

## Nationalism and Politics in Eastern Europe

In Eastern Europe, nationalism has since 1915 passed through five stages:

### *Stage 1*

At the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the whole of Eastern Europe was divided between three empires. Previous little statelets, survivors of medieval fragmentation, were absorbed into the three large units. Life was greatly simplified for the political map-makers: henceforth they would need only three colours to accomplish their task.

The three empires were largely indifferent to the national principle. Each of them was based on a dynasty and on identification with a religion: Sunni Islam, Counter-Reformation Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity respectively. Faith and dynasty were held to be natural, adequate and appropriate foundations of political order. Each of the three empires was ethnically very diversified, but virtually none held this to constitute an obstacle to political viability. Many of the culturally and linguistically distinct proto-ethnic groups were barely conscious of themselves as ethnic groups. For instance, in Sarajevo, if someone was referred to as a 'Turk', this did not mean that he spoke or even knew a Turkic tongue or that his ancestors had come from central Asia via Anatolia; it simply meant that he was Muslim, and was perfectly compatible with being of Slav speech and indigenous ancestry. By contrast, at present, what is in effect an ethnic group, defined by a shared Slav-Muslim cultural background (but no longer associated with proper adherence to a faith), calls itself *Muslim*, and it secured the recognition of this expression as an acceptable category for official purposes such as the census. Just as a gentleman was not a man who knew Greek and Latin, but one who had at least forgotten these languages, so a 'Muslim' is no longer a man who believes that there is no God but God and that Mohammed is His Prophet, but one who has at least lost that faith. The irony is that in the days when religion really mattered socially, an *ethnic* term was used to define the community of believers; nowadays, when it is ethnicity that matters, a *religious* term is used to define an ethnic community.

Many of the groups possessed a base in the social structure rather than in territory: they were associated with a distinct social and

economic function rather than with some piece of land. Those cultural groups that were linked to the land were nevertheless linked to it in an incredibly complex patchwork, rather than in neat compact blocks. The important thing is that when the masters of Europe assembled in Vienna in 1815 and carved up the political real estate in total disregard of ethnicity, this was deemed perfectly normal. No wave of protest swept Europe. The sacred right of Ruritanians to self-determination, to their own cultural home and political roof, was ignored, without arousing much or any indignation on the part of either Ruritanians or anyone else. Most Ruritanians did not even notice, and were hardly aware of being Ruritanians.

### *Stage 2*

Soon, all this was to change. The nineteenth century rapidly became a century of nationalist irredentism. The nationalist principle, proclaiming that the legitimate foundation for the state was the nation, acquired ever more passionate and committed adherents. In Eastern Europe, the Magyars more or less succeeded and the Poles did not; various Balkan ethnicities benefited from the weaknesses of the Ottoman empire and secured diverse degrees of independence; in central Europe, the Italians and the Germans achieved unification.

Why this change of mood? Why did something which seemed acceptable and even natural in 1815 lose its legitimacy in the course of the century? From inside the nationalist vision the answer is simple: the nations had not been dead, they had merely been dormant. Thanks are due to devoted Awakeners, intellectuals eager to revive ancient political and cultural glories, or alternatively to codify the tongues and cultures of 'un-historic' nations, which had not previously boasted either a state or a court literature. The latter might be devoid of past glories, but the Awakeners were willing to invent them or seek new ones. The Awakeners worked hard, and the Sleeping Beauty nations in the end responded with passion to their kiss. Wide awake at last, they claimed their legitimate rights. In the light of Hegel's observation that nations only enter history when they acquire their own state, they insisted on securing their place on the historic stage. If denied it—and of course the old power-holders did not abdicate simply on request—they often reached for the gun.

Those who are not in sympathy with the new nationalist politics often accept its own image of itself, and merely invert the valuation without changing the picture. The most widely held theory of nationalism is, I suspect, the one that believes it to be not merely the reawakening of cultures, but the re-emergence of atavistic instincts of *Blut und Boden* in the human breast. Ever latent but long restrained by religious faith or other factors, the loosening of bonds allowed the barely restrained monster to re-emerge. The Enlightenment ideals of reason and fraternity, or the merely superficial, instrumental links of a market *Gesellschaft*, were too abstract, too bloodless, too cerebral to compete with libidinous and turbulent Dark Gods. Much Romantic nineteenth-century literature gave great encouragement to such a picture of man and so in a way endorsed its political implications. It receives further

confirmation from Darwinism, which after all teaches that man is a beast. From this it would seem to follow that you cannot expect too high, and above all too rational, a standard of political behaviour from him. Realistic politics must adapt itself to its clientele, and if society is really a herd, we'd better adjust both its authority structure and its symbolism to this fact.

