

Nationalism and War

A Review of the Literature

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Introduction

There is a huge literature relevant to exploring aspects of the interrelationships between nationalism and warfare, but there are few systematic accounts of these linkages. John Hall and Sinisa Malešević provide an excellent overview in the introduction to their edited collection.¹ A significant problem is the complexity of delimiting what we mean by warfare. Miguel Centeno defines war as ‘a substantial armed conflict between organized military forces of independent political units’.² This is only a start since wars can be interstate, intrastate, imperial and liberation in character. They also vary enormously in their military organisation and in the range of sectors mobilised, which in the case of ‘total wars’ may include much of society. ‘Warfare’ can refer also to peacetime institutional initiatives and practices related to military preparedness. ‘War’ can also be a retrospective label placed on a series of disparate events. Related to this, the myths of war in this case may be as significant for collectivities as ‘objective’ experiences.

Defining nationalism too can be problematic: it can encompass both national sentiment and ideology (the latter largely a post eighteenth-century phenomenon), and it is necessary also to include its referents, the nation and the nation state. For the purposes of this review, I will focus on five main issues. These are, first, connections between European military



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revolutions and nation state formation; second, the role of war memorialisation in the 'sacralisation' of national communities; third, the impact of total war in the transition from a world of empires to one of nation states; fourth, the alleged denationalising effects of contemporary warfare; and, finally, the 'war proneness' of nationalism. These issues are further explored in John Hutchinson.³

The military revolution and the rise of the nation state

Charles Tilly and Michael Mann offer the most systematic account of the role of war in the genesis of the modern nation state.⁴ Here 'state' is defined in modified Weberian terms to refer to the control (if not monopoly) of legitimate violence over a territory. Tilly argues the modern nation state is a by-product of rulers' efforts to acquire the means of war and war is an organisational phenomenon from which the state derived its administrative machinery. The two are mutually re-enforcing, as summarised in Tilly's dictum 'war made states and states made war'. The setting is post-Roman Europe, a multi-actor civilisation of heterogeneous political units (empires, city-states, dynastic kingdoms) whose major polities fought to become an imperial hegemon. Both scholars draw on the substantial historiography on the European 'military revolution' of the early modern era, which resulted in new technologies, tactics and strategies, and a rapid increase in the size of armies relative to the population.

Tilly argues this favoured centralised political administrations able to levy taxes and raise large permanent armies and draw on revenues derived from trade and commercialised agriculture. Kingdoms such as England and France rose in strength in relation to city-states and (over time) agrarian empires, and their rulers could use standing armies to quell internal challenges to their rule. Such units became the prototypes of the nation state. State centralising pressures and recurrent wars encouraged a growing identification with the territory of the state rather than just one's

locality, resulting in a growing national consciousness. When populations revolted against state exactions, they staged national rather than local revolts. A decisive moment was the French revolution, which in transforming a dynastic into a people's state created the nation state model. The military power of the nation state drawing on the energies of its whole population ensured its universal diffusion.

In Tilly's account nationalism and the nation state are largely late derivatives of state-induced territorial consolidation. Mann is more nuanced in acknowledging the existence of proto-national loyalties from the time of the Reformation onwards, but argues that these have little organisational significance in themselves: it is only when they become fused with the horizontal politics of citizenship (during the French Revolution) that we get modern nationalism. He also relates nation state to class formation: the nation state forms from the increasing impress of the late-eighteenth-century state (via taxes and conscription) on the new social classes emerging from industrial capitalism. This produces political movements demanding representation in the state. Nationalism originates as a drive for democracy. In the course of the struggle for power both the bourgeoisie and working class come to identify with (or are caged within) the state, as the nation state.

