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THE EUROPEAN
EXPERIENCE

A Multi-Perspective History
of Modern Europe, 1500-2000

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3.1.2 State-building and Nationalism in Modern History (ca. 1800–1900)

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Introduction

The nineteenth century saw the consecration of the nation-state as a model for political and territorial organisation in Europe. It emerged out of long-term, structural developments, commonly known as nation and state-building processes. But what came first in historical terms: the nation or the state? Were state structures built around already-existing nations? Or, to the contrary, are national identities the products of action taken by state institutions in order to win the loyalty of the citizens that inhabit a given territory? This is a difficult question to which scholars have given different answers.

A New Model for Political Organisation in Europe: The Nation-state

The period of transition known as the Age of Revolution (ca. 1789–1848) is a crucial moment both for the history of the nation and that of the state. For some historians, such as Eric Hobsbawm or Ernest Gellner, modern states and nations emerged as new entities during liberal revolutions, and in connection with the parallel rise of modern capitalism. From this point of view, declarations of national sovereignty became a common feature of European liberal revolutions after 1789: from the moment that the French National Assembly was formed and declared itself competent to provide the monarchy with a new constitution, as the true representative of the national interest. Thus, national sovereignty became the main source of political legitimation for state institutions in the liberal age. Article Three of the 1812 Spanish Constitution

established that "sovereignty resides essentially in the nation, and therefore the right to establish its fundamental laws belongs exclusively to it."

Accordingly, those scholars who understand the nation in its modern sense as a product of this Age of Revolution stress its artificial nature: nations were constructed by state and capitalist institutions to provide common elements with which citizens could identify and operate, such as a common past (the national history taught in public schools and displayed in national museums) or a national market supervised by the state. Notably, Benedict Anderson described the modern nation as an "imagined community", imagined both as sovereign and limited (because no nation identifies itself with humanity). In such communities, horizontal personal ties among its members became central. One of the goals of the liberal revolutions was to construct a community of equals in order to eradicate the legal privileges and inequalities that had characterised the *ancien régime*. Equality before the law would allow citizens to identify with their compatriots, equals in rights and duties, thus strengthening national commitment.

From this perspective, nations were built through political and cultural actions, by which states sought to turn the inhabitants of their territory into participants of a political community. Nationhood would provide this community with a cultural identity through the establishment of national myths, traditions, and shared symbols (usually those of the dominant ethnic group in the territory).

Nations, therefore, were not predetermined when the nineteenth century began. Rather, they were rooted in the convictions of the individuals that formed them and the result of theoretical elaborations of political and cultural agents, self-proclaimed nationalists or patriots. Initially, nationalist activists cooperated in transnational networks, vowing allegiance to the mutual cause of building a continent or world of nation-states. Italian intellectuals cherished the idea of a 'shared fate' between Italy and Germany and used it to win over the hearts and minds of German nationalists. In central Europe, contrary to the image of hermetically-sealed national cultures, important intellectuals from different national groups often maintained tight connections with figures from 'rival' nations. They were educated at western European universities which ensured the transfer of western European ideas.

Such a social constructivist view should not, however, imply that *any* national project was viable in the nineteenth century. Some scholars argue that for a nation to be feasible, it must spring from existing political structures that are attached to the common experiences of its citizens, or from the existence of ethnic groups, defined by Anthony Smith as human groups linked to a mythic-symbolic system that typically preserves the idea of a common origin. Even if ethnic groups were not natural units, they were able to maintain themselves

through time using the intergenerational transmission mechanisms of these mythic-symbolic systems, such as certain customs, folklore stories or songs.

In any case, the nineteenth century witnessed intense processes of nation- and state-building all around Europe, propelled by political, cultural, and economic developments. This included the crystallisation into liberal states of old (or restored) monarchies such as the United Kingdom, France, or Spain, each one affected in different ways by revolutionary events. These were nations characterised by internal ethnic diversity that found ways to homogenise around a language identified with the state (English, French, and Castilian). This cultural diversity was the basis for the development of non-state regionalisms and nationalisms by the end of the century, like those of Wales, Scotland, the Basque Country, or Catalonia.

Other states appeared as the consequence of complex processes of unification between areas that were previously defined along cultural, linguistic, or commercial lines. Most spectacular was the appearance of unified states in Germany and Italy after intense warfare between 1859 and 1871. Next to that, several brand new states appeared, usually after episodes of revolutionary or bellicose secessionism. Finland became an autonomous region of the Russian Empire during the Napoleonic Wars, obtaining full independence after the Bolshevik October Revolution of 1917. In 1814, the separate kingdoms of Sweden and Norway were unified under a personal union (that is, they shared the same monarch) that remained until 1905. Norway was thus separated from the Danish crown which, in 1864, also lost the ethnically mixed Danish-German duchies of Schleswig and Holstein in a war with Prussia and the Habsburg Empire. In 1830–31, Belgium was carved out of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, a union that had recently been created by the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) to thwart French expansionism. Both Denmark and the Netherlands, after their territorial losses, reconstituted their diminished states around more ethnically defined national identities to stress the cultural distinction from Germany, their powerful and newly unified neighbour.

