

The Nation as a Fusion of Individual Will and
Collective Consciousness

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To define a nation is not an easy task. The inevitable discussion, however, poses interesting and challenging questions. Are there separate models of nation-formation? Does a minimum set of prerequisites exist, valid for all particular cases, or on the contrary, divergent causal paths at different places can lead to one and the same effect – a nation?

The definition I propose is: the nation is a group of people bound together by a common fatherland or the aspiration to have or regain one, the recognition of a common history, the existence of a common folk culture, the self-awareness that these characteristics make it different from any other nation, and the willful choice of every individual who constitutes it to continue identifying himself as a member of that nation.

When one is deliberating on the building elements requisite for the existence of a nation, it is tempting and somewhat easy to presume the lack of any antecedent characteristics prior to the nation. To be certain, the nation is an arbitrary construction and, indeed, it depends much on the will of its individual constituents, as well as on their self-awareness of being part of that nation, but in a sense it is true that “the nation has always been there.” A set of conditions, especially cultural and historical, whose ultimate revelation is the explosion of self-awareness of one’s national identity are equally important.

The first “antecedent” element in the proposed definition is the fatherland. Because of the mere fact that the world is a physical place, the nation needs a physical expression in order to verify its existence. Whether it possesses it or not at its inception as a nation is not so relevant and important. If it has achieved its presumed, God-predestined fatherland or the fatherland of its glorious past, the sense of pride and patriotism of the nation is bolstered. If it is still aspiring to achieve it, the mere fact of the struggle upholds its sense of mission and a common destiny. In both cases, the result is a strengthened national unity.

In connection with the problem of the territorial extension of the nation, the article “The Nation as Power-Container” presents an interesting question. Does the state require the existence of a nation, or is it vice versa? Both Wandycz and Hupchick give accurate account of the developments of two types of nationalism – the former labels them Western and Eastern, whereas the latter terms them Liberal and Romantic respectively. Western Liberal nationalism, according to both authors, led to nation-formation within a strong existing state (France, Great Britain) through the steady political, social, and economic development of the middle class, pushing aside the old aristocracies by drawing upon the values of the Enlightenment. Eastern Romantic nationalism, on the other hand, originated in divided or multi-ethnic states (Germany, Austro-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire) along cultural and historical lines when each group’s interpretation of the past and the surrounding world made it realize its uniqueness and define its goal as unification in a common state or freedom from an oppressor in a separate state. The seeming incompatibility of these two paths does not succeed to obscure the indispensability of the first constructing element of the nation – the existing or aspired fatherland.

The next elements, mentioned in the definition, common history and common folk culture, go together hand in hand. A nation’s sense of a shared history fortifies its unity and belief in a common destiny. Inevitably, this common history is just another version of what has actually happened, “reinforced by myth and invention”¹. The emphasis is not on the credibility of the rendition, but on the nation’s belief in its credibility. These distortions, which can sometimes reach formidable size, are necessary for the nation to justify its existence. It is a sad fact of reality that different interpretations often clash dangerously when

¹ Dennis Hupchick, “The Rise of Romantic Nationalism” in *The Balkans: From Constantinople to Communism*, 190 (Palgrave, 2002).

employed by eager nationalists. They evoke a nation's glorious past territorial advances and possessions of lands in order to enlarge the present state beyond present historical truth. This leads to confusion and conflict. An appropriate example is the dispute between Bulgarians and Macedonians about the 11th-century ruler Samuil – Bulgarians revere him as one of their czars who fought bravely against Byzantium, but eventually lost and Bulgaria was subdued under Byzantine rule for a century and a half; Macedonians, on the other hand, believe that when Samuil moved the capital of Bulgaria to Ohrid, that symbolized the establishment of the Macedonian state, and consequently consider him their first czar.

The element of common folk culture is necessary because it creates a sense of uniqueness in the nation. In that category can be included traditional rituals and rites, myths and fairy tales, songs – everything that can be generally termed lifestyle. High culture can never be as strong a source of national identity as folk culture is, because high culture transcends state boundaries and obliterates peculiarities supplanting them for universal objects of admiration.

Common history and folk culture are, incidentally, defining features of the ethnic group as well. The ethnic group, however, is a more basic unity of people. As Hupchick mentions, it carries “within itself a collective consciousness”², which is one step below the self-awareness of the nation. The collective consciousness of the ethnic group has a more intuitive and instinctive quality, whereas the self-awareness of the nation is characterized by a certain rationality that emerges from the realization of the individual as a part of a unique community, distinct on the merit of its history and culture from any other community. That is the point at which the ethnic group transforms into a nation.

² Hupchick, 194.

Self-awareness, however, refers only to the past and present of the nation. It needs another element which refers to the future and holds it together – the willful choice of all its members, each one in his individuality, to constantly think of themselves as adding up to a common nation. When confronted with individual will and the validity of its choices, one is tempted to ask whether it is possible at all. A conclusion, which states that anything in history is a matter of individual will, or that any concept doesn't exist until people accept it exists, is hardly ingenious. Most people's willful choice is imperceptibly shaped by, in the words of Renan, the "soul" and "spiritual principle" of the nation itself, that is, their belief that their nation transcends their immediate existence, has given them their notion of past history, and will be there long after they disappear. Indeed, national identity is a matter of personal choice and is not irreversible, as America's "melting pot" clearly indicates, but a person who chooses to sever himself from one nation often does so because he already belongs to another. His choice has two qualities: the quality of independence and the quality of being predetermined by the intangible, but powerful influence of the nation's soul.

The definition of the nation, whose elements were discussed in the previous pages, illustrates only one of the many concepts of and possible paths to the nation. I realize that it is restricted mostly to Central and Eastern European cases, but in the course of my exploration of the problem I discovered that a universally applicable definition neither exists, nor is necessary.

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