geography was something special and the foundation of its superior global position.

This geographical distinctiveness was often attributed to the character of Europe’s coastlines and its special relationship with the sea. In the early twentieth century, Emil Deckert of the University of Frankfurt am Main pointed to the “many seas at the boundaries as well as the continental waters and bays cutting into the mass of [Europe’s] body” and to “the large number of peninsulas and coastal islands.”4 He concluded that the Atlantic Ocean provided “such a

1 The paper is based on a chapter from my forthcoming book Globale Vorherrschaft und Fortschrittsglaube: Europa 1850-1914 (Munich: C.H. Beck). References have been kept to a minimum.
spectacular range of nautical difficulties that it was no surprise that the world’s most enterprising and proficient sea-faring race grew at the extended European coasts” and that culture and trade developed. Here we recognize the deterministic view of the relationship between environment and culture or politics, which many nineteenth and twentieth century geographers took for granted. This view resulted in the construction of long-term continuities apparently founded on spatial peculiarities.

As this all-too-brief summary of late-nineteenth-century geographical debates demonstrates, a history of Europe can rest only approximately on the geography of the continent. Historians need to abstract from it and, at the same time, specify the environmental factors locally. Population, economy, culture, and politics should be considered in relation to physical setting. Taking a cue from Deckert but discarding his determinism, I will describe European history in the second half of the nineteenth and the opening decades of the twentieth centuries by circumscribing the continent or, to put it differently, by traveling around Europe. I will focus on the margins of the continent and look closely at the straits of Europe. The tour begins at the Kara Strait in the Arctic Sea, continuing with the Öresund (the Sound) and the English Channel, and then moves to the Strait of Gibraltar and the Dardanelles and Bosporus in order to finally reach the Suez Canal. This verbal circumnavigation serves not to delimit the borders of Europe but to explain, first, their fluid nature and the changing relation between history and geography and, second, to identify some fundamental nineteenth-century processes that may be detected most clearly at the margins.

I. The Kara Strait

The Kara Strait is situated at the extreme northeast of Europe, leading from the Barents Sea into the Kara Sea, a marginal sea of the Arctic Ocean. On its southern coast the Ural Mountains start to rise. Today the area is best known for the discarded Soviet nuclear submarines dumped in the Kara Sea. The strait itself is 56 kilometers wide and separates the archipelago of Novaya Zemlya and the coastal Vaygach Island.

The strait began to receive increasing attention in the 1850s as Siberian merchants and goldmine owners searched for a direct link between European harbors and the Ob and Yenisei Rivers in Siberia, hoping
to replace the long and expensive route overland. During the reform era that followed the Crimean War, large numbers of settlers, many of them newly emancipated serfs, began farming in Siberia and hoped to send their cereal crops to markets in the west. Norwegian whalers, too, were interested in the arctic strait as they had overfished the Barents Sea and were now advancing into the Kara Sea in search of seals, walruses, and whales.

However, the Kara Strait and Sea were unknown waters and first needed to be surveyed and mapped. Wind and weather had to be observed to plan for safe, regular journeys. The gold merchants found little support for this venture from the Imperial Geographical Society in St. Petersburg or the Royal Geographical Society in London. In the end, it was the Swedish-Finnish geologist and arctic explorer Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld (1832-1901) who was persuaded to take on this challenge. Financed by the Gothenburg magnate Oscar Dickson, who later also sponsored Fridtjof Nansen, and by Alexander Sibiryakov, the wealthy owner of Siberian goldmines, Nordenskiöld started his journey in July 1878. He was the first to succeed in sailing through the Northeast Passage along the Siberian coast into the Pacific. His two-year journey took him from Gothenburg around Norway and through the Kara Strait towards Cape Chelyuskin, the northernmost tip of Eurasia. His ship, the Vega, had been built in Bremerhaven as a whaler for arctic waters. She got stuck in the ice just before the Bering Sea, forcing the crew to winter there. It was only in July 1879 that the journey could be resumed toward Japan and then through the Strait of Malacca near Singapore, the Suez Canal, Gibraltar, the Channel, and the Öresund.

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6 See George Kish, Northeast passage: Adolf Erik Nordenskiöld, His Life and Times (Amsterdam, 1973).
into the Baltic Sea. In April 1880 the Vega was welcomed home by splendid illuminations in Stockholm.

A year after his return, Nordenskiöld published a full report: *The Voyage of the Vega Round Asia and Europe*. The two volumes were quickly translated into several languages. His journey through the Northeast Passage was one of the numerous arctic exploration expeditions in the later nineteenth century; its scholarly report set the standard for others to follow. Nordenskiöld also published further scholarly and popular works to disseminate the newly acquired knowledge of geography and the natural world. The publications defined what was regarded as European at the northeastern margin of the continent. In contrast to the icy environment of the Arctic and to underdeveloped Siberia, “Europe” meant civilization. “European,” in turn, described people who heroically overcame adverse conditions and conquered the world as they collected knowledge about the seas and continents across the globe. The exploration of the Arctic Sea was an enterprise driven by economic interests and scholarly curiosity. The men on the Vega came from several countries in Europe; the crew was Swedish-Norwegian, the officers Swedish, Finnish, Danish, and Italian.

