

# How Significant is Nationalism as a Cause of War?

Written by James Bingham

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## How Significant is Nationalism as a Cause of War?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/19/how-significant-is-nationalism-as-a-cause-of-war/>

JAMES BINGHAM, JUN 19 2012

Nationalism has been closely associated with the most destructive wars of human history; the revisionist states responsible for initiating both the First and the Second World Wars have historically been examined as the epitome of the dangers of nationalism. However, it must be noted that whilst there is a great deal of academic literature surrounding nationalism as a social and political phenomenon, there is little concerning the causal link between nationalism and war, scholars often taking the 'war-causing character of nationalism for granted'[1]. A nationalist group can be defined as a set of individuals holding their most important loyalty to their ethnic or national group, with this superseding other loyalties (such as political ideology, religious ideology, etc), although these additional influences may contribute to their cultural identity, which in turn may be central to their nationalist identity[2]. It is also important to note that these individuals can share an identity despite never having met[3]; hence leading to literature, such as that of Anderson[4], arguing that such mutual cultural identity central to nationalist groups is simply fictional and is invoked by political leaders in order to precipitate a desired political response. A key characteristic shared by those within a nationalist grouping is a shared cultural identity; this can be language, history, customs or religion, as well as myriad other influences. There are several key attributes that can help determine a nationalist group's predisposition towards the use of violence (including war), as well as direct and indirect causality between nationalism and war. Using this framework an argument is drawn, stating that nationalism can provide the conditions needed for war; however it is incorrect to assume that all nationalist groups or states are more inclined to wage war than others.

There are four primary characteristics of a nationalist group that determine the likelihood of such a group using violence to achieve its goals. The first is the group's statehood status – has the nationalist group concerned achieved statehood? A defining characteristic of nationalist groups is the desire for a state which they perceive as group representing their unique cultural and national identity. Hence a nationalist group which has attained statehood is less likely to use violence as a group with unattained statehood; as such groups are more inclined to use force to achieve this political desire. The second is a nationalist group's stance towards the legitimacy and sovereignty of other states, particularly those bordering such a group's territory or state borders; if another state's borders are seen to be encompassing territory deemed to be rightly the possession of a nationalist group, the likelihood of war is increased. If a nationalist group is influenced by a diaspora (the dispersion of an ethnic or national group outside of a state or national border[5]), the efforts to reincorporate those of the same nationality back into what is perceived as the ancestral territory may make a nationalist group more inclined to use force to achieve such an aim. Finally, if a state suppresses an internal minority nationalist group (be it an ethnic or cultural national group), the likelihood of internal violence, such as civil war, is increased due to the increased friction between such suppressed groups and the central state – the level to which a nationalist group is subjected to oppression influences its tendency towards violence. Hence, these influences determine the likelihood of a nationalist group using violence to achieve political aims, be as a separatist group within an already-formed state or as an independent nation state.

Direct causality can be drawn between nationalism and war. The greater the number of stateless individuals who hold nationalistic sentiments, the greater the likelihood of war. This is dependent on whether they contain the strength to challenge the existing state. The highest likelihood of war is when the central state will challenge the plausible attempt by such nationalist groups to reach statehood, (such as seen during the 1991-2 Serbo-Croatian conflict). If the central state has no will to resist then a nationalist group may gain independence without the use of violence (such as Sub-Saharan African states gaining independence from colonial powers during the 1960s). The creation of

## How Significant is Nationalism as a Cause of War?

Written by James Bingham

new separatist states requires a change to the political system, hence peace is more likely when the 'supply/demand' is in equilibrium; when, in a given region, the separatist nationalist groups have obtained independent statehood, war is less likely to break out over nationalist causes. Nationalist groups within a state who desire their own independent state, (one organised to include their ethnic or cultural identity, for example), may conduct regular or irregular warfare in order to forcibly persuade a state to grant them independence. Separatist insurgencies are an example of this – the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, fighting for an independent Tamil state, are an example of a nationalist group using irregular warfare in pursuit of their aims.

