# State of Nationalism (SoN): Nationalism and Empire

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Works on nations and nationalism often include an introductory chapter on empires before more substantive matters are examined. Conversely, books on empires typically conclude with summary reflections on the rise of nations. This reveals a particular perspective in the larger literature where the worlds of empires and nation-states have long been clearly differentiated from each other, and have at times been treated as antithetical in nature. It has also been typical that when nationalism is studied within an imperial context the examination focuses primarily on minority nationalisms. Recently more thoughtful readings of history have started to produce a rich literature that reveals the complex relationship between empires and nationalism. The present essay will seek to introduce the main contours of such rethinking.

Before we move on any further it is best to clarify the conceptual universe we will inhabit. Empire has been a contentious and ambiguous concept whose connotations changed over time.[1] For the purposes of this essay an empire will be defined as a hierarchical political entity where 'the dominant metropole, exerts political control over the internal and external policy … of the other, the subordinate periphery', and where peripheral societies cannot act together.[2] Empires have also come in different shapes and forms.[3] The focus here will be on modern empires, and the discussion will include both continental land empires such as the

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Ottomans, Habsburgs and the Russian Empire, and the overseas empires of the Spanish and the British kind. The conceptualization of nationalism has perhaps been even more contentious. Here, I will refer to nationalism primarily as a form of political ideology, and as a basis of political legitimacy.

## Imperial(ist) versus National(ist) Universes

There exists a long tradition going back to the 18th century where empires and nations have been treated as naturally incompatible. Herder, for example, famously envisioned a future where empires would eventually collapse and be replaced by the 'natural' form of nations.[4] The literature on nations and nationalism has been drawing from this tradition. While, and until recently, contemporary scholars have continued to treat the imperial and national universes differently, they no longer consider them in antithetical terms.[5]

There are obvious differences between empires and nation-states which deserve highlighting. While empires are characterized by hierarchical structures, nation-states are founded on the ideals of freedom and equality. Empires champion universalism whereas nation-states are based on particularisms. Empires are characterized by heterogeneity whereas nation-states revolve around the logic of homogeneity.[6]

Some of the classic theoretical works in the literature similarly accentuate the differences between these two worlds. Ernest Gellner's works are relevant here. In his definitive study on Gellner's thought, Hall observes a 'tension between the major analytical expectation that multinational polities are doomed and the hope that they might somehow survive' in their more benign forms.[7] In his later writings, Gellner did consider Austria-Hungary as a morally appealing option, and

an example of indirect rule where cultural autonomy was protected. Yet, his more characteristic treatment of empires can be found in his *Nations and Nationalism*. In this work Gellner considers the rise of industrial society as a watershed moment in human history. The preceding agrarian systems were small in scale and characterized by a clear separation between the majority of the population and the ruling elite. Despite their size, empires were also part of this agrarian world. It was the coming of the industrial society and its requirements that shifted everything and relegated empires to history. Gellner further limited his attention to secessionist nationalism famously exemplified by Ruritanians in Megalomania.

Gellner's perspective which clearly differentiates the two universes as well as his focus on minority nationalisms are echoed in countless works in the literature. And it is on these two scores that recent works distinguish themselves. Accordingly, these latter works pay attention to similarities and continuities between empires and nation-states. They also seek to understand nationalising efforts by imperial centers as opposed to primarily or exclusively focusing on minority nationalisms. As a result, a burgeoning body of works offers a more nuanced outlook on the complex dynamics of imperial rule and the role of nationalism within imperial contexts as well as the mechanisms of transformation from empires to nation-states.

## Imperial Dynamics, and Explaining the Transformation from Empires to Nation-State

Different from earlier works, scholars are now careful not to assume the inevitability of the transformation from empires to nation-states.[8] They consequently devote considerable attention to understanding the imperial dynamics in order to explicate the mechanisms of

transformation. One such mechanism involves war-making. Here, one immediately recalls to mind Tilly's classic work where he argues that nation-states are by-products of war-making.[9] Other, more recent works, take this relationship seriously but treat it partly, and not exclusively, linked to the modern 19th century empires and forces of imperialism. In this vein, for example, Hutchinson offers an alternative explanation where the emergence of national communities is traced back to the Middle Ages.[10] In his account these communities shape, rather than are shaped by, state-building and war-making.

Modernist narratives, however, occupy a larger part in the literature. These narratives propose a variety of angles in looking at empires and nationalism. Wimmer's work has been one of the more influential additions to this literature. According to Wimmer, the transition from empire to nation-state is a result of nationalist movements that emerged and strengthened inside empires. In this framework, nationalism delegitimizes imperial rule, and consequently nationalist organizations play a critical role in imperial collapse. There could be some exceptions, Wimmer concedes, such as the Ottoman Empire where the interference by the Great Powers was a more decisive factor in explaining collapse. Nevertheless, secessionist nationalist movements remain the core reason in the creation of nation-states where nationalism is almost inextricably tied to violence.[11] While Wimmer's methodology, which combines statistical data with case studies, is a praiseworthy endeavour, his treatment of nationalism as the major cause of warfare has been rightly criticized.[12] Furthermore, his narrative limits nationalism exclusively to secessionism without sufficient consideration to differences in imperial dynamics.

