Modernity and the Road to War, c. 1890–1914

CHAPTER 25

IN THE FIRST DECADE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, a wealthy young Russian man traveled from one country to another to find relief from neurasthenia, a common malady in those days. Its symptoms included fatigue, lack of interest in life, depression, and sometimes physical sickness. In 1910, the young man encountered Sigmund Freud, a Viennese physician whose unconventional treatment—eventually called psychoanalysis—took the form of a conversation about the patient's dreams, sexual experiences, and everyday life. Over the course of four years, Freud uncovered his patient's deeply rooted fear of castration disguised as a phobia of wolves—thus the name Wolf-Man by which he comes down to us. Often building his theories from information about colonized peoples and cultures, Freud worked his cure, as the Wolf-Man himself put it, "by bringing repressed ideas into consciousness." Freud's theories laid the groundwork for an understanding of the human psyche that has endured, with modifications and some controversy, to our own time.

The Wolf-Man was emblematic of his age. Born into a family that owned vast estates, he reflected the growing prosperity of Europeans, albeit on a grander scale than most. Simultaneously, countless individuals seemed anguished and mentally disturbed, and suicides abounded—the Wolf-Man's own sister and father died from intentional drug overdoses. European society as a whole subjected itself to agonized

Edvard Munch, *The Scream* (1893)
In some of his paintings Norwegian artist Edvard Munch captured the spirit of the turn of the century using delightful pastel colors to convey the leisured life of people strolling in the countryside. Impressionists similarly depicted modern life in paintings of animated conversations in outdoor cafés and gardens. But modern life at this time also had its tortured side, which Munch was equally capable of portraying. *The Scream* is taken as emblematic of the torments of modernity as the individual turns inward, beset by neuroses, self-destructive impulses, and even madness. Today some believe that *The Scream* reflects Munch's violent reaction to the earlier eruption of a volcano. While some—like the two other figures in the painting—could react calmly to whatever modern life had to offer, others like the screamer were agonized at every turn of events. It can also be suggested that the screamer, like Europe, travels the road to World War I. *National Gallery, Oslo, Norway. © Scala/Art Resource. © Copyright 2005 The Munch Museum/The Munch-Ellingsen Group/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.*

questioning about the family, gender relationships, empire, religion, and the consequences of technology and progress. Conflict reigned throughout Europe and the world, as an array of powers (including Japan) fought their way into even more territories and took political control. Every sign of imperial wealth brought on an apparently irrational sense of Europe's decline. British writer H. G. Wells saw in this era "humanity upon the wane . . . the sunset of mankind."

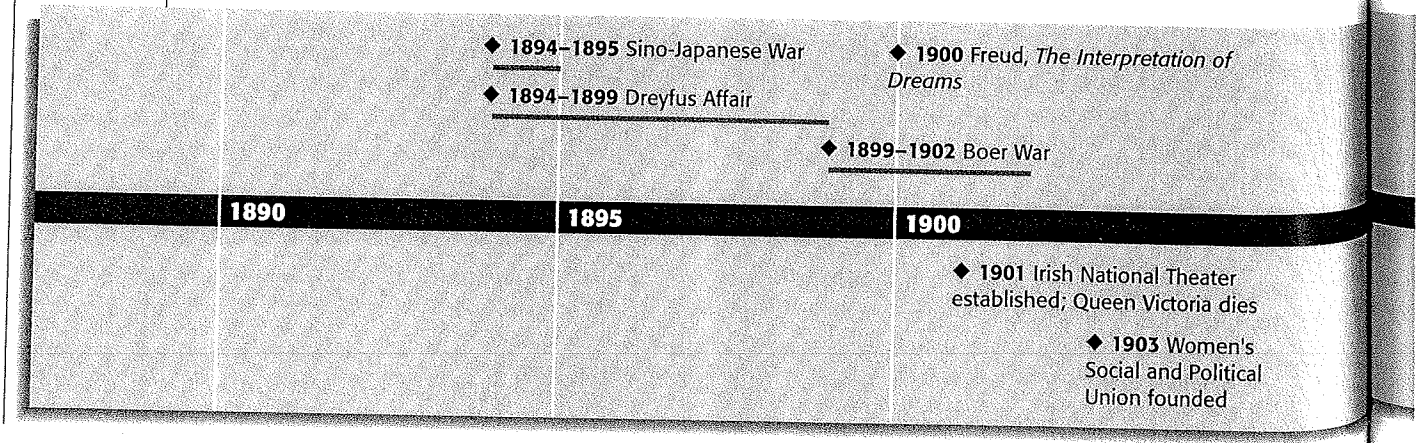
Governments expanded the male electorate during this period in the hope of making politics more harmonious and manageable. Ethnic chauvinism, anti-Semitism, and militant nationalism only increased the violence of political rhetoric, however. Women suffragists along with politically disadvantaged groups such as the Slavs and Irish demanded full rights, but the liberal ethos of tolerance receded before a wave of political assassinations and public brutality. While the great powers fought to dominate people around the world, their competition for empire fueled an arms race that threatened to turn Europe—the "most civilized" region of the world, according to its leaders—into a savage battleground.

