

CURRENT HISTORY

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The Global Crisis of the Nation-State

AVIEL ROSHWALD

From Edinburgh to New Delhi and from Barcelona to Beijing, nationalism is once again defying predictions of its decline or demise. Whether in the form of secessionist movements and ethnic conflicts, or of irredentist claims and assertive foreign policies, this seems to be the “ism” that just won’t go away. Yet instead of assuming that the problem lies in a worldwide surfeit of nationalist sentiments, we should consider whether it might be rooted in a deficit of well-constructed national identities. Rather than viewing the nationalist revival as simply a misguided reversion to a bygone era, we can best understand it as the by-product of a global crisis of the nation-state.

Resurgent Nationalism

Fourth in a series

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The term “nation-state” came into active usage in the 1890s. It was employed by Anglophone political scientists as an analogue to the term “city-state,” commonly used to denote the ancient Greek *polis*. Representative institutions, combined with modern transportation and communication networks, rendered plausible the notion of a large country’s citizenry sharing a sufficient simultaneity of experience and coalescence of interests to exercise political sovereignty, much as the citizens of a city and its immediate environs had done in Periclean Athens. Experience and logic alike suggested that popular sovereignty and national identity were closely intertwined. A shared identity helped sustain the belief that a population’s collective interest was greater than the sum of its

parts. The successful operation of political institutions working in the name of the people could, in turn, be expected to reinforce and sustain a shared sense of national identity. Nation and state would thus become mutually constitutive sources of identity and objects of loyalty in the modern world.

The domestic stability of this arrangement would find its counterpart in peaceful relations among nation-states, insofar as all would share a common understanding of the people’s will as the legitimate basis of territorial sovereignty and hence of interstate boundaries. Repeatedly—and ever more expansively—over the course of the twentieth century, American statesmen in particular took a leading role in upholding the nation-state as the ideal unit of political-territorial sovereignty and the soundest building block of global governance in a world beset by imperial conflicts, pan-nationalist ambitions, and communist menaces.

Almost a century after the creation of the League of Nations, we find ourselves in an era when such cut-and-dried conceptions of nationhood and popular sovereignty seem naive at best, hypocritical and cynical at worst, and unsustainable in any case. Three structural factors have played prominent roles in this crisis: economic, cultural, and institutional globalization; perceived or anticipated shifts in the global balance of power amid new or renewed imperial rivalries; and the passage of generations—specifically, of those generations that were indelibly shaped by the Second World War and its decolonizing aftermath.

GLOBALIZATION’S CHALLENGE

In an earlier incarnation—as European imperialism—globalization paradoxically served to dis-

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seminate the ideals of popular sovereignty and the nation-state as the sole legitimate bases for the exercise of political authority and as the only available mechanisms whereby underprivileged societies might taste the fruits of modernization. It was precisely the self-contradictory and manifestly inequitable character of vast overseas empires ruled arbitrarily by democratic nation-states that paved the way for the rise of anticolonial nationalism. Its very association with the economic, military, and political might of the imperial metropolises made the nation-state model intoxicatingly enticing for frustrated colonized elites.

By contrast, the recent post-Cold War wave of globalization poses a quadruple challenge to the nation-state. First, it threatens to constrain, undercut, and supersede the decision-making power of the state, thus emptying the concept of national self-determination of much of its substance. Secondly, it tends to divide societies by providing enormous enrichment opportunities for advantageously pre-positioned elites whose members are socio-economically and educationally plugged into global networks of exchange, while threatening to relegate other social sectors—in developed and developing countries alike—to relative immiseration. Such polarizing tendencies undermine the vital myth of a national interest that transcends the people's internal divisions.

Thirdly, the flow of workers, migrants, and refugees across borders calls into question popular assumptions about the stability of national identity. Fourthly, social media facilitate the coalescence of a kaleidoscopic array of virtual communities (for example, Islamist radicals, right-wing extremists, Bitcoin users) that cut across traditional political and national boundaries.