The Kara Strait was thus in many ways a European strait that intersected with Asia and with wilderness. Economically, it remained marginal despite the Russian colonization of Siberia. Its waters were too icy for regular merchant marine services. Only during the interwar period did Soviet icebreakers manage to get through the Northeast Passage without being interrupted by winter. The regular service installed after the Second World War was excessively costly and could not be kept going after 1991. Maybe global warming will in the future make the route through the Kara Strait into the Pacific as attractive as it was in the mid-nineteenth century.

**II. The Sound and the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal**

In contrast to the Kara Strait, the Öresund or Sound was economically highly profitable for a long period — benefiting the Danish state. The Öresund connects the North Sea and the Baltic. Numerous small and larger islands dot the shallow waters between Denmark and Sweden. There are three main passages; on the western side, the Little Belt and the Great Belt — their many shallows make navigation difficult and unsafe; on the eastern side between the large Danish island of Zealand and the southern Swedish province of Scania; the
third thoroughfare, the Öresund, is a 67-kilometer-long strait that is usually navigable throughout the winter. It is narrowest — only four kilometers wide — in the stretch between Helsingør and Helsingborg, which was long dominated by the Danish fortress of Kronborg. The cities of Copenhagen and Malmö lie across from one another at the southern end of the Öresund.

The Danish Crown began levying a toll on foreign ships and goods in 1429.⁸ The Sound Dues allowed the monarch a considerable amount of independence from the Estates and limited their participation in governing. Well into the nineteenth century, the toll provided a sizeable portion of the Danish state’s income. In 1853 almost 25,000 ships passing Helsingør paid some 2.5 Million Danish rigsdaler in tolls. The goods being transported came from Russia and other countries of the Baltic Sea, and included leather, canvas, coal tar, hemp, rope for ships’ rigging, and tree trunks for masts. In the opposite direction, luxury imports passed through such as wine, fruits, high-quality textiles, and colonial goods ranging from spices, coffee, cane sugar, and tobacco to rice and cotton — the latter products mainly from the United States of America.

The Sound Dues rested on bilateral treaties between Denmark and other maritime powers. When in 1856 the treaty with the United States was up for renewal, the American government insisted on the abolition of the tolls arguing that they were a trade obstacle and that they constituted an unlawful restriction of the freedom of the seas.⁹ U.S. diplomats threatened to take retaliatory measures against the Danish West Indies if the
tolls were not abolished. The Danes preferred to hold on to their colonial possessions among the Lesser Antilles; the Virgin Islands were eventually sold to the United States in 1917. In 1857, Denmark therefore gave in to international pressure and signed the Copenhagen Convention. For a one-time compensation of 30.5 million rigsdaler, Denmark relinquished the dues levied for more than 400 years, and the straits connecting the North and Baltic Seas were internationalized. The compensation came from those states whose shipping companies and trading houses stood to benefit most from free passage; Britain and Russia each paid a third, the United States contributed substantially, and lesser sums were paid by the Hanseatic cities of Hamburg and Lübeck.

The abolition of the Sound Dues signaled clearly that Denmark was no longer a Nordic power and had joined the ranks of Europe’s smaller states, a decline that was confirmed by the wars against Austria and Prussia in 1864 and 1866. At the same time, the end of the toll is an example of the international liberalization of trade during the nineteenth century. Finally, the Sound proves to be one of the nodes in the colonial entanglements of even minor European powers.

The Danish straits were not separating but connecting waterways. The bridging function across the Sound and the Belts was strengthened when in 1892 the first railway ferry started to transport railway carriages from Denmark to Sweden; two contemporary engines of progress, the steamship and the railway, now seamlessly came together in this European zone. More than a hundred years later, a combined road-and-railway bridge was opened in 1999–2000.

By contrast, an artificial strait that proved to be highly divisive was the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal, known today as the Kiel Canal or Nord-Ostsee-Kanal.10 It was built between 1887 and 1895 by the German Reich mainly for strategic reasons. During the construction some 9,000 workers from Germany, Denmark, Poland, Russia, Austria, and Italy were employed at the site. The new canal was almost 100 kilometers long; electric lights enabled operation by night. A mere decade after its opening, the canal needed to be widened and deepened to accommodate a new class of battleships, the Dreadnoughts of the German Navy.