These were just some of the conflicts associated with modernity—a term often used to describe the accelerated pace of life, the rise of mass politics, and the decline of a rural social order that were so visible in the West from the late nineteenth century on (see "Terms of History," page 962). Modernity also refers to the response of artists and intellectuals to this rapid change. The celebrated "modern" art, music, science, and philosophy of this period still resonate for their brilliant, innovative qualities. Yet these same innovations were often considered offensive at the time: cries of outrage at the new music echoed in concert halls, while educated people were utterly shocked at Freud's ideas that sexual drives motivate even the smallest children. Every advance in science and the arts simultaneously had consequences that undermined the middle-class faith in artistic and scientific progress.

When the heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne was assassinated in June 1914, few gave any thought to the global significance of the event, least of all the Wolf-Man, whose treatment with Freud was just ending and who viewed that fateful day of June 28 simply as the day he "could now leave Vienna a healthy man." Yet the assassination was the catalyst for an eruption of discord that had simmered for several decades, as the nations of Europe lurched from one diplomatic crisis to another. The consequences of the resulting disastrous war, World War I, like the insights of Freud, would shape modern life.

❖ Private Life in the Modern Age

Western ideals of a comfortable family life flourished because of Europe's improved standard of living. The prosperity brought by industrialization and empire, however, challenged traditional social norms just the way imperial and technological advance had up-



set international politics and worker confidence in the economic future. A falling birthrate, a rising divorce rate, and growing activism for marriage reform provoked intense debate by the turn of the century. Some among the elites acknowledged homosexuality as a way of life, while others made it the topic of politics. Middle-class women took jobs and became active in public to such an extent that some feared the disappearance of distinct gender roles. Women's visibility in public life prompted one British songster in the late 1890s to write:

