

THE IN A HURRY SERIES

Nationalism

in a Hurry

The most powerful idea of the modern age

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Contents

The Whole Thing in One Page 4

Why You Should Care 6

The Core Ideas 8

How It Actually Works 21

What People Get Wrong 32

Use It 37

Terms 42

Go Deeper 47

Notes and Sources 48

Bibliography 55

The Whole Thing in One Page

The noisy version of nationalism is easy to recognise: flags, enemies and demands that everyone fall into line. Its quieter claim is harder to escape. People who count one another as compatriots should govern their common life. Nationalism connects belonging to authority, giving a nation claims about who should rule, what territory matters and which obligations its members share. That idea can challenge a king or give him a new justification for staying.

Neither affection for home nor collective identity began with the modern age. Languages, religious communities and memories of earlier kingdoms supplied national movements with inherited materials. What expanded was the demand to organise legitimate rule around the nation. The Atlantic revolutions made that claim against monarchy, empire and, in Haiti, a colonial order founded on slavery. Later movements pursued unification, independence or recognition within an existing state. No single sequence describes them all.

A national community must work across distance. Most members will never meet. Print gathers readers around a public world; schools teach common language and history; administration connects people through categories and services. Ceremonies give membership a repeated public form. These instruments do not manufacture identical loyalties. Families may value bilingual education more than an activist's demand to choose one national side. People can use institutions, resist their messages and still recognise a shared country.

Strangers can see themselves as participants in a common government rather than subjects who happen to obey the same ruler. A national claim can strengthen demands for equal treatment or resistance to foreign domination. But the claim does not guarantee its own fulfilment. Women who participated in revolutions could remain excluded from political rights. A state promising national equality could govern an empire abroad. An appeal to shared sacrifice could conceal unequal burdens at home.

Nationalism therefore has no single political colour. Liberal republicans, conservative monarchies, socialists and religious movements have used it. Fascism made authoritarian national rebirth a justification for destroying plural politics; Nazism placed racial domination at the centre of its programme. These histories cannot be softened, but they cannot define every demand for national freedom either. The institutions and limits a movement accepts matter more than the flag alone.

Empire helped make the national question global without determining its answers. Indonesian organisers proposed a shared language before independence. African and Caribbean leaders explored federation and changes to international economic power, not merely separate flags. National liberation could challenge the world order as well as seek admission to it. The eventual map conceals many of those alternatives.

Self-rule also creates a recurring difficulty. Peoples overlap, states contain several identities, and a frontier drawn for one nation's freedom can subordinate another population. Pakistan's creation did not settle the claims that later produced Bangladesh. Independence changes the government; it does not finish the argument about membership.

Nationalism's reach lies in making that argument central to modern power. The community invoked to authorise a state must still be governed when its members disagree. The promise becomes more credible when opposition and difference remain compatible with belonging. It fails when a ruler turns the people's right to govern into the ruler's right to decide who the people are.

That is the book.

Why You Should Care

On 28 October 1928, a youth congress in Batavia, now Jakarta, endorsed an Indonesian nation and a language of unity: Indonesian. There was no independent Indonesian state to issue the instruction. The islands remained under Dutch colonial rule. Nor were the delegates reporting that everyone already spoke the same language at home. They were making a commitment about the political community they wanted to build.

The distinction in the pledge matters. It supported a common language, not the abolition of every other language. Indonesian developed from Malay, already used for communication across communities. The national movement gave that shared medium a new political purpose. People did not have to discover an identical ancestry before they could organise together. They could use a language to help make a common future possible, while bringing different histories into it.

A congress could not make that future happen by declaration. Its participants were activists, not a census of opinion across the archipelago. Independence required a wider movement and a struggle over power. A common language needed speakers, teachers and institutions. But the pledge exposes something that a map of finished countries conceals: national unity can be a proposal before it becomes an experience. A nation does not always arrive first and ask for a government afterwards.

