

Report of the Annual Meeting

Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Nationalism — The Historical Approach to the Problem in Europe

R. Flenley

Volume 22, Number 1, 1943

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300246ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300246ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Flenley, R. (1943). Nationalism — The Historical Approach to the Problem in Europe. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 22(1), 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300246ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1943

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>

NATIONALISM—THE HISTORICAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM IN EUROPE*

By R. FLENLEY
The University of Toronto

OVER fifteen hundred years ago an African Bishop, from his seat near the scene of the recent fighting in Tunisia, sought to explain the dissolution of the Roman Empire and to clear his Christian faith from the charge of responsibility for that gigantic calamity. A thousand years later the medieval Christian Commonwealth, in which some members had seen the slow realization of St. Augustine's *City of God*, and which Dante had declared "should be ruled in its motors and motions by a single prince as single motor"¹ was similarly in dissolution. A new thinker, Machiavelli, like Dante an Italian and a Florentine, set himself to work out the intellectual basis for a new type of political organization. He did more. For recent writers on Machiavelli have seen in him not merely the champion of the Prince, and of Reason of State, but also the exponent and defender of the modern doctrine of Nationalism. Machiavelli found his best exemplar, after ancient Rome, in the national state which Louis XI had created in France; and in the next century Richelieu, like Augustine a Bishop, nay more a Cardinal, but bearing no other discernible resemblance to the African Saint, applied the Machiavellian doctrine with a thoroughness and lack of scruple which made the French monarchy the very impersonation of the national state, and also gave France the hegemony in Europe. With the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, and the Humanitarian Movement, moral and idealist influences, Deist if not Christian, emerged again. There is an antithesis between Frederick the Great, the arraigner of Machiavelli and the first servant of his subjects, and Frederick as the greatest exponent, up to that date, of the unqualified power of the State. The French Revolution resolved the antithesis by declaring the people to be sovereign, but this solution, pregnant though it was for the future, proved too starkly in contrast with the practice of the day, in France as elsewhere, to win validity at the time. It remained for the outstanding political philosopher of the nineteenth century, Hegel, to invent a dialectical process by which German idealism could be harmonized with the limitless power of the national state, and so to arrive at the conclusion that "all value which man possesses, he possesses through the State alone." The process of History might be toward Freedom, but it was freedom of the spirit only. The State was power, an end in itself and a law to itself. The true beauty of History, Treitschke found a generation or more later, lay precisely in the conflict of such states.

Today we are reaping the fruits of this development of thought. We are in fact at a crisis in the history of the modern national state and our thinking about it. I do not suggest that this crisis is comparable to that

*Mr. Flenley's paper was delivered at a joint session of the Canadian Political Science Association, the Canadian Historical Association, and Section II of the Royal Society of Canada. A paper presented at the same session by Mr. Alexander Brady, University of Toronto, on the general topic of Nationality and Nationalism will appear in the November issue of the *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science*.

¹*De Monarchia*, I, ix.

faced by the African Bishop and to which his disciple Orosius sought to give an historical framework. Yet, there *are* thinkers who see us at the end of the period which began with the modern national state, with modern capitalism, and with modern science, at what we used to think of as the Renaissance of classical culture. Recently I have been engaged in collecting material as to what is thought about post-war problems, and I found a very large body of opinion which sees the root cause (or *a* root cause) of our present tragedy in the unbridled sovereignty of the national state, and the only hope for the future in its supersession by some other form, whether the establishment of federal organizations for parts or the whole of Europe, and indeed more widely, or in the setting up of supra-national bodies and controls of one sort or another, economic, political, or military.