An example of the use of regular warfare for the pursuit of nationalist aims are the Yugoslav Wars (1991-5), when various nationalist groups (such as Serbs, Croats and Bosnians) fought for independence from the Yugoslav state, resulting in the fracturing of the state into numerous independent states. The more a national minority within a state is oppressed within a state the higher the likelihood of such groups turning to violence to achieve their aims. One of the most important causes of war due to nationalism is when nationalist leaders pursue policies of 'recovery'[6] in order to incorporate ethnic or national groups outside of their state's borders into the nation state. An example of this is the Nazi desire to incorporate all German-speaking peoples into the *großdeutschland* ('Greater Germany'), an idea planned in Hitler's '*Mein Kampf*'[7]; he emphasised the extreme Nationalist goals which shaped Nazi policy by determining that 'people of the same blood should be in the same *Reich* [referring to the Nazi nation state]'[8]. The Nazi leadership under Hitler implemented this desire for a unified German nation through the occupation of the Sudetenland (part of Czechoslovakia) in October 1938. Hence the more hegemonic and assertive a nationalist state or group, the more likely they are to use violence to achieve their aims, increasingly the likelihood of war. This is the most dangerous strain of nationalism that has been associated with the destructive wars of the twentieth century.

Although direct links between nationalism and war can be drawn, there are several indirect causal links. These indirect ('remote'[9]) causes can also be termed as 'causes of causes'[10]. These can be classified into three areas of significance – structural, political and perceptual concepts[11]. Structural concepts are concerned with the physical distinctions and divisions influencing the likelihood of nationalist sentiments and divisions forming within a given region. Van Evera states that the greater the 'intermingling'[12] of nationalities within an area, the higher the likelihood of war due to cultural and ethnic divisions, including language, disputed mutual history and stereotyping. He goes on to state that conflict is more likely when this 'intermingling' is on a 'street to street'[13] basis as opposed to a larger 'region to region'[14] basis; the intimacy of such mixing is what gives rise to nationalistic sentiments due to inter-personal divisions. However, this is disputed by academics such as Gagnon, who argue that it is wrong to assume a mixing of nationalities increased the likelihood of conflict, citing the Yugoslav conflict as an example[15] – there was a significantly high inter-ethnic marriage rate prior to the outbreak of conflict, as well as widespread healthy social interactions between ethnic and national groups. Therefore is it wrong to assume that mixed nationality-communities are more inclined to break into violence than homogenous communities. This can be linked to Anderson's theory of 'imagined communities'[16], in which he states that this can be attributed to the falsity of nationality and cultural labels.

However, it is correct (as Van Evera argues) that when state borders follow ethnic or nationality divisions, the likelihood of internal conflict between opposing nationalist groups decreases, although this may not always be the case (one state may feel aggrieved by their perceived lack of territory, or another such basis for conflict). Hence, the legitimacy and defensibility of state borders is a crucial factor in whether a nationalist group or state will use force against another. For example, implementation of policies such as annexation by a nationalist state is more likely if the area desired is a plausible target for 'recovery'; hence war is more likely if such operations are possible but not easy. If they are too one-sided (i.e. impossible or too easy for one side, precipitating either a capitulation or quick overthrow of one side), then war is less likely.

Several perceptual factors, entwined with political factors can also be regarded as indirect causes, in certain cases creating the conditions within communities that can lead to an increased likelihood of conflict. Cultural identity is crucial in forming a coherent nationalist grouping – the greater divide between cultural groups the greater the likelihood of war. Nationalist sentiments may be instilled in a population through nationalist symbols, propaganda, emphasis on national history, language and other methods. Historical conflict and disagreements between national or

# How Significant is Nationalism as a Cause of War?

Written by James Bingham

ethnic groups may increase the likelihood of war – the disagreement over mutual history between the two groups may lead to a victim mentality, with both sides feeling aggrieved and wronged by the other. This is especially true in the case of war crimes and other such results of conflicts – the more a group can attach blame to another group, the higher the likelihood of war between the two opposing sides. A nationalist government may invoke such feelings of division in order to appeal to popular opinion; hence the less legitimate a government, the more likely such nationalist divisions can lead to war. Gagnon states; 'violent conflict along ethnic cleavages is provoked by elites in order to create a domestic political context where ethnicity is the only politically relevant identity'[17]. Hence a flagging nationalist leader may stir-up ethnic divisions (including policies such as using a national 'scape-goat' for domestic problems), in order to rally support, hence increasing the likelihood of war.

