EASTERN Europe, in both its history and geography, contrasted sharply with the West. Because of poorer climate, soil, and topography, the East was underdeveloped. The population of the Balkan Peninsula, tied more to the Mediterranean than to the Continent, had followed the lead of Byzantium; but the peoples that inhabited the cold plains of eastern Europe lagged far behind and only slowly came to develop monarchies, accept Christianity, and even use the plow. If, however, they had contributed little to the advance of civilization before 1300, during the next 150 years they nearly overtook their neighbors to the west.

During the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, when western and west-central Europe, in the grip of famine, plague, and wars, seemed on the point of economic and political disintegration, the lands between the Elbe and the Dnieper prospered. For the first time this area played a positive role in the history of western civilization. A great agricultural expansion stimulated the growth of towns, and those along the seacoasts and rivers began trading with the commercial cities of the
Mediterranean and North Sea, as well as with the caravan junctions on the steppes. The old urban economy of west-central Europe seemed to be shifting to the east, and by 1400, Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary appeared to be emerging as rivals of England, France, and Castile. But when the hard-hit West finally began to revive and trade moved increasingly out into the Atlantic, the East once more fell behind, never again to challenge the economic pre-eminence of its better-place rivals.

Those local rulers in east-central Europe who had been trying to take advantage of the economic boom to emulate the rising monarchs of the West ultimately failed in their efforts to create centralized kingdoms. The towns, whose counterparts were proving such vigorous allies of royal authority in the West, never became strong enough to play the same decisive role. As a result, the eastern kings had none of the basic elements of power necessary to subjugate their nobility or to integrate them into effective bureaucracies or standing armies. Even the many local magnates, who transformed their traditional position as tribal chieftains into the more independent status of feudal lords, were unable to form stable principalities. Their one important success was defensive. By uniting in representative estates, or diets, they were able to resist the efforts of would-be monarchs to give new substance to old legends of once powerful kingdoms. Though a few monarchs survived as figureheads, they found no significant class or segment of the population to support their pretensions. Even the peasants lacked the ethnic, linguistic, and religious homogeneity that was contributing to the new sense of national identity in various parts of the West. Only along the eastern frontier did strong states emerge; but both the Grand Duchy of Muscovy and the
Ottoman Empire were more Oriental and despotic in character than European and feudal. Geography and history thus again conspired to retard the political and economic development of eastern Europe.

**Geography, Peoples, and Religions**

Eastern Europe has always been as much a cultural as a geographic concept. Though its traditional eastern boundary is the Urals, in the west it is defined by the line that divides predominantly Slavic ethnic and linguistic areas from the Germanic or Italian territories of central Europe. In the north this division is effected by the Baltic and in the south by the Adriatic. The line connecting the two seas is bent toward the west by the Harz and Bohemian Mountains that define Bohemia, and then toward the east by the upper Danube Valley that thrusts beyond Vienna to the famous Iron Gate formed by the eastern Alps and western Carpathians that meet at the river. For those familiar with the map of Europe in the second half of the twentieth century, this line will be readily recognizable as the "curtain" between Soviet satellites and the West—with only the single difference that since the 1950's East Germany was considered part of western Europe.

Even where these boundaries were geographical in character they offered no serious impediment to migration and, since time immemorial, invaders have swept into the great central plain that constitutes the bulk of the area. The vast forest areas in the north and west and the Carpathian and Balkan Mountains in the southeast served primarily to slow the westward advance and to precipitate population deposits that produced a complex of linguistic, ethnic, and eventually cultural units.
Although these groups were not separated by well-defined boundaries, by the end of the Middle Ages they formed a pattern that is still recognizable today.

During the great migrations of the early Middle Ages, Slavic-speaking peoples came to populate most of eastern Europe. Three basic groups evolved: the Western Slavs, settled in a triangular area with its apex thrusting westward into the Bohemian plateau; the Southern Slavs, based between the Danube River and the Balkan Mountains; and finally the Eastern Slavs, or Russians, located in what is today European Russia. In time each split into subgroups speaking distinct languages: the Western Slavs into Wends, Sorbs, Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks; the Eastern Slavs into Great Russians, White Russians, and Little Russians, (the last were also known as Ukrainians or Ruthenians); and the Southern Slavs into Macedonians, Slovenes, Serbs, and Croats.

Non-Slavic peoples had also gained a place in eastern Europe by the end of the early Middle Ages. Five of them spoke Finno-Ugrian languages. Of these the Finns, in the extreme north, and the Estonians, Livs, and Cours, just south of the Gulf of Finland, lived on the eastern shores of the Baltic, while the Magyars occupied the center of the Danube Valley. Another major non-Slavic linguistic group—the Letts, Lithuanians, and Prussians, known collectively as Balts—was strung out along the southern shore of the Baltic Sea. Along the lower Danube, in what is now Rumania, the Vlachs, probably descended—at least in part—from Roman settlers, spoke a Romance language derived from Latin. To the south of them, the Bulgars, in spite of their Mongol origin, had adopted a Slavic language, while at the southern end of the Balkan Peninsula the Greeks, though mixed with Slavic immi-
grants, continued to speak their own language. To complete the list, it is necessary to mention those survivors from earlier migrations who still inhabited a small mountainous area along the Adriatic and spoke Albanian.