On the other hand it would indeed be rash to predict that there is any likelihood or even possibility of the immediate or proximate overthrow of the National State or the spirit of Nationalism. On the very eve of this war, the contributors to a solid and thoughtful study of Nationalism ended their survey with the conclusion that "The Nation is the political unit, and Nationalism the group symbol, of the present stage of civilization." We fight today as United Nations. We daily invoke national sentiment in our war effort. The principle is enshrined in the Atlantic Charter, and in dozens of speeches and declarations of war and peace aims. We recognize the claims of many nationalities, at present subject, to be free. We envisage the advance toward freer national status of hitherto dependent peoples all over the world. Here then is our dilemma and our problem. Hegel in his day found a synthesis which led directly to the *Machtpolitik* of a Bismarck, and indeed a Hitler. *Our* problem is to find a synthesis which will harmonize what we regard and accept as the just claims of the individual citizen, national societies, and humanity at large.

This problem is by no means solely a European one, but is present in its greatest complexity and urgency there. I do not intend to try and sketch the general development of European Nationalism (or Nationality) through the period from the French Revolution onwards, when the modern doctrine may be said to have taken shape. That has been done many times already, at far greater length and far more effectively than I could do it here. Nor need I take up your time discussing the many definitions which have been given of Nationalism. My task, as I see it, is to ask what light more recent history throws on the problem, how and why it is that a force which, from the middle of the nineteenth century at least was almost generally accepted as beneficent, as the natural and normal basis of political arrangement, and which under the title of self-determination was applied as a leading principle in the peace settlement of 1919, how it is that this principle is now so criticized and attacked as a major source of the ills of our age? And to do this I can only select certain recent tendencies or developments in Nationalism which seem to me significant, and indicate their share in the development of the subject.

But before I do that, two observations must be made. In the first place criticism of Nationalism is not new. Apart from earlier expressions of regret at the passing of the universalism of the Middle Ages, in part, as in Novalis, fruit of the nostalgia of the Romantic Movement, at the very height of the nationalist movement in mid-nineteenth century two eminent thinkers and writers, starting from opposite poles, raised their

voices in opposition to the prevailing trend. The Catholic historian Acton, influenced both by his faith and by his sympathy for the non-national Austrian Empire, in a famous essay on Nationality (1862) condemned the view that the nation and the state should be co-extensive, and argued that the modern theory of Nationality marked a retrograde step in History. He saw in it the greatest adversary of the rights of Nationality, since it would deny to subject nationalities the claims it made for itself, a prophecy borne out in our own day. A few years earlier Karl Marx had denied the claims of Nationality in the interests of socialist revolution: "the working man has no country." The national state was the expression of the interest of the dominant class, and he would have none of it, save as an instrument for assuring the dictatorship of the proletariat. Whether the later Marx maintained these views is a question I can safely leave to the wider knowledge of the economists. There seems to be difference of opinion on this point.

In the second place it must not be forgotten that there were other forces at work in the nineteenth century running counter to Nationalism. Marxian socialism, at any rate in its first phases, was one of these, and I need not remind you of the cultural and even economic forces working in the same direction, of the beginning of International Law, of humanitarian and scientific efforts, all of them necessary preliminaries before the idea of a League of Nations could be born or translated into fact in 1918.

I said that I was not going to try and follow the development of Nationalism from the cosmopolitanism of the eighteenth century to our own day. Yet there is one distinction which has been made, which throws light on the process, viz:—that between the *cultural* nation, its nationality based on common traditions, on language, literature, and, it may be, religion; and the *state* nation, possessing a common political unity and independence. This distinction is less valid for such western European countries as France and Britain, when nation and state (or state and nation) developed together. But it has much value for central and east-central Europe, where a major development of the nineteenth century was the process by which *cultural* nations struggled to become *state*-nations as well. The process began with Greece, Serbia, and Belgium, rose to its most portentous achievement in the unification of Germany and Italy, and reached its consummation in the peace settlement of 1919.

Long before this process was completed the identity of Nation and State had become an accepted principle with most liberal thinkers. J. S. Mill put it succinctly enough: "The boundaries of governments should coincide in the main with nationalities." The outstanding champion of the political rights of nationalities in the middle period of the nineteenth century was, of course, Mazzini, who wrote and worked unceasingly for forty years to make his beloved Italy a free and united nation, and who undoubtedly did more than anyone else to popularize the nationalist gospel in Europe. Mazzini was not always wise or practical in his activities for the cause of Italian nationality, and he certainly assumed too lightly that the Italian people were ready to govern themselves. But there are certain other features (or accompaniments) of Mazzini's nationalism which are worth noting today.

