

*Michael Howard*

## **War and the Making of Nations 1789-1945**

Historians writing at the beginning of this century tended to see in the making of the Nation State "the end of history": "end" not so much as Hegel conceived it, in the sense that history was now complete and no further development conceivable, but as in the Aristotelian sense that the Nation State had been the purpose, the telos, towards which the whole historical process had been tending. Everything that had assisted that process had been good, everything impeding it bad. Liberal historians saw, in the unification of Germany and Italy in particular, the just resolution of the problems of political organization that had plagued Western Europe for centuries. They looked forward to a similar resolution in Eastern Europe, once Polish independence had been restored and the emerging nations of the Balkan peninsula—Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria—had completed their emancipation from the decaying Habsburg and Ottoman Empires. Woodrow Wilson, a liberal historian par excellence, saw in such "national self-determination" the key to the future peace of the world, and did his best to implement it in the Versailles settlement of 1919. National self-determination was now to provide the criterion of political legitimacy that would replace the outworn dynastic framework established in the aftermath of the Napoleonic wars, which had now been discredited, where it had not been totally destroyed by revolutionary upheaval.

For better or worse, the nation-state, or rather the concept of the nation-state, was to provide the framework for international politics throughout the twentieth century. Both fascists and liberal democrats, for widely differing reasons, endorsed it with enthusiasm, and communism

flourished only where it could enlist nationalism in its service. Now, as the century draws to its close, that framework seems to be disintegrating. In some places, Canada among them, traditional loyalties are strained by cultural or ethnic divisions. In others, notably Western Europe, a deliberate attempt is being made to transcend national boundaries and create a broader framework for political and economic co-operation. And although national sovereignty remains the ruling operational principle for the conduct of international relations, it is being at least notionally challenged by that of universal and enforceable human rights. The concept of "nationalism," once dominant and accepted throughout the world, is now, to put it mildly, very problematic. Once integrative, it is now more often than not a major factor in political disintegration.

Historians—unless they have the courage of my former Yale colleague Paul Kennedy—are the last people to try to forecast the future, and heaven only knows what the twenty-first century will bring. It may be an advance to supra-national units, a regression to infra-nationalism, the reinforcement of transnational loyalties, or a combination of them all. But whatever it may be, I believe that we are likely to look back on "the era of the nation-state" as a discrete phase in world history, and one that is now approaching its end.

Although it had its origins much earlier—especially in England—the nation-state, the idea of a sovereign political community consisting of a culturally homogeneous "people," emerged as a conscious concept with the French Revolution, and reached its apogee with the First World War. It remained effective, and was in some regions to be powerfully reinforced, until the end of the Second. During the Cold War it began to lose some of its force in the industrialized world, where national loyalties became subsumed in ideological, but it reached full flood elsewhere as formerly colonized peoples took over the nationalist ideologies of their former masters. And with the disintegration of the last great colonial empire, that of the Soviet Union, it has reappeared among its successor states with all its pristine force.

The nation-state is unlikely to disappear from the world in a hurry: as an organizing concept and focus for political loyalties, it has as yet no obvious successor; and even if such a successor were to appear, national loyalties would no doubt long co-exist and conflict with it, as feudal and national loyalties long co-existed and conflicted with each other. But the

structure of international relations is likely to be very much more complex in future than it has been for the past 300 or so years.

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I have mentioned feudalism, and that is not a bad place to begin my survey; for both feudalism and the national state system were created at least in part by military necessity, and both were made acceptable by a necessary "myth."

Feudalism flourished in Europe for half a millennium, from about 1000 to 1500 A.D. It was basically a military hierarchy, in which territorial power was devolved in return for military service, in particular service by mounted men at arms who enjoyed a monopoly of the most effective weapons system available at that time. Ties of political obligation were legitimized by an ecclesiastical organization that sanctified authority and endowed its incumbents with quasi-sacerdotal powers. The Emperor at the apex of the hierarchy, and the various princes and kings within it, exercised authority, not because of their naked power, but because of the mandate transmitted to them through the Church from God. Even when at the end of the feudal era—an end itself hastened by the development of new types of military power—the medieval hierarchy disintegrated into territorial states under princes "absolute" from superior control, those princes legitimized their authority by ecclesiastical sanction. Church and King, like Pope and Emperor, remained mutually supportive.