In the early Middle Ages, the western Latin and the eastern Greek churches had competed for the conversion of the indigenous pagan population. The Greek rite was established among the Serbs, the Bulgars, the Vlachs, and all the Eastern Slavs; but the Latin ritual triumphed among the Croats, the Slovenes, the Magyars, the Finns, and almost all the Western Slavs. Thus, by 1100 the division between the Orthodox and Catholic religions, together with that between the Greek and Latin cultures, split eastern Europe down the middle; and the few remaining pagans—the Balts, Wends, Estonians, Livs, and Cours—would, before the end of the Middle Ages, be forced to choose between Catholicism and extinction. The line of religious cleavage, it might be noted, coincides strikingly with that formed by the eastern boundaries of the new states that appeared in central Europe following the First World War. Running between Finland and the Soviet Union in the north, it followed the Russian boundary, deviating only to take in part of Poland and most of Yugoslavia and the Balkans, thus establishing an effective division between east-central and eastern Europe.

Between the twelfth and the fourteenth centuries invaders overran almost all of eastern Europe: the Teutons from the west, the Mongols from the east, and the Turks from the south. Only Poland-Lithuania, Bohemia, and Hungary—all three in the central part of the region—managed to maintain their independence. Around them the invaders' domination left a lasting
imprint. Thus, by the fifteenth century the Finns, Estonians, and Balts were largely reduced to the status of serfs of German or Swedish nobles. At the same time the Southern Slavs, Greeks, Albanians, and Vlachs were being conquered by the Turks, while most of the Russians, or Eastern Slavs, were still suffering, or just emerging from, Mongol domination.

The history of eastern Europe, then, in the fifteenth—or first modern—century is confused. The still independent Western Slavs and Magyars fought on all sides to defend themselves. The Poles and Lithuanians not only stopped the German advance in the northwest, but they actually drove it back in places. The Czechs became involved in a long struggle for independence against their German rulers; and in the south and southeast the Hungarians resisted the intermittent but powerful pressure of the Turks, to which most of the South Slavs had already succumbed. In the east and northeast the pattern exhibited a strange variation. There the Eastern Slavs, or Russians, adopting the ambitions and even to some extent the methods of their recent Mongol lords, began the cautious but relentless drive that was eventually (in our own day) to make them masters of the entire area. But for most of the fifteenth century, the Russians still had to rely on intermittent and independent forays of their western neighbors to maintain pressure on the Mongols.

The principal actors in this story, therefore, are the Poles, Lithuanians, Czechs, and Hungarians; and its geographical focus is the western sector of the great plain extending from the southern shores of the Baltic to the Balkan and Carpathian Mountains and from the Bohemian Mountains in the west to the valley of the Dnieper in the east. The ill-defined and loosely organized
Kingdoms gradually learned to coordinate their efforts against their common enemies, frequently through electing the same leader king of more than one country, thus creating personal monarchical unions. The fact that these eastern kingdoms were so loosely organized undoubtedly contributed to the ease with which they formed these combinations. The attempts of the various kings during the fourteenth century to imitate the centralizing efforts of their fellow sovereigns in the west had not quite succeeded. In spite of their new prosperity, they were still basically dependent on the voluntary support of their nobles; and while this was usually forthcoming in any crisis caused by foreign invasion, it frequently cost constitutional concessions. The inevitable result was the reduction of these emergent kings to mere figurehead rulers of decentralized aristocratic republics. To follow these developments, it will be necessary to consider the history of each area in turn.

*East-central Europe*

Viewed from our vantage point in the West, the story begins in the twelfth century, when the Germans began to push permanent settlements across the Elbe. Extending their influence or domination to eastern Europe in a continuing movement that has become famous as the *Drang nach Osten*, their conquest, though frequently directed by prelates or religious orders, was brutal. The Slavic peoples living between the Elbe and the Oder, usually referred to as the Wends and the Sorbs, almost completely disappeared under the impact, and their territory was divided among powerful bishops, abbots, and lay lords. The Prussians, too, began to vanish from the area as the Teutonic Knights, a military order originally
organized to fight in the Holy Land, transferred their operations to the shores of the Baltic in 1229. Gradually pushing their conquest east, they exterminated those inhabitants they failed to Germanize and absorb. Simultaneously other Germans—nobles, clerics, and townspeople—subjugated but did not assimilate the indigenous population of the rest of the southern shore of the Baltic, in Livonia, Courland, and Estonia.

In other areas—Poland, Lithuania, Bohemia, and Hungary—strong native princes fiercely resisted conquest but encouraged peaceful German immigration, hoping to benefit economically from the new settlers. As a result two border areas—Silesia, a Polish-speaking province on the upper Oder, and what has become known to Americans as the Sudetenland, the mountainous region on the Czech side of the German frontier—were largely Germanized. In addition, Transylvania, a rich agricultural region protected by mountains, also received a particularly heavy German influx. Unlike the Asiatic invaders of eastern Europe, the Germans were townspeople who brought skills, industries, and a highly developed culture as well. Thanks to these contributions, they tended to dominate the scattered towns in which they settled and to exert disproportionate influence in the churches and the courts. In consequence they fostered all too natural resentment and resistance among the indigenous rural population, both gentry and peasants, of these eastern kingdoms.

