

NATIONAL BESTSELLER

• The ~~reports~~
~~and~~ Uses ~~of~~
~~the~~ and ~~the~~
g. Abuses ~~of~~
~~the~~ of ~~the~~
History ~~has~~

History
and Nationalism

Margaret ~~the~~
Macmillan 0

Of the many ways in which we can define ourselves, the nation, at least for the last two centuries, has been one of the most enticing. The idea that we are part of a very large family, or in Benedict Anderson's words, an imagined community, has been as powerful a force as fascism or communism. Nationalism brought Germany and Italy into being, destroyed Austria-Hungary, and, more recently, broke apart Yugoslavia. People have suffered and died, and have harmed and killed others, for their "nation."

History provides much of the fuel for nationalism. It creates the collective memories that help to bring the nation into being. The shared celebration of the nation's great achievements—and the shared sorrow at its defeats—sustain and foster it. The further back the history appears to go, the more solid and enduring the nation seems—and the worthier its claims. Ernest Renan, the

nineteenth-century French thinker who wrote an early classic on nationalism, dismissed all the other justifications for the existence of nations, such as blood, geography, language, or religion. "A nation," he wrote, "is a great solidarity created by the sentiment of the sacrifices which have been made and those which one is disposed to make in the future." As one of his critics preferred to put it, "A nation is a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbours." Renan saw the nation as something that depended on the assent of its members. "The existence of a nation is a plebiscite of every day, as the existence of an individual is a perpetual affirmation of life." For many nationalists, there is no such thing as voluntary assent; you were born into a nation and had no choice about whether or not you belonged, even if history had intervened. When France claimed the Rhineland after World War I, one of the arguments it used was that, even though they spoke German, its inhabitants were really French. Although ill fortune had allowed them to fall under German rule, they had remained French in essence, as their love of wine, their Catholicism, and their *joie de vivre* so clearly demonstrated.

Renan was trying to grapple with a new phenomenon because nationalism is a very late development indeed in terms of human history. For many centuries, most Europeans did not think of themselves as British (or

English or Scottish or Welsh), French, or German but rather as members of a particular family, clan, region, religion, or guild. Sometimes they defined themselves in terms of their overlords, whether local barons or emperors. When they did define themselves as German or French, it was as much a cultural category as a political one and they certainly did not assume, as modern national movements almost always do, that nations had a right to rule themselves on a specific piece of territory.

Those older ways of defining oneself persisted well into the modern age. When commissions from the League of Nations tried to determine borders after World War I in the centre of Europe, they repeatedly came upon locals who had no idea whether they were Czechs or Slovaks, Lithuanians or Poles. We are Catholic or Orthodox, came the answers, merchants or farmers, or simply people of this village or that. Danilo Dolci, the Italian sociologist and activist, was astonished to find in the 1950s that there were people living in the interior of Sicily who had never heard of Italy even though, in theory, they had been Italians for several generations. They were the anomalies, though, left behind as nationalism increasingly became the way in which Europeans defined themselves. Rapid communications, growing literacy, urbanization, and above all the idea that it was right and proper to see oneself as part of a nation, and a nation, moreover, that ought to have its own

state on its own territory, all fed into the great wave of nationalism that shook Europe in the nineteenth century and the wider world in the twentieth.

For all the talk about eternal nations, they are created, not by fate or god, but by the activities of human beings, and not least by historians. It all started so quietly in the nineteenth century. Scholars worked on languages, classifying them into different families and trying to determine how far back into history they went. They discovered rules to explain changes in language and were able to establish, at least to their own satisfaction, that texts centuries old were written in early forms of, for example, German or French. Ethnographers like the Grimm brothers collected German folk tales as a way of showing that there was something called the German nation in the Middle Ages. Historians worked assiduously to recover old stories and pieced together the history of what they chose to call their nation as though it had an unbroken existence since antiquity. Archaeologists claimed to have found evidence that showed where such nations had once lived, and where they had moved to during the great waves of migrations.

The cumulative result was to create an unreal yet influential version of how nations formed. While it could not be denied that different peoples, from Goths to Slavs, had moved into and across Europe, mingling as they did so with peoples already there, such a view assumed that at some point, generally in the Middle Ages, the music had

stopped. The dancing pieces had fallen into their chairs, one for the French, another for the Germans, or yet another for the Poles. And there history had fixed them as "nations." German historians, for example, could depict an ancient German nation whose ancestors had lived happily in their forests from before the time of the Roman Empire and which some time, probably in the first century A.D., had become recognizably "German." So—and this was the dangerous question—what was properly the German nation's land? Or the land of any other "nation"? Was it where they now lived, where they had lived at the time of their emergence in history, or both?

