I. Introduction

Histories of “Western Civilization” tend to be based on the assumption that the cultural space of “the West” is defined by democracy, individualism, and liberalism. Consequently, they trace the development and gradual expansion of “western” freedoms from the birth of democracy in ancient Greece, through the expansion of liberties and civil rights in the wake of the Enlightenment, to the defense of “western” democracy against fascism and communism in the twentieth century, in order to show how “western” nations became exemplary, stable, and wealthy democracies.\(^1\) There are also numerous monographs which celebrate and explain the uniqueness and alleged superiority of “the West” or “Western Civilization.”\(^2\)

These sweeping overviews of Euro-Atlantic history usually first define what they hold to be “western” values and then analyze how (Western) Europe and North America came to develop into a “community of values” characterized by political participation, pluralist civil societies, human rights, the separation of powers, and the protection of civil liberties over the course of time. Such analyses, however, typically ignore contradictory developments such as imperialism, colonial exploitation, totalitarianism, and genocide (which could just as well be defined as “western”) or downplay them as an “aberration” from the true “end” of the West’s history: the expansion of freedom. Alternatively, historians have examined the value systems of countries like Germany in a specific period to determine how “western” they had become, usually by comparing them to the

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Anglo-Saxon countries, which serve as the normative standard of measurement. This treatment of “the West” is essentialist. Since “the West” is a construct and not a timeless entity and since defining certain values as “western” is a normative exercise, an analysis of how the concept of the West emerged and how it was supplied with meaning is needed.3

How the concept of the West evolved is a question which historians have largely ignored. While there is an abundance of work on the history of “Western Civilization,” there is little literature on the conceptual origins and shifting meanings of “the West.”4 The same is true of cardinal directions.7 Geographical concepts — particularly those frequently employed in political discourse, such as “the West” — are tied to non-geographical concepts such as democracy to provide them with meaning and import. They are not neutral but imply normative judgments that call for critical scrutiny. This article will reconstruct how the concept of Western Civilization emerged and acquired its current connotations.

II. Westernizers versus Slavophiles

The geographical concept of the West can be traced back for millennia. The idea of a westward movement of empires achieved prominence in the Middle Ages as the theory of translatio imperii, which held that power would be repeatedly transferred from east to west. Ever since


the early eighteenth century, this “heliotropic myth” has been influential for American self-descriptions. From Troy in the east through Greece to Rome, “westward the course of empire takes its way,” as the Anglo-Irish philosopher George Berkeley famously put it in his Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America. It was only in the nineteenth century, however, that the modern idea of the West as a cultural community linking Western European nations (and later North America as well) emerged.

As capitalism and the industrial revolution dramatically transformed Western Europe and North America, a socio-economic schism between them and Russia emerged, and consequently an east-west divide came to dominate European mental maps. Before the nineteenth century, Russia had mostly been considered a northern power. The roots of the designation of Russia as a northern state can be traced to the ancient worldview according to which Europe’s major dividing line went from northwest to southeast separating the Roman Empire in the south from territories outside Roman control in the north; the “East” was usually synonymous with the “Orient.” In the nineteenth century, however, Russia, in light of its diverging development, was slowly re-imagined as an eastern power. Industrializing Western Europe appeared increasingly “modern” and “progressive,” whereas Russia was described as inherently “backward” and “reactionary.”

The spatial reordering of Europe in the nineteenth century, however, was not an imposition by the quickly developing Western European countries. To the contrary, it can be said that the concept of the West was invented in Russia, where it stood at the center of debates over Russian identity. In his 1829 review of Russia’s development since Peter the Great’s ambitious attempts to “Europeanize” Russia, the Russian philosopher Pyotr Chaadayev complained bitterly that Russians were “neither of the Occident nor of the Orient,” resisted