Unlike the natural straits between the North and Baltic Seas, the canal’s construction was not related to the freedom of the seas but to the competition between the European imperial powers Britain and Germany. Their rivalry was the reason for the deep cut through the

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landscape and transformation of geography by engineers. Ultimately, however, the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal proved to be almost worthless strategically. During the First World War, the British blockade of Kiel and other German ports rendered the idea of allowing the German fleet easy passage between the North Sea and the Baltic moot. The canal also had financial implications. The fees for merchant ships did not cover the construction and running costs. Therefore the Reich introduced a new tax in 1902, the so-called *Schaumweinsteuer*, a tax on champagne. The artificial strait thus tied geography to domestic politics and the intricate relations between the German states and the Reich. In 1919, the Treaty of Versailles internationalized the canal.

### III. The English Channel / La Manche

Whereas the technical and financial power of the new German Reich materially changed the geography at one of the straits, the northwestern strait of Europe remained basically unchanged despite the engineering capability to transform it. The English Channel / la Manche is roughly 350 kilometers long. At its eastern end, the gap between Dover and the Cape Griz-Nez, the so-called Pas de Calais or the Dover Strait, is only 34 kilometers wide. This has long been one of busiest waterways in the world connecting the North Sea, and therefore also the entry to the Öresund, with the Atlantic Ocean. It channels the traffic from northwestern Europe via the Strait of Gibraltar into the Mediterranean Sea and, since 1869, further on through the Suez Canal to the Indian Ocean and beyond.

Coastal geography produces irregular tides in the eastern parts of the Channel and even a double tide in places. The climate results in foggy weather throughout the year. The biggest freshwater river to feed into the Channel is the Seine. Among the important ports are Le Havre (the largest European harbor for coffee imports before 1914), Portsmouth (the naval port of the Royal Navy), and Southampton (where in 1912 the Titanic began its first and fatal journey in the direction of New York). The international denomination “English” Channel for the strait signified who dominated it in the nineteenth century. It was at Portsmouth that the *Dreadnought*, which lent its name to the new class of battleships, was launched in 1906, triggering busy digging at the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal.

The Channel was thus a central sea bridge connecting different parts of Europe and the world; it had seaports tied to global trade; and it was the naval base of an empire and, at the same time, the highly
The English Channel, ca. 1900

protected national security zone of England. The nineteenth century saw several plans for strengthening the ties between the British Isles and the Continent through large-scale engineering projects. Beginning in the 1850s, proposals were regularly put forward to build a bridge, dig a tunnel, or establish a railway ferry. In 1881-82 the first test drillings for a tunnel took place at the Shakespeare Cliffs near Dover and at Sangatte in the vicinity of Calais, advancing for a mile on both sides. Before voting on a bill on the proposed tunnel, both houses of Britain’s Parliament called in experts; engineers, merchants and industrialists, railway representatatives, naval and army officers gave exhaustive evidence. Yet the Joint Select Committee could not come to agreement. In the end, supporters of the tunnel were only narrowly outnumbered by their opponents.

The main argument against the project came from the British Ministry of War. Although most contemporaries thought this unrealistic, the army leadership feared that the subterranean tube could be used by a foreign power — and this meant France for most of the period — to occupy the British Isles. It became a shibboleth to link Britain’s national strength to its being an island despite arguments to the contrary which emphasized the existing close links with the continental Europe. Britain’s island status was considered an essential factor for the building and preservation of the Empire as well as for the country’s national character.

Although the majority of official Britain regarded the Channel as something that closed the country off, several nineteenth-century developments actually brought Britain closer and closer to the Continent. Many French proponents of a Channel tunnel supported the project for commercial reasons — because a tunnel would allow perishable goods

such as milk products, fruits, and luxury items to be transported faster and without reloading. Likewise, salesmen would be able to travel more easily to, and therefore increase their business with, England. Above all, the supporters in both countries argued, a tunnel under la Manche would benefit tourism. The interests behind the project at the beginning of the twentieth century had not changed much from the mid-nineteenth century — and would not be very different by the end of the twentieth when the channel tunnel was finally opened in 1994: all along, these were railway companies and their bankers, free traders, and export industries. At the opening of the twentieth century, however, they could not yet overcome the opposition from within the government in Britain. Still, despite prevailing doubts, traffic across the Channel became easier and increased from mid-century through regular steamship services jointly run by French and British companies. Then, in 1909, the French aviation engineer Louis Blériot (1872-1936) flew from Calais to Dover in just 37 minutes; the sea gap had begun to narrow substantially even if security and strategic measures against air attacks were implemented after the Great War.

The story of the tunnel projects demonstrates the central role of this northwestern strait of Europe. Besides the Channel’s political function in the European power game and the manifold threads from all over the world entangled at this junction, the tunnel plans were also a manifestation of the pride and self-assurance of the period’s engineers. They had the will to change the landscape, and they did transform European geography. In other places they constructed masterworks such as the twenty-kilometer Simplon Railway Tunnel through the Swiss and Italian Alps, which opened in 1906. This enterprise was financed by, among others, Emile Baron d’Erlanger (1832–1911), a Paris banker who was born in Frankfurt am Main. Baron d’Erlanger was also the chairman of the Channel Tunnel Company and of the Chemin de Fer du Nord. His bank invested not only in European railways but also in colonial Africa, in North and South America, as well as in the transatlantic cable, together with Julius Reuter. The channel tunnel was just one of the era’s many landscape-transforming engineering projects that created the infrastructure for European and global interactions.