The only political entities in eastern Europe to maintain their independence were the Christian kingdoms of Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary, and the still pagan Grand Duchy of Lithuania. For a while, it looked as if these might also succumb—Poland and Bohemia to the Germans, Hungary to the Turks, and Lithuania to the
Tartars. Rallied by brilliant leaders in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, these countries not only survived but flourished as never before. Able to tap the wealth of the expanding agriculture and the prosperous new towns, these rulers succeeded in establishing bases of central authority from which they moved first to reinforce their threatened frontiers and then to challenge simultaneously their own entrenched nobles and clergy and their threatening neighbors. So fiercely did the native magnates oppose the administrative ambitions of the kings, however, that by the end of the fifteenth century the forces that would normally have contributed to the centralization of royal power had been weakened and diverted by their efforts to stop the Turks. Distracted by their temporary success in this campaign and urged on by their nobles, the kings proceeded to mount victorious counteroffensives against the Germans and the Tartars; but in the process their authority within their monarchies was seriously eroded. By the end of the century all the thrones in east-central Europe had been reduced to the status of elective offices. In spite of these struggles, or because of apparent victories, the later Middle Ages seemed to mark a high point in the development of Poland, Bohemia, Hungary, and Lithuania, and—in more recent, less happy times—their peoples have tended to look back on this period as a golden age.

*Poland and Lithuania*

By 1300, Poland was still little more than a "geographical expression" denoting the valley of the Vistula. A sprawling, sparsely populated rural country with ill-defined and fluctuating borders, it consisted of only three provinces: Great Poland, Lesser Poland, and Masovia.
Silesia, still populated predominantly by Poles in spite of the heavy German immigration, had fallen to Bohemia. The Teutonic Knights ruled western as well as eastern Prussia, thus controlling the mouth of the Vistula and Poland's access to the sea. To resist this foreign threat, Casimir the Great (1333–1370), the last of the Piast dynasty which had ruled Poland since the tenth century, set out to strengthen his kingdom through a program of reforms. He managed to codify Polish law, then to create a rudimentary central administration, check the unruly nobles, attract migrant peasants, and encourage the growth of cities. He even founded the University of Cracow, which antedated any German university and which, in the sixteenth century, was to produce the great Copernicus. He also induced refugee Jews from the west to come and settle in such numbers that Poland eventually had the largest Jewish population in the world. Before these farsighted efforts could produce sufficient returns to enable him to establish an independent administrative authority, however, he died.

His brother-in-law and successor, Louis the Great (1370–1382) of Hungary, was able to win election to the throne only by promising the nobles a strong voice in political affairs and virtual control of all taxation. This set a fateful precedent according to which the diet, now the stronghold of the nobility, regularly wrung concessions from aspiring candidates to the crown. Its upper chamber, or Senate, was the king's council and consisted of the great magnates, much as did its western prototypes. The lower house, however, instead of representing the towns, whose dominant patriciate was non-Polish, was composed largely of delegates from provincial legislatures which were entirely dominated by the local nobles. After the death of Louis, the magnates elected his daughter,
Jadwiga, "king" (since the constitution had no provision for a queen) and married her to the pagan Jagello, Grand Duke of Lithuania. Following his conversion to Roman Catholicism, he too was named king of Poland, thus uniting the two countries under a single dynasty.

Lithuania, before its union with Poland, had been the largest, though by no means the best organized, realm in Europe. Its size was due in part to the instinctive respect of its ruling class for local rights and customs. For example, Lithuanian magnates not only tolerated but occasionally actually adopted the Orthodox faith and culture, and in some cases even the language, of the White Russians and Ukrainians they were annexing in the wake of the Mongol withdrawal. Not surprisingly, therefore, other Russian states—Tver in particular—had sometimes sought the protection of these moderate, if quite unorthodox, Lithuanians against the Orthodox but despotic Muscovites. Even so, the Lithuanians, most of whom remained pagan until Jagello's conversion, were encircled by hostile powers: Poles, Teutonic Knights, Muscovites, Turks, and Tartars. Their primitive tribal structure, religious differences, and failure to practice primogeniture encouraged internal disorders, which in turn rendered their military position precarious. Rival Lithuanian princes eventually invited the Teutonic Knights to intervene in their domestic conflicts; and in 1389, Grand Duke Jagello turned, in desperation, to his old rivals the Poles, who, also threatened by the Knights, were ready to make common cause and sanction his marriage with Jadwiga.

As the last stronghold of paganism in Europe, Lithuania had long been a prime target of the Knights. These incorrigible crusaders, having won the Baltic littoral for Catholicism, intended to convert and dominate its Lithuanian hinterland and annex some Polish provinces
into the bargain. In pursuit of these objectives they were all but annihilated, in 1410, by the combined armies of Poland and Lithuania led by Jagello and his cousin the legendary hero Vitold. The battle of Grunwald, or Tannenberg, which in effect opened the fifteenth-century phase of the history of this area, broke the military power of the Knights, who had already lost their religious \emph{raison d'\’etre} as a result of the conversion of the Lithuanians. Thus weakened, the Knights also found their hold on Prussia threatened by class strife and social revolts. The war dragged on, however, until the Knights suffered another defeat and ceded the valley of the lower Vistula in the Second Peace of Thorn, in 1466. Thus ended three centuries of German encroachment on the Slavs. In spite of Polish control of this “corridor” through German territory, however, the rich port of Danzig continued to be ruled and to be largely populated by Germans, who kept alive a smoldering hostility against, as well as a feeling of superiority to, the surrounding Slavs.