These accounts have been criticised as Eurocentric by Miguel Centeno, who argues that the military-fiscal-extraction system does not apply to states in Latin America, and by extension post-colonial Africa, which rarely went to war with each other and which could finance their spending by access to overseas loans or foreign aid.⁵ Intrastate rather than interstate war predominated. John Hutchinson, drawing on medieval historians, maintains that both statehood and a sense of nationality – invoked in the Hundred Years War between England and France – preceded the military revolution, and we need a much more interactive relationship between nationalism, war and state formation.⁶ War, although capable of accelerating state formation, also destroyed states. He explores how a sense of nationality could both underpin and undermine effective state development. Philip Gorski claims that a programmatic nationalism, often

infused with religious motifs, crystallised in the wars of the Reformation and Counter Reformation, notably in the Dutch Revolt out of which the Netherlands formed.⁷

Michael Howard provides a succinct guide to how nationalism transformed the practices of war by applying the concept of the citizen in arms.⁸ There is a related scholarship linking war or military pressures to the development of national democratic citizenship. Barry Posen emphasises the central role of universal conscription (in conjunction with general education systems) in nationalising populations (the people in arms), but as Jorn Leonhard shows conscription was only one among many military practices and could provoke popular resistance.⁹ Mann, we observed, argues that such resistance itself generated a democratic politics for control of the state. Arthur Marwick examined the twentieth-century industrial wars which required a total mobilisation of the population as accelerators of mass democracy, but such intense politicisation could also throw up totalitarian models of the nation state in Fascism.¹⁰

Warfare and the sacralisation of nations

A second focus is on the nation as a moral community which might be in tension with the nation state. There are several ways in which warfare may contribute to national (re-) formation, explored in particular by ethnosymbolic approaches.¹¹ First, wars may generate myths around climactic events whose narratives endow populations with a sense of meaning and unique destiny. John Armstrong has examined how politics and/or populations in the struggles between Christians and Muslims led to particular polities and their populations defining themselves as border guards of their civilisations.¹² Second, Anthony Smith discusses how recurring dyadic wars with neighbours may produce 'we-they' ethnic stereotypes in state propaganda that result in collective self-differentiation.¹³ Third, the intense emotions generated in war have given

rise to public rituals that in turn produce a sense of in-group commonality. George Mosse pioneered the study of great national commemorative festivals, including those devoted to the myth of the fallen soldier, as a form of surrogate religion.¹⁴ In Durkheimian terms, such commemorations created a cult around the remembrance of the dead, which functioned to renew social cohesion, committing survivors in honour of the dead to commit to the (national) values for which they sacrificed. This has fed into ethnosymbolic accounts of nation formation of Smith and Hutchinson.¹⁵ Fourth, the outcomes of war, both of victory and defeat, shape nation formation. Victory especially in liberation wars may be said to canonise a revolutionary generation, but arguably defeat has more radicalising potential since in the era of nationalism it can be seen represent a failure of the people, itself.¹⁶ This can lead to demands for a thorough moral and socio-political transformation of existing institutions, including a search for scapegoats that may include 'corrupt' governing classes or the scapegoating of minorities.¹⁷

All four of these factors can embed memories of war in the everyday culture of the society. This is an important but relatively underexplored topic.¹⁸ A related topic concerns the question of individual's motivation to fight in wars and the role nationalism plays in this. Some authors see nationalist ideology as particularly potent ideological device for mass mobilisation whereas others are more sceptical.¹⁹

Sceptics have argued that ethnosymbolic approaches exaggerate the long-term nation-forming significance of war commemoration in the absence of evidence of how they are received, and that attempts to impose hegemonic narratives often result in cultural contestation, which can (depending on context) result in civil wars or a pluralisation of national identities.²⁰ However, it could be argued that such contestation leads to a process of nationalisation as outgroups compete to be recognised in national terms.

War and the transition from empires to nation states

A third topic is the role of war in the transition from a world of empires to one of nation states. If in Western Europe the nation states emerged through recurring interstate wars over centuries, the majority of the world's nation states came into being through a different route in the twentieth century, suddenly and in successive waves, via imperial dissolution in World Wars or subsequent geo-political exhaustion.

