

History Matters: Nationalism vs. Patriotism

It can be challenging to conceptualize the world as it existed before nations had clear borders and names we recognize today. As late as the second half of the nineteenth century, many people did not think of themselves as citizens of a country but as subjects of a kingdom. The kingdoms of 18th- and 19th-century Europe were difficult to draw on a map, especially in an era when royal families were genetically related and constantly engaged in territorial disputes that began at family gatherings and lingered for generations. The popular TV series "Game of Thrones" did a good job of acquainting viewers with this idea.

Many of the borders drawn by burgeoning nations in 19th-century Europe were a reaction to the Napoleonic Wars. These borders were designed to secure peace and prevent border disputes. For much of Europe, they succeeded in these goals for the next half-century.

As loose alliances and petty disputes spread, Europe was increasingly left with vaguely defined boundaries and loyalties. In the pre-industrial age of kings and popes, there had been few reasons to prevent subjects from crossing the hazy borders between kingdoms. With the rise of industrialization, however, growing competition encouraged a need for more defined boundaries. The rise of imperialistic ambitions inspired countries to secure borders, resources, and industrial secrets and thereby consolidate the boundaries of national wealth. As rural towns grew into urban centers, outdated definitions of nations began to change. The citizenry found itself realigned on the basis of new commonalities and, gradually, the concept of a "national identity" arose.

The era in which the force of a strong personality, a king, or a charismatic religious leader could hold a group together was over. Instead, a more aggressive and dangerous form of national identity emerged. As new ideas of collective identity took shape, new constraints around group unity coalesced. Racial identity became a popular option for setting up the new rules of citizenship. Nations began imposing stricter rules on what it meant to be a citizen and the kinds of people who would be counted.

Mythical thinking is a common tool for forging strong national affiliations. Often rooted in fear and insecurity, it deploys comforting stereotypes that create divisions in society. These divisions favor the group in power by fostering loyalties that can be conveniently manipulated to their advantage during power struggles. Such thinking creates separations within the nation between racial groups, ethnic groups, and religious affiliations, to name a few.

National identity can be built around various commonality. Language, religious commitments, educational systems, military service, birth location, or even characteristics as arbitrary as hair and eye color can become important tools for creating forms of national identity. For example, it has always been important amongst the Irish and Scottish to identify ways that they are not English. Similarly, Swedes are keen not to be confused with Norwegians, and the Japanese are anxious to be recognized as different from Korean and Chinese people. And so it goes in all corners of the planet.

In some nations, unity is easily achieved as most people fit into the mold, but in others, it has increased conflict. Civil unrest or even civil war can follow the implementation of such divisions, as groups fight for dominance within the nation.

The idea of a national identity tends to bring with it a heightened sense of national exceptionalism and an increased concern to defend the nation from both internal and external threats. This in turn often leads to the belief that a nation's survival might be best ensured through expansion. After all, we might wonder, why should current boundaries limit such an extraordinary people?

Of course, Germany in the Nazi era is an easy target when we discuss the dangers of nationalism at its worst. But, in the 20th century, Germany wasn't unique in believing it was superior to other nations and deserving of expansion at their expense. In fact, history shows that unchecked nationalism is often a precursor to war.

Link: Congress of Vienna, Europe 1815:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_Vienna

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