Alternative explanations propose a more balanced and nuanced reading of history, reminding us that while the power of ethnic nationalism should be recognized inside imperial contexts, its significance should not

be blown out of proportion. In fact, recent research reveals the limits of the nationalization of the masses even during the apogee of nationalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Judson's brilliant research on the Austrian parts of the Dual Monarchy, for example, examines the indifference of local populations toward nationalist ideas.[13] Similarly, the burgeoning historical research on central and eastern Europe pays particular attention to the concept of 'national indifference', and reveals that 'far from being a premodern relic, national indifference was often a response to modern mass politics'.[14] Admittedly, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to measure the extent of 'national indifference' with great accuracy. However, it still is a useful and significant concept. Further research along these lines would deepen our understanding of how nationalism operated (or failed to operate) inside empires, and how 'national indifference' changed forms in different imperial contexts over time.

A related caution should be issued about connecting nationalist movements to imperial collapse in a causal manner. Reynolds' (2011) examination of the borderlands of the Ottoman and Russian empires, for instance, powerfully reveals the role of geopolitical competition, as opposed to the strength of nationalist movements, in bringing about the fall of empires.[15] In the Balkans local rebellions have long been interpreted as tied to nationalism and imperial collapse. Yet, a revisionist look at these unrests convincingly establishes the actors involved as opportunistic local elites, and disgruntled peasantry rather than ideologically driven nationalists. Identities in such 'movements' often lacked clear definition and articulation.[16] What was observed more consistently inside the Ottoman Empire, for example, was an 'indifference to nationalist categories among the Sultan's Christian subjects' which 'reflected their sense of belonging to a community defined by religion, where linguistic differences between Greek and Bulgarians mattered less than their shared belief in Orthodoxy'.[17]

Nationalist movements did eventually develop in the Balkans; but the process was much slower and uneven than sometimes presented. As well, nationalism often emerged as a result of violence and war-making rather than the other way around.[18] Finally, and as it is suggested by these recent works, an explanation of imperial collapse should more seriously consider the broader framework of capitalist development and the modernisation attempts by the imperial centres as well as Great Power interference and rivalries.[19]

In such imperial contexts, when national movements did emerge, they were not always secessionist. Their demands typically included calls for imperial reform and autonomy as opposed to independence.[20] Nationalist intellectuals and activists were often demonstrating their loyalty to their empire rather than their wish to separate. Ottoman Armenians, for example, sought institutional and administrative reform with a clearly articulated desire to remain within the empire. National consciousness remained relatively weak during the 19th century, and was mostly limited to intellectual circles.[21] It would be the imperial policies and at times the ruling elite's indifference which turned out to be the decisive factors in strengthening nationalist movements. In the Habsburg Empire too, nationalist demands which were often articulated around institutional reform in language, courts, schools etc. fundamentally sought 'political solutions within the legal framework of the empire'.[22]

The situation was similar in non-contiguous imperial contexts such as the French case. In her study of the French Empire, Lawrence considers secessionism as only one of a number of possible outcomes.[23] Her analysis shows that the demands of the colonial elite were initially about political equality. Nationalist secessionist mobilization eventually came about and only as a reaction to exclusion from democratic institutions. The decolonization process thus should not be exclusively understood in

relation to anti-colonialist nationalist movements. Spruyt's study of the process of decolonization further suggests that the particular configuration of political elites in the metropolitan core mattered. 'The more fragmented the decision-making in the core', he argues, 'the greater the resistance to change in territorial policy and decolonization'.[24] While the French case, for example, demonstrates the difficulty of decolonization of Algeria due to multiple factions (or 'veto points') amongst the political elite, the relatively unified position of the metropolitan elite in Britain eased the final outcome. In a slightly different yet complementary vein, Lieven points out that in the British case, democracy at the core severely limited the legitimation of colonies making the appeasement of the public opinion progressively more difficult.[25] We should also add the financial burden of holding on to the empire as another consideration influencing the decolonization decision inside the metropole.[26]