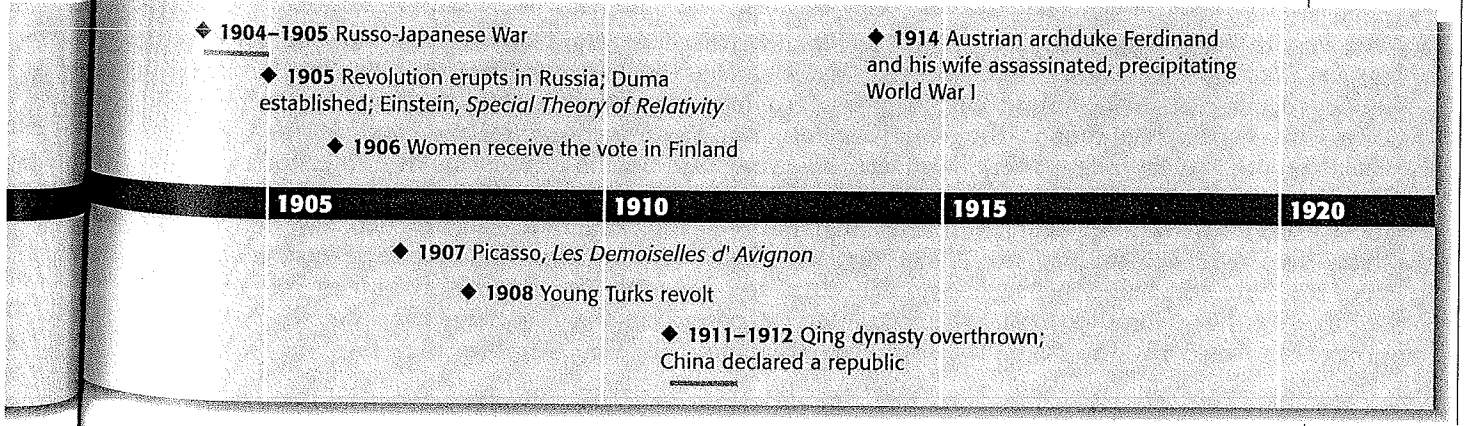
Rock-a-bye baby, for father is near
Mother is "biking" she never is here!
Out in the park she's scorching all day
Or at some meeting is talking away!

Discussions of gender roles and private life contributed to rising social tensions because they upset so many traditional ideals. They also fueled the optimism of reformers that Western society was making constant progress and becoming more rational and egalitarian. Freud and other scientists tried to study such phenomena dispassionately and eventually formulated new theories of the human personality. Public discussions of private life—especially when they became intertwined with politics—demonstrated the close connection of private and public concerns.

Population Pressure

Urgent concerns over trends in population, marriage, and sexuality clogged the agendas of politicians and reformers from the 1890s on, and they still do so in the present day. The staggering population increases of the eighteenth century had continued through the nineteenth. At the turn of the century, cities looked chaotic as population soared and changed the urban landscape by filling it with rural people and migrants—even some from other ethnicities and continents. Faced with the urban masses, often crowded into tenements and shacks, Social Darwinists warned of racial decay and Western leaders faced tense population dilemmas. Reformers, politicians, and critics of public life were seriously concerned over the quantity and quality of population.

Europe's Population Soars. Dramatic increases in the European population continued as the twentieth century opened. Germany increased in size from 41 million people in 1871 to 64 million in 1910; tiny Denmark, from 1.7 million in 1870 to 2.7 million in 1911. Such growth resulted from improvements in sanitation and public health that extended the life span and reduced infant mortality. To cope with their burgeoning populations, Berlin, Budapest, and Moscow were torn apart and rebuilt, following the lead of Vienna and Paris. The German government pulled down eighteenth-century Berlin and reconstructed the city with new roadways and mass-transport systems as the capital's population grew to over 4 million. Rebuilding to absorb population growth was not confined to capitals of the most powerful states: Balkan cities like Sofia, Belgrade, and Bucharest gained tree-lined boulevards, public buildings, and better sanitation.



TERMS OF HISTORY

Modern

The word *modernus* was introduced into Latin in the sixth century; after that, the claim to being modern occurred in many centuries and cultures. Shakespeare, for example, referred to "modern ideas" in his plays. By the second half of the nineteenth century, historians were heatedly debating where "modern" history began: with Abraham? with Charlemagne? or with the Renaissance?

Despite the many claims to being modern, the term has fastened itself most firmly around the period from the end of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth. Its most specific historical use has been to describe the art, music, and dance that flourished at that time. When used in this sense, *modern* indicates a sharp break with lyrical romantic and classical music and dance and also with the conventions for representing objects in the arts. The blurred images of the impressionists and the jarring music of Arnold Schoenberg are part of modern art. The sexual rawness of *Madame Bovary* (see Chapter 23) or of Sigmund Freud's analysis of the Wolf-Man's dreams gave a further ingredient into the multifaceted meanings of the word *modern*. Sometimes this intellectual break with the cultural past is referred to as modernism.