It was this divine mandate that entitled rulers to send men into battle and demand that they should if necessary die for them. Even when, in the nineteenth century, the wider diffusion of political awareness introduced a new element, "country" or "fatherland," into the rationale for military obedience, loyalty to King (or Queen, or Emperor), a loyalty confirmed by a sacramental oath, showed that the feudal element of personal obligation had survived into a new and different age. At the beginning of this century, and for many decades after that, soldiers in many countries went to war and if necessary died for the trinity of God, King and Country; not least the forces of the British Empire.

Nonetheless as the nineteenth century wore on, "country" became an increasingly important element in this trinity, and the more democratic the political structure, the more important it became. "God," or God's explicit

sanction, was probably still an important element in those societies where the Church still exercised serious influence. "King," or Kaiser, or Czar, bulked larger the further eastward in Europe one penetrated. But the United States had led the way a century and a half earlier in eliminating King from the formula altogether, and a few years after that the French eliminated God as well. They were left only with *la Patrie*, the Nation, which had not only killed its own King but declared war on all others. The Nation effectively took the place of God, as the leaders of the Revolution destroyed the Catholic Church and mounted magnificent ceremonies and festivals to wean the people away from their old allegiance and focus their loyalty on the country to which they owed all and to which they must if need be sacrifice all: France.

It is a nice subject for historical disputation, how far this gigantic experiment in social mobilization and reeducation, not to be paralleled until the Russian Revolution over a hundred years later, was provoked by military necessity, the need to mobilize both military manpower and civilian support to deal with those

féroces soldats  
qui viennent jusqu'au dans nos bras,  
égorger nos filles et nos compagnons

as Rouget de Lisle described them in the Marseillaise, or whether it was the expedient of a desperate minority that had seized power in the face of popular disapproval and was concerned primarily to destroy internal opposition. Both explanations are plausible. But in any case the experiment did not last long. The "total war" demanded by Dubois Crancé in words so often cited:

The young men shall fight; the married men shall forge weapons and transport supplies; the women will make tents and clothes and serve in the hospitals; the children will make up old linen into lint; the old men will have themselves carried into the public squares to rouse the courage of the fighting men, to preach the unity of the Republic and hatred against Kings

—this kind of war was not to become a reality for over a century, and it was to take almost as long, as Eugene Weber has shown us, to make

Frenchmen out of the peasants who lived within the geographical area covered by France.

Nevertheless the French Revolution and the reactions it unleashed made three things clear. The first was that "nations" did not exist, like sleeping beauties imprisoned in feudal dungeons, awaiting the kiss of political liberation. They were political artifacts that had to be created, and that creation could be a brutal process, involving the suppression, conversion, or elimination of minorities that did not or would not fit into the accepted image of "the nation." The second was that states which *could* identify themselves as "nations" enjoyed, in war, a great advantage over those that could not; a point made by Clausewitz when he identified "popular participation" as an element in war as important as political leadership and military skill. And the third was that the actual challenge and experience of war was itself the most powerful factor in what today we call "nation-building": indeed it might be almost impossible to create a nation without it.

The British experience had already given indications of this. An English *State*—broadened by the Act of Union with Scotland into a British State—had been created over the centuries by English (or rather, Norman) Kings extending a single rule of law and economic community throughout their dominions. In the seventeenth century the political control of that state had passed into the hands of an oligarchy that claimed—though it did not seek—the mandate of the English people. But as Linda Colley has recently shown in her magnificent book, *Britons* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992), it was only during the long wars with France which occupied so much of the eighteenth century, and through the demands made on the British people by those wars, that anything like a British nationalism, or national self-consciousness emerged. It was then that the British learned to identify themselves in terms of the Other, the French adversary they at once feared and despised. The songs, the pamphlets, the cartoons which first expressed British nationalism mostly antedate the Napoleonic wars, which were seen as just another round in what seemed likely to be a perpetual and divinely ordained contest; initially for the establishment of the Protestant Succession in Britain, an extension of England's own civil wars, but ultimately for the mastery of the world. Between 1689 and 1815—even during the American War of Independence—Britain had no serious adversary other than France; and

it was out of that ultimately victorious contest that there emerged a British national self-consciousness, and self-confidence, that was to last well into the twentieth century and sustain her through far more serious wars.