That is one reason to understand nationalism. It explains how people separated by distance and custom come to regard one another as partners in a political undertaking. The achievement is easy to overlook because most of us encounter it after the work has been done. We inherit national names, school histories and public institutions. What was once a disputed project becomes the ordinary setting of a life.

Consider an illustrative classroom in which some children speak the official language at home and others must learn it at school. A common teaching language can let them study together and later work across the country. It can also give some an unearned advantage, make parents dependent on

interpreters, or suggest that a family language belongs outside public life. The same policy can create access and impose costs. Asking whether it promotes unity does not tell us enough. We also need to know whose route into that unity is easier.

Nationalism makes those practical choices questions of belonging. A dispute about a school may become a dispute about whether a community has a future. A change in citizenship law may alter the standing of people whose families have lived in the same place for generations. Conversely, a national promise can give people a language in which to demand equal treatment: if this country is ours, its institutions must serve us too.

The subject is therefore larger than aggressive speeches. It includes the patient work of common education and the organisation of resistance to foreign rule. It includes the troubling moment when a government treats criticism as betrayal, claiming to embody a nation that its opponents are no longer permitted to represent. Affection for home does not settle which of these things is happening.

One hour cannot decide every territorial dispute or provide a formula for an ideal nation. It can make the recurring choices visible. You will be able to distinguish a community from the state that governs it, a demand for recognition from a demand for exclusive power, and solidarity from a rule that some neighbours can never fully belong.

The Indonesian delegates did not inherit a ready-made answer to all those questions. Neither did the revolutionaries, unifiers and anti-colonial organisers who appear in this book. They made choices under constraints, and later generations lived with the results. Understanding nationalism begins when countries stop looking like the natural containers of history and start looking like human achievements whose terms remain open to argument.

The Core Ideas

The People Become Sovereign

In August 1789, a declaration adopted in Paris located sovereignty in the nation. No body or individual could exercise authority that did not come from it. The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen was not saying that a population happened to share a ruler. It was saying that his authority had to come from the nation, rather than from his family. A king might remain in office, but inheritance alone no longer supplied the declared foundation of his power.

Three things need separating here. The nation is the community understood as a people with a shared political life. The state is the machinery of public authority; the government is the group currently directing it. A nation may lack a state, and changing a government need not change the nation. Earlier subjects could love a homeland. Modern nationalism made belonging a claim to rule, whether by supporting an existing state or challenging one that treated the nation as subordinate.

The word people does important work here. A crowd is many individuals; a population is an administrative total. A people is represented as capable of a common political will. Nationalists generally imagine this community persisting through governments and generations. Its members can dismiss a ruler as a usurper while claiming fidelity to the country. But a shared will cannot be inspected like a tax return. Someone has to interpret it, and rival interpreters can each claim to speak for the same enduring nation.

Nationalism and democracy often reinforce each other because both ask rule to proceed in the people's name. They are not identical. Democracy asks how members participate and how power is controlled. Nationalism asks who the members are. A state can hold competitive elections while defining the nation narrowly. A national movement can demand independence without promising liberal institutions after victory. The phrase national self-government contains two questions, and success on one does not answer the other.

Constituent power names the people's claimed authority to establish the rules under which governments act. Conquest and bargains among elites also shaped actual constitutions. An assembly could invoke the people while excluding much of the population. National language offered a challenge to that exclusion, not a certificate of equality.

National language changes the justification of obligation. An army may defend the people's own political existence; taxpayers may finance a common undertaking. These appeals can encourage participation or conceal unequal burdens. Mobilisation still depends on administration and compulsion as well as belief. The conscript may remain unwilling.

Revolutionary France exposed the gap immediately. Women participated in the revolution but were denied equal formal political rights. In 1791, Olympe de Gouges answered the declaration with a Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen. Her version located sovereignty in a nation comprising women and men. She challenged the exclusion from inside the revolutionary principle: how could the nation authorise government if half of it could not participate on equal terms? The dispute concerned who counted as an author of the political order.