At the end of the nineteenth century the word *modern* referred to social phenomena. Women who went to work or entered universities or began careers in the new field of social work were called modern women. They believed that by showing themselves capable and rational they could attain social progress and end restrictions placed on them. Some of them lived different lives from those women who had large families and confined themselves to the domestic sphere. This departure from tradition also made them appear modern.

In seeking an education and hoping for progress toward rationality in the law, these women were invoking a meaning of the word *modern* dating back to the Enlightenment. Progress, rational thought, and science have also been taken as the bedrock of the modern. *Modernization*—another derivative of the word *modern*—refers to the kind of scientific and technological progress that came with industrialization and the rise of commercial agriculture as they began to shape the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indoor plumbing, electricity, telephones, and automobiles were signs of modernity. As a result, modern artists painted teeming cities, industrial workers, world's fairs, and other scenes associated with the modernization of the late nineteenth century. In the second decade of the twentieth century, other artists started converting parts of industrial products like the toilet and the automobile into works of art.

Modern may be a popular word because it contains paradoxical meanings that make it multipurpose. While associated with the triumph of industry and rational thought at the turn of the century, cultural modernism brought a glorification of the so-called primitive and non-Western, whether in representational art, music, literature, or philosophy. The great innovative composer Richard Wagner gained inspiration from Indian philosophy, while the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche read Asian religious and philosophical writings. Pablo Picasso derived some of his modern style from African art, while the clean lines of modern architecture—the turn away from Victorian curlicues and gaudy colors—were modeled on the pure forms of native American, African, Asian, and Middle Eastern dwellings.

Complex, paradoxical, and dense with meaning, *modern* may not always be precise enough to be useful. But its very breadth explains why *modern* remains a crucial—and debated—term of history.

In many countries the number of urban residents was surpassing that of the rural population, and the multitudes began to live their lives among strangers, getting their news from impersonal media like newspapers instead of trading stories with neighbors. Some ruling elites from the countryside protested the independence and unruliness of urban dwellers.

Alarm over the Falling Birthrate. While the absolute size of the population was rising in much of the West, the birthrate (measured in births per thousand people) was falling because of urbanization and industrialization. The birthrate had been decreasing in France since the eighteenth century; other European countries began experiencing the decline late in the nineteenth century. The Swedish rate dropped from thirty-five births per thousand people in 1859 to twenty-four per thousand in 1911; even populous Germany went from forty births per thousand in 1875 to twenty-seven per thousand in 1913.

Rural community norms, such as postponing marriage until the late twenties when couples were too old to produce large numbers of children, broke down under rapid economic change. Urbanization released the grip of rural community decision making in reproductive matters. In an age when agriculture was also becoming industrialized, farm families needed fewer hands, and individual couples determined their own birth-control practices to limit their family's size. Abstinence was a common method, but the spread of new birth-control practices that would encompass most of the globe by the end of the twentieth century mainly accounted for modern Europe's ebbing birthrate. In cities, pamphlets and advice books for those with enough money and education spread information about coitus interruptus—the withdrawal method of preventing pregnancy. Technology also played a role in curtailing reproduction: condoms, improved after the vulcanization of rubber in the 1840s, proved fairly reliable in preventing conception, as did the German-invented diaphragm. Abortions were also legion, if still legally sanctioned.