This has been relatively underexplored. Andreas Wimme, supported by a large statistical study, argues that nationalist ideology is the direct cause of imperial dissolution in 'waves of war'.²¹ He discounts as secondary geo-political factors. Nationalist liberation wars fought in other parts of the empire increased the probability of nation state creation, and the more territories that succeed in seceding to form nation states, the more likely that the remaining territories would go the same route. As new nation states formed with messy boundaries and with their own minorities, armed secessionist movements emerged, while many of these states engaged in irredentist campaigns.

In spite of his insights, Wimmer insufficiently emphasises how nationalist military revolutions in the nineteenth century shifted the balance power between nation states and dynastic empires, how the ideology of nationalism challenged imperial practices of war making, and how the processes of World War (which were total wars) radicalised national minorities. This is a complex topic since in the modern world there have been many kinds of empires, in which there was a hybridisation with national principles. There were the dynastic continental empires, such as the Romanov, Habsburg and Ottoman empires, which produced nationalising projects, expanding nation-state overseas empires where homeland nationalism was in tension with imperialist civilising missions, and the USSR which domesticated principles of self-determination within ideocratic principles.²² The challenges of war and military geo-political

competition produced distinctive problems to each imperial form but certain general patterns emerge.

Cynthia Enloe discusses how nation-state models of universal conscription proved problematic for empires employing 'martial races' strategies of co-opting specific ethnic groups.²³ Aviel Roshwald shows how the leaders of national minorities in Central Europe were able to exploit the passions and chaos of total war to achieve independence.²⁴ This was also the case for Asian nationalist elites in the nation-state overseas empires during the Second World War when the victories Japanese armies shattered European authority and the collaborative networks, on which their power largely rested.²⁵ Karma Nabulsi and Daniel Moran and Arthur Waldron have also analysed the rise and transmission of guerrilla and popular insurrectionary traditions and techniques and their efficacy against imperial powers.²⁶

Tilly claims a formative role for the treaties at the end of major wars at which the victors established rules of the subsequent world order.²⁷ This is pertinent to the end of both World Wars, most strikingly after the First World War when Woodrow Wilson sought to impose the principles of national self-determination to reconstruct Central and Eastern Europe. Arguably, it was the resistance to such treaties by the vanquished that is most striking.

Imperial dissolution had very varied consequences, which, with some exceptions, has had too little treatment.²⁸ What Aviel Roshwald argues with respect to the First World War applies also to its successor: that war and its aftermath catapulted nationalist movements into positions of authority before the necessary cultural and institutional framework was able to develop.²⁹ In general, the rapidity of imperial disintegration, often an indirect effect of war, meant the coming into existence of insecure and unstable political units that have provoked recurring attempts of re-imperialisation. As John Darwin has argued the era of empires has not ended, but rather taken new 'informal' characteristics. Mark Beissinger

even suggests that the interstate system has imperial characteristics: the norms of state sovereignty and restrictions of self-determination to state territorial units constitute a form of coercive rule by established states that deny the rights of stateless nations.³⁰

Nationalism and contemporary war

A fourth issue is whether we have moved into a post-national global era, in which interstate war between advanced states is curbed by the UN Charter and inhibited by spread of weapons of mass destruction, whereas there is a proliferation of 'new' intrastate wars in postcolonial states. Is the nexus between warfare and nation formation diminishing? There are several interrelated topics.

First, in the West, it is argued, since 1945 nationalism has been associated with destructive world war and genocide. This has led to global and regional initiatives, the establishment of the UN and the European Union respectively, to replace the realpolitik of nation states. Bernhard Giesen maintains Europe is pioneering solutions to conflict not in war but in a politics of restitution and reconciliation.³¹

Second, Michael Howard and Anthony King have examined the impact of transnational military revolutions that have produced a shift from mass conscription to professional militaries and a civilianisation of society in the developed West.³² Howard argues that the rise of high-precision technologies and nuclear weaponry has made obsolete conscription armies with the result that nationalism is no longer required as a mobilising ideology. In addition, Luttwak maintains declining fertility in the West has alleged led to a casualty aversion and a consequent suspicion of military adventures.³³