In the fourteenth century, the still rival kingdoms of Poland and Lithuania had begun to expand toward the east to fill the vacuum left by the Mongol retreat. Then, strengthened by the dynastic union arranged at the end of the century, Poland seized Galicia; and Lithuania, after incorporating White Russia, managed to secure most of the Ukraine and control of the north shore of the Black Sea as far east as the no man’s land separating her outposts from the Tartars. She even dominated Moscow itself during the minority of one grand duke, thus approaching the fulfillment of her long-cherished dream of controlling all Eastern Slavs. But though the union had improved Lithuania’s position in foreign affairs, it had also contributed to the creation of new and serious domestic problems.
First, the decentralization of royal power, already well advanced in the Polish diet, continued under the united monarchy until it reached its ultimate conclusion, in 1505, in the famous constitution *Nibil Novi* (Nothing New). Its provisions further restricted the prerogatives of the crown and increased those of the nobles by promising that nothing new would be decreed without the unanimous consent of both houses of the diet. In practice this meant that the negative vote of a single delegate, the famous *liberum veto*, could block any piece of legislation. Thereafter, the power of the kings depended almost entirely on their vast agricultural wealth or their personal magnetism.

Second, many of the upper-class Lithuanians became Catholic, while most of their subjects, the majority of whom were Eastern Slavs, remained Orthodox. Thus new religious differences, accentuating old ethnic divisions, created a fatal political weakness in the Polish-Lithuanian state and provided Moscow with the invaluable role of defender of the Orthodox faith. Late in the century, Ivan III of Moscow launched an attack on Lithuanian territory in the Ukraine and White Russia which, in spite of pauses and setbacks, was to culminate in the famous eighteenth-century partitions of Poland. By means of these notorious arrangements the German-speaking rulers of Prussia and Austria absorbed the western parts of Poland-Lithuania, and Ivan's Russian successors took most of the area that had been united in 1389, including even the basin of the Vistula.

**Bohemia**

Early in the fourteenth century the Bohemian throne had devolved upon pro-Czech princes of the House of Luxemburg. In 1346, Bohemia's king, Charles IV, was
elected Holy Roman Emperor. His interest, however, continued to center in Bohemia, to which the original Premysl dynasty had attached the margrave of Moravia, the Lusatias, and Silesia; in the latter two, Germans and Poles outnumbered Czechs. Wishing to strengthen his hereditary possessions, Charles attempted to incorporate these new acquisitions with Bohemia in a firm dynastic union, but his plan aroused vigorous local opposition.

Even his famous Golden Bull of 1356, ostensibly intended as a new basis for imperial policy, was fashioned to favor the interests of Bohemia. Not only did this act assure to the seven imperial electors complete legal immunity from political interference, but it also gave the king of Bohemia, as chief elector, a preponderant influence in German affairs. Moreover, by transforming Prague into a great and beautiful city with archbishopric and university, Charles made it the effective capital of the Empire and one of the intellectual centers of Europe.

Bohemia itself, in spite of greater ethnic homogeneity than any other kingdom in east-central Europe, contained sizable German minorities, particularly in the Sudetenland. In addition, many of the nobles, clerics, and burghers spoke German, a situation that created chronic misunderstanding and hostility in the Slavic-speaking peasantry. Open conflict between these two groups finally flared under Wenceslas (1378–1419), Charles's eldest son, who succeeded his father on both the imperial and Bohemian thrones. Although he was deposed from the former in 1400, he continued to reign in Bohemia, until Prague erupted in a national revolt against the Germans. In the reigns of both Charles and Wenceslas many Czechs had been attracted to the capital. Like most cities of eastern Europe, it was composed of an "old
town” largely populated by Germans and a “new town” inhabited by Slavs. The inevitable tension between the overbearing German patriciate and the new Czech majority was soon kindled into civil religious war by a charismatic leader.

A professor of theology, John Hus won popular support through his denunciations of the corruption of the higher clergy and the pretensions of the papacy. Once he began attacking the influence of foreign groups within Bohemia, the German members of the university retaliated by refusing to support Wenceslas’ plan to end the papal schism. Thus challenged, the king deprived the Germans of their voting control of the faculty, and in protest they left to found the University of Leipzig. Thereupon, Wenceslas made Hus rector of the University of Prague. When, by order of the Council of Constance, Hus was burned for heresy in 1415, most Czechs, irrespective of class or condition, rose in revolt. The uprising was national (against the Germans), social (against the rich), and religious (against the decadent and divided church); but its immediate target was the German elite, which enjoyed a disproportionate share of the nation’s worldly wealth and clerical power. With the death of Wenceslas in 1419 and the spontaneous refusal of the Czechs to accept his staunchly Catholic brother, Emperor Sigismund, as his successor on the Bohemian throne, the uprising was transformed into civil war.