The Balkans was a European region with a particularly intense propensity for state innovation, following a process of national mobilisation based on ethnic differentiation. This was directly connected to the long-running crisis of the Ottoman Empire and the regional aspirations of the great powers, especially Russia, Austria-Hungary, and later Germany. Greece was the first to obtain its independence after a long war (1821–1830). Serbians, Romanians, and Montenegrins obtained autonomy within the Ottoman Empire following incessant rebellions, but international recognition of an independent Serbia, Romania and Montenegro only arrived at the Congress of Berlin (1878). Bulgaria became a *de facto* independent principality within the Ottoman Empire and obtained the status of kingdom in 1908. National rivalries and

the existence of disputed, 'unredeemed' territories and populations led to the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), usually considered the prelude to the First World War. Several national movements in Central and Eastern Europe were only realised as sovereign states like Czechoslovakia, Poland, or Yugoslavia after the defeat of the multiethnic Austro-Hungarian, German and Russian empires following the First World War.

Fig. 1: Europe 1815 after the Congress of Vienna, Wikimedia, Alexander Altenhof, CC 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Europe_1815_map_en.png.

Institutions and Symbols

When we think about politics in this period, it is natural to think of the rise of nationalism. In nineteenth-century Europe, as mentioned above, state-building and the emergence of modern nations were closely interrelated processes. National movements sought to capture state power to create nation-states. As an ideology, nationalism was a foundational and far-reaching concept with which political institutions, social structures, cultural norms, and even economic processes could be rearranged. Thus, the development of modern nation-states was connected to the ambitious and wide-ranging elaboration of a series of institutions. These institutions were an expansion of state power, aimed at forming an efficient, modern, and bureaucratic administration that would be capable of acting on behalf of the homogenic collective of the nation-state. It was crucial that these institutions appeared as a concrete reality in the

minds of citizens and foreigners. To this end, institutions integrated the state's population and territory, and were capable of demarcating and stabilising spatial and mental borders *vis-à-vis* adjacent states.

One of these institutions was the written constitution. In the nineteenth century, constitutions reshaped the legal framework and placed limits on state power throughout Europe. They were based on principles like national or popular sovereignty, a liberal vision of civil and political rights, and the separation of powers (executive, judicial and legislative). Legislative power lay in elected assemblies, which now represented national sovereignty and were no longer separated into estates, as in medieval or early modern times. Thus, the ideal of the nation as a community of equals promised political participation for all citizens. In practice this meant a suffrage that, as the century progressed, expanded to include more parts of the national population.

Constitutions guaranteed the fundamental rights of every citizen and regulated the basic rules of political and social life within a state by abolishing privileges based on birth and securing equality before the law and the right to property. Constitutional movements emerged all over the continent. In May 1791, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was the first state in Europe to adopt a constitution, four months before revolutionary France did the same. In the course of the nineteenth century, almost all European states followed their lead. By the eve of the First World War, only the autocratic Tsardom of Russia and the Grand Duchy of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (a small territory within the German Empire) had not adopted a modern constitution.

We should not underestimate the institution of the monarchy. Fundamentally contested by the idea of popular sovereignty and the principle of equality, the monarchy was forced to produce proof of its superiority over competing forms of government. The survival of the monarchy depended on the efficiency and performance of its leaders. France, for instance, changed from monarchy to republic and vice versa several times. Overall, many monarchs had to abdicate from the throne as a result of revolts or revolutions.

Still, with the exclusion of France, European monarchies and their dynasties were anchors of stability in a century of dynamic change. In unification processes like those of Italy and Germany, monarchs took the lead: Piedmont's Vittorio Emanuele II and Prussia's Wilhelm I claimed to be acting as leaders of the newly unified nation. Dynasties that tied themselves to the new ideas of the nation, such as the royal houses of Great Britain, Denmark, and the Netherlands, also succeeded in acquiring a popular basis that enlarged their stature and informal power. Many more of the new nation-states that appeared in Europe during the long nineteenth century chose the monarchy as the form of government: Belgium in 1830 (Leopold I), Greece in 1832 (Otto I), Romania in 1859/66 (Alexandru Ioan Cuza, Carol I), and Norway in 1905 (Haakon VII).

Claiming to stand above party politics, the monarchs appeared as integrative factors of the states, even in the multinational Habsburg Empire with its fragile balance of different national movements.

Besides these public-facing political institutions there were other, less conspicuous forms, which more subtly fostered the economic, social, or cultural cohesion of a nation. Compulsory military service attempted to enhance the state's military power and generate political participation among conscripted soldiers, who were taught to sacrifice their lives in the defence of the beloved nation. Magnificent new buildings were erected in European capitals, representing the glory and modernity of the nation or, by using neo-Romanesque or neo-Gothic stylistic elements, its historical tradition. Buildings like the Palace of Westminster in London, the Stortingsbygningen in Oslo, or the Országház in Budapest accommodated political institutions such as ministries and the parliaments. States also erected majestic buildings for economic institutions like central banks. National theatres and opera houses as well as national museums, national libraries, and national archives, preserved and propagated the cultural heritage of the nation.