Patriotism usually means attachment to a country, its institutions or its way of life. Nationalism gives the nation a claim to political authority. The feelings often overlap, but a person can love a country while opposing demands to enlarge its territory or silence its critics. Once national self-rule becomes a standard of legitimacy, inherited and foreign rulers face a challenge: possession of a territory is not, by itself, authorisation to govern its people.

Nations Are Made from Inherited Materials

A national language can look ancient while its official spelling, school grammar and range of public uses are comparatively recent. The sounds and stories are inherited; the demand that they express a sovereign people may be new. This combination makes nationalism neither an awakening of something unchanged nor an invention without raw material.

People formed durable named communities long before modern

nationalism. Jewish peoplehood, Armenian religious institutions and the Greek language survived major changes of government and territory. Continuity did not mean an unaltered population or one programme of sovereignty. Communities could preserve a shared past without demanding the same political arrangements in every century. Conversely, the absence of a modern state does not establish the absence of a collective identity. The historical question is what people recognised, how widely they recognised it, and what authority they believed it gave them.

Modern nationalism selects from that inheritance and rearranges it around political sovereignty. A dialect becomes the national language while neighbouring speech is demoted to dialect, corruption or foreign intrusion. A regional hero becomes a national founder. Religious festivals become cultural heritage. Defeats are remembered as sacrifices made by the nation before it possessed a state. Old materials survive, but their political function changes.

Language shows how inherited material and institutional choice interact. Before standardisation, speech often changed gradually across territory, with no obvious line where one language ended and another began. Grammarians, teachers, publishers and officials selected forms that could travel. Their choice might follow a prestigious court, a literary revival or a political movement. Once taught and examined, the standard looked less like a choice and more like the nation's natural voice.

Invention can therefore mean institutional design rather than fabrication: choosing symbols, fixing a calendar, standardising spelling and teaching a sequence of history. Such choices become effective when they connect to recognisable practices and interests. A propagandist does not have unlimited power to turn any population into any nation.

Ernest Renan made remembrance political in his 1882 lecture on the nation. He stressed both a shared inheritance and a continuing willingness to live together, while also arguing that collective forgetting helped make national unity possible. That last observation is uncomfortable. A family whose suffering has disappeared from the national story may experience an official

celebration as exclusion. Memory can join people by acknowledging different experiences, or join a majority by editing other people out. Neither a long history nor a stirring commemoration tells us which has happened.

Ernest Gellner explained the modern transformation through a change in what people needed to know. Imagine leaving a village trade for an employer who has never met your family. Local reputation no longer travels far enough. Literacy, recognised qualifications and a language strangers can use become routes to work. Gellner argued that industrial society required this transferable education, making control of schools and public culture politically decisive. A certificate could become a national opportunity or barrier. This explains a pressure towards standardisation, not a timetable that every agrarian independence movement must follow.

The dispute about older continuities concerns how far identities already reached beyond elites, and how much modern movements changed them. A people need not start from nothing to acquire a new political ambition. Nor must it acquire one language. Switzerland sustains a common political identity across linguistic divisions. The decisive question is how institutions join people, not whether they have become culturally identical.

Strangers Learn to Belong Together

You can know the people in a village. You cannot know a nation that way. Most compatriots remain strangers, yet their decisions may send your taxes elsewhere or your children to war. National membership needs ways to make absent people feel present.

Print was one. Books and newspapers made written vernaculars more uniform and gathered readers around events beyond their immediate surroundings. Benedict Anderson called the nation an imagined community because its members would never know most of their compatriots. A newspaper reader could nevertheless picture others attending to the same public world. The imagination was social, not a diagnosis of false belief. Yet a common language did not dictate one nation: readers of Spanish in the Americas eventually belonged to several republics, not a single state of all

Spanish speakers.

Schools reproduce the relationship. They teach a standard language, frame history within a national map and introduce children to the same public institutions. A pupil learns which past is ours and which authorities deserve recognition. The lesson may be self-critical or heroic, but the choice is part of how a national public renews itself.