French nationalism was not reciprocally nurtured by the English wars: fought mainly at sea or far overseas, these were peripheral to the bulk of the French population. Even the more immediate enemies on the continent were dealt with by a professional army, largely on battlefields remote from France, serving a dynasty that did not seek—except possibly in the disastrous year of 1709—the support of a public opinion that in any case barely existed. When the representatives of the French Nation came together in 1789 they initially identified themselves by opposition, not to any foreigner, but to their King: he, and his supporters domestic and foreign, were "the Other." The Wars of the French Revolution were initially an extension of a French civil war, and as such divisive rather than integrative. The great national ceremonies and festivals mounted by the Committee of Public Safety to which I have referred, with their explicitly anticlerical content, probably did more to divide than to unite even the urban minority which was able to observe them.

But the Napoleonic wars were a different matter. They were fought neither for the Monarchy nor for the Revolution. They were fought for *France*, or rather for the image of France that Napoleon (himself a pretty marginal Frenchman) was able to project to his countrymen and the world. The French Army was the French Nation; its triumphs were national triumphs, its defeats national disasters. Wherever the colors of Napoleon's legions were carried (and the analogy with Rome was conscious and deliberate), there was France. Conscription we know to have been erratic and unpopular and young men did their very best to avoid it, but once they were in the army there lay before them undreamed-of opportunities and undreamed-of adventures; splendors that made up for the miseries, splendors in which the whole Nation could share and which became part of the communal consciousness. Radicals and conservatives could take equal pride in the Napoleonic victories. Even today, even for a foreigner, it is hard to pass the Arc de Triomphe with its magnificent inscription *A Toutes les Gloires de la France* without feeling a sympathetic lump in the throat. Pacifists, socialists, liberals, men and women of good will have sought to find an alternative image, an

alternative "myth" for the French Nation, but I fear that none of them have succeeded. The Marseillaise, even though its text may have been "sanitized," remains the National Anthem: no one who rejects it can be wholly French.

Then there were the Germans. If ever there was a supreme example of the "knock-on effect," it is that of the Napoleonic impact on Germany. Napoleon humiliated the Germans, not only by defeat, which was not unusual, but by conquest and physical occupation, which was; and not only by occupation, but a radical transformation of their institutions and political structures. The physical space of Germany was effectively colonized by Napoleonic France. If it was not to remain so colonized, subordinated to foreign power and a foreign ideology, a German Nation had to be created out of the somnolent and diverse peoples of Central Europe who shared nothing except a language.

It was a slow process. Perhaps for half a century, "Germany" was little more than an intellectual construct, a flaming ideal in the minds of university professors and students who had heard or read the work of Fichte and Hegel and sung the songs of Arndt. But it was an ideal that had come to flickering life in the Wars of Liberation. The German Nation, so its publicists proclaimed, had found itself in war, and created itself by war. According to Hegel, that was the only way in which a Nation could find itself: war was the supreme achievement, indeed the virtual essence of the State, and the activity in which a people could find their highest fulfilment. The German nation was ultimately to be fashioned, as it has been well said, by coal and iron rather than by blood and iron; nationalism, as Ernest Gellner has pointed out, was the product of industrialization as much as of ideology. But German nationalism, even more than French, expressed itself in a peculiar kind of military ardor that was virtually to identify the German nation with not only the conduct but the glorification of war.

I shall not deal with the history of German militarism and its horrific consequences. It is perhaps more important for our purposes to realize that although these ideas were expressed in Germany with unique intensity, they were by no means exceptional among nationalist writers in nineteenth-century Europe, from the romantic idealists of the Mazzinian era—those "Young Italians" or "Young Poles" or "Young Serbs" who from their exile in Paris summoned their imagined peoples to fight

wars of national liberation—to the Social Darwinians of the turn of the century who bolstered their arguments with dubious biological analogies. For them War and the Nation were symbiotic: war was the ultimate test of an emerging Nation's right to statehood, and of an existing Nation's fitness to survive or prevail in the brutal process of natural selection. Even the self-confident British became anxious as the century drew to its close; many of its most influential political thinkers believing that England could survive only as part of a greater Britain, an Empire organized as a single political entity whose forces could be mobilized, not simply for defence of its peripheries, but to enable the entire British Nation to take part in an ultimate struggle for survival. The attempt to create a great imperial superstructure failed, but the unanimity with which the Empire entered the First World War is some measure of their success.