National literatures were also developed, including widely known novelists and poets like Adam Mickiewicz in Poland, Victor Hugo in France, or Friedrich Schiller in Germany, who increased awareness of distinct languages. Historians spread in their scholarship the myth of the nation as a *Schicksalsgemeinschaft* (community of fate), by writing histories in a specific national manner: typically, they would narrate the history of the nation as alternating periods of prosperity and struggle, while portraying the lives of peoples whose origins were rooted in medieval or even ancient times. In the economic sphere, standardised weights and measures, as well as a common national currencies, let different regions grow together. For instance, the 1834 German Customs Union played an important role in the economic unification of the German principalities. As the economist Friedrich List put it, the aim was "to bind the Germans economically into a nation."

Moreover, a multitude of symbols helped bind a nation together. Many, like coloured maps that established clear-cut boundaries, illustrated the sovereignty of the European nation-states and underlined the exclusionary character of national belonging. Flags, ribbons, and brooches with the national colours were used in everyday life to show—literally—one's true colours. Anthems were composed to strengthen national sentiments and celebrate the fateful struggle for independence and the glory of the nation. They were played on festive days like the ruler's birthday or important historical anniversaries. Monuments, paintings, and caricatures were decorated with iconic allegories as personifications of the nation, which could either be female (Marianne,

Britannia, Mother Russia, Mor Danmark, the Dutch Maiden), male (John Bull, the German Michel), or even animal (the English lion or the Russian bear).

The Nation in Everyday Life: National Identities and Indifference

Although it is important to familiarise oneself with intellectual discourses on the nation, since they carried the central ideas of the period, one must not confuse them with people's everyday experience. National identity is not experienced in the same way by an intellectual living in a capital city as it is, on the other extreme, by an illiterate peasant.

Certainly, everyday activities might help to form the nation as a collective identity, as argued by Anderson: even reading the newspaper supported the imagination of the nation as a community and tightened social relations. However, in peoples' everyday activity the national idea was far from omnipresent. For instance, in Habsburg Central Europe, local experiences of nationalism were far from homogenous and national consciousness was not capable of determining all aspects of life, as the works of Pieter M. Judson have shown. This was especially striking in the case of the so-called 'language frontiers', where national conflicts were supposedly ubiquitous. Instead, people's self-identification did not necessary revolve around the idea of the nation, and often they did not define themselves with this category. Neither did they have difficulties adapting themselves to their multilingual surroundings; they saw an opportunity in this condition, rather than an anomaly. For example, to guarantee more possibilities for their children, families often sent them on holiday to a neighbouring family who spoke other languages of the region. Such practices were denounced by national activists, who advocated a view according to which the world was made up of separate nations, each representing distinct cultures and mutually exclusive by nature. In this sense, one ought to speak more of nationalist conflicts rather than conflicts between nationalities. In the Habsburg Empire, in the face of the central imperial administration, national activists were increasingly successful in their claims and the administration progressively adopted basic elements of their worldview. Thus, the criteria of national belonging made its way into several administrative processes. As a result, people were under obligation to declare, for example, if they were Czech or German even though they might not have originally defined themselves with these categories.

However, national activists started to portray their regions as an agglomeration of several, mutually exclusive and closed cultures. For them, the frontiers of these cultures were places of conflict, of defining oneself by the differentiation from the other at the opposite side of the frontier. Although

this was one function of borders, it was certainly not the only one. As Moritz Csáky pointed out, frontiers also served as places of connection, transition, and mutual influence. This becomes clear, for instance, by looking to Central Europe's musical and gastronomic styles, or by cross-border shared religious practices such as the use of Dutch throughout the nineteenth century by some Calvinist churches in north-western Germany. In fact, many nineteenth-century Europeans lived displaying dual patriotisms without contradiction, like most Catalans in Spain or Scots in Britain, who understood their multiple national allegiances not in exclusionary ways, but in aggregate terms.

Conclusion

The nation-state was one of the most significant phenomena of nineteenth-century Europe, with immense political, social, economic, and cultural impact. It changed the map of Europe, strengthened the connections of regions, citizens and often monarchs to the central state, and impressed the significance of its borders to other nation-states. However, its apparent omnipresence in the discourse of the period should not be overemphasised, as individual and regional identities continued to be crossed by a multiplicity of allegiances and interests of a different nature and clear-cut ethnic differentiations did not always take precedence over everyday practices. In any case, national tensions not only persisted in Europe, but would intensify in the course of the twentieth century.

Discussion questions

1. How did the development of the nation state and nationalism in the nineteenth century differ across Europe?

2. What was the role of culture in the development of nationalism?

3. How does the way Europeans thought about the nation in the nineteenth century differ from today?

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