IV. The Strait of Gibraltar

The Strait of Gibraltar was a strategic place in Europe. It joined the Mediterranean Sea with the Atlantic Ocean, and Europe with North

13 See Gabriele Mendelssohn and Kristin Schwarz, Die Familie Erlanger: Bankiers, Mäzene, Künstler (Ingelheim am Rhein, 2005).
During the period under review, it acted as a bridge rather than a dividing line. The western entry between Cape Trafalgar in the South East of Cadiz and Cape Spartel at the northern tip of Africa near Tangier is 44 kilometers wide. Navigation is tricky because of a strong surface current from the Atlantic. Strong winds add to the difficulties, while on the inside along the Rif Mountains regular calms could keep sailing ships idle for long stretches. The bays of Algeciras and Gibraltar on the northern side made for two of the safest ports in the world.

Gibraltar has been in British hands since 1704. On the Rock, which is connected by a sandy piece of land to the Iberian Peninsula, there was a British fortress and town. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Gibraltar was not the enclave it has been since the days of Franco. Its borders were permeable; dividing rules were internal rather than external. Seen from London, Gibraltar was a military base: a safe harbor and docks for the Navy; an impressive fortress at an important strait, which became even more valuable with the opening of the Suez Canal at the other end of the Mediterranean; a pivotal point for steamships in a worldwide system of coaling stations. The garrison held up to 5,000 soldiers. The civilian population numbered around 5,000 in 1800, but grew to more than 20,000 by 1901. Only some of them were British subjects; the rest were aliens. The origins of the British were rather mixed. Only a small portion came from the British Isles, the majority had Spanish, Portuguese, and Genovese, Maltese or North African roots. There were more Catholics than Protestants, and a Jewish community was present on the Rock as well.
Many merchants profited from the free port. Fortress and town had to rely on food and water from the mainland. These and other services were provided by workers who went back and forth between Gibraltar and the mainland on a daily basis. The workers and other aliens received permits to work and live in Gibraltar under a permit system, which underwent several reforms during the nineteenth century. The impetus for reform first came from epidemics that were attributed to overpopulation and often blamed on the many resident aliens. Yellow fever killed several thousand in 1804, 1813-14, and 1828. Cholera took its toll in 1860 and 1864. Besides sanitary reforms, the governor and the police introduced measures to limit population growth. First, permits were limited and the time periods shortened. Second, new laws and regulations made naturalization more difficult. Since whoever was born on the Rock was automatically granted British citizenship, from the 1830s pregnant women who were not British or were married to an alien had to leave Gibraltar three months before the baby was due. Likewise, the new British naturalization law of 1844, which obliged women to take their husbands’ citizenship, was suspended for Gibraltar and other Crown colonies because the authorities did not want alien women to acquire British citizenship by marrying British subjects. They had primarily prostitutes in mind, who they thought were likely to seduce British men who were staying on the Rock or passing through. Marriage regulations, the eviction of pregnant women, and the permit system were periodically tightened in the following decades.

The necessity of involving the population in the concomitant sanitary measures led in the long term to political participation by the male dignitaries in the government of the colony. In 1865 a Sanitary Commission was appointed by the governor; this body was partially transformed into an elected town council in 1921. Civil society first started to organize around the local merchants’ Exchange Committee formed at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In 1817, a library was founded, later a Chamber of Commerce. Catholic associations, the Jewish community, Boy Scouts and, in the 1920s, trade unions were established. The civilian population developed strong loyalties to the Crown. During occasional royal visits and the 1887 and 1897 jubilees, its members demonstrated their allegiance thereby confirming their demand for participation, both together with the Governor of Gibraltar and over his head.

Until 1937 Spanish representatives were always present during official festivities. In the nineteenth century, border lines were drawn


inside societies rather than between nation states. Situated at the geographical margin of Europe, Gibraltar experienced problems similar to those of other European societies and tried similar solutions. Citizenship, population, and sanitary policies in the Crown colony are merely examples of the internal lines drawn in Europe on the basis of gender and social status, and elsewhere of ethnicity. The dialectics of inclusion and exclusion formed identities, in the case at hand the new notion of “Gibraltarians.” Economic and security interests were often intertwined with moral judgments and social concerns. A closer look at the Rock would also reveal that state control was incomplete and that people still had sufficient resources to avoid the tightening grip.