8 Jan Willem Schulte Nordholt, The Myth of the West: America as the Last Empire (Grand Rapids, 1995).
10 The context of European nationalism and imperialism was essential for the concept of the West as a cultural community to emerge. The ideology of nationalism promoted the idea of cultural individuality and thus made it possible to imagine the world being composed of various distinct civilizations. As European nations set out to colonize the rest of the world, they claimed the superiority of their own civilization to justify their imperialism. As a result, the concept of the West had a distinctly racial cast and was closely tied to the concept of whiteness. See Edward W. Said, Orientalism (New York, 1978). Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London, 1983). Alastair Bonnett, The Idea of the West: Culture, Politics, and History (Basingstoke, 2004).
“all real progress,” and had not been as affected as their “Western brethren” by the ideas “of justice, right, and order.”¹² In his critique of Russian society, Chaadayev used the concept of the West as a point of comparison from which to evaluate Russia’s development in the last century.

The publication of Chaadayev’s First Philosophical Letter in 1836 set off an intense debate about Russian identity and led to the formation of two political camps. The “Westernizers” wished that Russia would follow the course of Western European countries and modernize according to their example in order to catch up to those states that had become more powerful than Russia over the course of the nineteenth century. The “Slavophiles,” by contrast, gave the term “Westernizers” a negative connotation and set Russia’s allegedly harmonious, organic, and spiritual community proudly apart from what they perceived as a divisive, artificial, and hollow “West.” In the 1860s, Pan-Slavists used the discourse of Russian Anti-Westernism to dissociate a Slavic civilization from a Romano-Germanic Europe, which was believed to be in eventual decline, and to justify Russian expansionism. To Slavophiles, Russia was a distinct civilization defined in opposition to “the West.”¹³ In the Russian print discourse, the term “the West” would, therefore, be used synonymously with (non-Russian) Europe.¹⁴ It should be noted, however, that Russia did not identify itself with “the East.” The Russian term “vostok” (east) only referred to the “Orient.” Russia’s disassociation from “the West” was always framed in the opposition of “Russia and the West” or “Russia and Europe”; it was, in other words, located between the “vostok” and the “zapad” (west).¹⁵ Over the course of the nineteenth century, imperial authorities and the Russian Geographical Society produced maps incorporating contested territory in the west into the Russian state, and as a result, the geographical location of Poland, Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia in Europe was also increasingly “easternized.”¹⁶

The rest of Europe followed the Russian debates about “the West,” and Russian anti-Westernism certainly contributed to the fact that
the developing Western European concept of the West tended to be constructed in opposition to Russia. According to Ezequiel Adamovsky, "between about 1740 and 1860, Russia was constructed as a 'land of absence,' a historical entity characterized not by what it is but by what it lacks — that is, by the absence of certain elements that were considered fundamental to civilization, development, modernity, or simply freedom." In the eyes of Western Europeans, Russia thus became the antithesis of “the West.” In fact, the “Easternization” of Russia and the “Westernization” of Western Europe went hand in hand. It was “by means of the concept of Eastern Europe” that “the narrative of Western civilization transferred onto the Slavic nations many of the stereotypes and prejudices traditionally ascribed to the Orient” and thus invented “the West” in a process which Adamovsky has described as “Euro-Orientalism.” The Crimean War of 1854, in which France and Great Britain were pitted against Russia, contributed further to the ideological antagonism between Russia — now synonymous with “the East” — and “the West.”

Defining “Western Civilization” in opposition to Russia resulted in the increasing association of “the West” with industrialism, capitalism, progress, and the Enlightenment. These were the elements that Slavophiles rejected most emphatically, considering them incompatible with Russian identity. These values thus lost their universal claims, as they became tied to a specific locality: “the East” — and “the West.”

Importantly, the concept of the West developed within a European context. Russia — deeply entangled in European history — was not excluded from what was held to be the European “continent.” Most Europeans considered the Ural Mountains to be the border between Europe and Asia, and thus Russia was a power that was both European and Asian. Since Europe as a continent included Russia, some observers went so far as to claim that the idea of Europe was irrelevant as a civilizational category. In The Decline of the West (published between 1918 and 1922), which was groundbreaking in promoting the idea of the West as a coherent cultural community, Oswald Spengler dismissed the idea of Europe. “The word ‘Europe’ ought to be struck out of history,” he wrote. “There is historically no ‘European’ type. [...] It is thanks to this word ‘Europe’ alone, and the complex of ideas resulting from it, that our historical consciousness has come to link Russia with the West in an utterly baseless unity.
...‘East’ and ‘West’ are notions that contain real history, whereas ‘Europe’ is an empty sound.”23

