

PASSIONATE ATTACHMENTS: REFLECTIONS ON FOUR MYTHS OF NATIONALISM*

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INTRODUCTION

In this Article, I reflect on what I call the four myths of nationalism: myth one—"one people, one nation," myth two—"one people, one territory," myth three—"a people has a historic destiny which associates it with a land," and myth four (which is actually a hypothesis rather than a provable assertion)—religion is the starting point of nationalism. Nationalist leaders often use religion to rally huge masses of people to their cause. The theme of this Article is that nationalistic ideas are "social constructs"—products of particular times, places, and events. Nationalistic ideas are the products of intellectuals and activist leaders who organize and rally the masses around ideas of the "imagined community."¹ Nationalism becomes a passionate attachment for which individuals have extreme emotional energy, a passionate attachment to die for. An example of a passionate slogan is, "For God, for country, and for Yale."

I. THE WORLD ORDER IN TRANSITION

To understand why and when nationalistic aspirations occur, we need to take account of the larger social context. We need to consider the world order. Nationalism, virulent nationalism, and genocide of a people only occur under certain circumstances, in certain kinds of transitional phases between the old world order which is collapsing into a new emergent one.

Not long ago many of my friends and even commentators on the international scene were saying, "Peace is breaking out all over." South African oppression of tribals and other people of color had been resolved as South Africa moved to free elections and representative government under agreements and cooperation between De Klerk and Mandela; East and West Germany were reunited into one nation, a western democratic one; and, more amazing still, the Soviet Union collapsed into itself. It took many observers time to realize that the solutions and compromises to national boundaries and territorial control that had been established in Peace Conferences and Treaties after World War II were disintegrating. The world was no longer divided between the western and eastern camps; it would no longer be run by the great superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union—and their satellite countries. Only one super-power remained, the United States, a country now engaged at home, concerned with its own economic and social problems that had been long neglected.

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1. BENEDICT ANDERSON, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES. REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM* 13-14 (1983).

Then, new disorder, chaos and horror occurred as ethnic violence and virulent nationalism broke out in many countries. Ethnic rivalries and hatreds had been held in check when groups belonged to states, and states were held in check because they were clients of the super-powers. The cement, glue and structure of international relations was collapsing, as the east-west dichotomy disappeared. With the pressure off client nations, some aggressive ethnic groups, in the name of national aspirations, turned on their countrymen. For example, in Rwanda the Hutus killed the Tutsi.² In Sukhumi, a Black Sea coastal resort in Georgian Russia, Abkhazian separatists claimed a victory against Georgians.³ In nearby Azerbaijan, the Armenian province of Nagorno-Karabakh had been fighting a long and bloody war to secede from Azerbaijan, where the other ethnic groups are Azeri Turks, Russians, Kurds, and Circassians.⁴ In Bosnia, once a Balkan province of the Ottoman Empire, the Sunni Muslims and Croats joined forces against the Christian Serb aggressors. By November 10, 1994, the Clinton Administration had stopped enforcing the arms embargo against the Muslims.⁵ The Bosnian Serbs have had no problem getting arms, because they were heavily supplied with tanks and artillery by the Yugoslav Army.⁶

In France, in June, 1994, to celebrate D-day, the commemoration of the Allied landing on the Normandy beaches fifty years ago, President Clinton warned of "violent nationalism, a cancerous prejudice, eating away at states."⁷ As Clinton celebrated the beginning of the Allied drive against the Nazis, the State Department and the National Security Council told his aides back in America to avoid referring to the mass murders in Rwanda as genocide. Spokespersons could only say that "acts of genocide may have occurred."⁸

However, prominent experts say that the killing of 200,000 to 400,000 people definitely reflects the deliberate and widespread extermination of an ethnic group and should be called genocide.⁹ "Genocide" is a new term for a beastly social phenomena which has occurred periodically throughout history. The term came into use during the World War II era. It was legally defined by the United Nations Convention on Genocide in 1948, Article II:

In the present Convention, genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group, as such: (a) Killing members of the group; (b) Causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; (c) Deliberately inflicting on the group

2. Peter Smerder, *Rwandan Prisoners Say They Were Forced to Kill Tutsi*, N.Y. TIMES, June 6, 1994, at A8.

3. Raymond Bonner, *Ethnic War Lacerates Former Soviet Resort Area*, N.Y. TIMES, June 8, 1994, at A3.

4. Bonner, *supra* note 3, at A3.

5. Michael R. Gordon, *President Orders End to Enforcing Bosnian Embargo*, N.Y. TIMES, Nov. 11, 1994, at A1.

6. Gordon, *supra* note 5, at A1.

7. Maureen Dowd, *Clinton Warns of Violent Nationalism*, N.Y. TIMES, June 8, 1994, at A16.

8. *U.S. Aides Avoid Labeling Horror*, N.Y. TIMES, June 10, 1994, at A1.