At mid-century the southern side of the strait featured several Spanish military posts in the large bay formed by the Rif Mountains. The bases from Ceuta in the west to Melilla in the east had been established during the Reconquista. The most recently acquired position, captured in 1848, were the Islas Chafarinas. As a consequence of the European occupation, Moroccan trade had shifted away from the Mediterranean Sea towards the Atlantic coast. The Sultan exercised no real control over the Rif’s coast, which was one of the poorest stretches of the Mediterranean. By the nineteenth century local conditions allowed only for scant agriculture, fishery — and piracy. European colonialism worsened conditions. The Spanish posts in North Africa, from the 1830s, disturbed Moroccan trade with Algeria because they regarded it as smuggling or suspected the traders of being pirates. Indirectly, the Spanish thus made piracy more attractive or even necessary for some tribes to make a living.16 Although by the beginning of the nineteenth century the European sea powers had mostly suppressed Muslim and Christian pirates, they never succeeded in controlling the small groups operating from the Rif Mountains. These local pirates captured and robbed sailing vessels caught in the Gibraltar calms. The rugged coastal landscape with its many hiding places and scattered settlements, which could not be placed under fire by naval artillery as a city could be, made suppression from the sea impossible.

From 1855 on, the British government put effective pressure on the Sultan to regain control over the Rif’s Mediterranean coast. Mulai Abd ar-Rahman sent several military expeditions to discipline the inhabitants of this area so that piracy stopped for some decades. When Morocco’s government experienced internal conflicts and increasingly fell victim to European imperial rivalries towards the

century’s end, piracy flared up again. In 1893-94, Spain led a war on some Berber tribes, and in 1909 entered a military conflict with the Sultan over the Spanish fortress and settlement of Melilla. European imperial competition triggered two diplomatic crises over Morocco in 1905-6 and 1911. Finally in 1912, the Treaty of Fez established a protectorate, with France taking over most of southern Morocco and Spain controlling the northern Mediterranean coast plus a small strip on the Atlantic side of the strait. The city of Tangier became an international zone (officially in 1923). Spanish Morocco again gained historical prominence in the 1930s. It was from here that General Franco, who had fought as second-in-command of the Spanish foreign legion in yet another war against the Berber people from 1921 to 1926, launched his revolt against the Republic in 1936 with the support of the colonial army.

The Strait of Gibraltar was a fuzzy border between Europe and Africa. On both sides, particular localities developed from regional and transnational sources during the nineteenth century. British Gibraltar, international Tangier, Spanish Ceuta, and other such localities were all somehow at the “frontiers of the state,” whose control over the population at Gibraltar or over the Rif’s inhabitants, for example, though it increased, was by no means complete. Identities and internal divisions formed along different lines at the strait; European-Oriental was just one of them; others of equal importance could be religious, ethnic, social, or gender markings. An ever-increasing power over the strait was exerted by European colonialism and imperial competition, particularly on the southern side where states were failing to gain effective control. In some respects, this “deficiency” still manifests itself in the present. Today, the Rif Mountains are the world’s largest cannabis growing fields, producing half of the global output. The Strait of Gibraltar was an intersection of power, a contact zone, and a sphere for exchanges among Europeans and between Europeans and others. The opening of the Suez Canal made it into a global strait.

V. The Dardanelles and the Bosporus

At the other end of the Mediterranean, the so-called Turkish Straits, made up of the Dardanelles and the Bosporus, were a pivotal spot of European diplomacy and warfare. Here, the European state system manifested itself throughout the nineteenth century. At the same time, the straits formed the intersection of the Ottoman Empire and its European and Near Eastern territories.
The straits connect the Mediterranean with the Black Sea. The Dardanelles are 65 kilometers long and 2 to 6 kilometers wide. They lead into the Sea of Marmara, which is followed by the Bosporus, whose waters narrow down to 700 meters and stretch over 31 kilometers before they flow into the Black Sea. On both sides of the Bosporus, Constantinople/Istanbul spreads out. The city had more than a million inhabitants in 1897, a figure it regained only in 1950 after a slump in the interwar years. According to the census of 1885, some 15 percent of its inhabitants were not subjects of the Sultan. Among the Sultan’s subjects only a minority (44 percent) were Muslims; the rest adhered to the Greek Orthodox Church (17 percent), the Armenian Church (17 percent), Judaism (5 percent), or the smaller communities of Catholics, Bulgarian-Orthodox, and Protestants. Constantinople accommodated a conglomerate of religious, ethnic, and national groups who spoke a myriad of languages and followed widely varying customs. The 1911 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* characterized it as “not of one nation but of many, and hardly more of one than of another.” Although the city deserves in-depth treatment, our focus here will be on the straits as an object of European and, indeed, world politics.