The Hussite Wars not only threatened to split Bohemia along religious lines but also to break off its incorporated provinces. (See below, Chapter V.) The Hussites repelled two crusades hurled against them and launched a counteroffensive that ravaged much of central Europe; but before they could consolidate their military gains, they
fell victims to internal dissension. Frightened by the emergence within their ranks of a minority of poor radicals, the majority of the Hussites turned on and exterminated these visionary extremists. In an effort to defend social stability against their revolutionary brethren, the majority negotiated a settlement with their conservative opponents. Because they agreed to recognize the papacy and Sigismund, they were allowed to retain certain religious practices, especially the right of the laity to partake of the wine as well as the bread in the ceremony of Communion. This was considered particularly important because it symbolized to them their emancipation from the foreign clergy. A confused interregnum followed Sigismund's death, until a Czech nobleman, the former regent, George Podiebrad (1458–1471), was finally elevated to the throne. A moderate Hussite and a popular leader, Podiebrad took vigorous steps to restore the monarchy; but during his reign a new extremist Hussite group, called the Czech or Moravian Brethren, rejected his leadership and withdrew from the Roman church. Roused to vengeance, the Pope repeatedly incited its neighbors to crush Bohemia. Finally the king of Hungary launched an invasion. Before Podiebrad could re-establish order, he died and was succeeded by Ladislas Jagello (1471–1516). This son of the Polish sovereign managed, after restoring an uneasy peace in Bohemia, to win election to the throne of Hungary and to unite the warring kingdoms by a common dynasty with Poland. Calm was finally restored to the realm, but at the cost of heavy royal concessions to the nobility and clergy. Worse still, from the point of view of Czech nationalists, the crown had passed into unsympathetic foreign hands, going to the Jagellons in 1471 and then to the Hapsburgs in 1526.

Devastated by the Hussite struggles, foreign invasions,
weak kings, and frequent changes of dynasty, the royal power had been so eroded in Bohemia that the diet had been able to follow the Polish precedent and establish the principle of an elective monarchy.

Rival candidates for the kingship were regularly forced to pledge the crown's prerogatives and resources in advance, and the victor was even sometimes compelled to dissipate them further in order to retain the throne after his election. Such was the general anarchy that ensued that even the great lords suffered. The lesser nobles and the burghers, who dominated the Hussite armies and the diets, were able to encroach on the interests of the magnates and prelates on the one hand and of the peasants and laborers on the other. Instead of supporting their sovereigns, they strove for personal autonomy. The Czech monarchy itself suffered most severely from the confusion. Salvaging only fragments of past national greatness, it entered a period of severe decline and only lingered on until it was destroyed in the Thirty Years' War.

Under Hussite patronage, the Czech language developed into a literary vernacular, and the more radical theological ideas of Hus were cultivated at home and propagated abroad. Although any direct effect of these proselytizing efforts would be virtually impossible to measure, it is interesting to note that Martin Luther was born and lived less than a hundred miles from the Bohemian frontier.

Hungary

Lying exposed in the middle of the Danube Basin, Hungary has never enjoyed the security often provided, or suffered the restriction often imposed, by natural frontiers. During the high Middle Ages, the native Arpad
dynasty expanded its rule in every direction, annexing Croatia to the west, Transylvania to the east, Slovakia to the north, and the Banat to the south. These disparate areas, each with its own language, customs, and religious convictions, were bundled together to form a greater Hungary; but instead of merging, their inhabitants persevered as recalcitrant minorities. The ethnopolitical situation was further complicated by Germans and Jews who moved down the Danube to settle in the cities and in Transylvania. Although the Arpads had managed to Catholicize their Magyar subjects, they failed to consolidate their overextended kingdom or to disengage it from territorial struggles with the Venetians, Poles, Lithuanians, Mongols, and Turks.

The Angevin dynasty (1308–1382), which followed the Arpads on the throne, produced its most brilliant ruler in Louis the Great (1342–1382). Although he and his successors struggled valiantly with the inherited problems of the kingdom, they were severely limited by the failure of their fledgling cities to give them financial support. Hence, reduced to dependence on a levy of feudal cavalry for an army and on voluntary services of the nobility for a bureaucracy, Louis did what he could to help develop the monarchy. It is a testimony to his genius that in spite of the weakness of his position he was able to accomplish as much for Hungary as he did. Not only did he contribute to the prosperity of the country, but he also managed to sustain western cultural influences at his court and founded the first Hungarian university. Meanwhile, he inherited the Polish throne, subjugated the principalities of Wallachia and Moldavia, extended his power south into Bulgaria and Bosnia, and regained the Dalmatian coast.
Sigismund of Luxemburg, who eventually succeeded Louis on the Hungarian throne in 1387, became emperor in 1410 and king of Bohemia in 1436. Although he was an ambitious ruler, his aims and tastes exceeded his resources and ruined his ability to meet rapidly increasing responsibilities. For Sigismund and his subjects the fifteenth century may be said to have opened in 1389, when the Turks broke the resistance of the Southern Slavs at Kossovo. Not only did the Hungarians find themselves saddled with the burden of defending the Cross against the Crescent; they gradually discovered that they were involved in a struggle for survival which was to continue through most of the seventeenth century. Sigismund never succeeded in organizing an effective crusade against the Turks. First, because of the Venetians' morbid jealousy of Hungarian interests in Dalmatia, he could not persuade them to join him in a campaign against their common foe. Second, he himself could not resist the temptation to dissipate his energies by aiding the Teutonic Knights against the Poles or by organizing crusades against the Hussites.

