

Student Feature - The Evolution of the Nation-State

Written by Erik Ringmar

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ERIK RINGMAR, JAN 12 2018

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The early modern state was a coercive machinery designed to make war and to extract resources from society. Yet at the end of the eighteenth century, this machinery came to be radically transformed. Or rather, the ‘state’ was combined with a ‘nation’ forming a compound noun – the ‘nation-state’ – which was organised differently and pursued different goals. A nation, in contrast to a state, constitutes a community of people joined by a shared identity and by common social practices. Communities of various kinds have always existed but they now became, for the first time, a political concern. As a new breed of nationalist leaders came to argue, the nation should take over the state and make use of its institutional structures to further the nation’s ends. In one country after another the nationalists were successful in these aims. The nation added an interior life to the state, we might perhaps say; the nation was a soul added to the body of the early modern state machinery.

The revolutions that took place in Britain’s North American colonies in 1776, and in France in 1789, provided models for other nationalists to follow. ‘We the People of the United States’ – the first words of the Preamble to the US Constitution – was a phrase which itself would have been literally unthinkable in an earlier era. In France, the king was officially the only legitimate political actor and the people as a whole were excluded from politics. In addition, the power of the aristocracy and the church remained strong, above all in the countryside where they were the largest landowners. In the revolution of 1789, the *old regime* was overthrown and with it the entire social order. The French nation was from now on to be governed by the people, the nation, and in accordance with the principles *o*liberté, *égalité et fraternité* – liberty, equality and brotherhood.

The French Revolution: Crash Course World History #29

Already in 1792, confrontation began between the revolutionary French nation and the kings of the rest of Europe. The wars were to go on for close to 25 years, most ferociously during the Napoleonic Wars of the early nineteenth century named after the French general, Napoleon Bonaparte, who made himself emperor of France. In contrast to the kings of the old regimes, the revolutionary French government could rely on the whole people to make contributions to the war due to the power of patriotism. This allowed first the revolutionaries, and later Napoleon, to create a formidable fighting machine which set about conquering Europe. Germany was quickly overrun and its sudden and complete defeat was a source of considerable embarrassment to all Germans. The Holy Roman Empire, by now in tatters, was finally dissolved in 1806 in the wake of Napoleon’s conquest. Yet, since there was no German state around which prospective nationalists could rally, the initial response was formulated in cultural rather than in military terms. Nationalist sentiment focused on the German language, German traditions and a shared sense of history. Before long a strong German nation began looking around for a unified German state. The goal was eventually achieved in 1871, after Germany – appropriately enough, perhaps – had defeated France in a war.

The Congress of Vienna of 1815, where a settlement was reached at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, was supposed

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to have returned Europe to its pre-revolutionary ways. Yet, nationalist sentiments were growing across the continent and they constantly threatened to undermine the settlement. All over Europe national communities demanded to be included into the politics of their respective countries. Nationalism in the first part of the nineteenth century was a liberal sentiment concerning self-determination – the right of a people to determine its own fate. This programme had far-reaching implications for the way politics was organised domestically, but it also had profound ramifications for international politics. Most obviously, the idea of self-determination undermined the political legitimacy of Europe's empires. If all the different peoples that these empires contained gained the right to determine their own fates, the map of Europe would have to be radically redrawn. In 1848 this prospect seemed to become a reality as nationalist uprisings quickly spread across the continent. Everywhere the people demanded the right to rule themselves.

Final Act of the Congress of Vienna

The Revolutions of 1848

Although the nationalist revolutions of 1848 were defeated by the political establishment, the sentiments themselves were impossible to control. Across Europe an increasingly prosperous middle-class demanded inclusion in the political system and their demands were increasingly expressed through the language of nationalism. The Finns wanted an independent Finland; the Bulgarians an independent Bulgaria; the Serbs an independent Serbia, and so on. In 1861 Italy too – long divided into separate city-states and dominated by the Church – became a unified country and an independent nation. Yet it was only with the conclusion of the First World War in 1918 that self-determination was acknowledged as a right. After the First World War most people in Europe formed their own nation-states.

As a result of the nationalist revolutions, the European international system became for the first time truly 'international'. That is, while the Westphalian system concerned relations between states, world affairs in the nineteenth century increasingly came to concern relations between nation-states. In fact, the word 'international' itself was coined only in 1783, by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham. In most respects, however, the inter-national system continued to operate in much the same fashion as the Westphalian inter-state system. Nation-states claimed the same right to sovereignty which meant that they were formally equal to each other. Together, they interacted in an anarchical system in which power was decentralised and wars were a constant threat. Yet, the addition of the nation changed the nature of the interaction in crucial ways. For one thing, leaders who ruled their countries without at least the tacit support of their national communities were increasingly seen as illegitimate. This also meant that newly created nation-states such as Italy and Germany were automatically regarded as legitimate members of the European community of nations. They were legitimate since the people, in theory at least, were in charge.

There were also new hopes for world peace. While kings wage war for the sake of glory or personal gain, a people is believed to be more attuned to the aspirations of another people. Inspired by such hopes, liberal philosophers devised plans for how a 'perpetual peace' could be established. For some considerable time, these assumptions seemed quite feasible. The nineteenth century – or, more accurately, the period from 1815 to 1914 – was indeed an uncharacteristically peaceful period in European history. At the time, great hopes were associated with the increase in trade. As Adam Smith pointed out in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), a nation is rich not because it has a lot of natural resources but because it has the capacity to manufacture things that others want. In order to capitalise on this capacity, you need to trade and the more you trade the wealthier you are likely to become. Once the quest for profits and market shares has become more important than the quest for a neighbouring state's territory, world peace would naturally follow. In a world in which everyone is busy trading with each other, no one can afford to go to war.

Adam Smith Institute: The Wealth of Nations

By the twentieth century most of these liberal hopes were dashed. As the First World War demonstrated, nation-states could be as violent as the early-modern states. In fact, nation-states were far more lethal, not least since they were able to involve their entire population in the war effort together with the entirety of its shared resources. The peaceful quest for profits and market shares had not replaced the anxious quest for security or the aggressive quest for pre-eminence. In the Second World War, the industrial might of the world's most developed nations was

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employed for military ends with aerial bombardments of civilian populations, including the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan. Between 1939 and 1945 over 60 million people were killed – around 2.5 per cent of the world's population. This figure included the six million Jews exterminated by Germany in the Holocaust, which was one of the worst genocides in recorded history. After the Second World War, the military competition continued between the United States and the Soviet Union. This was known as a 'cold war' since the two superpowers never engaged each other in direct warfare, but they fought several wars by proxy such as those in Korea and Vietnam.

Further Analysis

The Real Lesson of the Vietnam War

USA vs USSR Fight! The Cold War: Crash Course World History #39

Why are we so obsessed with World War II?

How did Hitler rise to power?

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