National minorities may be targeted by such political scape-goat policies, where ethnic or racial stereotyping can be employed to bolster a sense of nationalism in the face of a perceived internal threat. This is true of Nazi Germany's Jewish population during the inter-war and Second World War eras. The weaker the influence of independent institutions on both the leaders and population of nationalist states or groups, the more inclined the public is to believe nationalist propaganda and act upon it. Hence, perception of both the internal nationalist identity and the perceived threat to such an identity in a nationalist state or group can lead to an increased aggressiveness towards either a different national group or a national minority group, in both cases increasing the likelihood of war.

Nationalism has the potential to be either a direct or indirect cause of war. The likelihood that war will occur as a result of nationalist confrontations is dependent on several factors; the nature of the nationalist group or state in question (their likelihood to resort to force over diplomacy, for example), the galvanising effect of nationalism in the face of a perceived external threat or indeed conflict within a state either due to the suppression of national minorities whose national identity is under threat or the use of violence as a political tool by secessionist nationalist groups within the state. Hence the likelihood that nationalism will lead to war depends on context – the nature of the nationalist group(s) in question as well as the political and socio-economic environment; a wealthy, politically-stable nation state that holds 'healthy' nationalist sentiments is less likely to turn to violence than a politically unstable, poor and nationalist state or group. An example of the latter is the Nazi-Germany of the 1930s who would be responsible for the most devastating war in human history. Hence, nationalism holds the potential to ignite entire populations, as in many cases they feel it is their very identity that is under threat, however it is incorrect to assume a nationalist state or group is more inclined to turn to violent methods than a different politically-orientated entity.

## Bibliography

B. Anderson, '*Imagined Communities*', 1983, Verso, New York

V. P. Gagnon Jr, '*Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict*', *International Security*, Vol. 19 No. 3 (Spring 1994), MIT Press

A. Hitler, '*Mein Kampf*', 1937, translation by M Ford (2009), Elite Minds Inc., New York

B. R. Posen, '*Nationalism, the Mass Army and Military Power*', *International Security*, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 2 (Fall 1993)

S. Van Evera, '*Nationalism and War*', *International Security*, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 4 (Spring 1994)

[1] S. Van Evera, '*Nationalism and War*', *International Security*, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 4 (Spring 1994), page 5

[2] Paraphrased from S. Van Evera, '*Nationalism and War*', *International Security*, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 4 (Spring 1994), page 5

[3] Paraphrased from B. R. Posen, '*Nationalism, the Mass Army and Military Power*', *International Security*, MIT

## How Significant is Nationalism as a Cause of War?

Written by James Bingham

Press, Vol. 18 No. 2 (Fall 1993), page 80

[4] B. Anderson, *'Imagined Communities'*, 1983, Verso, New York

[5] S. Van Evera, *'Nationalism and War'*, International Security, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 4 (Spring 1994), page 8

[6] Ibid, page 16

[7] A. Hitler, *'Mein Kampf'*, 1937, translation by M Ford (2009), Elite Minds Inc., New York

[8] Ibid, page 2

[9] S. Van Evera, *'Nationalism and War'*, International Security, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 4 (Spring 1994), page 34

[10] Ibid.

[11] Structure taken from S. Van Evera, *'Nationalism and War'*, International Security, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 4 (Spring 1994)

[12] Ibid, Page 56

[13] S. Van Evera, *'Nationalism and War'*, International Security, MIT Press, Vol. 18 No. 4 (Spring 1994), page 47

[14] Ibid.

[15] V. P. Gagnon Jr, *'Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict'*, International Security, Vol. 19 No. 3 (Spring 1994), MIT Press

[16] B. Anderson, *'Imagined Communities'*, 1983, Verso, New York

[17] V. P. Gagnon Jr, *'Ethnic Nationalism and International Conflict'*, International Security, Vol. 19 No. 3 (Spring 1994), MIT Press, Page 132

—  
*Written by: James Bingham*  
*Written at: King's College London*  
*Written for: Dr Thomas Rid*  
*Date written: March 2012*