Mazzini was an internationalist as well as a nationalist. "We come in the name of God and Humanity" [not the nation], he declared in *Faith and the Future* (1835). "The Family, the Nation, and Humanity are the three

spheres within which the human individual has to labour for the common weal, for the moral perfecting of himself and of others. . . . Your *first* duties, first in importance, are to Humanity" he wrote in *The Duties of Man* (1844 and 1858). And Mazzini was as sympathetic to the rights and claims of other nationalities as to those of his own. So far as I know he was entirely free from any suspicion of racial or national superiority. Nor did he give to the State any of that adulation with which later Fascism was to adorn it. "That institution which we call government is only a Direction," he wrote, "You have no Master but God in Heaven and the People on Earth." For Mazzini, though he repudiated both the Papacy and much of organized Christianity, was a living exponent of the Christian qualities of unselfishness and self-sacrifice. And, finally, the core of Mazzini's political faith was his belief in the People, in Democracy. For him the people was not merely a *Folk*, to be led (to the slaughter it might be) by a *Leader*, but a body responsible, with duties as well as rights. Granted that there is something naïve and certainly inexperienced in Mazzini's faith in Italian popular government, such faith is infinitely more hopeful for the future than the arrogant and cynical contempt expressed and practised by a Hitler and a Mussolini. And Mazzini would have cried of Nationalism (as Mme Roland did of Liberty) "What crimes are committed in thy name" had he lived to foresee the later developments of the faith he preached.

But Mazzini died in 1872, just over the dividing line of 1870 which saw the successful uniting of both Italy and Germany. That year 1870 was indeed a turning point, a milestone, of the greatest importance in European history. Papal infallibility found its definition, the Paris Commune made its unavailing if partly prophetic gesture, Berlin became the new capital of Europe, the giant figure of Bismarck occupied the centre of the stage, the new imperialism backed by the ever more rapid advance of science was in the air. I need not elaborate so obvious a list. What I wish to suggest is that it is after this decisive year (though of course not beginning then) that there manifested themselves in European Nationalism certain qualities which have made Nationalism what it is today, and these I must briefly refer to. Inevitably, much of what I have to say refers to Germany, since 1870 had made Germany both the great example of successful nationalism, and the leading state in Europe.

The triumph of German nationalism, achieved by Prussia through three speedy, staccato, and successful wars within six years, injected a *militarist* quality into the Nationalist movement, gave it a military stamp. Prussian militarism was an old story of course, truer than many old stories. "I find pleasure in nothing in this world except in a strong army" wrote the first King of Prussia over a hundred years earlier. Now the faith seemed triumphantly vindicated on the larger scale of Germany, and indeed (for those who could achieve it) of Europe, as a part of the panoply of Nationalism. Many countries had fought wars for national freedom. But this permanent identity of armed force with national unity was something new. No one at all familiar with German literature but must admit that from Kleist to Ernst Jünger of today (or from Clausewitz to Bernhardt and Banse) there has been present in it a warlike element not present in anything like the same degree in the literature of other European peoples. Treitschke, a convert from that earlier German liberalism which lacked

this quality, made a good sounding board for the sentiment: "Only in war does a nation become a nation, for war is the mightiest and most effective moulder of nations. . . ." "The second most essential function of the State is to make war. . . . It is precisely political idealism that demands war," and so on.

If the second essential of the modern national state to Treitschke was to make war, the first in his eyes was Power: "The State is in the first instance Power." This, too, was in the direct Prussian tradition, and the absorption of Germany by Prussia in 1870 extended the sphere of that tradition over the whole Reich. True, the new state was a federal one, and there were important limitations of imperial authority, but what the Emperor might not do, the King of Prussia could often achieve. And although the new Reich had a framework of parliamentary government, any hopes of its free or fruitful development were effectively scotched by Bismarck. Thus Nationalism in Germany came to be more closely identified with the State, and this just at a time when other forces were marshalling themselves in the same direction.