POWER SHIFTS

Actual, imminent, or imagined shifts in the global balance of power and neo-imperial rivalries heighten security dilemmas for all states while placing the independence of smaller nation-states at risk. China's thirst for natural resources places it at odds with its neighbors and indirectly with the United States in the South and East China Seas. American efforts to preempt or contain China's power-projection capabilities heighten Beijing's fears in turn. The rhetoric of

national self-determination and the inviolability of national territory serves as a fairly transparent instrument of imperial rivalry in such contexts. At stake for the Pacific's large actors (China, the United States, and Japan) is access to energy reserves and/or the ability to project naval and air power and to protect commercial interests; the weaker Southeast Asian countries seek to forestall hegemonic thrusts by the most threatening of the regional great powers.

Weak nation-states have often been able to leverage rivalries between imperial giants to their advantage. Yet the danger always exists that one imperial power will abandon a region to another, or that two or more rivals will cut a deal at the expense of the smaller players, or—worst of all—that tensions will escalate into an imperial conflict in which the weaker countries become collateral damage. Having once planted the seeds for the nation-state system, imperial rivalries in new forms can also lay waste to it.

Indeed, what might be termed sponsored self-determination has resurfaced as a tool in the service of imperial expansion. This phenomenon is as old as nationalism itself. In the eighteenth century, France promoted American independence in order to strike a blow against the British Empire.

In the early nineteenth century, it was Britain that acted as the effective enforcer of America's Monroe Doctrine; preserving the independence of the Latin American countries facilitated the flow of British manufactures and investments into Spain's and Portugal's former colonies. In March 1918, Germany sponsored the nominal self-determination of Ukraine as a fig leaf for the *Kaiserreich's* expansion onto former Russian imperial territory under the German-Bolshevik Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Britain followed suit as sponsor of Arab and Jewish nationalism alike in the formerly Ottoman Middle East, while Japan sought but failed to gain international recognition of its creation of an "independent" Manchukuo on the territory of occupied Manchuria in 1932.

From Moscow's perspective, the Western-backed independence of Kosovo in 2008 was a page out of the same book. All the more so in the case of Ukraine, whose formal independence Russian President Vladimir Putin was willing to countenance as long as it constituted a mechanism for the perpetuation of Russian influence, but whose peo-

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ple's right to self-determination does not extend to determining their country's geopolitical alignment, as far as Putin is concerned. The prospects of the European Union's enlargement further eastward, and potentially of continued NATO expansion, are seen by the Kremlin not as a matter of the legitimate choice of free nations, but as a struggle for influence between American and Russian imperial spheres. If the West can sponsor a popular revolution against an elected government in Kiev, then Russia feels free to respond in kind by promoting ethnic Russian separatism in eastern Ukraine.

Thus, the current efflorescence of national self-determination movements can—in some cases—be understood as both by-product and instrument of imperial competition amid a shifting global balance of power. This is not to say that such movements do not have lives of their own and that they cannot affect the fortunes of imperial powers in turn. It was just such a dynamic that triggered the outbreak of the First World War, after all.

FADING MEMORIES

The relentless passage of time since the epochal historical watersheds of the mid-twentieth century means that the direct influence of those events on

political elites and masses alike is fast fading. The Second World War's searing impact on the post-1945 leadership of Western Europe's nation-states helped motivate and inspire them to undertake the colossal project of institutionalized cooperation and mutual restraint known as European integration. For a rising new generation of Europeans—among whom a reference to “the war” may elicit the question “which one?”—the post-1945 taboos that once governed the functioning of their societies may become ever more violable.

This can have positive manifestations, as in the reversal of postwar amnesias about the depth and breadth of wartime collaboration with Nazi occupiers, combined with the critical reappraisal of simplistic myths about the resistance. But it also means that an extreme right once consigned to the status of a lunatic fringe has been making a comeback toward the mainstream (if not away from lunacy) in Western, Central, and Eastern Europe alike.

The events of the Second World War do remain rhetorical reference points for a new generation that has no direct recollection of them, and for whom the ever more multivalent interpretations of wartime history threaten to open a Pandora's

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box of chauvinism and racism once thought to have been sealed for good. The surge in electoral support for the neo-Nazi and neo-collaborationist Golden Dawn Party in Greece and for Hungary's neo-fascist Jobbik Party (along with some of the utterances and policies of Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán's governing Fidesz Party), and the rising profile of the aptly named Right Sector in Ukraine, are cases in point. So, for that matter, is the historical revisionism of Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Putin's eagerness, in turn, to paint the entire revolutionary movement in Kiev as neo-fascist smacks of a more old-fashioned, Soviet propagandist model, but the sympathy his policies are evoking among various far-right parties in Western and Central Europe suggests the possibility of novel political-ideological alignments, as does his recent justification of the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact.