III. “German Culture” versus “Western Civilization”

In the German states, the development of the concept of the West was more complicated. The Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were an essential precondition for the emergence of the idea of a Western Civilization, since they created an ideological schism in the Euro-Atlantic world separating the nations that had undergone democratic change and those that had not.24 As a result, although the emerging German nationalism was highly Russophobic, most German intellectuals tended not to identify with “the West,” which they associated with weak and ineffective democratic government. In part, this can be attributed to Germany’s geographical position in Central Europe, which promoted the idea that Germany occupied a mediating role between “western” and “eastern” principles. The concept of central Europe (Mitteleuropa), dominated by its German region, also gained currency in the nineteenth century. Even though German liberals attacked Russia’s “eastern” despotism, the notion that Germany was part of a “Western Civilization” was not very popular.25 Instead, in the early twentieth century, German intellectuals contrasted the “ideas of 1914” with the “ideas of 1789,” and “German culture” with “Western Civilization” in order to assert German superiority over Great Britain and France and to justify the First World War.26 Thomas Mann, for example, pitted German culture (Kultur), spirit (Geist), soul (Seele), freedom (Freiheit), and art (Kunst) against “Western” civilization (Zivilisation), society (Gesellschaft), politics (Politik), voting rights (Stimmrecht), and literature (Literatur).27 To many Germans, “western democracy” became the antinomy of German values.28 The notion that Germany followed


27 See Marcus Llanque, Demokratisches Denken im Krieg: Die deutsche Debatte im Ersten Weltkrieg (Berlin, 2000).

a special path (Sonderweg) — avoiding “western materialism” and “eastern despotism” — became an important component of German national identity.\textsuperscript{29}

The German debate was closely followed in Great Britain, France, and the United States, where intellectuals used Germany as a negative foil to define “the West.” By 1834, Britain’s Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerston assembled a “western” quadruple alliance, consisting of the constitutional states of Great Britain, France, Spain, and Portugal, against the Holy Alliance of monarchical states, consisting of Austria, Prussia, and Russia. While the immediate origin of the alliance was the desire to support the more liberal contestants for the Spanish and Portuguese thrones, it was also intended as a diplomatic alliance for the defense of liberal governments in Europe.\textsuperscript{30} The quadruple alliance was thus not only based on power politics but justified ideologically. For the first time, Europe witnessed the emergence of an alliance that set a liberal “West” against an illiberal “East.”\textsuperscript{31}

Since there was no direct threat from the “eastern” powers and the Holy Alliance was fragile, the “western alliance” failed to garner lasting political influence. For “the West” to become a useful concept for structuring international relations, a powerful enemy image was needed. This came about only in the early twentieth century, in the form of the expansionist German Empire. It was thus not just in Germany that the First World War was depicted as an ideological struggle between the “ideas of 1914” and the “ideas of 1789.” As with the Russian debates of the nineteenth century, the German debates about the “ideas of 1914” were absorbed in Western Europe and North America and given a negative twist. Great Britain, France, and the United States thus, too, conceived of the conflict in ideological terms between “western” democracies and “eastern” autocracies. The identification of “the West” with liberalism and democracy was hence further strengthened.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{29} It was only after the emergence of National Socialism and World War II that the notion of a German “special path” received a negative connotation. Historians such as Fritz Fischer and Hans-Ulrich Wehler held that Germany modernized only economically in the nineteenth century and not politically. The failure of liberals to seize power in the revolution of 1848 in particular set Germany on a different path from its western neighbors, they argued. For synopses of the “special path” historiography, see Jürgen Kocka, “German History before Hitler: The Debate about the German Sonderweg,” Journal of Contemporary History 23, 1 (1988): 3–16. Jürgen Kocka, “Deutsche Identität und historischer Vergleich: Nach dem Historikerstreit.” Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte B 40–41 (1988): 15–28. Thomas Welskopp, “Identität ex negativo: Der ‘deutsche Sonderweg’”


\textsuperscript{31} Hochgeschwender, “Was ist der Westen?,” 21. See also Karl Eduard Goldmann, Die europäische Pentarchie (Leipzig, 1839), 111.