Administration supplies categories. Censuses ask people to fit official identities. Maps draw a continuous national surface across places experienced locally. Identity papers connect the person to the state. Railways, post, broadcasting and later digital media let a capital speak across territory, though they also let regional and diasporic movements organise against it. Technology expands the audience. It does not determine which national claim wins.

Military service can compress the process. Recruits are moved away from home, drilled in a common command language, issued the same uniform and told that the unit embodies the country. War then gives national membership stakes measured in bereavement, rationing and debt. Yet armies can divide as well as integrate. Unequal promotion, segregated units or a reputation as the instrument of one group can teach exclusion more efficiently than unity.

A public holiday synchronises remembrance across distant households. A museum places local objects within a national past. A sporting team lets spectators identify with people they have never met. Such practices offer repeated occasions to participate in the same public. Enthusiasm, duty and indifference may all be present; participation need not mean identical feeling.

Michael Billig called the routine reproduction of national assumptions banal nationalism. The flag behind a minister, the news divided into home and abroad, or a speaker's unexamined use of we can place an audience inside one national public. The frame remains present even when nobody is making an impassioned nationalist speech.

Families could frustrate the programme. Tara Zahra describes rural and working-class parents in the Czech-German borderlands who sent children to families speaking the other language so that they would become bilingual. Nationalist activists wanted a firmer separation, treating children as the future property of one national community. For these parents, knowing the other language could be an advantage, not a betrayal. The disagreement was over what a child's future required. An activist saw a national boundary to defend; a family might see a useful relationship on the other side.

Nation-building involves response as well as instruction. Eugen Weber traced how schools, roads, military service and markets integrated rural France, especially during the later nineteenth century. People could value a school for employment, reject its language policy, or turn its lessons against the government. Institutions offer reasons to participate as well as instructions to obey. Whether participation becomes loyalty depends on what happens between the official programme and the lives it enters.

Every Nation Draws a Boundary

A nation is a claim of solidarity, and solidarity needs an answer to who receives it. That answer can be generous, revisable and layered. It is still a boundary.

Some national movements define membership through citizenship and commitment to public institutions. Others emphasise ancestry, language, religion or descent. In practice, the civic and ethnic labels blur. Citizenship laws inherit histories. A supposedly civic state may expect one culture to set the public norm. An ancestry-based nation may naturalise outsiders, accept mixed descent and redefine its tradition. The useful question is not which box a country occupies. It is which tests of membership operate, who can pass them, and who decides.

Territory makes the boundary harder. Nationalism commonly claims that a people should govern itself in a homeland. Populations, however, are rarely arranged in clean blocks. Cities attract migrants. Border regions contain overlapping languages and loyalties. Conquest, trade, marriage,

displacement and empire scatter communities. A map that colours one nation across a territory can hide the neighbours living inside the colour.

The minority is partly created by this political geometry. A religious or linguistic community can live among others for centuries without being understood as a national minority. It becomes one when the state is identified with another nation's culture and counts difference as a problem of loyalty, representation or security. A group that was one part of an empire can become a minority overnight when borders change around it.

Citizenship law gives the membership test administrative force. Some systems emphasise birth on the territory, others descent from a citizen, and most combine rules, exceptions, residence and naturalisation. Colonies exposed the contradiction sharply: people could be subjects of the same state without entering the national citizen body on equal terms. Formal equality after empire did not erase the social ranking built during unequal membership.

Responses range from equal citizenship and shared government to forced assimilation or expulsion. These are not moral equivalents. They confront the same difficulty: how a state claiming to express one people governs inhabitants who identify differently. The most dangerous answer treats demographic complexity as an error to be corrected.

The boundary also enters the household. National movements have often made women symbols of collective honour and assigned them responsibility for raising future citizens. That can give education a public urgency while subjecting marriage and reproduction to political control. Women have also organised movements, challenged citizenship exclusions and contested what national duty required. De Gouges' declaration makes that agency visible. Membership is not decided exclusively by men writing laws; it is disputed by people whose work or sacrifice the nation requires without necessarily giving them equal authority.