The most obvious of these were economic, for it is just in this period that Economic Nationalism in its modern form began to take definite shape. I do not mean, of course, that all the remarkable economic development of Germany in the Bismarckian Empire was carried through by the State. But the initiative and support of the State played an important part in the co-ordination of scientific education, research, and its application to industry. "State initiative," as Dawson wrote over thirty years ago, "is the tradition of German government." There were the traditions of Prussian Cameralism and mercantilism, Fichte's *Closed Commercial State* (1800), List's *National System of Political Economy* (1841), and now the teachings of the "historical school" of German economists, all illustrating or reinforcing the trend. Its applications were seen in the turn from free or freer trade to protection and tariffs in the seventies; the control by the state of the railways and other means of communication; the remarkable legislation for the conditions of industry and the working class by which Bismarck sought to undermine socialism. The turn to tariffs was, of course, not confined to Germany, any more than the new phase of imperialism which set in after 1870. This likewise illustrated in some of its aspects the newer nationalism which sought to extend itself, to take in all those who could be claimed as belonging to it, and to find room for its expansion whether over contiguous areas, or further afield. Socialism, after the failure of the First International, dissolved in 1876, tended likewise to fall into a nationalist pattern, with the German Social Democratic party as the outstanding example of organized socialism before 1914. True, its declared ends were international, but its organization and, as 1914 revealed, its spirit were far more national than international, in Germany as elsewhere. Thus economic life took on a more nationalist colouring and increased the political and actual powers of the national State, in preparation for the greater heights of economic nationalism to be manifested in our own day.

Much of the achievement of this latest phase of the industrial revolution was due to the achievements of science and technology. We usually regard science as international rather than national: "Science knows no boundaries of race, nationality, religion or region" as one writer puts it. But science could also be used to subserve more national ends. The days

when an English scientist could travel about freely in a country with which Britain was at war, as Sir Humphrey Davy had done in France by permission of Napoleon, had passed away. It has been remarked that Darwin's teachings on natural selection, the struggle for existence, and the survival of the fittest, came with a curious timeliness for the nationalist wars. War, said Moltke, was "a providential fact"; it was also seen as a biological necessity. And after 1870 science was invoked (or abused) to foster another feature of the modern nationalism, its *racial* interpretation. Some of this had a more real foundation in the clash of races now becoming more marked in the Austrian Empire, where German and Slav, Magyar and Slav or German, fought with increasing bitterness to preserve or advance their own cause at the expense of the declining Habsburg régime. But much of it was based on the more dubious, if not spurious theories of racial inequality developed by Gobineau and others, and fed by the imperialist expansion and the concern for national prestige. That aspect of nationalism, like the economic, was to reach its height in the fanatical and fantastic nightmare of Nazi Germany, but already in Bismarck's day anti-semitism had raised its voice, echoing earlier pronouncements by Fichte and others on German racial purity and superiority.

By 1900 the Frenchman Charles Maurras had invented Integral Nationalism, a curious medley of traditionalism and monarchism, Latinism and Catholicism, anti-semitism and general disgust with the Third Republic in the days of the Dreyfus affair. But although the doctrines of Maurras and the *Action française* were to be a disturbing factor in French political life, especially during the crises of the nineteen-thirties, and were even to provide a momentary basis for a stop-gap régime after the military crash of 1940, integral nationalism was rather French in *origin* (like so much else in the cultural development of Europe) than a national faith in France itself. France had made her decisive contribution to Nationalism at the time of her first Revolution, and a well-known French writer on the subject of Nationalism sees the principle declining in the France of this period. She had, partially at least, outgrown it; and integral nationalism in France was at bottom a defensive protest. The real development of what we have now come to call totalitarian nationalism was to come across the Alps and across the Rhine.