\textsuperscript{32} See Carol S. Gruber, Mars and Minerva: World War I and the Uses of the Higher Learning in America (Baton Rouge, 1975).
The notion of a Western Civilization, characterized by democracy and capitalism and whose roots could be traced back to ancient Greece, gained widespread popularity in Britain, France, and even in the United States. This was a profoundly new development: previously, Americans had defined themselves in opposition to Europe and had interpreted the founding of their union as a radical break with the past. A new “Grand Narrative,” as David Gress called it, emerged, which placed the United States firmly into a larger civilization and which told a story of continual democratic progress from antiquity to modernity, culminating in America’s exemplary republic. Subsequently, Americans were taught the narrative in newly created “Western Civilization” courses at institutions of higher education. It is no coincidence that the concept of Western Civilization caught on with the onset of the First World War, since it provided a justification for American participation in the conflict. In opposition to the German “ideas of 1914,” American propagandists represented the war as a “fight for civilization and human liberty against barbarism.” Walter Lippmann, editor of the influential magazine The New Republic, for example, called for America’s entry into the war in 1917 by arguing that the United States was part of an “Atlantic community” that had been attacked. Germany’s war against France and Great Britain was a war “against a civilization of which we are a part.” The new narrative was a corrective to the frontier thesis, which held that American democratic practices were the result of unique New World experiences and justified American unilateralism rather than American involvement in European affairs. The Second World War also promoted the notion of a Western Civilization linking democratic North America and Western Europe in a common cultural space threatened by fascism and Nazism. Again, America’s involvement in Europe was justified by re-imagining America not as an independent “city-upon-the-hill,” but as part of a larger civilization in imminent

34 Gress, From Plato to NATO, 39.

36 Gruber, Mars and Minerva, 57.
danger, thus turning America from a continental into an Atlantic power.\(^3\) In a similar argument used to justify America’s entry into the First World War, Lippmann explained to Americans that the “Atlantic Ocean is not the frontier between Europe and America” but the “inland sea of a community of nations allied with one another by geography, history and vital necessity.”\(^4\)

The importance of the World Wars thus lay not only in the powerful boost they gave to the concept of the West but also in the fact that “Western Civilization” now also included — besides Great Britain and France — the United States. Moreover, at least within the American discourse, the United States actually emerged as the hegemonic power and, in the words of Henry Luce, the “inheritor of all the great principles of Western Civilization.”\(^4\)

**IV. “Western Civilization” and “American Exceptionalism”**

In 1945, all the major elements of the concept of the West had emerged. It combined the North American and West European nations in a common cultural space that was defined by the heritage of the Enlightenment, liberalism, and democracy, whose history could be traced to ancient Greece. It was only in the postwar situation, however, that “the West” would become the most important principle structuring international relations and that it would achieve the same prominence in the United States, which still had reservations about entanglements with the Old World, and Germany, which had previously kept out of the “western” camp, as in Great Britain and France.

As Patrick Thaddeus Jackson demonstrated, it is misleading to characterize American debates about the role of the United States in the postwar order as a struggle between isolationists and internationalists. Instead, it is more fruitful to frame the American discussion as one between proponents of either “exemplarism” or “vindicationism.” To exemplarists, America was different from Europe and even defined itself by its distinctiveness from the Old World. Vindicationists, by contrast, emphasized that the United States was part of a larger “Western Civilization” and therefore argued that it was America’s duty to protect “Western Civilization” from the communist threat. According to Jackson, “America was still considered to be exceptional within ‘Western Civilization,’ and ‘Western Civilization’ was exceptional when compared to the rest of the world, but (in effect) the firm connection between the physical borders of the United States and the boundaries of America were severed.”\(^4\)