POSTCOLONIAL DISILLUSIONMENT

In the postcolonial world, the transformative moment of gaining formal independence during the great wave of decolonization between the late 1940s and the early 1960s is likewise growing increasingly remote from people's memories. By the same token, the significance of that moment has come into question for those postcolonial societies that have endured domestic tyrannies at least as oppressive as the old European ones, or suffered from vicious circles of economic dependency at least as debilitating as those experienced under formal imperialism. In countries deeply fragmented along lines of language, religion, class, and/or clan—and particularly in those that do not have a precolonial legacy of statehood along roughly equivalent territorial lines that they can draw on as a “usable past”—national identity and the political legitimacy associated with governance in its name are very elusive elements.

During struggles against imperial masters and amid the initial euphoria of independence, activist elites could use the image of a shared external foe, and a certain sense of momentum linked with the mythologized experience of common resistance to that oppressor, to consolidate their power and assert their control over territory and population in the face of deep socioeconomic, educational, and ethno-cultural divisions. But the passage of time and of generations, along with the multigenerational failure to deliver on the promise of independence as the gateway to peace, dignity, and

prosperity, has eroded the foundations of many of these polities.

The ability of some postcolonial ruling elites to game the Cold War system may have won them superpower subsidies that extended the life spans of their regimes, while financing regional warfare and internal oppression. But this form of artificial respiration is no longer readily available outside of energy- and mineral-rich regions where great powers retain strategic interests. In recent years, the collapse—or failure to coalesce in the first place—of a shared sense of national identity has gone hand in hand with the decline or disintegration of the state in such cases as Sudan and South Sudan, Central African Republic, Libya, and Syria, and with chronic crises of political legitimacy in the likes of Pakistan, Mali, and Nigeria (whose government seems unmotivated to exercise power effectively in the face of the extremist Islamist group Boko Haram's challenge in the country's northeast).

HISTORICAL PRECEDENTS

Having established that the nation-state is under severe strain or worse in many parts of the world, we might also note that from a historical perspective, this is not so unusual. After all, the factors noted above are variations on themes that have played out in one form or another throughout much of recorded history. As early as the mid-fifth century BCE, Athenians were tightening the criteria for citizenship in response to the growing influx of aliens into a *polis* that was becoming a commercial hub of the Aegean Sea and the wider Mediterranean. In other words, the vexed relationship between the dynamics of what we term globalization and the delineation of bounded political identities is not altogether new, although today it is obviously playing out more intensely and across a much vaster range of territories and populations than ever before.

It should go without saying that global shifts in the balance of power and the fading or recasting of once-formative historical memories are also par for the course. The Cold War seemed to freeze into place a relatively static equilibrium between the superpowers and their respective political systems in the Euro-Atlantic sphere, even as it fostered armed conflict and bloodshed in other parts of the world. But the Cold War was the exception to a far more fluid historical norm. In its aftermath, what is surprising is not the current state of flux and uncertainty along the borderlands of

the former Soviet Union, but the fact that, since the collapse in 1991 of Europe's last great multinational empire, some two decades elapsed before the outbreak of a crisis on this still relatively contained scale. The ethnic conflicts and nationalist rivalries into which the fall of the Romanov, Habsburg, and Hohenzollern empires plunged Eastern and Central Europe in the immediate aftermath of the First World War were far more violent and destructive than the recent conflicts in Georgia and Ukraine.

As to the post-Ottoman Middle East, the case can be made that no stable framework for legitimate political-territorial sovereignty—let alone popular sovereignty and national self-determination—has crystallized in the region since its conquest by British-led forces nearly a century ago. The individual successor states to the Ottoman Empire, such as Syria and Iraq, competed with one another as standard bearers of a secular pan-Arab nationalism whose logic pointed toward the dissolution of the very states ostensibly championing its cause, even as it marginalized non-Arab communities within each country. What held these polities together was the exercise of brute force by ever more clannish elites, along with fitful modernization efforts as well as the

mobilizing energy generated by the conflict with Israel (and, in Iraq's case, with Iran). Syria's and Iraq's collapse amid violently conflicting conceptions of legitimate sovereignty is the latest manifestation of a crisis that can be traced back to the late years of the Ottoman Empire.