The straits became the object of international conventions on several occasions. In principle, the Ottoman emperor exercised control over them. From the eighteenth century on, however, Russia sought favorable regulations for itself but encountered resistance not only from the Ottomans but also from the other European powers. The Russian demand for free passage of its merchant fleet through the straits had already been granted in the peace of Küçük Kaynarca in 1774. Well into the nineteenth century, the Russian cargo consisted mainly of cereals from Ukraine bound for export. Later the coal and iron industries of the

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Don accessed the world market through the straits. Controversy arose from the strategic interests Russia pursued in the wake of its expansion south towards the Black Sea and the Caucasus. The Tsarist Navy wanted ice-free access to the seas, and the Russian government tried various means to reach this aim: threats against the Ottoman Empire, alliance with the Sultan, and finally war against the other European powers.

All to no avail; throughout the nineteenth century, the Turkish straits remained closed for all warships but the Ottoman fleet, unless the Ottoman government determined otherwise. The European powers guaranteed this state of affairs in the multilateral Conventions of London in 1840 and 1841. This was yet another example of the (partial) internationalization of important European waterways, in peace time at least. The issue of the passage of warships arose several times during the following decades, such as in the Crimean War in 1854–56 and in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78. In 1895, the British cabinet considered sending its Mediterranean fleet through the Dardanelles for a humanitarian intervention in response to the murder of large numbers of Christian Armenians who had protested Sultan Abdul Hamid II’s connivance in pogroms against their brethren in Anatolia. The Russian government discussed similar plans and wanted to reach Constantinople before the Royal Navy. Despite humanitarian campaigns in Europe and the United States, the powers distrusted and blocked each other. No ships sailed forth. The German Protestant missionary Johannes Lepsius began his publicity and aid campaigns for the Armenians on this occasion.

In 1905 the international conventions prevented the Russian Black Sea fleet from sailing through the straits and the Suez Canal to reinforce Russia’s Pacific fleet against the Japanese. The politics surrounding the Dardanelles and the Bosporus began to take on a global dimension, particularly in the context of Anglo-Russian rivalry. The two empires came into direct contact with each other in Afghanistan just northeast of India, the jewel in the Imperial Crown. Since the British sea route to South Asia went through Gibraltar via Malta and Cyprus to the Suez Canal, the London government did everything to prevent the free movement of the Russian Navy in the Mediterranean Sea. Therefore, keeping the Turkish Straits closed to warships was a central British strategic aim. But the domestic and internal weakness of the Ottoman Empire made it increasingly difficult to uphold the “European principle” from 1841 on.

18 For the background, see Winfried Baumgart, Europäisches Konzert und nationale Bewegung: Internationale Beziehungen 1830-1878 (Paderborn, 1999), 287–301.

19 See D.W. Spring, “Russian Foreign Policy, Economic Interests, and the Straits Question, 1905-1914,” in New Perspectives in Modern Russian History, ed. Robert B. McKean (Basingstoke, 1992); Ronald P. Bobroff, Roads to Glory: Late Imperial Russia and the Turkish Straits (London, 2006).
During the First World War, one of the bloodiest campaigns took place at the European entry to the Dardanelles. This peninsular area carried the name Gallipoli. British and French troops tried to land there in order to reach Constantinople and open the straits for transport to the Eastern front in Russia from the south via the Crimea. This seemed a solution to the blockade of the Baltic Sea in the north by the German fleet at the Øresund. The British Army at Gallipoli encompassed the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC), a Gurkha regiment, and other colonial troops. The French army corps included several battalions from Senegal. On the other, Ottoman side, a certain Mustafa Kemal (1881-1938) served as commander of a division. The Gallipoli campaign, or the battle of Çanakkale as it is called in Turkey, was a transformative moment for British Dominion and colonial troops, as well as for their Turkish counterparts. For the former, the Gallipoli campaign was decisive in shifting identity away from the European metropoles. More than 200,000 soldiers died in the futile attempt to gain control of the straits. Only with the armistice in 1918 did these come under Allied control. The 1923 Treaty of Lausanne established an international strait commission, but in 1936 the execution of the regulations fell back into Turkish hands. In sum, there is ample justification for calling the straits between the Mediterranean and the Black Sea a “focal point of world history.”

VI. The Suez Canal

My circumnavigation of Europe concludes with a strait that did not even exist before the second half of the nineteenth century. It was also a focal point of world history and particularly of European imperialism. The reference is, of course, to the Suez Canal, built between 1859 and 1869. Its construction was one of the largest engineering projects of the period. Without any locks, the canal slopes gently from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. It links two different sea worlds. For a while, the Great and the Small Bitter Lakes, two saltwater lakes between the northern and southern sections of the canal, prevented the migration of flora and fauna. But by the late 1920s the continuous flow of waters diminished their salt content, and maritime flora and fauna began migrating from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean. Biologists have called this “Lessepsian migration,” after Ferdinand de Lesseps, the organizer of the canal’s construction. The migratory movement was furthered by the construction of the Aswan Dam in the 1960s, which changed the sea environment at the Nile Delta. As a result, today Red Sea fish are no