The wider use of birth control stirred controversy. Critics accused middle-class women, whose fertility was falling most rapidly, of holding a "birth strike." Anglican bishops, meeting early in the twentieth century, deplored family limitation, especially by artificial means, as "demoralizing to character and hostile to national welfare." Politicians worried about a crisis in masculinity that would detract from military strength. But U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt blamed middle-class women's selfishness for the population decline, calling it "one of the most unpleasant and unwholesome features of modern life." The "quality" of those being born worried activists and politicians: If the

Large German Family
Improved medicine, hygiene, and diet at the turn of the century helped more people survive infancy and childhood. Thus, in many cases family size grew larger, as this photo from a working-class apartment suggests. Even those opposed to birth control were appalled that lower-class families were becoming larger than those of the "best circles," where family limitation was increasingly practiced. What Social Darwinist ideas could be used to describe this family? How would a birth-control activist describe it? Might these two groups have the same ideas about the family? *AKG London.*

"best" classes had fewer children, they asked, what would society look like when peopled mostly by the "worst" classes?

Racism and nationalism shaped the debate over population. The decline in fertility, one German nationalist warned, would make the country a "conglomerate of alien peoples, above all Slavs and probably East European Jews as well." Nationalist groups promoting large, "racially fit" families sprang up in France, Germany, Britain, and elsewhere. The Social Darwinist focus on national peril in a menacing world merged the debate on gender and family issues with anxieties over class and race, inflaming the political climate. Instead of building consensus among all groups, politicians instilled fears of ethnic minorities and the poor and also placed blame on well-to-do women in order to win votes.

Reforming Marriage

Reformers focused on improving both the conditions within marriage and the quality of children born as a way of solving the problem. The fear that one's nation or "race" was being polluted by the presence of "aliens," the mentally ill, and the severely disabled was a feature of the so-called science of eugenics, a discriminatory set of beliefs about the lower classes and people of other races and ethnicities popular among wealthy, educated Europeans at the turn of the century. As a famed Italian criminologist put it, such people were not humans but "orangutans." Eugenicists favored increased fertility for "the fittest" and limitations on the fertility of "degenerates," leading even to their sterilization or elimination. Women of the "better" classes, reformers felt, would be more inclined to reproduce if the legal shackles in the traditional system of marriage were removed. Married women's wages and other property were generally made the property of the husband. Given the existing constraints of motherhood—all property legally transferred to husbands, no legal rights to their own children, little recourse and no financial resources in the event of an abusive or miserable marriage—women were reluctant to have more than two or three, if any, children. The law made both marriage and motherhood unattractive, even detrimental to women's well-being.

Reformers worked to change these conditions in order to boost the birthrate, while feminists sought to improve the lot of mothers and their children. Sweden, which made men's and women's control over property equal in marriage, allowed women to work without a husband's permission. Other countries, among them France (1884), legalized divorce and made it less complicated, and thus less costly, to obtain. There was good reason to believe that these legal changes would result in an upswing of the birthrate. Divorce would allow unhappy couples to separate and undertake new, more loving, and thus more fertile marriages. Greater financial parity in marriage was seen as a way to promote better maternal health and thus ensure higher quality children. By the early twentieth century, several countries had passed legislation that provided government subsidies for medical care and child support in order to improve motherhood among the lower classes. The concern for population lay the foundations for the welfare state—that is, one whose policies addressed the not just military defense, foreign policy, and political processes but also the social and economic well-being of its people.

The conditions of marriage, motherhood, and other aspects of women's lives varied throughout Europe; for example, women could get university degrees in Austrian universities long before they could at Oxford or Cambridge. A greater number of legal reforms occurred in western Europe, however. In much of rural eastern Europe the father's power over the extended family remained almost dictatorial. According to a survey of family life in eastern Europe in the early 1900s, fathers married off their children so young that 25 percent of women in their early forties had been pregnant more than ten times. Yet reform of everyday customs did occur, as community control gave way to individual practice in places, even though the pace of such change was slower than it was in western Europe. For instance, in some Balkan villages, a kind of extended-family system called the *zadruga*, in which all the nuclear families shared a common great house, survived from earlier times, but by the late nineteenth century individual couples developed a degree of privacy by building one-room sleeping dwellings surrounding the