For its part, Israel existed as a democratic nation-state (with a remaining Arab minority, small enough to be enfranchised) for the first 19 years of its existence. But ever since 1967, the anomalies and ambiguities surrounding the status of the West Bank have contributed to an ever more acute gap between the principles of popular sovereignty and Jewish nationalism. The recent, politically opportunistic proposals for a "nationality law" bandied about by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and members of his outgoing governing coalition are symptoms of this problem rather than prescriptions for its solution.

UNSTABLE IDENTITIES

The havoc playing out across the Middle East is an extreme manifestation of dilemmas and con-

traditions that inhere in any form of territorial government and collective identity. Anchoring institutions of popular sovereignty in a foundation of national identity can form a strong framework for stable governance, but the undertaking can prove a Sisyphean task. Success hinges partly on the recognition that, as the historian Edmund Morgan noted, popular sovereignty is a fiction—an ideal. It is an objective toward whose realization modern representative institutions and political practices may strive, but it remains inherently unattainable. National identity (a stable version of which is a vital counterpart to popular sovereignty) is likewise perpetually in flux amid global shifts in the distribution of economic and political power, and as demographic and cultural currents flow across borders, continually reshaping the contours of societies.

Rather than concluding that the world is simply suffering from an excess of nationalism per se, I would argue that it is the failure to consolidate or maintain national identities that are cohesive

yet adaptable, rooted in shared historical memories yet capable of integrating new ones, that helps generate some of the major threats to peace and stability in today's global environment. This perspective

can even be applied to the Ukrainian crisis. Putin has responded to the perceived imperial encroachment of the West by employing the rhetoric of Russian nationalism on behalf of a vision that is fundamentally neo-imperial rather than genuinely preoccupied with national self-determination. The domestic support for his policies reflects a historic failure on the part of post-1991 political and cultural leaders alike to articulate and inculcate a realigned sense of Russian national identity that is detached from the tradition of political hegemony over a broader, Romanov/Soviet territorial sphere.

The Middle East has suffered its share of troubles at the hands of aggressive nationalism. Yet this region's alternatives to the nation-state model are far worse. On the one hand, these countries face the prospect of fragmentation along seemingly infinite ethnic, tribal, and sectarian lines. On the other hand, movements such as the so-called Islamic State indulge in bloodshed on behalf of a transnational Islamist vision that respects no borders. The shortcomings of the territorially and demographically bounded nation-state pale by

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comparison with the atrocities committed in the name of religious universalism.

A FLEXIBLE FUTURE?

If the nation-state is worth salvaging, it is also important to avoid an overly rigid definition of the nation, a one-size-fits-all model of state building, and a doctrinaire conception of national self-determination that ignores the realities of unequal global distributions of power. British politicians' openness to the possibility of greater Scottish autonomy proved crucial to the independence referendum's negative outcome in September 2014, while Madrid's refusal to countenance a formal vote on Catalan independence augurs ill for the future of interethnic and interregional relations in Spain. In the case of Ukraine, surely a long-term solution hinges on balancing the country's right to determine its own economic and political orientation with Russia's demand for a clear limit to further NATO expansion.

One of the most startling aspects of the recent turmoil in the Middle East is the roster of states

it has largely spared: The monarchies dominate this list. In the case of the Arabian Peninsula, this may be a matter of oil wealth that has allowed kings and emirs to bribe their subjects into quiescence. Yet the Jordanian and Moroccan kingdoms, neither of which enjoys this advantage, have also remained relatively stable amid the wider crisis. Perhaps evolution toward constitutional monarchy holds greater promise for the consolidation of nation-states in this region than the failed republicanism of the Nasserist era.

Over the past several centuries, the nation-state has served as both a vehicle for the advancement of liberal-democratic aspirations and an instrument of repression and aggression. It has been hailed as the cornerstone of a peaceful world order and derided as an obstacle to universal harmony. Accommodating the political culture and institutions of the nation-state to an ever-changing global environment is the only way to contain the potential for its abuse, and to avoid the dangers of its being supplanted by structures and ideologies that are more inherently violent. ■