Diasporas complicate the map further. A person may belong emotionally and legally to different countries, support a homeland movement from

abroad, or be claimed by an ancestral state whose citizenship they do not hold. Governments may treat expatriates as members, investors and voters while questioning the loyalty of resident minorities with similar cross-border ties. Physical residence, ancestry and political obligation no longer line up.

A membership boundary need not produce hatred. Danger grows when it is treated as natural and unchangeable, or when ordinary diversity becomes evidence of contamination. A political community needs rules about membership. Those rules remain human decisions, not instructions written into the soil.

Nationalism Borrows Every Political Colour

Germany's 1871 constitution made the king of Prussia the German Emperor. National unification had given a monarch a larger job. That outcome looks strange only if nationalism is assumed to come with a republican constitution attached. The nation can be the justification for authority without deciding how that authority should be organised. Liberals and conservatives could agree that a people belonged together while fighting over who should govern it.

Nineteenth-century liberal nationalists attacked dynastic empires and defended constitutional rule. Giuseppe Mazzini imagined nations as free peoples whose independence would prepare cooperation among them. But national freedom did not settle the freedom of individuals inside the nation, a tension that troubled other liberals. Conservatives could turn the same collective attachment towards monarchy, school and army. Italian unification combined republican agitation with royal diplomacy and war; German unification consolidated Prussian leadership. Nationalism was useful to opposing camps because it supplied a reason for political unity without supplying an agreed set of rules for life within it.

Socialists faced a different tension. Workers were asked to recognise class interests across borders, but they organised and voted inside particular states. Marxist movements could dismiss nationalism as a ruling-class diversion or support oppressed nations against empire. Vladimir Lenin

defended a right to secede while hoping that recognising it would make voluntary socialist union possible. The Soviet Union gave national groups territorial and cultural institutions while concentrating political power at the centre. It could organise people as nations and deny them control over the union.

Religion could pull in both directions. Catholicism helped sustain Polish belonging under partition, yet the church also joined believers beyond Poland. A faith could preserve a community whose state had disappeared without belonging exclusively to it. Religious nationalisms draw on sacred narratives for modern political claims. But sharing a religion does not settle which nation someone belongs to, or whether national allegiance should come first.

Fascism took the national claim in an authoritarian direction. It rejected plural politics, imagined decline and rebirth, glorified unity and violence, and placed the individual beneath an organic national body. Nazism made a radical racial worldview central to its politics. Jews were cast as an existential enemy on grounds of ancestry, so assimilation offered no escape from the regime's definition. Dictatorship, war and state-organised persecution led to genocide. These histories reveal capacities nationalism can carry. They do not define every national movement, any more than colonial empire defines every state.

Electoral competition intensifies the struggle to own the national voice. A party can accuse rivals of governing for a class, region or foreign power rather than the country. Authoritarian rulers make the same move without permitting a fair contest. Losing an argument can be cast as losing the nation. An opponent can be expelled symbolically before any law excludes them.

Common belonging can also widen the circle of obligation. A taxpayer may see a stranger's pension or hospital treatment as part of a shared undertaking, rather than a favour to somebody else's family. That is a moral argument for solidarity, not proof that stronger national pride produces more generous welfare. The argument turns on who is counted as a compatriot

and what duties membership entails. The same appeal can defend support for strangers or demand that a minority be shut out.

A socialist and a conservative can claim the same national future while proposing opposite budgets. One may call taxation a common contribution; the other may call lower taxes the route to national prosperity. The flag does not resolve their disagreement. Follow the claim into the institutions and decisions that give it practical force.

Empire Made Nationalism Global

Empire brought a glaring contradiction to the national promise. A European people could claim the right to govern itself while its state governed other peoples without granting them the same right. Colonised organisers could turn that claim back on the ruler. In doing so, they changed what self-rule could mean, rather than merely importing a finished European answer.