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42 Jackson, *Civilizing the Enemy*, 19.
The traditions of isolationism (the doctrine of completely withdrawing from Europe and rejecting alliances and foreign commitments) and exceptionalism (the belief that America was inherently different from and superior to Europe and did not conform to European laws and norms) were deeply ingrained in American identity. As a result, it took an “army” of publicists and politicians engaged in a collaborative “propaganda” effort to legitimize the notion that America was an integral part of an Atlantic community of “the West,” which required American power for its defense against Soviet communism.43 Besides Walter Lippmann, the journalist Clarence K. Streit suggested a union of North Atlantic democracies to protect individual freedoms. It would be based on the common “western” heritage of the Atlantic Revolutions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.44 It was not only liberal internationalists who invoked the idea of a Western Civilization to justify American involvement in Europe. Conservative intellectuals such as Carlton J. H. Hayes and Ross J. F. Hoffman also promoted the notion that Western Europe and North America formed a civilization that required America to defend the Old World against “eastern” communism. In a critical response to Frederick Jackson Turner’s “frontier thesis,” which highlighted America’s uniqueness and separateness from Europe, Hayes claimed that America was the western frontier of Europe.45 The American government, too, employed the notion of a Western Civilization tying the United States to Europe to garner support for its postwar policies. Secretary of State George Marshall justified the European Recovery Program to Congress in January 1948 by arguing that if Europe’s economy did not recover and Western Europe fell prey to communism, “the historic base of Western civilization, of which we are by belief and inheritance an integral part,” would be shattered.46 His successor Dean Acheson explained in a speech delivered in April 1950 that the purpose of NATO was not just the defense of democratic forms of government in Western Europe. “But, more than the institution of democratic government is at stake,” Acheson explained. “The threat, as I have said, is to our civilization, and each of us is a bearer of that civilization.”47

43 See Ronald Steel, Emiliano Alessandri, and Marco Mariano (eds.), Defining the Atlantic Community: Culture, Intellectuals, and Policies in the Mid-Twentieth Century (New York, 2010).


Americans came to conceive of their nation as part of “Western Civilization,” the defense of which justified America’s integration into a transatlantic security system.

V. From the Abendland to the “West”

Whereas Germans had commonly considered themselves to be outside “Western Civilization” before 1945, the postwar situation was conducive to a reinvestigation of Germany’s relationship with “the West.” An important precondition for Germany to conceive of itself as part of a larger “Western Civilization” was the concept of the Abendland (“occident”). While the term Abendland had already been used in the sixteenth century, it was only in the nineteenth century that the concept of the Abendland as a fixed cultural space, defined in opposition to the Morgenland (“orient”), emerged in Europe, particularly in England, France, Germany, Italy, and the Iberian Peninsula. It evolved in response to the French Revolution and connoted Europe, whose roots were to be found in medieval Christendom and which had been unified before the Reformation. Having a strong religious undertone, which the concept of the West lacked, it was particularly popular among Catholics. In contrast to the concept of a liberal West based on individualism, the Enlightenment heritage, and democratic traditions going back to ancient Greece, the Abendland concept was strongly conservative, emphasized values such as order and authority, and was defined in opposition to both Russia and America. America — the epitome of modernity and liberal democracy — was the antinomy of the Abendland, which stood for tradition and Christianity.48

While there were thus profound differences between the concept of the Abendland and the West, the former was essential for making it possible for Germans to adapt so easily to the idea that they were part of “the West” after 1945. Jackson argued that “it is the Abendland strain that survives Germany’s defeat in the Second World War and eventually serves as the legitimating rhetoric for Germany’s reconstruction as a part of ‘the West.’”49 According to Axel Schildt, the Abendland ideology served as the bridge that allowed West German conservatives to make their peace with the transatlantic alliance and integration into “the West.”50 The Abendland concept paved the way for the concept of the West to gain a hold in the Federal Republic after 1945 by means of its claim that Germany was a central part of a supranational civilization. As many Western Europeans felt threatened by


49 Jackson, Civilizing the Enemy, 98.

50 Schildt, Zwischen Abendland und Amerika, 19.
the Soviet Union and found America’s support indispensible for their security, the strong anticomunist impetus of the Abendland ideology and its emphasis of Christianity as a civilizational link also allowed for the inclusion of America into this cultural space. Therefore, when Adenauer justified West Germany’s close cooperation with the U.S. after the end of the Second World War, he could declare at the first party rally of the Christian Democratic Union in the British Zone in 1947 that “Abendland, the Christian Abendland, is not a geographical concept: it is a historical concept that also includes America. It is this Christian Abendland that we want to try to save.”