Following Sigismund's death in 1437, the throne of Hungary remained an object of contention until the Polish king, Ladislas Jagello, won election by promising Polish troops to fight the Turks. In 1444 he and the prince of Transylvania, John Hunyadi, led their crusaders to a disastrous encounter with the infidels at Varna; Ladislas apparently earned the martyr's crown, although some believed he escaped to live out his life as a hermit. Hunyadi salvaged a remnant of the army, only to be beaten again in 1448, this time so definitively that Constantinople was left open to conquest by the Turks.

Undaunted, John Hunyadi assumed the regency of
Hungary and continued, with significant assistance from the Vlach principalities, to guard the Danube frontier. By saving Belgrade in 1456 and thus demonstrating that the Turks—and particularly their elite infantry, the Janissaries—were not invincible, he died a hero in 1457. His son and successor, Matthias Corvinus (1457–1490), managed to bridle the nobility and maintain Hungary's predominance in the Danube Basin. Although these achievements were accomplished mainly by the notorious Black Troop, an oversized bodyguard of mercenaries paid partly with plunder, this last Magyar sovereign made his court at Buda a brilliant center of culture. Though it reflected Hungary's revived power, it also exhibited the western orientation of its sovereign and the Italian influence of his Neapolitan wife, Beatrix.

Following Matthias' death in 1490, the nobility exploited the inevitable struggle for succession to exact concessions from the rival candidates. The king of Bohemia, Ladislas Jagello (1490–1516), in an effort to outbid the Hapsburg contender, promised to desist from the military adventures and to renounce the absolutist ambitions of his predecessors. He won the crown, but neither he nor his son Louis (1516–1526) was able to exercise the recently established powers of the monarchy. The realm was torn by intrigue, the outlying provinces fell away, and the possibility of organizing a common front against the Turks was frittered away. Even though members of the same dynasty now wore the three crowns of eastern Europe, the Jagellon kings of Poland-Lithuania had little interest in forging closer ties with their relatives in Bohemia and Hungary. The possibility of, as well as the need for, mutual aid ended in 1526, when Louis's
followers were slaughtered by the Turks at Mohacs and he drowned trying to escape.

The western fringe of Hungary that was salvaged from that disaster went to the Hapsburgs, while some surviving native Magyar princes managed to maintain semi-independence in the buffer region of Transylvania. The long, oppressive Ottoman occupation (1526-1697) and the incessant raiding by Turks and Hapsburgs turned Hungary into a wasteland on which peasants eked out a miserable existence and the few remaining gentry cooperated with the Turks. Mediaeval Hungary lay in ruins, but its legend of heroic resistance to invaders from the east survived into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to fire the minds of patriots.

Southeastern Europe

The history of the Turkish conquest of the Balkans begins in the high Middle Ages, when the traditional power in the peninsula was the Byzantine Empire. From the capital at Constantinople, the Byzantines ruled the Serbs and the Bulgars and campaigned against the Seljuk Turks for control of Asia Minor. During the thirteenth century the power structure in those areas was toppled by two dramatic events: the capture of Constantinople by Crusaders and the collapse of the Seljuks. The western feudal lords of the Fourth Crusade, who conquered Constantinople in 1204, divided the city, the Greek peninsula, and the Aegean Islands between themselves and their ally the republic of Venice. Three Greek pretenders set up rival states in other parts of the dismembered Empire, while the Serbs and the Bulgars asserted their independence. One of the Greek claimants, Michael Paleologus, reoccupied Constantinople in 1261 and founded a
dynasty which was to last until 1453. But neither he nor any of his successors was ever able to reunite all the old Byzantine territories or to restore the former grandeur of the Empire.

Shortly after the Byzantine debacle of 1204, the degenerate Seljuk sultanate in Asia Minor, weakened by Mongol pressure, finally succumbed. One of its former mercenary generals, Osman (1259–1327), who had been stationed on the Greek frontier farthest from the Mongols and nearest to the Christians, began to lead razzias, or holy wars, against the Byzantines. The numerous recruits from various Turkish tribes who joined him in these popular forays came to be known as the Osmamlis, or Ottoman Turks. Under Osman’s son and successor, Orkhan (1327–1362), they overran the western part of Asia Minor, which by then had been largely abandoned by the Mongols. But this was only a beginning.

Indefatigable warriors inspired by fanatical devotion to Islam, the Ottoman Turks became the greatest conquerors of the later Middle Ages. Asian nomads by origin, they were unsurpassed cavalrymen; and their famous Janissaries, a corps recruited from their Christian subjects and converted to Islam, gave them an elite infantry to match. Rigidly disciplined and prohibited from marrying, these magnificent troops were taught to regard the sultan as their father and the regiment as their family. The highest offices of the state were open to them, and they earned the reputation of being the world’s best fighting force.

Although the Ottomans came from Asia, they achieved their most spectacular early successes in Europe. In 1354, they crossed the Dardanelles to begin the conquest of the Balkans, an objective which they would achieve a century later with the seizure of the ultimate prize, Constanti-
nople, in 1453. Finding the Bulgars involved in fratricidal struggles with the Serbs, and the Greeks hopelessly divided among themselves, they defeated both in a series of battles before closing their vise on Constantinople. The now desperate Greek emperor appealed to the West for military aid to relieve his encircled capital; but the responding crusaders were overwhelmed by the Ottomans at Nicopolis in 1396.