European imperial powers became national at home while ruling multinational hierarchies abroad. Britain, France, the Netherlands and others represented empire as evidence of national greatness, taught imperial history, mobilised colonial resources and ranked subjects unequally. National equality within the imperial centre could coexist with rule over people denied the same sovereignty. Empire was not nationalism's opposite. It was one of its vehicles and contradictions.

Colonial administrations classified populations, fixed jurisdictions and promoted selected languages, often unevenly and for purposes of control. They encountered existing networks rather than an empty social world. A newspaper could circulate through a colonial market while its readers drew authority from an older religious community. Schools could teach the language in which officials were challenged. Administrative instruments could become instruments of opposition without determining what the opposition wanted.

Anti-colonial nationalists did not receive a finished European model. They argued over scale, culture and membership. Indian nationalism had to imagine unity across languages, religions, castes, regions and princely

states while confronting British claims that the subcontinent was too divided to govern itself. Congress contained liberal constitutionalists, socialists, religious thinkers and mass organisers. Muslim political claims developed through their own institutions and fears of majority rule, contributing to the demand for Pakistan. One anti-imperial field produced rival national futures.

For several African and Caribbean leaders, independence was too small if it merely placed a flag over a colonial territory. Kwame Nkrumah linked Ghana's freedom to African union. West Indian federalists sought political and economic strength beyond individual islands. Adom Getachew describes a group of such Black Atlantic projects as worldmaking: attempts to alter the unequal international order. Their question was how a formally sovereign country could escape dependence on powers that still dominated its trade and finance. For these thinkers, national liberation required looking beyond the nation.

The map of surviving states hides this unfinished argument. A small state could possess a vote abroad and little bargaining power over its own survival. Federation promised a larger political unit; economic reform promised more substance to sovereignty. Independence alone guaranteed neither.

The struggle's form depended on what it confronted. In Algeria, a settler colony made liberation a struggle over who could claim the country as home. In Vietnam, communist organisation connected national liberation to social revolution. Both opposed foreign rule; that common aim did not give them the same social base or political destination.

Anti-colonial unity also contained internal disputes. Workers, peasants, women, minorities and regional movements did not enter the nation on identical terms. A movement could need mass participation during struggle and centralise power after independence. Colonial borders joined populations with different histories and divided others. Leaders faced immediate pressures to govern a territory, build institutions and prevent secession, often with scarce resources and coercive administrative inheritances.

Students, migrants and exiles crossed imperial frontiers, comparing conditions and translating constitutional claims into local arguments. Independence elsewhere could make imperial permanence harder to believe. No single author directed these exchanges. Colonised people adopted some ideas, rejected others, and moved from asking whether they deserved admission to an imperial order towards asking what right that order had to govern them.

Self-Rule Recreates the Minority Question

National self-determination sounds like a clean rule: let every people govern itself. The difficulty begins with every word after let.

Before the First World War, multinational empires governed much of Europe and the wider world. The Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman imperial orders collapsed through war and revolution; Germany lost its monarchy and substantial territory rather than breaking up in the same fashion. New and enlarged states claimed national legitimacy, but their populations remained mixed. The question moved from how an empire should govern several peoples to how a state identified with one nation should treat inhabitants associated with another. A change in sovereignty could alter someone's status without anyone moving house.

After the First World War, leaders invoked self-determination without agreeing who qualified or how overlapping claims should be settled. Minority protection could constrain the resulting states, but foreign governments could also claim to protect co-nationals as a pretext for intervention.

This is irredentism when a state or movement demands territory beyond its borders as part of the national homeland. It differs from seeking rights for a minority where it lives. Turning protection into annexation changes the proposed remedy, and may place another population under the domination the claim condemns.

After 1945, decolonisation shifted the governing rule. Colonial peoples increasingly gained a recognised right to independence, while inherited colonial boundaries were usually retained. Retaining those boundaries

reduced pressure to turn every ethnic or linguistic distribution into a new frontier, but it placed nation-building inside states whose territorial shape had often been designed for empire. Governments had to create common citizenship across diversity while facing movements that claimed the colonial unit was not the right people.