Thus by 1914 Nationalism had changed materially from the days of Mazzini and "Liberal" Nationalism. Nationality had become Nationalism, one of the many German "ismuses" at large by that day. Bacon in the *Novum Organum* refers to "the Idols and false notions which take possession of the human understanding, and take deep root therein," and by 1914 Nationalism was in fair way to be such an Idol. And it was now, when Nationalism had been thus changed by its connection with Militarism, the devouring state, racialism, and economic nationalism, that the problem in Europe was further complicated by the results of the War of 1914-18.

For the peace settlement of 1919 marked "the apogee of the right of self-determination," as E. H. Carr puts it. The long narrow strip of European territory stretching from Finland to Greece ran like a geological "fault" through the structure of the continent. Here was the meeting place of races, of religions, of cultures, even of alphabets. The area had rumbled with discontent and revolt throughout the nineteenth century. The earthquake shock of 1914-18 destroyed its weaker foundations, the

retaining walls of the four adjacent empires, German, Austrian, Russian, and Turkish, crumbled simultaneously; and from the confusion there emerged a kaleidoscopic confusion of fourteen small or middle-sized states, a larger number than in the whole of the rest of the European continent, some entirely new, some older, some heroic revivals after long submergence, but all alike sovereign nations in the full political meaning now accepted as essential to Nationalism, and all concerned to preserve their identity, above all from reabsorption within their former framework.

Looking back from this day, and admitting the superiority of hindsight over foresight, it seems hardly likely that this efflorescence of national states in east central Europe could survive in its entirety in the form of absolute sovereignty in which it was established. Their creation ran counter to what had seemed to be a trend of the nineteenth century toward consolidation into larger political and economic units. Most of them were militarily weak, many of them were politically and socially backward, with little experience of conducting political affairs. They had been neglected or subjected (or both) by their former masters. They had just been ravaged by war, famine, and disease. They were surrounded by revolutionary movements, notably that in Russia, which affected them. Their boundaries were in many cases very imperfect whether from a political, an economic, a military, or an ethnic point of view. As to this last, there was an inextricable confusion of racial or national groups through much of this area, so that the drawing of accurate boundaries was impossible, even had the peace-makers been possessed of super-human wisdom. These treaty-makers did try to provide for this difficulty by Minorities Treaties, but the problem continued to bedevil the fortunes and lives of most of these states, whether new or old, both in their internal politics, and in their relations with each other. The new political divisions ran across the lines of trade and economic life generally developed in the immediate past. The new states had been able to emerge because their greater neighbours and former masters had fallen; but sooner or later these, Germany and Russia at all events, would rise again and that would create difficulties for them. True, there was the League of Nations, but that was to prove too weak to be able to save them in the hour of supreme trial. It was a pity that old fears and new jealousies prevented them from forming any effective unions or even alliances amongst themselves. Instead, a number of them tended to follow only too faithfully the pattern set by the Nationalism of the day in its economic and other policies.

And meanwhile that Nationalism was developing into an *Idol* beyond the dreams of Bacon, under the corpulent rhetoric of a Mussolini, the pseudo-mysticism of a Rosenberg, and the sadistic hatreds of a Hitler. This latest stage of Nationalism is so near and so familiar that I need not go into it. It marked indeed the completion, the totalization of the Nationalist creed as it had developed on Italian, German (and Prussian) soil in the period we have been surveying. The three fundamental concepts of the National Socialist State are defined by Ernst Rudolf Huber, its official constitutional-legal expositor² as those of the *Volk* or people, the *Führer* or leader, and the Party or Movement. But neither these nor the so-called corporate state as developed there or in Italy; or the farrago of pseudo-philosophy, pseudo-racial science and economics, in reality con-

²In *Verfassungsrecht des Grossdeutschen Reiches*.

tribute anything fresh to the world. Even the methods used, proscription and persecution, terrorism and war, are old. "It is not only the *bodies* of men," wrote Polybius over two thousand years ago, "and the ulcers and imposthumes which are bred in them, that grow to a fatal and completely incurable state of inflammation, but their *souls* most of all. For as in the case of ulcers, . . . so at times it happens that similar plagues and gangrenes fasten upon men's souls; and when this is so, no wild beast can be more wicked and cruel than a man."