Would the scholars have gone on with their speculations if they could have seen what they were preparing the way for? The bloody wars that created Italy and Germany? The passions and hatred that tore apart the old multinational Austria-Hungary? The claims, on historical grounds, by new and old nations after World War I for the same pieces of territory? The hideous regimes of Hitler and Mussolini with their elevation of the nation and the race to the supreme good and their breathtaking demands for the lands of others?

A paradox, as the British historian Eric Hobsbawm put it, is that "nationalism is modern but it invents for itself history and traditions." The histories that fed and still feed into nationalism draw on what already exists rather than inventing new facts. They often contain much

that is true, but they are slanted to confirm the existence of the nation through time, and to encourage the hope that it will continue. They help to create symbols of victory or defeat—Waterloo, Dunkirk, Stalingrad, Gettysburg, or, for Canadians, Vimy Ridge. They highlight the deeds of past leaders—Charles Martel defeating the Moors at Tours; Elizabeth I at Plymouth Hoe facing the Spanish Armada; Nelson destroying the French fleet at Trafalgar; George Washington refusing to lie about his cherry tree. Often nationalism borrows from the trappings of religious identity. Think of the war memorials that resemble martyrs or Christ on the Cross, or the elaborate rituals on days such as November 11.

Many of what we think of as age-old symbols and ceremonies are often newly minted, as each age looks through the past and finds what suits its present needs. In 1953, all around the world those who had televisions watched, with awe and fascination, the ancient coronation rituals—the monarch's ride through London in the gilded state coach, the solemn procession into Westminster Abbey, the music, the decorations, the Archbishop of Canterbury in his magnificent robes, the elaborate ceremony of crowning. As a schoolchild in Canada, I was given a booklet that explained it all. What most of us did not know was that much of what we watched with such respect was a creation of the nineteenth century. Earlier coronations had been slipshod, even embarrassing affairs.

When a hugely fat George IV was crowned in 1821, his estranged Queen Caroline hammered on the door. At Queen Victoria's coronation in 1837, the clergy stumbled through the service and the Archbishop of Canterbury had trouble with the ring, which was much too big for her finger. By the end of the century, the monarchy was more important as the symbol of a much more powerful Britain. Royal occasions became grander and were much better rehearsed. New ones were added: David Lloyd George, the radical prime minister from Wales, found it useful to have a formal ceremony within the ancient walls of Caernarfon Castle to install the later Edward VIII as Prince of Wales.

One of the most famous of national symbols is the Battle of Kosovo, where Serb forces were defeated by the Ottoman Turks in 1389. In Serbian nationalist lore, this was both an earthly and a spiritual defeat that contains within it, however, the promise of resurrection. For Serbian nationalists, the story is tragically clear. The Christian Serbs were defeated, through treachery, by the Muslim Ottomans. The night before the battle, Prince Lazar, the Serb leader, had a vision in which he was promised that he could have either the kingdom of heaven or one on earth. A good Christian, he chose the former, but the implicit promise was that one day the Serbian nation would be resurrected on earth. Lazar died on the battlefield, after he was betrayed by a Judas, a fellow Serb. His people, true to their faith, remembered the defeat and

the promise and longed for a restored Serb state for the next four hundred years.

The only problem with the story is that it is not only much too simple but parts of it are not supported by the sketchy records from the time. Prince Lazar was not the ruler of all the Serbs but merely one among the several princes who were scrambling for power in the wreckage of the Serb empire built by Prince Dusan. Some had already made their peace with the Ottomans and, as vassals of the Sultan, had sent troops to fight against Lazar. It is not clear that the battle was an overwhelming defeat for the Serbs; at the time, reports in fact called it a victory. It may equally as well have been a draw because neither side resumed hostilities for a time. And an independent Serb state lingered on for decades.

Lazar's widow and Orthodox monks began the process of turning the dead prince into a martyr for the Serbs, curiously at the same time as his son was fighting as a vassal for the Turks. For centuries, though, Lazar and Kosovo were more symbols of Serbs as Orthodox Christians and a people who had a common language than of an independent Serb nation state. The story was kept alive in the monasteries, along with much other Serb culture, and in the great epic poems that were passed down through the generations. It was only in the nineteenth century, with the awakening of nationalism throughout Europe, that that story became so central in mobilizing

Serbs to fight for independence against a declining and incompetent Ottoman Empire.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, with history as their inspiration, the Serbs moved first toward autonomy within the Ottoman Empire and then full independence. The highly influential Serbian scholar of the early nineteenth century, Vuk Karadžić, standardized a modern Serb written language and collected the epic poems. He also left a poisoned legacy by arguing that those peoples such as Croats and Bosnian Muslims who spoke virtually the same language were also Serbs. Ilija Garašanin, the statesman who did so much to shape Serb nationalism and to build the structures for the new Serb state, drew on history to point his fellow Serbs toward their destiny. The Serbian Empire had been destroyed by the Ottoman Turks but now the time had come to restore it. We are, he said in a document that remained secret until the start of the twentieth century, the "true heirs of our great forefathers." Serbian nationalism was not something new or, heaven forbid, revolutionary but the flowering of ancient roots. Again, it was a dangerous vision because it assumed that the Croats and Bosnians were a natural part of the empire.