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There was of course nothing new about states and empires rising or falling, surviving or perishing, according to the arbitrament of war. What was novel in the nineteenth century was the perception that States were seen as unlikely to rise and survive unless they were also Nations; that is, unless they could command the whole-hearted participation of all their members, irrespective of class or ethnic origin or even sex. Initially that participation was seen as necessary simply to provide numbers for the armies; the huge numbers that had enabled Napoleon to sweep over Europe without concern for casualties and to overwhelm the smaller, if better trained forces that opposed him. A succeeding generation rightly judged that such numbers were counter-productive except in the hands of a ruthless genius, and was reluctant to take the political risks inherent in producing them. Because small armies of professionals were politically more reliable, there was a disposition to believe that they would be militarily more effective. But the Franco-Prussian War showed that in the age of railways, numbers were again decisive. For better or worse, conscription of all available manpower became seen as an indispensable element in military power. And since that manpower was increasingly literate and politically conscious, it had to be motivated to believe that it was fighting not only for a dynasty or a regime, but for itself, as part of



a nation with which it whole-heartedly identified and for which it was, if necessary, prepared to die.

This was a lesson that the ruling elites of Europe and their professional advisers were very slow to learn. The idea that the ruling classes deliberately indoctrinated their peoples with a nationalistic ethic in order to make them docile cannon-fodder simply won't wash. Napoleonic experience had suggested very strongly that nationalism and revolution went hand in hand, and political and military conservatives were at one in fearing that conscription would, in the words of the French statesman Adolphe Thiers, "place a rifle on the shoulder of every socialist." The fact that Friedrich Engels, for one, shared this view, and saw the nationalization of war as an inevitable part of the revolutionary process, did not encourage them. Until the very eve of the First World War conservative military thinkers fought against accepting the idea of "the nation in arms," and dreaded its consequences once war began.

But they failed to appreciate what a force for social cohesion national sentiment had now become. In an age of growing secularization, it provided an emotional substitute for religion; for the growing urban masses uprooted from the countryside, it filled the vacuum left by their former parochial loyalties. Even the most archaic of feudal symbols were now accepted as the icons of the nation. The Emperor Francis II of Austria had famously enquired, when told that one of his subjects was a great patriot, "Ah, but is he a patriot for me?" His successor Franz Joseph found that in 1914 the overwhelming majority of his subjects *were* patriots for him; not least Sigmund Freud, who at the outbreak of the war ecstatically offered his libido to the service of the Fatherland. Curiously enough, the fact that the King to whom the troops of the British Empire pledged their loyalty and for whom they were to die in rather large numbers was a scion of the Houses of Hanover and of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha did nothing to diminish their enthusiasm.

Without this heightened concept of national loyalty, it is hard to see how the nations of Europe—let alone the overseas dominions of the British Empire—could have fought the First World War at all; certainly have sustained it for as long as they did. For this was truly the total war foreshadowed in 1793. The men did fight; the women did make the weapons or grew the food to enable them to fight; the old men did make propaganda; while the children, lamenting their inability to enlist as yet,

were supportive in any way that lay to hand. That war saw the apotheosis of Nationalism at its best and at its worst, and it was only the European states which had successfully developed the solidity and homogeneity that national sentiment could provide—Britain, France, Germany—that survived till the end. Newer nations uncertain of their nationhood saw it confirmed by the most terrible *rites de passage*—the Anzacs at Gallipoli, the Canadians at Messines—and were accepted in consequence as full members of the international community.

For the generation that had endured such sacrifices, the cause in which they had been made *had* to be holy; it was unconscionable to conceive that they had been purposeless, made in vain. And for no one was it less possible to believe this than the Germans. The Allies may have paid a terrible price for victory, but they had at least obtained it. The Germans had gained nothing by their sacrifices but humiliation and defeat. So there arose in Germany the last and most terrible phase of nationalism; a totalitarian, revolutionary nationalism, foreshadowed in the French Revolution, but one that mobilized the German people, in the service not,—as the French revolutionaries had professed—of a higher ideal of international brotherhood, but of a bid for racial hegemony and a philosophy of perpetual war.

Elsewhere in the western democracies the frenetic nationalism of the earlier part of the century was ebbing. Where it survived it was often partisan and divisive; fatally so in France. But in Britain and the Commonwealth this atavistic sentiment—evoked by a somewhat atavistic figure in the shape of Winston Churchill—still remained strong enough to act as an effective force for social mobilization in a war which, even more than that of 1914-18, demanded a prolonged and total effort from all its citizens, civilian and military alike. In the Soviet Union, Stalin conveniently forgot that he was a revolutionary, and summoned the peoples of the Union to defend the Soviet Motherland in a Great Patriotic War. In the United States, the war seems to have evoked the kind of intense national passion with a concomitant devotion to patriotic symbols and expressions of the national myth, that was already on the ebb in the European democracies; a passion that made possible and was used to justify the sacrifices of Guadalcanal and Iwojima, as in Europe it had made possible and justified those of the Somme and Verdun. And in Japan a combination of national sentiment and feudal loyalty seems to

have produced in the entire population a spirit of self-sacrifice bordering on national suicide.