9. *U.S. Aides Avoid Labeling Horror*, *supra* note 8, at A1.

conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; (d) Imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; (e) Forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.¹⁰

The 1948 Genocide Convention, which the United States signed, requires all signatory nations to respond to genocide by investigating and punishing those who are responsible.¹¹ This strict requirement explains the reluctance of the U.S. State Department to call the events in Rwanda genocide. Meanwhile, the French have decided to lead several African armies into the Rwandan fray in order to stop the killing.

II. THE MYTHS OF NATIONALISM

A. *Myth One—“One People, One Nation”*

Nationalistic yearnings, especially in their more virulent forms, may and have in the past led to genocide. Nationalism is the belief that “homogenous cultural units” should be the “foundations of political life.”¹² In its extremist form, leaders assert “one people, one nation.” In many ways this view suffers from a pervasive myth—that only one ethnic group inhabited a region at sometime in the past. But, who lived there depends on how far back into history you trace occupation of the land. In medieval periods and even earlier, for instance, people were not organized into nations. Instead, they lived in agricultural communities, tribal groups, feudal states and empires—empires which were based mostly on trading relations and garrisons of soldiers. Therefore, in almost every case, multiple ethnic claims can be asserted to the *same* territory. Whose historical claim should prevail? Whose history of the region will become the “authentic” one? As the informed world currently witnesses, under the guise of “ethnic cleansing,” a number of ethnic groups are using military force and the terror of rape, plunder and killing to gain territorial advantage.

But, within the written historical record, no “national group” had “pure” blood lines. Breeding with other ethnic groups occurred as far back as the historical record takes us. Intermarriage among ethnic groups has always been common. National identities are more a construction of passionate leadership than narratives told generation after generation.¹³

B. *Myth Two—“One People, One Territory”*

The large geographic territories needed to make a modern state economically viable have always been occupied by diverse peoples. The Armenians and Kurds occupied the same territories in what is now eastern Turkey and northern Iraq for equally long times,

10. See GENOCIDE WATCH 2 (Helen Fein ed., 1992); FRANK CHALK AND KURT JONASSOHN, THE HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY OF GENOCIDE: ANALYSES AND CASE STUDIES 44 (1990).

11. U.N. CONVENTION ON GENOCIDE, ART. I (1948), *reprinted in* UNITED NATIONS RESOLUTIONS, Series I, vol. II, at 238 (Dusan J. Djonovich ed., 1973).

12. See ERNEST GELLNER, NATIONS AND NATIONALISM 125 (1983).

13. See ANDERSON, *supra* note 1, at 58-59; Prys Morgan, *From a Death to a View: The Hunt for the Welsh Past in the Romantic Period*, in THE INVENTION OF TRADITION 43 (Eric Hobsbawm & Terrence Ranger eds., 1984) [hereinafter THE INVENTION OF TRADITION].

living peaceably in the region under the Ottoman empire. Yet, when Kemal Ataturk used Turkish nationalism between 1914 and 1923 to rouse his compatriots against the foreign invaders—Britain, Greece, Italy, and France—he also deliberately incited Kurdish tribesmen to massacre large numbers of Christian Armenians. Later, the new Turkish military (made up of ethnic Turks, Kurds and others) would quell a Christian Nestorian mutiny and a Kurdish rebellion in 1925, led by a sixty-year old, very religious sheik. To claim that a particular ethnic or religious group has used land exclusively is not fact but fiction.¹⁴ Even Native Americans, who can put forth the most profound claims to certain regions of the United States, were known to migrate during pre-conquest times and to sometimes raid each other for women and children. Of course, when land was plentiful and before the emergence of nation-states in the late eighteenth century, ethnic rivalries and hatred did not take the color of nationalistic claims that they do today.

C. Myth Three—“A People Has a Historic Destiny Which Associates It with a Land”

Nationalists often feel that “ethnic cleansing”—the forcing out of a group or groups of people who are different—is necessary and even acceptable to reach the goals of nationalism. According to Ernest Gellner, an eminent Middle Eastern anthropologist, nationalism’s myths “invert reality.”¹⁵

[Nationalism] claims to defend folk culture while in fact it is forging a high culture; it claims to protect an old folk society while in fact helping to build up an anonymous mass society. . . . It preaches and defends continuity, but owes everything to a decisive and unutterably profound break in human history. It preaches and defends cultural diversity, when in fact it imposes homogeneity both inside and, to a lesser degree, between political units.¹⁶

Nationalism, then, is a very distinctive kind of patriotism, “one which becomes pervasive and dominant only under certain social conditions.”¹⁷ These social conditions have occurred only in the modern world (the world since the eighteenth century) and at no other time. “Homogeneity, literacy, [and] anonymity are the key traits” that enabled nationalism to flourish.¹⁸

An essential ingredient of nationalism is communication through the media, such as newspapers, printed books, radio, movies, tape recordings, television and video. As states have centralized their power, the media has also become centralized and pervasive. Centralization and standardization of communicative units allows a fervent political party to communicate with millions of people at the same time. Apart from what is put into the specific messages, the core ideas of nationalism can easily be communicated.¹⁹

14. See, e.g., Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Tradition: The Highland Tradition of Scotland*, in *THE INVENTION OF TRADITION*, *supra* note 13, at 15 (discussing the similarity of the Celtic societies of Ireland and the Western highland and how the Scottish tradition was a retrospective invention).