It is easy to challenge such views of the past but not to shake the faith of those who wish to believe in them. In the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1980s and 1990s, the old historical myths came to the forefront again. Yet again, the

Serbs were fighting on alone in a hostile world. In 1986, a memorandum from the Serbian Academy of Sciences warned that all the gains the Serbs had made since they first rebelled against the Ottomans in 1804 were going to be lost. Croats were terrorizing the Serbs in Croatia, and Albanians were forcing Serbs to flee the province of Kosovo. In 1989, Slobodan Milosëvić went to Kosovo on the six-hundredth anniversary of the battle and declared, "The Kosovo heroism does not allow us to forget that, at one time, we were brave and dignified and one of the few who went into battle undefeated." At the same time, in Croatia, nationalists were looking back into their past to argue that a greater Croatia, incorporating hundreds of thousands of Serbs, was historically necessary. History did not destroy Yugoslavia or lead to the horrors that accompanied that destruction, but its skilful manipulation by men such as Milosëvić and, in Croatia, Franjo Tudjman, helped to mobilize their followers and intimidate the uncommitted.

The Balkans have had, in Winston Churchill's marvelous phrase, more history than they can consume. New nations have worried that they do not have enough. When Israel came into existence in 1948, it was, despite the long connection of Jews with Palestine, a new state. With immigrants from all over Europe, and, increasingly, by the 1950s from the Middle East, building a strong national identity was essential if Israel itself were to survive. It was

difficult to identify shared customs and culture. What did a Jew from Egypt have in common with one from Poland? Nor was religion a sufficient basis; many Zionists were resolutely non-religious. Although Hebrew was reviving, it had not yet produced a national literature. That gave history particular significance as a glue. In its declaration of independence, Israel called on the past to justify its existence. The land was the historic birthplace of the Jewish people: "After being forcibly exiled from their land, the people kept faith with it throughout their Dispersion and never ceased to pray and hope for their return to it and for the restoration of their political freedom." More recent history became part of the story, too. The Jews had managed to return in great numbers: "They made deserts bloom, revived the Hebrew language, built villages and towns, and created a thriving community, controlling its own economy and culture, loving peace but knowing how to defend itself, bringing the blessings of progress to all the country's inhabitants, and aspiring towards independent nationhood."

In 1953, the Israeli Knesset passed a law to commemorate the Holocaust (Yad Vashem) and the State Education Law. Their author was the minister of education and culture, Ben-Zion Dinur, who had been active as a Zionist educator and politician long before Israel's independence. His view of history was rooted in the need to build an Israeli consciousness. "The ego of a nation," he declared in

the Knesset, "exists only to the extent that it has a memory, to the extent that the nation knows how to combine its past experiences into a single entity." For Dinur and those who supported him (and many both on the left and the right did not), that meant teaching Israelis that there was and always had been an Israeli nation, that it had survived the long centuries of exile, and that it had always been focused on getting back to its lost lands. Israel therefore was the heir and the culmination of a long historical process. Dinur's view has been much criticized for leaving out religion, for example, in the definition of Jewishness and for presenting an oversimplified view of Jewish history, but it has been very influential in Israeli schools. A study of textbooks used between 1900 and 1984 found that, increasingly as time went on, Jewish history was presented in terms of the establishment of Israel, that, among Jews in exile, the Zionist dream of a Jewish state was "the strongest and oldest" movement.

Nationalism has far from run its course and new nations keep appearing—and they, too, find history important in defining themselves. In the 1960s, Wolfgang Feuerstein, a young German scholar, came upon a people inhabiting a remote valley on the south coast of the Black Sea near the Turkish port of Trabzon. The approximately 250,000 Lazi were Muslim, like the great majority of Turks, but had their own language, customs, and myths. It seemed to the young German that they must have once

been Christian. He started to study them, this anomaly left behind by history, and, to help record their stories, he devised a written language for them. The Lazi began to take an interest in their own past and culture, and the Turkish authorities, who have enough trouble with the demands of their other minorities such as the Kurds, became concerned. Feuerstein was arrested, beaten, and deported, but from his exile he has sent texts with Lazi stories and poetry back in to the unofficial schools that are now being run surreptitiously. As the Lazi develop a sense of themselves and their past, they are becoming a nation. In 1999, a Laz Party was established to push for a "Lazistan" within Turkey. Its manifesto talks of fostering the Laz language and culture and encouraging the study of history from a Laz point of view. And, if I am not mistaken, they will use that history to present a bill of claims one day.