In June, 2009 I was one of the lucky teachers, students, and professors that went on an EUCE sponsored educational trip to Brussels to study and gain insight into the workings of the European Union (EU). Our trip was packed full with excursions to a variety of EU related offices and institutions as well as a visit to NATO headquarters. It was both very educational and pleasant. The weather was nice and cooperative. According to our hosts Belgium was experiencing a heat wave.

Our first visit was to the European Commission which is the executive arm of the EU. The Commission is housed in an enormous complex. The architecture of much of Brussels is quite institutional. As the capital of Europe it is a strange mix of the old, such as the intimate and handsome setting of the “Grand Place” which is the center of gravity for tourists – and the new, as the seat of the EU and NATO. At the Commission we were introduced into the curious world of trying to wrap one’s head around what the EU is, how it functions, and what the future might hold for EU enlargement. We soon found out that there was a wide variety of opinions on these matters.
We also paid a visit to the EU Parliament. Again, a huge complex but this building was much more charming visually than the Commission. We were shown the Hemicycle, the huge room where the MPs meet and vote on the legislation drawn up by the Commission. With around 800 seats flanked by the translator’s stations it was very impressive. The Slovenian tour guide was informative and animated. I was always impressed by how multilingual all of our hosts were. Our visit to NATO was a bit of a disappointment aside from the daunting security arrangements and the vicious Doberman guard dogs. The presentations at NATO were unfortunately less candid and informative than the other visits.

At night we were free to go out and enjoy the town. The cuisine was outstanding whether we ate the regional fare such as mussels or if we had a falafel. Brussels is an international city and its faces and offerings reflect that diversity. Like most European cities the “inner city” is where the wealth and commerce as well as the tourists are located while the “suburbs” are where the immigrants and poverty is concentrated. Exposure to both scenes offers interesting insights into the complexity and challenges of modern European society.

Our group also went to Bruges to visit the College of Europe which is where many of the “eurocrats” that make the EU their career are trained. The curriculum is extremely rigorous and incorporates history and politics along with an intensive language studies program. The town itself is really beautiful with narrow cobblestone streets and medieval architecture - quite different than busy and bustling Brussels.

After our stint in Brussels the members of the group went their separate ways. I used the opportunity to stay an extra week and to rent a car, drive into northern France, and to traverse along the Western Front battlefields of World War I. It was an awesome yet disconcerting compliment to the week in Brussels. On the one hand I was learning and witnessing how Europe was cooperating and prospering in fascinating and innovative ways, while my trip to northern France and to Flanders was the reminder of the extent to which Europeans used to butcher each other.

I teach an AP course on modern European history at East High School in Madison, Wisconsin. The story of modern Europe is a harsh tale of warfare, colonialism, nationalist chauvinism, and genocides. This year, because of my visit to Brussels and what I gained and learned about the EU, I decided to start the story from the end and to teach about the EU and all its successes, as well as its challenges, before I go into the tale of woe which makes up much of modern European history. It only goes to show how far Europe has come from looking over the precipice of barbarism that the world wars had brought it to.