Other critics of nationalism (for instance, Elie Kedourie) adopted a different view: nationalism was instilled by European ideology, perverting hitherto perfectly sound political systems. Marxists adopted a different explanation still: nationalism was a cunning, often conscious distraction of populations from the real underlying conflict between classes, the obfuscation perpetrated in the interest of ruling classes, having much to fear from class-consciousness, and much to gain from the encouragement of a spurious national consciousness.

None of these theories seems to me remotely acceptable. Nineteenth- and twentieth-century man is not more susceptible to the Call of the Blood than his predecessor: being better fed, more comfortable, more sedentary and pacific in his daily life (spent in an office or at the controls of a machine, not in a struggle with nature), he may even be a little less prone to atavism than his less educated, less urbanized, less domesticated grandfather. As for ideology, on its own I very much doubt whether it has such power to transform the political and moral climate. And it is very hard to explain the persistent and repeated victory of national over class consciousness as simply the result of astonishing cunning on the part of rulers. They do not otherwise display such amazing control over the human material they rule.

What then? The appeal of the nationalist principle—One Culture, One State—seems to me an inescapable corollary of the new socio-economic order, carried along by industrialism, and even by the shadow that industrialism casts ahead of itself. Agrarian society has an intricate and fairly stable structure, and culture—styles of speech, dress, consumption, ritual, and so forth—is not at all a suitable political principle within it. Its characteristic political units are either local communities, which seldom exhaust the culture they use (they generally share it with other similar communities), or empires that go far beyond the limits of any one culture. The former have neither the inclination nor the means to expand to the limit of their culture; the latter have no motive to remain within them (they are interested in the surplus and the obedience of their subjects, not in their folklore).

All this changes with modernity and industrialism. A fairly stable but intricate social structure is replaced by a mobile, anonymous mass society. In it, work ceases to be physical and becomes semantic: 'work' becomes the manipulation of people, messages, and not of things.

Work now presupposes the capacity to communicate in a context-free manner with anonymous strangers. Hence, it presupposes formal education, which alone can confer literacy and other required skills. Life and work also becomes one long series of encounters with

pervasive economic and political bureaucracies. Participation and effective citizenship and employability and dignity all depend on possessing mastery of the literate High Culture that is also the chosen idiom of the political unit in which one lives. To achieve such full citizenship, one must either assimilate into the dominant High Culture, or change the political boundaries so as to ensure that one's own culture becomes the defining one in the newly emerging unit.

Nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europeans have adopted each of these strategies, sometimes in succession. Note that industrial society is the first society ever in which a formalized, codified, education-transmitted, context-free culture ceases to be the privilege and accomplishment of a minority of scribes, and becomes the pervasive style of an entire society. Political units cease to be Protectors of a Faith and become Protectors of a Culture. That, and not atavism, or the cunning of either ideologies or rulers, is the secret of the new force of nationalism. High Culture matters, matters desperately, for everyone. Real citizenship depends no longer on access to the rites of the city or its sub-units, but on mastery of an ethnicity-defining High (that is, codified, script-endowed, education-transmitted) Culture, and on acceptability by that culture, in terms of the stereotype it has, and enforces, concerning what a member should be like.

### *Stage 3*

By 1918, nationalism was triumphant. The three religious empires which had carved up Eastern Europe in 1815 were all sprawling in the dust. One of them, the Tsarist, admittedly recovered under new political and ideological management soon after, but let us leave aside, for a moment, that atypical line of development. On the territory of the other two erstwhile empires, nationalism was victorious, but its victory was somewhat Pyrrhic. The new units invoked the nation as their legitimating principle, but they were as haunted by ethnic diversity and hence conflict as their imperial predecessors had been. The complexity of the ethnic map ensured this. In some ways, the predicament of the successor states was worse: they were smaller and hence weaker, and their minorities included many members of the previously dominant cultural groups, the people who spoke the language, and more or less shared the culture, of the erstwhile imperial centre. These did not relish their new demotion, and could count on the support of their linguistic or cultural brethren across the border.

The combination of weakness, fragmentation and ethnic tension proved their undoing. They fell like ninepins to Hitler. Some resisted, some resisted perfunctorily, and some did not resist at all. It made relatively little difference to the speed of their subjugation.

### *Stage 4*

Throughout the 1940s, the ethnic complexity of Eastern Europe was in many places considerably simplified, first by Hitler and then by Stalin. The method of peaceful assimilation had done something in the past to further ethnic homogenization, but it was now supplemented by more brutal methods, notably genocide and forcible

transplantation of populations. There had been some earlier experiments in this direction, notably in the genocide of Armenians and the Greek–Turkish exchange of population after the war at the beginning of the twenties, but it was the forties which were *par excellence* the period of ethnic mass murder and exile. In consequence, certain previously plural societies became incomparably more homogeneous: Poland, the Czech lands, Byelorussia. Others did not ‘benefit’ from the crimes of Hitler and Stalin so much, and ethnic tensions continued to fester.

