Origins and Impacts of Nationalism

By Malcolm F. Purinton

Nations and nationalism are not very old but they have had dramatic effects on how we view the world and each other. With the decline in the power of religion and religious authorities, people looked for a new way to identify themselves, they found this within their nations.

What exactly is nationalism?

It feels like we've always had countries, and people who believe their own country is the best. But in fact, nations and nationalism are only around 200 years old. If you think about how long people have been around and all the kinds of governments and kingdoms and empires they've built over thousands of years, nations are actually quite young!

What is a nation? What is nationalism? We often think our nation is an important part of our identity—I am "American," "Indian," "Italian," "Chinese," and so on. But what does that really mean? How are you part of your country/nation? Well, nationalism begins with the idea that the whole of human society is divided into distinct, autonomous groups called nations. What is nation? A nation is a group of people speaking a common language, sharing a common culture, a sense of a common destiny, and sharing a common history. So, nationalism is also a term to describe the common bonds that hold people together within a nation, creating a new type of community. Tied to this is the idea that individuals' loyalty should be focused on the nation and that each nation should be able to determine its own future—an idea known as self-determination. So, nationalism is also the idea that the nation should have that right to govern itself and the right to self-determination. Finally, sometimes, nationalism is expressed in the belief that one's own nation is better than other nations. In those instances, it can become competitive or discriminatory.

An elaborate satirical map reflecting the European nations in 1899.
How are European nations represented? By Frederick W. Rose, public domain.

Nationalism bonds people together in a way that is not genetic, not biological, and not based on even having a personal connection with other members of your nation. In some ways the idea of a nation is actually an imaginary relationship and nations could be considered *imagined communities* because so much of the making of a nation is about creating unity and loyalty in our minds. It is not enough to just have a common government to make a nation— we must have shared cultural symbols like flags, national anthems, a shared idea of the history of our nations to create and build a community of a nation.

Origins

As noted earlier, nationalism is not very old. Before the very end of the eighteenth century (1700s), nationalism didn't even exist as a widespread cultural or political ideology! When people told you where they were from, they said the name of a village or town. How did we go from identifying ourselves by our town to identifying ourselves by our nation? Well, to understand that we need to look at some of the revolutions around the turn of the nineteenth century, especially in Europe, and what people were fighting for, and against.

The French Revolutionary era had great importance in the development and spread of nationalism as an ideology. After French ruler Napoleon Bonaparte rose to power in 1799, he extended the central government of France into all the countries he conquered across Europe. This was after ten years of war within France, and by now the French people had gained a sense of cohesion against its enemies. Especially Great Britain. They were able to define themselves both as what they were—"We're French, *ça va*?!"—and what they were not—not English, not German, not Italian, nor anything else. The military victories of France helped to create a common sense of history and identity, making nationalism strongest in France. But here's the funny thing about nationalism: As Napoleon expanded and his armies occupied many other European countries, those other countries all agreed national self-determination was the way to go. It was like being bullied by someone who ends up showing you enough wrestling moves that you are able to defeat them. Uniting against the French regime created a sense of common destiny—a sense of nationalism.

Napoleon ended up unintentionally leading Europeans from old regimes of kings, queens, and subjects to new nations of citizens and parliaments, but that's not the only reason nationalism took hold. There were many other trends occurring at the same time including the growth in literacy, urban areas, and print culture (communicating through printed words and images). With the Enlightenment, education and literacy and the many forms of print were crucial to the spread of ideas. Common bonds formed between intellectuals and the reading public within countries. The most devoted nationalists in the early nineteenth century were actually secondary students and university students in urban areas! Peasants who were mostly illiterate and often shared very little in terms of common culture, were left out of the nationalism conversation. But peasants were still the majority of people in Europe, and their views would change for other reasons.

Napoléon Bonaparte in 1799 by François Bouchot, public domain.

Other reasons...