While certain elements of the Abendland concept facilitated the dissemination of the idea that Germany was part of “the West,” we are still left with the question of why that idea gained widespread acceptance so quickly. Most importantly, the notion of a common Western Civilization now allowed Germans to disavow their “special path” tradition. After World War II and the Holocaust had thoroughly discredited any positive ideas of a German exceptionalism, emphasizing that Germany was and always had been part of “the West” not only legitimized Germany’s integration in the Atlantic alliance, but also justified transferring full sovereignty to the West German government. Moreover, if Germany was an essential member of “the West,” it also had to be equal to the other members. Since the Federal Republic was dependent on its alliance with the United States and the key to re-attaining sovereignty lay in American hands, it was politically expedient to emphasize German-American commonalities. Moreover, the United States exerted a tremendous cultural influence in West Germany in the early years of the Cold War, because a large number of Americans were stationed in West Germany, American economic and cultural products flooded the German market, and the United States actively tried to influence West German society through institutions such as the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Furthermore, partially as a result of America’s cultural influence, West Germany’s society became more liberal in the 1950s, undermining the Abendland concept, whose appeal to pre-Enlightenment Christianity made it seem increasingly antiquated, if not outright reactionary. Finally, emphasizing liberalism as the true building block of “Western Civilization” was the best way of countering the internationalism of communism, as it allowed for a “western” universalism based on the Enlightenment heritage.


52 See Timothy Garton Ash, In Europe’s Name: Germany and the Divided Continent (New York, 1993), 19–25.


Thus a transnational coalition emerged that legitimized the postwar order by propagating the concept of a Western Civilization threatened by “eastern communism.” North America and Western Europe were linked in a common cultural space, institutionalized in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, which understood itself not just as an alliance of convenience but as a community of nations sharing the same values and the same cultural heritage.

VI. The Future of the Concept of the West

The geopolitical threat of first Imperial and Nazi Germany and later the Soviet Union was an essential precondition for the emergence of the concept of the West. In consequence, the end of the Cold War could have marked the end of the “Atlantic community,” since “the West’s” imaginary Other had simply disappeared. As Owen Harries argued in 1993, “the political ‘West’ is not a natural construct but a highly artificial one. It took the presence of a life-threatening, overtly hostile ‘East’ to bring it into existence and to maintain its unity.” As a result, he predicted, the dissolution of the Soviet Union would necessarily result in the end of “the West.”

Proclaiming “the end of history” after the end of the Cold War, Francis Fukuyama, moreover, argued that, with communism thoroughly discredited, liberal democracy remained the only acceptable form of government. From this vantage point, “the West’s” distinct features such as democratic forms of governments and market-based economic systems were being globalized, depriving “Western Civilization” of its separate identity.

Profound disagreements over the war in Iraq seemed to confirm that the end of “the West” was at hand.

On the other hand, new enemy images emerged, which replaced the Soviet Union and which gave a new boost to the concept of the West. Most prominently, Samuel Huntington’s prediction about a “clash of civilizations” suggested that “the West” found its new nemesis in radical Islam. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, gave, at first glance, credence to his claims and brought renewed attention to the idea of a Western Civilization. The rise of new non-democratic powers, moreover, is undermining the enthusiasm for the universalism of “western” values reaffirming the perception of “the West’s” uniqueness. Nations such as China openly challenge the validity of “western” forms of democracy and instead propagate “Asian values.” Whether the concept of the West has reached its...
heyday or will continue as a potent force in world politics is, therefore, an open question.

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