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It was the victorious nation-states, forged by the experience of two world wars, that met to settle the destinies of the world in 1945, as the old dynastic states had met to settle the destinies of Europe in 1814. Like those predecessors, they saw their immediate task as being to debellate their former enemies and discredit their ideology. Like those predecessors they quarrelled, and their former enemies, more or less purged of their ideological poison, were restored to a place at the conference table. As with their predecessors, fear of renewed war kept the peace among them for a generation, while the world was transformed around them. But whereas their predecessors could reasonably believe, for the best part of half a century, that if war came it could be fought with much the same weapons and the methods as the last, after 1945 such an idea became untenable within ten years.

When, five years after the end of hostilities the western allies found themselves again called upon to fight, in Korea, the military techniques of the Second World War served them well enough, but the popular sentiment to support them was no longer there. The analogies of the 1930s used to justify that war may have been correct: it may well have been a "necessary," prophylactic war fought to preserve a stable regional and global balance; but it was fought without any enthusiasm. The forces involved were motivated by professional pride rather than national sentiment, and domestic support was lukewarm even in the United States. But this was to be the last war in which the experience of the World Wars was seen to be relevant. Its conclusion in 1953 coincided with the explosion of the first thermonuclear weapons.

It did not take long for governments and peoples to draw the necessary conclusions from that event. In the era of the hydrogen bomb there would no longer be a need for great national armies or a prolonged national effort, with the civil population working and accepting deprivation in order to keep those armies in the field. If the civil population was now to play any part at all in major war, it would be as hostages, their safety depending, not on the valor of their armed forces, but on the effectiveness of their government's threat to destroy the enemy's cities. As for minor wars, their successful conduct demanded, as Vietnam

showed with tragic clarity, not the commitment of masses of short-service conscripts, but the sustained effort of dedicated professionals. War had become once more denationalized. As in the eighteenth century, the military had again become a small group of specialists. As in the eighteenth century, their activities swallowed a substantial slice of the national budget; but unlike the eighteenth century, their activities, if mismanaged, could result not only in the *dé*feat but in the physical annihilation of the societies they were trying to defend.

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I am not trying to argue that military developments were solely responsible for the rise and decline of national sentiment in the developed world, and I am certainly not going to join the crowded ranks of the political scientists who are now seeking to provide some kind of holistic theory for that phenomenon. Excellent economic and psychological explanations have been advanced to explain the rise of the nation-state, and they can provide equally good reasons for its decline in terms of the growth of a global economy and the development of an equally global and supra-national culture. But military requirements if they did not provide a cause, certainly provided powerful reinforcement for the growth of the nation-state; while the disappearance of those requirements substantially weakens the position of those who wish to preserve the nation with all its traditional symbols and institutions as the prime focus of political loyalty.

Yet contemporary events throughout the world provide evidence, not so much of the waning appeal of the nation-state as it has developed over the past two centuries, but of the difficulty of providing an effective replacement for it. New loyalties are increasingly localized, but the new states coming into being are correspondingly fragile. The old nation states were in general not only cohesive political entities but militarily effective and economically viable. The vast majority of the new nations now represented in the UN are neither; and without economic or military credibility, it is an open question for how long their political viability can last.

The question indeed arises, for how long a state can command the allegiance of its citizens and the respect of its peers without going

through the *rite de passage* of war. In the current issue of the journal *Daedalus* it is posed very frankly in an article by Professor John A. Hall:

There have been extraordinarily few interstate wars within the Third World since 1945—which should not for a moment detract from the vast number of deaths in civil wars. A consequence of that state of affairs is that states have often been content to rest on top of different segments rather than to rationalise their societies. In a horrible sense, Third World countries have not had enough war, or perhaps enough war of the right type. They are quasi-societies, not nation-states. (21)

One would be tempted to say, so much the worse for the nation-state, if only the chaotic alternative did not provide such an unattractive model. We can only hope that a new but equally effective force for social mobilization will emerge that will not carry within itself so disastrous a potential for conflict. A political substitute for the nation state may be needed if we are to find a moral substitute for war.

#### WORK CITED

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