Only the overwhelming material power, made available to the large modern national state by the achievements of western science, is new. It is Nationalism not *in excelsis* but *in infernis*, its virtues eclipsed, its vices given free play. We are almost reduced to agreement with Professor Paul Tillich, the eminent theologian, and ex-German, that Nationalism is the most dangerous incarnation of the demonic principle, especially when it assumes (as in Nazi Germany) a religious form, striving to take the place of true religion. For that is the logical end of totalitarian nationalism, to comprehend everything, including God.

And that brings us back to the dilemma of present-day Nationalism with which we began. There are those, like Professor Cobban, who see the modern sovereign national state as the root of all evil, and would supersede it by federal arrangements; or like Mr. H. G. Wells, who want to see a world revolution to set up a world state. There are those who would, at least, break up the national state of the arch-offender, Germany, as an essential to future peace. Without attempting to discuss these and other proposals for the future, there are, it seems to me, one or two conclusions which may be drawn from the material presented in this paper.

In the first place it appears that it is just these developments of Nationalism since about 1870—militarism, the excessive power of the State, economic nationalism, and national intolerance, which have done so much to discredit Nationalism today, and which we fight to overcome. From which it seems plain that there must be in the future some limitation of these overgrown powers: limitations of the National State's military powers, of its economic powers, of its capacity to oppress minorities. And this involves international controls in various fields, international organization (such as a revised and revived League of Nations), interdependence in place of complete independence, definite infringement of the sovereignty of the state-nation of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Then, the special problem created by the existence before 1939 of many small national states in Europe, unable to defend themselves unaided, and subject to the drawbacks we have indicated, suggests that economic and political union of some at least of these states should be encouraged, to aid and supplement any more general international organizations. It is tempting at this distance, and with Europe reduced to a flux under the Nazi heel, to redraw the map of the continent in terms of the federal union of such groups as the Scandinavian countries; the Balkan States; all or part of east-central Europe; the Netherland countries. But no student of history will deny the difficulties in the way of securing the permanent establishment of such unions, any more than he can fail to see the obstacles to those wider schemes of federal union which have been put forward and supported with so much earnestness.

But whatever new political forms may emerge in Europe as the result of this war, Nationalism will not disappear. And attempts to destroy it

will only encourage the resurgence of its more dangerous qualities. Nor can I feel that we should attempt to destroy it. For Nationalism, like human nature, is compounded of good as well as evil. It has been the source of many valuable and fruitful things in the past, the lever for much of the progress human society has made. When John Bunyan's Christian was toiling up the Hill Difficulty between the two fatal side paths of Danger and Destruction, he found as he climbed that he had lost what he called his "Evidence," and had to go back for it before he could attain to the Palace Beautiful. Today Nationalism has likewise lost some of its "evidence," and will have to return for it in order to reassume its proper role, which Mazzini saw as providing a natural and necessary link between the individual and humanity, allowing and fostering the harmonious growth of all three. That is still the role of the National Society. But I would add that its success in achieving this depends not so much on the possession of full political sovereignty, or indeed on the qualities of Nationalism itself, as on the general level of development of the members of the society. "The success of any form of government," as Cobban puts it, "is relative to the political development of the people it governs." If the citizens of the national state are sufficiently advanced in the art of governing themselves, in the capacity for using and not abusing freedom, in toleration of diversity of opinion, then nationalism will cease to be a menace. In other words, the real problem is one of political and social education, and that, as I need not remind a body of educators, is a noble but an arduous task, requiring in Milton's phrase "sinews almost equal to those which Homer gave Ulysses."