Late 19th Century European Culture: Thought & Society

Main Themes:

1. By 1900, thinkers had drawn new conclusions for traditional problems.
2. Christianity underwent a strong attack.
3. By the end of the 19c, scientists had made major changes in the Newtonian picture of the physical world.
4. A new aggressive nationalism replaced the humanitarian ideals of liberalism and socialism.
5. The social context of intellectual life changed during this period because for the first time, Europe had a mass reading public, with literacy improved by the proliferation of state financed education.
6. New concepts and technologies challenged the basic presuppositions of science, rationalism, liberalism, and bourgeoisie (Victorian) morality.

I. Late 19c Society → La Belle Epoch
   A. The "Victorian" Age:
      1. Appearances were everything.
      2. Middle-class domination (bourgeois values).
      3. High moral standards.
      4. Strict social codes (especially of etiquette and class status).
      5. Interest in social reform for the lower classes.
   B. Christianity Under Attack:
      1. New scientific theories (Darwinism, psychoanalysis) threatened traditional religious values and views of man.
      2. Historical scholarship (especially archaeology) questioned the veracity of the Bible.
      3. Philosophers (like Nietzsche) cast doubt on the morality of Christianity ("God is Dead" movement).
      4. Organized religion came under attack from the secular state (especially because of the government's expanding role in education).
      5. Religious revival:
         a. Pope Pius IX → the doctrine of papal infallibility.
         b. Pope Leo XIII (Rerum Novarum) → addressed the great social issues of the day, condemning socialism but urging improvements in the conditions of labor.
   C. Expansion of literacy.
   D. Anti-Semitism (especially Dreyfus Affair).
   E. Second Industrial Revolution (1850-1914).

II. New Ideas:
   A. Darwinism → the Origin of Species.
      1. Evolution according to natural selection.
      2. "Survival of the fittest".
      3. Social Darwinism → its effects on political ideology? (Used as a justification for imperialism).
   B. Albert Einstein
      1. Theory of Relativity (expressed the complex relationship of matter, space, motion, and time).
      2. A small amount of matter could be converted into a tremendous amount of energy (E = mc^2).
C. Sigmund Freud
   1. Psychoanalysis.
   2. The importance of sexuality to the human mind. (Civilization depended on the sublimation of sexual energy.)
   3. The importance of the human consciousness. (Division of the inner realm of the mind into the id, ego, and superego.)

D. Friedrich Nietzsche
   1. He condemned Christianity as a slave religion and democracy as the rule of the mediocre.
   2. A small group of "supermen" (Übermensch) would eventually dominate the world.
   3. His philosophy (along with other earlier 19c German philosophers) provided the philosophical background for 20c Nazism.

E. Modern Physics —→ Roentgen, Becquerel, Rutherford, Curie, Planck, etc.

III. Late 19c & Early 20c Art Movements:
   A. Impressionism/Post-Impressionism (1840s-1880s):
      1. A revolt against realism.
      2. They expressed not a photographic accuracy, but the artist's personal feelings or "impressions" of his subject.
      3. Great use of light and brilliant colors.
      5. How did this art movement reflect the intellectual atmosphere of late 19c Europe?
   B. Cubism (1890-1920s):
      1. Beginning of abstract painting.
      2. Forerunner of the modern art movement.
      3. The artist sees an object from all angles/sides at the same time.
      4. A protest against war and brutality.
      5. Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, etc.

   ADDITIONAL TERMS TO KNOW:
   - revisionism
   - syndicalism
   - Nihilism
   - irrationalism
   - Max Weber
   - "quantum theory"
   - Social Darwinism