Ethnic Nationalism

By Trevor Getz

Nationalism emerged as the aspiration of a people for a state. In the French Revolution, nationalists felt that the community as a whole should be represented in government. In many multi-ethnic empires, however, nationalism soon took a different form. Members of an ethnic group embraced nationalism as a movement for independence from the larger empire.

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Ethnic nationalism

Nation-states emerged in the 1800s and 1900s. The rise of nation-states was one of the most important changes of the modern age. Nation-states are countries whose citizens believe they are a unified people of one culture. Before, there were kingdoms and empires. For now, the nation-state is the most common political structure.

Nationalism is the idea that people should rule themselves as one nation. Nationalism emerged in the 1700s. Creoles lived in the Spanish colonies in the Americas. Nationalism helped them fight against the Spanish empire. In France, nationalism united the lower and middle classes. Together, they removed the French king. In some parts of Europe, nationalism helped smaller groups in multi-ethnic empires. It allowed them to fight for independence as an "ethnicity." This is called "ethnic nationalism."

"Ethnicity" is not easy to define. People believe they belong to an ethnicity because of their ancestry. Ancestry is someone's family history. But ethnicities can include people of different backgrounds. People from different ethnicities can also share ancestry. Belonging to an ethnic group is partly ancestry. Shared language, history, and culture can also be important. Ethnicity is somewhat real and somewhat "imagined."

Ethnic nationalism in the Ottoman Empire

Many ethnic groups lived in the Ottoman Empire in the 1900s. Most of the population spoke Turkish. There were also Greeks, Serbs, and Armenians. People had different religions. There were Muslims, Christians, and Jews.

Small groups wanted changes in the 1700s. Ideas about nationalism spread throughout the empire. People began to think of themselves as distinct nations.

Greece had been ruled by the Ottomans since 1453. In the 1820s, Greece had economic challenges. Many Greek men went to other parts of Europe to work. While there, they learned about nationalism. After returning, they called for an independent Greece.

Celebration of the "New Greece" after independence. By Macedonian Heritage, public domain.

Greek ethnic nationalism had a dark side. Nationalists wanted one type of supposedly "pure" Greek identity. They destroyed symbols of the Ottoman empire. Non-Greek groups were also attacked. This included Muslim mosques and Jewish synagogues.

Greece became independent by 1830. Ethnic nationalism was a powerful force.

Ethnic nationalism in the Habsburg Empire

The Habsburgs were a German family. The Habsburg dynasty ruled most of central Europe in the 1800s. This multi-ethnic empire included Germans in Austria and nearby territories. It also included Italians, Ukrainians, Poles, Romanians, Croats, Serbs, Czechs, Hungarians, and others.

In 1848, uprisings broke out all over Europe. Ethnic nationalism grew among different groups. Ethnic nationalism was used to fight empires. Hungarians wanted to be independent. The Czech also wanted their own nation. In the end, both failed.

Ethnic map of the Habsburg Empire. *ByAndrei nacu, public domain.*

These revolts fueled Italian and German nationalism. Germany and Italy were not large states yet. Both countries were made up of many small territories. The Habsburgs controlled some territories. In 1848, Italians and Germans wanted their independence. Yet they had a bigger challenge. How would they each unify many small territories?

German and Italian nationalists needed to create unified ethnicities. Both states were multi-ethnic. Italians spoke almost 12 languages. Northern Italians did not always understand Italians from the south. Germans also had many different cultures.

Nationalists used symbols to create unity. Kings became important symbols. German and Italian nationalists needed kings. Germans chose Prince Wilhelm I of Prussia. The Italians chose King Victor Emmanuel II of Sardinia-Piedmont. Kings could unite people under one "nation." Germany and Italy became states in 1871.

Ethnic nationalism brought together people from different states. But there was a price. People outside of these ethnicities were excluded. In Germany, the Roma and Jewish people were not seen as German. This attitude would have a big effect on the future.

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