Third, Western powers continue to military intervene in conflict zones. However, these are now justified as 'peace-keeping' interventions under

United Nations rather than national mandates and are characterised as 'risk transfer wars'.³⁴ As interstate war between advanced polities has declined, 'new' intrastate wars, enabled by global processes such as the arms trade, proliferate in post-colonial countries that fragment the possibilities of collective identities, Mary Kaldor argues that nationalism is increasingly irrelevant and looks to a cosmopolitan politics as an alternative.³⁵

Finally, too, many analysts propose that in a post-imperial world and post-Holocaust world there is growing suspicion of the military narratives of Western nation states and an awareness of the victims of war, that erodes the heroic ethos on which collective sacrifice for the nation depends. Anthony King, among others, has suggested that the language of national sacrifice no longer sacralises the military dead in the West who are portrayed instead in terms of their qualities as individuals and their exemplary professionalism.³⁶

While these arguments have some force, a recent collection edited by Sibylle Scheipers indicates they reflect a West European perspective and nationalism and military commitment remain strong in many areas of the world.³⁷ Casualty aversion is related to the legitimacy of specific wars, not of war itself. Even far-distant humanitarian 'wars of choice', though justified by universal mandates, are ultimately sustained by coalitions of nation states and may re-inforce a sense of national allegiance. Outside the West, many of the 'new wars' are far from novel in their features and contribute to nation and state formation.³⁸ Finally, although commemoration of the war dead is contested and is more individualistic in its expression, it relies on repertoire and practices that are embedded in everyday life and the frameworks provided by 'sacred' ceremonial occasions, whose resonance remains as potent as ever.

Nationalism as ‘war prone’

It is a popular assumption that nationalism is bellicose, and one supported by several traditions of scholars of nationalism. In a study of the USA Caroline Marvin and Derek Ingle make the general claim that national solidarity and reproduction is dependent on regular cycles of interstate war.³⁹ War diverts the violent instincts of society (embodied in young males) outwards to external ‘others’, and the martial young die to become martyrs whose cult binds survivors to national values. Commemorative rituals also function to prepare young men for future martial service. Although powerful, this has problems with the existence of many pacific nations.

A second perspective, reflected in Elie Kedourie, views nationalism as a millenarian politics that is radically subversive of all established arrangements domestic and international, not sanctioned by the people, leading inevitably to war.⁴⁰ Its justification of claims (to territory and populations) by reference to historical mythologies makes the resolution of differences intractable. This critique, while having some force, fails to acknowledge the varieties of nationalism, some of which are compatible with conservative and liberal constitutional politics. It rather ignores the fact that the centuries before modern nationalism were of incessant confessional and dynastic conflict.

A third tradition, represented by Andreas Wimmer, considers both nationalism and nation states are ‘war-prone’ arising from the bellicose origins of modern state, identified by Tilly.⁴¹ The nation state is a compact between martial elites and masses who are offered public goods in return for military service and taxes. A difficulty with this approach is that in the era of nationalism interstate wars have declined and military spendings have declined as a proportion of state expenditures. Moreover, nation states have sponsored the growth of international law and the establishment of transnational organisations to limit war-making.

A final perspective, strongly reflected in international relations literature considers the proliferation of intra-state war as a product of the contradictions between ideas of state sovereignty and the ideology of national self-determination.⁴² While secessionist and irredentist claims continue to present a problem to the international system, it could be argued that in many parts of the world violent disorders arise from an absence of national solidarities, and that coalitions of nation states remain as essential mechanisms through which a stable order can be maintained.

Each of these critiques then has force, but they are one-sided. Nationalism can be seen as both a principle of order and disorder, suggesting that contingent factors have to be brought into play to explain outburst of violence.

*This review is part of
The State of Nationalism (SoN), a comprehensive guide
to the study of nationalism.
As such it is also published on the SoN website,
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Endnotes

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