Some historians have argued that nationalism became important because older loyalties became less important—which brings us to religion. For hundreds of years after the split of the Christian church into Catholic and Protestant, wars were fought over religious and dynastic loyalties. The Enlightenment weakened the hold of religion over many parts of the population by pointing out the abuses of the church and focusing on reason over religion. People soon lost trust in religious authorities. In addition, European dynasties had relied on absolutism to keep their subjects loyal. But between the Enlightenment ideas and the French Revolution, there were enough critiques against kings and queens to shift the people's loyalties. That made absolutism a lot less absolute.

While nationalism has much to do with unity, its development often comes through the defining of differences. Russia in the nineteenth century is a great example. For Russians, nationalism wasn't just about customs, language, and history, though those mattered. Russian nationalists defined themselves as *not part of the West*—Western Europe. The Western European models of industrialization and constitutional governments had no appeal to Russian nationalists, who wanted to keep their rural and religious traditions, thank you very much.

Across the Atlantic in the Americas, nationalism got going even earlier than in Europe. The national liberation revolutions of the United States and Haiti were tied to similar Enlightenment ideals, though having a national language was less of a factor. As historian Benedict Anderson points out, the creole states in the Americas shared common languages with the colonizing countries of Europe. The connections between the American colonies and the European countries ruling them likely helped the spread of Enlightenment and national ideas.

Even as Napoleon's armies overran most of Continental Europe, Toussaint L'Ouverture helped establish the second independent republic in the Western hemisphere in Haiti in 1804. After several hundred years of European colonization in the Americas—and Asia and Africa as well—things had changed. People had changed, as there was less distinction between European colonizers and the local populations. Now there were Eurasians, Eurafricans, and Euramericans who all had closer ties to the colonized lands than to the European powers who controlled them. Local loyalty to the land where they lived would help propel movements and revolutions for national liberation and decolonial movements both during the nineteenth century and through the mid-twentieth century.

"St. Domingue: Prise De La Ravine Aux Couleuvres." (Saint Domingue: Capture of Ravine-à-Couleuvres) Depiction of the Battle of Ravine-à-Couleuvres (23 February 1802), during the Haitian Revolution, by Jean Jacques Outhwaite. Public domain.

Obstacles

France already had a central government and system of administration that helped bring the center and outlying areas together. This state structure helped to build ideas of "the Nation." But that wasn't the case in many other countries. Sure, Germany and Italy each had common literary languages and the elites of these countries were developing ideas of a common destiny for all German or all Italian peoples. But neither place had a central government structure. They were both split up into a whole bunch of little states without any notion of German or Italian citizenship, no national armies, and their various royalty did not include a singular, that's-the-one-in-charge monarch in either place. Nationalists in places like Italy and Germany had to do a lot more than just talk up the benefits of nationhood to the population. They also had to propose a way that the nation could be expressed in a form of government. It wouldn't be until 1871 that these two regions would each become unified into nations. In Germany it would be through the military force of the Prussians and in Italy, through the political leadership of the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia in the northwest part of present-day Italy.

The German Empire is proclaimed in 1871, public domain.

Conclusions and future differences

The rise and spread of nationalism gave people a new sense of identity and also led to an increased sense of competition among nation-states. After Napoleon was defeated (twice!) several other European nations joined together to attempt to return to the old—conservative—ways with royal dynasties returning to their thrones. However, over the following century several revolutions across Europe would remove these royals from power. New constitutional governments led by citizens of these nation-states would take their place. These nations would then compete for colonies across the world in Africa, Eastern Asia, and Southeast Asia by the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the twentieth century, however, nationalism would play a major role in the competition between nations. It was an extremely bloody competition that we now call World War I.

Malcolm F. Purinton

Malcolm F. Purinton is a part-time lecturer of World History and the History of Modern Europe at Northeastern University and Emmanuel College in Boston, MA. He specializes in Food and Environmental History through the lens of beer and alcohol.

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