#### *Stage 5*

Stage Five is not, as far as Eastern Europe is concerned, a historical fact. It is more in the nature of a hope, a wish-fulfilment, though some grounds for believing at least in its possibility do exist, both on the ground and in theoretical considerations. Stage Five, if it comes, or if in some places it is already beginning to appear, has a number of benign characteristics. It is marked by the greater and better diffused affluence of later industrialism. This means that hostility between culturally distinct groups is not exacerbated so much by jealousy and by the humiliation of a poverty visibly and consciously associated with ethnic status and treated as ‘backwardness’. More advanced industrialism also more effectively modifies the occupational structure and standardizes cultures, so that their mutual differences become, at least in some measure, merely phonetic rather than semantic: they do similar things and have similar concepts, even if they use different words. The thesis of the standardization of industrial cultures is far from fully established, and is in many ways questionable (consider the industrial countries of the Far East); but for all that, when it comes to societies that in some measure share similar backgrounds and have long been neighbours, there is something in it. Economic and cultural convergence jointly diminish ethnic hostilities: late industrial man, like his immediate predecessor, early industrial man, still finds his identity in a literate culture rather than anything else, but his literate culture no longer differs quite so much from that of his ethnic neighbour. Above all, whatever cultural differences there still are, they no longer receive quite so much reinforcement from the fact that men on either side of the boundary may be at quite different points in the process of initiation into industrial civilization. (That feature still occurs in the relationship between an advanced host culture and *Gastarbeiter*, and of course aggravates or causes the tension between hosts and migrants.)

This relatively benign condition is at least approximated in parts of Western Europe, allowing for exceptions such as Ulster or Basque-land. It is not easy at present to imagine a war between Western European countries over an issue of territory. A condition is conceivable, and seems to be approaching, which could be described as federalization and cantonalization; as long as each major culture is endowed with its home base, guaranteeing its perpetuation, it no longer insists either on full independence or on the convergence of ethnic and political boundaries. This, at any rate, is the desirable end point of the development which, under industrialism, has transformed the relationship between culture and polity. After the storm, a relative calm.

## A New Secular Ideocracy

So much for a relatively abstract model of the evolution of ethnic-political interrelations between 1815 and the present. At this point, a very major factual point must be introduced, one hitherto largely ignored in the argument, mainly because it in no ways flows from the premisses on which the model was built. In 1815, *three* empires divided Eastern Europe between themselves. Two of them (or rather, the territories they occupied and the populations they governed) followed the trajectory specified in my argument. But the third one did not.

Tsarist Russia did indeed collapse and disintegrate. In the modern world its ideological cement proved no sturdier than that of its Ottoman and Habsburg rivals. On Russian churches the orthodox cross is superimposed on a crescent at the base of the cross, a symbolism sometimes explained as marking the triumph of orthodox Christianity over Islam. But when many of the churches tumbled under the Bolsheviks, the cross was brought down *with* the crescent.

Tsarist Russia was replaced by a new secular ideocracy, with a vibrant faith ruthlessly imposed, and though 'all the Russias' had followed through Stages One and Two, Stage Three was aborted: the Caucasus was reconquered by the Red Army in the early twenties, central Asia pacified and the Basmachis guerrillas destroyed by the thirties, the Baltic retaken in 1940 and 1944–45, and much of Eastern Europe, well beyond the line ever controlled by the tsars, brought under effective indirect rule.

The new secular ideocracy was, strong enough to suppress the irredentist nationalism, as long as it retained faith in itself and the determination to use all means required to retain control. After 1985, perestroika was born out of a loss of faith in the economic methods of Communism, and the renunciation of the use of ruthless force was in part an ingredient of the recipe for the hoped-for economic revival, and in part a price for the retention of Western good will, which turned out to be essential for the new experiment. So came the end of determined repression—coercion is still used on occasion, but only reluctantly and under provocation and with political restraint. Under these new rules of the game, what happens to the ethnic situation?

One can formulate the question, but one cannot yet answer it. The evidence so far shows lurches towards each of those stages which this part of Eastern Europe, under Communism, had missed out: the stage of ethnic irredentism, that of murderous violence, and that of some striving for that final and more peaceful solution, the federal-cantonal Common Home, which avoids the murderousness and brutality of the penultimate stage.

History does not altogether repeat itself. Marx had said that it repeats itself in so far as what was a tragedy the first time returns as farce the second time round. One ought not trust this aphorism too much. There is no guarantee at all that what was tragedy the first time will not also be a real tragedy the second time.