20 Zechlin, “Die türkischen Meerengen.”
longer regarded as exotic aliens in the eastern Mediterranean and continue to spread. Some of the unintended biological consequences of the canal were unwanted. Contemporary European experts, for example, feared the spreading of pathogenic germs from Asia. International conventions regulated quarantine rules to keep cholera and the plague at bay.\footnote{Valeska Huber, “The Unification of the Globe by Disease? The International Sanitary Conferences on Cholera, 1851-1894,” \textit{Historical Journal} 49, no. 2 (2006): 453-76.}

The human history of the canal’s construction was full of irony.\footnote{See Daniel R. Headrick, \textit{The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940} (New York, 1988), 25-31.} Initiated by French diplomats and engineers and financed largely with French capital, the waterway was initially built by Egyptian forced labor until the British protested; then modern machinery was introduced, and the construction triggered further technical improvements. The British government had been suspicious of plans for the canal and tried to block it as best as it could. But as it turned out, Britain quickly proved to be the greatest beneficiary of its construction. The project had been meant to strengthen the Egyptian Viceroy against the Sultan in Constantinople, but the financial costs eventually led the Egyptian state to bankruptcy. This, in turn, set in motion the establishment of the British protectorate over Egypt in 1882.

The canal introduced a direct route to the Indian Ocean, eliminating the need to sail around southern Africa. Its length was 164 kilometers with a bottom width of 22 meters and an original depth of 8 meters. Traveling via Suez shortened the route from Britain to Bombay by more than 40 percent, to Calcutta by a third, and to Hong Kong still by 25 percent. On account of the unreliable desert winds and high towing costs, sailing ships hardly used the canal. The canal thus boosted the British steamship industry and hastened the end of the sailing
era. The tonnage going to East Africa and Asia quickly exceeded expectations. Taken together, the shortening of the sea routes, the increased production of steamships, and the growth in tonnage all benefitted British financial interests, the shipbuilding industry, and the merchant fleet. Suez became a tool of empire.

The other parties involved were the Egyptian Viceroy and the French backers of the project. Ever since Napoleon had surveyed Suez in 1798, plans to cut through the isthmus had been proposed to the Khedive. A successor to Muhammad Ali, the Albanian founder of the self-proclaimed dynasty of Egyptian viceroys, finally granted a concession to the former French diplomat Ferdinand de Lesseps (1805-1894). De Lesseps founded the Compagnie Universelle du Canal de Suez. The logistics of the undertaking and the physical task of digging through the ground necessitated enormous efforts; financial and political obstacles also had to be removed. Two-thirds of the shares were bought by Frenchmen; the rest had to be acquired by the Egyptian government because analysts did not expect the company to make a profit. British Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston, who later became prime minister, rejected the plans at first. Although he realized the proposed canal’s strategic importance for British India, he feared the negative consequences of a canal under French control. Later, when the canal had opened, Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli bought 44 percent of the shares from the indebted Viceroy Ismail (1830-1895), who in 1879 had to leave office under joint pressure from Britain and France and spent the rest of his life in a palace on the Bosporus.

The canal was open to all nations, like other waterways internationalized in the nineteenth century, for example, the Rhine (treaties of 1831 and 1868) and the Danube (1838 and 1856). In fact, the British protectorate over Egypt and the presence of the army ensured control by London from 1882 on — until some 90 years after the opening of the canal, the Suez Crisis of 1956 signaled the end of the British Empire.

The establishment of the British protectorate over Egypt is regarded as one of the key events in the history of European imperialism. The motives and causes have been the subject of debate among historians. The occupation of Egypt was not the catalyst of the “new imperialism” in the late nineteenth century but an important step in Europe’s involvement in ruling over lands and peoples beyond the geographical borders of the continent. Imperial geographies crystallized at the Suez Canal. However, we should keep in mind that


European imperialism was not all about rule and profits. Culture was also an essential dimension. In this respect, the Suez Canal marked a frontier, or, more precisely, a liminal space. Valeska Huber has pointed out that the canal became a new emotional border for Europe. European merchants, soldiers, colonial servicemen with their families, missionaries, workers, and tourists all passed through the canal. Upon reaching Port Said, they bought suitable clothing for the tropics and put it on. On the return journey, this was the place to change back into the usual European outfit and thus drop one’s colonial role and status. In letters, postcards, and diaries, many travelers noted this symbolic border crossing. Novelists and poets often referred to Suez. Rudyard Kipling, for example, who was born in India in 1865, described Suez as a frontier between very unlike worlds with different rules and customs. In his poem *Mandalay* (1890), he expressed his desire to return to the East in the following lines:

> Ship me somewhere east of Suez, where the best is like the worst,
> Where there aren’t no Ten Commandments an’ a man can raise a thirst;
> For the temple-bells are callin’, an’ it’s there that I would be —
> By the old Moulmein Pagoda, looking lazy at the sea.26

In Kipling’s view, powers other than Christian ones seemed to rule beyond the Canal.