## Nationalising Empires, Geopolitics and Nationalism

Most current scholarship has recognized the need to study not only minority nationalisms in imperial contexts, but the nationalist policies of the imperial cores themselves. This perspective also parts ways with earlier works where empires and imperial policies were seen as inhibiting nationalism and nation-building.[27] As Lieven put it succinctly, with the exception of Austria, 'in 1900 … European empires … were sustained … by the strength of metropolitan nationalism'.[28] Inside the European imperial cores the political elites did not only see nationalism as a threatening force, but also as a tool to cement a sense of solidarity amongst the metropolitan populations.[29] Imperialism and nationalism could and did coexist inside modern empires where nationalist policies provided imperial elites with a justification for their expansionism.[30] In the hands of the political elite national pride became tightly attached to

the strength of the empire; and nationalist sentiments were preferred to the less palatable radical ideologies such as socialism. In the British case, for example, Darwin's work powerfully demonstrates how the 'empire evoked, or was used to invoke, what … we might see as a distinctively ethnic dimension of Britishness'.[31] More particularly, he demonstrates how the British Empire created 'imperial ethnicities' in an effort to garner loyalties to the empire through the creation of a common high culture. A definition of Britishness which comprised an ethnic dimension was essentially linked to the imperial, and not to the local, level.

The efforts to understand the actions of imperial elites add to the complexity of the relationship between nationalism and empires. It is true that sometimes national movements preceded the rise of 'official nationalisms'.[32] However, as Hall powerfully demonstrates, more often than not it was the 'actions of states [that] actually created nationalist movements where none existed before'.[33] Hence, the 'general idea is that nationalism has a great deal to do with the way empires behave'.[34]

It is equally important to incorporate the role of geopolitics, and inter-imperial or interstate competition into this picture. In the Ottoman-Russian borderlands, Reynolds argues, nationalism is 'best understood as a form of geopolitics … [and] is better seen as a by-product of interstate competition than as the stimulus for competition'.[35] More particularly, Reynolds talks about how the national idea increasingly crystallized as a principle around which the competition of the Great Powers was shaped. In many instances, local violence was not the consequence of nationalist movements, but was contingent on Great Power rivalries.[36] Hence, the argument that nationalism is inextricably tied to violence is revised. In accounting for the outbreak of World War I, for example, a more complex picture is suggested which involves geopolitical competition, and the failure of states to act rationally as more critical variables than nationalist mobilization.[37] In fact, some

accounts highlight the War as the catalyst of such mobilization through 'exposing both the brutality and fragility of imperial states'.[38]

Other works remind us that oftentimes nationalist policies were implemented as a check on a possibly expansionist policy of rival entities. For instance, the promotion of Latvian and Estonian nationalisms by the Romanovs could be understood as an effort to limit the power of Baltic Germans.[39] It was also not uncommon inside contiguous empires to encourage nationalist feelings in different communities as a controlling device on nationalist mobilization. Austrians, for example, encouraged Ukrainian identity inside their empire to limit Polish mobilization. Similarly, the Russian imperial elite supported Lithuanian nationalism in order to control the Polish one.[40] These and similar actions by the imperial elite affected the emergence and development of minority nationalisms in return. In the case of Ukrainian subjects of the Austrian empire, for example, the imperial policies led to their political mobilization.

## After Empire

The 20th century was about the ending of formal empires. Yet, arguably, the imperial form could still be considered as a relevant category in a world dominated by nation-states.[41] Such recent works arguing for their relevance have typically focused on the Soviet and post-Soviet worlds as well the United States.

Perhaps more interesting, however, is the sustained attention in the current scholarship on similarities and continuities between empires and nation-states.[42] Institutional and administrative practices, it is demonstrated, underwent significant revisions and rebuilding under the nation-states. However, some imperial institutions and practices have

continued to cast their shadow in their redefined forms. The persistence of the Ottoman millet system (albeit in a transformed format) under the Turkish Republic is an example of such continuity. Relatedly, Malešević's *longue durée* approach to the rise of nation-states suggests historical continuity in the areas of organization and ideology where empires 'provided the necessary scaffolding for the nation-states'.[43] After the fall of empires, the nations which were built from the imperial cores had to find ways to manage the residual heterogeneity of populations. This was not a smooth process by any means. Writing about the Habsburgs, Judson notes that after World War I, 'the Habsburg Empire was gone, but the production of politics around cultural difference as the primary way for people to make claims on their state continued with a vengeance'.[44] Future research along these lines promise to add to our understanding of the processes of social and political change.

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## Endnotes

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[9] See C. Tilly, *Coercion, capital and European states, AD 990-1990* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

[10] See J. Hutchinson, *Nationalism and war* (Oxford, 2017).

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[34] Hall, 'Taking megalomanias seriously', 30.

[35] Reynolds, *Shattering empires*, 18.

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[37] Hall, *The Importance of being civil*; Lieven, *Towards the flame.*

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[43] Malesevic, *Nation-states and nationalisms*, 53; Malesevic, 'The foundations of statehood'.

[44] Judson, *The Habsburg empire*, 449.