But the circumstances are not altogether identical. First of all there is the desire by people of good will and sense to avoid the repetition of genocide and forcible transplantation. Any *à l'outrance* application of the national principle, requiring a convergence of ethnic and political boundaries, would inevitably involve such barbarism: the ethnic patterns of many parts of the Soviet Union are so complex as to ensure that there is no sweetly reasonable way of implementing that principle. Its application must be modified and accompanied by many compromises.

The political reaffirmation of ethnic identity is also being played out in new, indeed completely original, and historically unprecedented circumstances. Civil society had been crushed and atomized by Bolshevik centralism, by the fusion of all social hierarchy and organization—political, economic, ideological—in a single *nomenklatura*, a unique pyramid. It is true that, in the painful revival of civil society, it quickly became obvious that ethnic associations can be revived far more quickly and effectively than any others. The new political parties tend to be relatively small clubs of intellectuals, whereas it is the 'national fronts' which rapidly acquire real and persisting grass roots.

This might lead one to expect that this time round, nationalism will be even stronger than it was the last time. Previously, nationalist movements had non-nationalist rivals, often quite formidable ones. Nationalism was not the camouflage of devious class interests, as Marxists claimed, but all the same it did not completely sweep everything before itself. Rival principles of association were also operative. But at the same time, there can be no doubt but that there exists a genuine craving for civil society, for pluralism, for the absence of political and ideological and economic monopoly, and above all for the absence of that catastrophic fusion of the three forms of centralism.

This is the new background against which ethnic and other political revindications play themselves out. We can specify the factors which enter into the game; we cannot predict its outcome.

Moscow, September 1990

### Postscript

The above text was typed out rapidly in the course of an afternoon on a borrowed and dreadful Soviet typewriter, in the heavily guarded (scientific departments?) Academy of Science high-rise building on Leninsky Prospekt in Moscow, in reply to a pressing local request for a comment on the Soviet ethnic situation. There follow some afterthoughts, a year later, in Cambridge.

Raymond Aron used to say that there were only two real institutions in France—the state and the Communist Party. In the USSR, these two being identical, there was only *one* institution. So, in the absence of alternatives, the Gorbachevite strategy of trying to use the only

available institution did not seem to me wholly absurd. One could argue against it, saying that you cannot use an institution to destroy itself. One can argue in favour of it, and say that if only one tool is available, you have to use it.

It was my sensitivity to this argument (without full conviction, and without liking the situation that provided it with its premiss) which separated me and many other Western well-wishers of perestroika, from the Muscovite intellectuals who had come to loathe Gorbachev. (The difference was not based on any assessment of his personality or guesses about his political *pensée intime*, topics on which I do not presume to possess any insights. It was based simply on the outward, visible traits of a strategy.) But the sensitivity to this viewpoint was reinforced by an awareness of the fact that the only countervailing force, capable of matching the (alas) single available institution, was made up of *ethnic* movements, which could be and were mobilized rapidly and effectively. Yeltsin's willingness to use this counterforce frightened me. My fear was of course strengthened by the recollection of the sequel to the analogous break-up of the Habsburg empire, which led to a political system so feeble that it fell to Hitler and Stalin with barely a sign of resistance. Yeltsin was evidently doing what Lenin had done, abandoning all territories in the hope of securing allies or neutrals, whilst fortifying his position at the centre. Lenin had a disciplined party and ideological commitment, whilst Yeltsin enjoys neither of these benefits, which makes him correspondingly more dependent on the unleashed ethnic forces. Lenin could eventually turn to the much-invoked NEP: but people who invoke this now do not seem to realize that the real present equivalent of NEP would be some return to the old command-admin economic methods, on the principle (the genuine analogy to NEP) that a method you no longer believe in, but which is known to work more or less, and which people know how to work, is better than one you do believe in, but have not the slightest idea how to implement. The *perestroichiki* have about as good an idea of how to operate a market as the Bolsheviks had of how to build socialism. But the dismantling of the old structures also deprived Yeltsin of the option of a nationwide temporary use of the old institutions.

For all these reasons, I was doubtful concerning the Yeltsinite strategy, without at any time wishing to be dogmatic about it. However, events seem to have confirmed the correctness of Yeltsin's political intuitions. Gorbachev's appeasement policy does not seem to have bought off the Bunker. (It may, however, have contributed to its lukewarmness and hesitation and abstention from the use of ruthless methods.) When the backlash came in the form of the abortive coup, it was the fact that Yeltsin had built up a rival power-base, unfastidiously using whatever material lay to hand, that was decisive in thwarting the coup. This has to be acknowledged.

Cambridge, September 1991