Although geographically not part of the Continent, Suez clearly marked a European frontier. In many respects — political, economic, and technological as well as ecological — the canal was one of the essentially European straits in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In cultural terms it may best be described, though, as a liminal zone of an imperial character.

**Conclusion**

Let me summarize and draw some conclusions. Europe’s many straits allow us to understand its uncertain borders during the nineteenth century. Ecologically, economically, politically, socially, and culturally, its straits were points of intersection and contact. They were interfaces where diverse interests, ideas, peoples, goods, flora and fauna from Europe and other parts of the world encountered one another. Straits linked the peoples of Europe to one another and to non-European societies. To be sure, they also separated peoples. Nonetheless, the multiplication and intensification of contacts

outweighed the divisions. Europe in the second half of the nineteenth century was characterized by a high level of mobility. Depending on circumstances and region, this mobility resulted in cooperation, competition, or resistance. Europeans attempted to shape geographically different conditions — think of the Kara Strait in the Arctic Ocean and the Suez Canal — by means of scientific reconnaissance and the use of advanced technology. These efforts rested on the mobilization of economic resources and the exercise of political and military power, as well as the development of complex systems of knowledge and organization.

In the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, political power shifted. Think of Denmark’s loss of control over the Öresund or the weakening of the Ottomans’ hold over the Bosporus. The Suez Canal illustrates two things: first, the successful efforts of the Egyptian viceroyalty to achieve greater autonomy vis-à-vis the Ottoman sultan by means of reforms and progressive projects; second, the failure of Egypt’s European-oriented modernization policy to resist European business and financial interests. It was, above all, British predominance that was evident from the Channel to Gibraltar across to the Bosporus and the Suez Canal. The intense competition between the European powers was manifested in the control of the Turkish Straits as well as in the construction of the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal. In the strategic consciousness of European governments, the different straits were
linked to one another. Internationalizing straits provided a way to avert conflict or to bring hostilities to an end.

Straits became imperial intersections during the nineteenth century. Siberia, North Africa, the Black Sea region, East Africa, South Asia, and the Far East were now more easily accessible to European traders, missionaries, scientists, soldiers, and bureaucrats. In many respects, Europe’s straits became more globally enmeshed than before. But the example of Europe’s inability to impose order in the region of the Strait of Gibraltar shows how precarious Europe’s predominance was at its colonial margins. Here, the frontiers and limits of the state were felt.

The example of Gibraltar also illustrates how state action and societal need led to identity formation within societies during the nineteenth century. This process is perhaps more clearly evident in certain regions at Europe’s margins than elsewhere. Europe’s straits were crystallization points for the construction of various types of collective consciousness: social, religious, ethnic, national, and gender-specific. The self-understanding manifested here was marked as “European.” It was also rooted in the experiences of individuals who crossed the icy Kara See in the 1860s, who passed Port Said and Suez after 1869, or who fought at the Dardanelles in 1915.

Finally, some general remarks on the historiographical intentions of writing history from the margins of a continent. This approach does not merely serve the purpose of illustrating significant nineteenth-century processes, which may also be detected elsewhere. It is not simply a European “world-in-a-nutshell” principle but has further implications. First, this approach decenters European history. This allows us to recognize that central places of the nineteenth century were actually situated at the so-called periphery. The perspective from the periphery reveals global, imperial, and international connections between the straits. The fluid and permeable character of borders stands out instead of their separating and delimiting qualities. Second, history from the margins emphasizes the transnational and relational character of the period over the national element by showing the political, economic, and social pertinence of the manifold European interaction “within” and in relation to the world beyond the Continent. Studying the straits of Europe is therefore not an arbitrary but an appropriate choice of localities. From this perspective, it is difficult to regard nineteenth-century Europe solely as an age of nationalism: it was as much an age of internationalism and globalization.  

Third, the journey around the margins of Europe shows the potential of translocality as a heuristic concept.\textsuperscript{28} It allows us to distinguish the various layers of relations that entangle localities with other places in an often hierarchical and asymmetrical manner. Questions of power and domination arise in all places concerned as well as in the linking channels between them. Translocality appears not as a condition but as the result of movements and interactions. There are tensions at work between the fluidity and changeability of geographical space and the forces of solidification and condensation, institutional or otherwise. In general, the future historiographical challenge may be to approach what are regarded as the centers of European history in the same manner, that is, to analyze the liminal zones within Europe by researching the spatial dimensions of how Europe negotiated differences, otherness, and inequalities, and how these were established, overcome, or sustained.\textsuperscript{29} Such an approach will challenge standard histories of Europe as a system of nation-states.

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\textsuperscript{28} Ulrike Freitag and Achim von Oppen, eds., \textit{Translocality: The Study of Globalising Processes from a Southern Perspective} (Leiden/Boston, 2010), 1-21.