Thus, on the eve of the fifteenth century Byzantium appeared to be at the mercy of the Turks. In 1402, however, the Ottomans were diverted from their prize by a crushing defeat at the hands of Tamerlane. With the sudden death of this formidable Tartar chieftain in 1405, his empire broke up almost as rapidly as it had been conquered, and the Turks were able by 1422 to return to their offensive against Constantinople. Though at first unsuccessful, they maintained the initiative and at Varna, in 1444, annihilated another force of western crusaders, that the Greek emperor had procured at the price of union with the Latin church. In 1453, Sultan Mohammed II (1451–1481) resumed the siege, this time with a highly developed plan backed by a fleet and massed artillery. For the second and last time in history the battlements were successfully stormed, and despite heroic resistance, Constantinople fell on May 29, 1453. With the city, Mohammed won the epithet “the Conqueror.”

Even though Constantinople had long been a mere enclave in Turkish territory, its fall stunned Christendom. The impact on the West, however, was largely psychological, and only the papacy was seriously concerned with the recovery of the city. Nicholas V tried in vain to arouse Europe, and Pius II died heartbroken by his failure to launch a crusade.

The other consequences of the Turkish conquest of
the sacred capital were as varied as they were important. Economically it helped the cynical Venetians, who continued to trade with the conquering Turks and profited enormously as the price of grain from the plantations along the southern shores of the Black Sea, as well as that of spices and other eastern goods, rose sharply in the West. Moreover, the economic advantage Venice now enjoyed in the eastern Mediterranean incited ambitious Genoese adventurers like Columbus and the Cabots to seek new trade routes to the Orient. The fall of the city also ended the brief union of the Catholic and Orthodox churches; and by thus confirming the schism in Christendom, it offered a precedent to later Protestant reformers. But though the fall had symbolic value, what we now know of the long decline in wealth and population, already suffered by the city in the preceding period, robs the final collapse of political significance. The fate of one city, however famous or strategic, could no longer determine the course of Europe’s history.

The Ottomans quickly followed their triumph with the occupation of the rest of Serbia and Greece. On land, only the Magyars, Vlachs, and Albanians continued to oppose their advance; but in the Mediterranean, they were blocked by the Venetians and the Knights Hospitallers, an order of fighting monks who, after the fall of the Holy Land in 1291, had retreated to the island of Rhodes. Instead of smashing the opposition in Europe and the Mediterranean, the Turks turned first to the south and east, where they overran Armenia, Syria, and Egypt. Not until the early sixteenth century did they return to the offensive in the Danube Valley.

Constantinople, renamed Istanbul by its conquerors, became the capital of their empire. In a sweeping admin-
istrative reform, Mohammed placed each province under a military governor called a bey, who was integrated into a bureaucracy staffed largely by Greek civil servants. This hierarchy was headed by a grand vizier, or prime minister, and two "beys of beys," one responsible for the European and the other for the Asiatic provinces of the Empire. Following earlier Persian and Arabic practice, Mohammed dealt with his new Christian subjects through their religious leaders, thus conferring on the church an increased authority and prestige that gave it an Oriental character which it was to retain long after its liberation. Any resistance to the Ottomans met with atrocious reprisals, and Christians faced sporadic persecution. Exactions were heavy, and the annual recruitment of boys for the Janissaries and girls for the harems was degrading; but the Christians were little molested in other ways.

While the Mongol legacy to the Russians was tyranny, that of the Ottomans to the Balkans was poverty, ignorance, and humiliation. The Ottoman realm, even more than that of Muscovy, remained an Oriental despotism which had virtually nothing in common with the emerging European states.

Eastern Europe

It remains, finally, to consider the development of the people whose state was gradually to absorb all of eastern Europe. Although the Russians' role in the fifteenth century hardly presaged their later expansion, their history in this period can now be seen to have contributed to their remarkable development. Early in the thirteenth century, Genghis Khan, leading a host of nomadic tribes loosely referred to as Mongols or Tartars, had conquered most of Siberia, all of Persia, and parts of China. Batu, Genghis'
grandson, inherited the western fourth of that huge empire, which he used as a base for a lightning conquest of European Russia. There he formed the great new khanate of the Golden Horde, ending the Kievan, or Varangian, period of Russian history. (See Sullivan, *Heirs of the Roman Empire.*) His despotic successors ruled southern Russia directly but supported semi-autonomous Russian princes in the north and west in return for tribute in the form of men and taxes. In return for these abject services, the khans defended the princes against their own rebellious subjects or their European neighbors, particularly the Teutonic Knights. The princes of Moscow rivaled those of neighboring Tver as agents and beneficiaries of the ruthless Mongols.

During the second half of the fourteenth century, however, civil conflict within the Golden Horde laid Mongol territory open to attack. The Poles seized Galicia, while the Lithuanians occupied all of White Russia and a significant part of the Ukraine. Most of western Russia was thus freed from Mongol sway, and although its inhabitants remained Orthodox, they were, following the conversion of the Lithuanians, brought under western Catholic jurisdiction. Only the Great Russians remained under the Mongol yoke, and for another hundred years they continued to absorb Asiatic influences which today still distinguish them from their western neighbors.

