

CENTRAL AND NORTH-WESTERN EUROPE.

This area consists of two mountainous regions separated by the Great Plain, and the importance of the continuity of this plain, in affording easy communication in all directions, has already been pointed out (see p. 8). It is, however, well to remember that, on account of the temperate and moist climate, this region was for long largely occupied by dense forests and swamps; so that, from early historic times down to nearly a century ago, the rivers across it, which hindered communication due east and west, proved themselves to be the most important routes from south-east to north-west. The dense forests are also partly responsible for the fact that the civilization of the plain is of a later date than that of some of the Mediterranean countries, as they hindered the effective occupation and development of the region. It was, however, the resin from a kind of pine-tree which formerly flourished around the Baltic shores that furnished the amber which so early figures as an article of trade with the southern countries.

Of all the rivers which cross the plain, the most important is the Rhine. This river formed at one time part of the frontier of the Roman Empire, though at another period the empire also included much of the basins of the Neckar and Main. About the ninth century the northern and western portions of its basin became part of a Frankish kingdom called Lotharingia, the name of which survives in Lorraine, though the kingdom was soon split up into other States. During the Middle Ages, when Venice carried on such a large trade with the East in spices, silks, etc., these reached the Rhine valley by various Alpine passes, and were by this means distributed to Northern Europe; but after the Dutch monopolized the trade with the East by way of the Cape route, such goods were sent up the river from Holland into Central Europe, instead of coming down it. In modern times the river-basin has been a bone of contention between France and Germany; and the present north-east frontier of France is a purely artificial line, lying mainly west of the basin. Belgium and Holland, which now occupy the lower basin of the river, may be regarded as a fragment of the old lost kingdom of Lotharingia, and partake of the nature of 'Buffer States.'

France is a very important country in acting as a link between Mediterranean and Northern Europe, since, besides the slope to the Atlantic, it possesses the Rhone valley and the gap between the Cevennes and Pyrenees, which define easy routes from south to north and west. The