

Everyone who tried to unite Europe – and why they failed

Rome, Charlemagne, the Habsburgs, Napoleon, Hitler – every attempt to unite Europe by force collapsed. Only the version built on consent has lasted.



Five serious attempts, one pattern. It's worth walking the ledger, because the pattern is the most useful thing European history has to say about Europe's future.

Rome: the original, and the outlier

Rome is the one entry that half-succeeded: the Mediterranean world plus Gaul, Iberia and Britain, held for roughly five centuries under one law, one currency and one road network. Even Rome never took the continent's northeast, and when the western empire fell in 476 it left Europe with a memory that has haunted every ambitious ruler since – proof that unity was once possible, and a mirage of how.

Charlemagne: one generation

Around 800, the Frankish king reassembled the largest piece of the West since Rome and was crowned emperor to make the point. The structure was personal, not institutional – loyalty to a man, not a system – and at Verdun in 843 his three grandsons split it into pieces whose ghosts (France, Germany, and the contested strip between them) organized European conflict for the next eleven centuries.

The Habsburgs: everything except a state

By marriage more than conquest, Charles V came to rule Spain, the Netherlands, Austria, half of Italy and America's silver – “the empire on which the sun never sets.” It was a portfolio, not a polity: separate crowns, separate laws, held together by one exhausted man. The Reformation split his

subjects' souls, France fought him at every turn, and in 1555–56 he abdicated and divided the inheritance himself. The lesson nobody drew: even overwhelming resources cannot unify Europe without institutions.

Napoleon: the modern template

Napoleon got furthest fastest – by 1810, client states and family thrones from Madrid to Warsaw, a common legal code radiating outward, a continental trade blockade against Britain. Eight years at the peak. Then Russia, then the coalition of everyone else, then collapse so complete that France ended smaller than it began. He demonstrated the two rules of forced unification in their clearest form: the periphery cannot be held, and the attempt itself manufactures the alliance that ends it.

Hitler: the terminal case

By 1941 Nazi Germany controlled or dominated more of Europe than anyone since Rome. It lasted four years, killed tens of millions, and ended with Europe partitioned between two outside powers – the continent's nadir as a subject of its own history. After 1945, “uniting Europe by force” was not just discredited; it had become the definition of what Europe needed protection from.

The pattern, stated plainly

Force fails in Europe for structural reasons, not moral ones. The land itself – a bundle of peninsulas and mountain walls – shelters every loser for a comeback. And a would-be hegemon unites

everyone else against him, so the project carries the seed of its own encirclement. Five attempts, five collapses, each leaving the continent more divided and more damaged than before.

Which makes the sixth attempt genuinely different in kind, not just in manner. The union built after 1950 is the only one in this ledger that grew by application: twenty-two countries have joined it voluntarily, several after escaping the empire next door, and none has been conquered into it. It is slower, messier and less finished than any emperor's version – *deliberately so* – but it is also the only one still standing. In Europe, consent isn't the idealist's option. On the historical evidence, it is the only method with a working prototype.

[All questions →](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED

Has Europe ever been fully united?

Never entirely, and only Rome came close – holding the Mediterranean world plus much of the north for roughly five centuries. No one since has ruled even half the continent for more than about a decade.

How long did Napoleon control Europe?

At his 1810–1812 peak, about eight years of real dominance. The empire stretched from Madrid to Warsaw – and collapsed within three years of the Russian campaign, leaving France smaller than it started.

Was the Habsburg empire a united Europe?

No – it was a dynastic web. Charles V ruled Spain, the Netherlands, Austria and half of Italy at once, but as separate crowns; the Reformation and constant wars with France broke the project within his lifetime.

Why does unification by force keep failing in Europe?

Geography and coalition. Mountains, seas and peninsulas shelter whoever loses round one, and every would-be hegemon eventually faces an alliance of everyone else – a pattern from Louis XIV through Hitler.

What finally worked instead?

Consent, starting small: the 1950 coal-and-steel pool grew into today's EU. It is the only unification in European history that expanded by countries applying to join rather than being invaded.

SOURCES

- Fall of the Western Roman Empire, 476; Treaty of Verdun, 843
- Charles V's abdications 1555–56 (division of the Habsburg inheritance)
- Napoleonic Wars 1803–1815; Continental System
- Nazi occupation of Europe 1940–1945
- Schuman Declaration 1950; EU enlargements 1973–2013 (by application)