Two centuries of Mongol domination cast a blight on Russia. Its once flourishing cities were demolished and their merchants and artisans scattered. The Ukrainian population was left prey to roving bands of Tartar raiders. Many survivors migrated and settled in the vast northern forests, where they constituted a sparse population consisting of a small group of aristocratic landowners, or
boyars, and a mass of peasants, slaves, and serfs. Helpless, in any case, and conditioned to despotic rule by the khans, the Russian nobles accepted the absolutism of their own princes in return for aid in controlling the lower classes and resisting the invasions of Germans and Lithuanians. Thus, the Russian princes, salvaging abandoned Mongol institutions, continued the tyrannical abuse of the peasants long after the invaders had been driven out.

Religion and culture also felt the impact and retained the imprint of Mongol occupations. Prepared to tolerate any religion so long as it did not challenge their authority, the Mongols had left the Russian church to the close supervision of the native nobles who, by using it as an agency of control, turned it into the principal focus of Russian life. As a result, the peasants, most of whom had remained pagan during the Kievan period, now joined the upper and middle classes in accepting conversion. Churches and monasteries prospered and proliferated. Monks colonized the wilderness and, with the labor of peasant pioneers, cultivated it so successfully that many of the convents became fabulously rich. The consequent attachment of the peasants to the church (and of the church to wealth) long remained an outstanding characteristic of Russian life. But intense as were the religiosity and mysticism which permeated Russian culture during this period, the Russian church was not allowed to develop any institutional independence under the Mongols, with the result that it succumbed to the domination of Moscow as soon as the country was liberated from their occupation. In fact, this merely re-established the condition of state control that the Orthodox church had known under Kiev and Byzantium.
As international struggles weakened the Mongols in Muscovy, Grand Duke Basil II (1425–1462) managed to draw power into his own hands. Helped by an economic upswing, he and his successor were able, by the early sixteenth century, to realize their ambition of making Muscovy the most authoritarian state in Europe. Ivan III (1462–1505)—Ivan the Great—after affirming his independence from the Golden Horde, began expanding his hereditary holdings. In the sparsely settled eastern lands he met little opposition, and the movement he had begun continued unchecked through the great forests of the northeast until Russian pioneers ultimately reached the Pacific. In the southeast, Ivan succeeded in overrunning lands along the Volga and encouraged groups to push across the steppes beyond his frontiers, where they lived in constant dread of Tartar attacks, much as American settlers did of Indian raids. In this exposed position some, known as Cossacks, produced a vigorous, individualistic culture, which for centuries defied absorption by any great power.

Muscovite expansion into the long-settled and more heavily populated west, however, met strenuous resistance. Only after a hard campaign did Ivan succeed in subduing the proud and powerful princes of Tver and the prosperous commercial republic of Novgorod. By these conquests, particularly that of Novgorod, which derived its prosperity from the exchange of Russian forest products for Hansa wares, he finally brought Muscovy into important contact with the West. Aided by local uprisings, Ivan also began to dispute Lithuanian control of White Russia and the Ukraine and managed to seize several border districts of those provinces. Ever since, this Russian pressure toward the west and south, begun by Ivan, has
remained one of the most constant and disturbing factors in European politics.

In the mid-fifteenth century the metropolitan of the Russian church asserted his independence from the Greek patriarch and, rejecting the Union of Florence (whereby the Byzantine emperor had agreed to subject the Orthodox church to the papacy in return for aid against the Turks), proclaimed Moscow the center of Orthodox Christianity. In 1472, Ivan III married the niece of the last Byzantine emperor and, on the basis of this and an earlier marriage, claimed the imperial inheritance and the title Tsar, or Caesar. Thus both church and state could assert that Moscow had now supplanted Constantinople, as that city had previously supplanted Rome. Since Ivan's day, Russian imperialism has often been inspired, consciously or unconsciously, by the conviction that Moscow was the "third Rome," the center of Orthodoxy, and the rightful capital of the world.

Summary

In summary, it appears that a fundamental economic lag in the countries of east-central and eastern Europe—with Muscovy providing a partial exception—largely prevented them from achieving the strength and unity of western states. The relative lack of trade, and consequently of towns, left the nobles and prelates with no effective rivals and deprived the princes of important allies. Without a source of revenues with which to hire loyal armies or efficient bureaucracies, royal resources were seriously restricted, and the position of the nobles was consequently strengthened. Able to refuse to pay taxes, they were free to subjugate the peasants, who could not appeal to royal agents. Split by religious, ethnic,
and racial differences compounded by class hatreds, every kingdom was also vulnerable to invasion because of the absence of natural frontiers. The surprising thing is not that the great dynasties of east-central and eastern Europe failed to create solid national or princely states of the sort that was appearing in the West, but that they were able to acquire so much independent authority.

From the Battle of Mohacs until the eighteenth century, Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary gradually lost their hard-won independence to military invaders: the Russians, Ottomans, and Germans. Concurrently Catholicism was forced to retreat before the advance of Orthodoxy, Islam, and the new Protestant heresies. After 1500 the Western Slavs and the Magyars, who had experienced a golden age in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, entered a long period of stagnation from which they were to emerge only once—briefly, after 1918—before succumbing again to German and Russian domination. The Muscovite, Hapsburg, and Ottoman despotisms failed, however, to satisfy or assimilate the heterogeneous, impoverished masses under their sway. In 1917–1918, all three collapsed, after centuries of unmitigated misrule and oppression.