15. See GELLNER, *supra* note 12, at 124.

16. GELLNER, *supra* note 12, at 124-25.

17. GELLNER, *supra* note 12, at 138.

18. GELLNER, *supra* note 12, at 138.

19. GELLNER, *supra* note 12, at 127.

D. Myth Four—Religion Is Often the Impetus Behind Nationalism

With the exception of Zionism and the state of Israel, religion per se has not been the driving force behind nationalism, although it does have a role to play in nationalistic movements. For example, consider the Kurdish nationalistic movement in the beginning of the twentieth century. The leaders were tribal Kurds from eastern Anatolia who were educated at a Kurdish school in Paris and became intellectuals. In Paris, they were exposed to the nationalistic ideas of a number of other groups who also wished to throw off the Ottoman yoke. Other Kurdish leaders came from the military, where they had been members of an elite Kurdish light cavalry, the Hamidiye, organized by the Ottoman Sultan Abdulhamid in 1878.²⁰ Several different Kurdish nationalistic organizations were forerunners to the major one, the Azadi, which emerged after 1908. By the early 1920s, the Azadi realized that, since the rural Kurds of the east were strongly influenced by the Sunni Muslim sheikhs, in order to mobilize the tribal Kurdish groups of eastern Turkey to resist the new Turkish army, they would have to choose a religious leader, a sheikh, as the overt leader of the revolt.²¹ The most famous was Sheikh Said, who became the figurehead to lead the rebellion organized by Kurdish intellectuals against the fledgling Turkish Republic from February 8th until the 15th of April, 1925, when it was crushed by the Turkish army.

Interestingly, the abolishment of the Caliphate, the religious head of Turkish state, by the new government in 1924 did not rally the sheikhs, hocas and tribal leaders to the Kurdish nationalist cause. The action that galvanized the religious and tribal leaders was the threat to their large land holdings—under the new Turkish Constitution of 1924, law 1505 stated that property of large landowners who did not identify as Turks could be expropriated by the state and awarded to those who identified as Turks and they would be resettled in Kurdistan. In this example, religion provided the traditional symbol by which to rally the illiterate masses of the rural poor, but it was the possibility that their land would be appropriated that cemented the resolve of the Kurdish leaders to rebel.

Obviously, more cases in which nationalism and religion are intertwined need to be examined. But for now, I suggest that nationalists will use whatever symbols they need to rally people, religion being one of the possible rallying points.

CONCLUSION

I started by suggesting that nationalism takes place in the larger context of the world order and that nationalisms, virulent nationalisms, ethnic cleansing, and even genocide only occur in certain times and places—in transitional phases between one old world order and a new emergent one. If this is true, and I think it is, then our best option for preventing virulent nationalism is to first strengthen world government through strengthening the United Nations, and, second, to develop standards and commitments to human rights which transcend national policy objectives (the United States has trouble

20. See ROBERT OLSON, *THE EMERGENCE OF KURDISH NATIONALISM AND THE SHEIKH SAID REBELLION, 1880-1925*, at 7-8 (1989).

21. See generally MARTIN VAN BRUINSEN, *AGHA, SHAIKH AND STATE: THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL STRUCTURES OF KURDISTAN* (1992).

defining the United States' interest in Rwanda, a country that is landlocked in an area without oil, vital minerals or potential consumer markets).

Recognizing the problems entailed when the United States acts as a police force in the world, would it not be in our interest to develop a military force of the United Nations that does more than keep the peace between sides who are in negotiation? Why does the United Nations not have a Human Rights Commission of its own to investigate claims, much as Amnesty International does? Why does the international legal world not develop more clear cut criteria as to when the nations of the world should intervene in civil wars, such as those in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda, and perhaps in Iraq, Turkey, and Azerbaijan? Because the United States as a political entity believes in the rule of law, should we not try to strengthen the resolve of the world community against aggressive nationalism? It is a good sign that the United Nations has begun setting up a War Crimes Commission to hear cases against the military leaders in Rwanda.²²

What is interesting in our common cultural heritage is not that laws, treaties and international conventions represent consensus, a common unifying ethos. What these laws, treaties and international conventions represent are the accumulated record of the most intense conflicts that the world has known and that have been resolved. They represent achievement out of the chaos, not a sublime rising above conflict. They are agreements hammered out over time, despite the weak resolve of nation-state leaders.

If people, as individuals and groups, need passionate attachments, such as are manifest in nationalism, let these attachments change. Let people and groups become devoted to tolerance, democratic principles, pluralism, and difference. Let their attachments be to cultural pluralism.

22. *The MacNeill/Lehrer Newshour* (PBS television broadcast, week of Nov. 1, 1994).