Indigenous peoples expose another limit. Their claims may concern land, treaties and jurisdiction within settler states rather than a request for a smaller copy of the state itself. The 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples affirms self-determination and autonomy while preserving a territorial-integrity safeguard. It does not convert every claim into an automatic right to secede. Treating self-rule as synonymous with independent statehood can erase forms of collective authority that peoples wish to retain or recover.

Secession can free a population from repression and create a new minority. Federalism can share power or harden political divisions. Autonomy offers recognition without independence, but needs credible protection from unilateral removal. Individual citizenship can cross group lines while leaving one language dominant in public institutions. No arrangement removes the need to govern disagreement.

The United Nations has 193 member states, not 193 universally agreed nations. Its membership is a legal and diplomatic category, not a census of identities. Some national communities lack a state of their own, while states can include several national identifications. A person may regard being Scottish and British, or Quebecois and Canadian, as compatible; another may reject the combination. Nested belonging is possible, not compulsory. No official map can determine how strongly each identity matters to the person carrying it.

The initial claim, that a people should authorise its government, has now produced a continuing question: who belongs to that people, and on what terms? Independence does not end the work. A state must govern those who opposed its creation, arrived later, or wish to describe themselves differently. Equal membership cannot mean that every disagreement is

settled in advance. It means that disagreement is not itself sufficient reason to remove someone from the political community whose decisions shape their life.

National solidarity faces a harder test in disagreement than in celebration. Can a minority defend its language, or a historian criticise the national past, without forfeiting membership? When belonging requires submission to one authorised account, the claim that people should govern themselves has become a restriction on which people may speak.

How It Actually Works

The army at Valmy

On 20 September 1792, French forces held their position against a Prussian-led invading army near Valmy. The artillery exchange checked the advance towards Paris when the revolution was vulnerable. On 21 September, the National Convention abolished the monarchy; on 22 September it began dating official acts from the first year of the republic. A military success and a constitutional rupture became joined in the national memory.

The soldiers did not constitute an entirely new army. Many were veterans of royal service, and their training and artillery mattered. The revolution changed the authority in whose name that machinery fought. France was now claimed for the nation rather than treated as a dynastic possession. In August 1793, the Convention's mass-requisition decree assigned wartime duties across society. Young men were to fight; other people were directed towards supplying arms, nursing or preparing material for wounds. Even the elderly were instructed to encourage resistance. The public claim was that everyone had a place in defending the republic.

The revolution neither invented collective loyalty nor demonstrated that enthusiasm could replace military competence. It gave a national claim to sovereignty an unusually forceful combination of law, administration and arms. That combination challenged the political world beyond France.

Before national rule

Early modern Europe was crowded with composite states. A monarch might hold several kingdoms, duchies and provinces under different laws. The Habsburg ruler governed subjects speaking German, Hungarian, Czech, Croatian, Italian and other languages. The Ottoman sultan ruled Muslims, Christians and Jews through an imperial order that did not expect one national culture. People could owe allegiance to a town, estate, church, crown, province and language community at once.

Older collective identities were strong, but they did not ordinarily supply a universal instruction to give every cultural community a sovereign territorial state. A crown might invoke descent, religion or inherited law while maintaining different privileges among its provinces. Subjects could share a ruler without regarding themselves as one nation; equally, a people could preserve a collective identity through changes of ruler.

Print and commerce widened publics before the revolutions. Vernacular literature travelled, and states extended taxation and communication. Such changes made large political audiences more accessible, but did not determine which identity would join them. An expanding state could encounter a national movement or help create one against itself.

The Atlantic experiments

Durable national republics emerged around the Atlantic rather than from one European capital. Representatives of thirteen British colonies declared in 1776 that legitimate government derived from the consent of the governed. Their union contained strong state loyalties and excluded enslaved people, Indigenous nations and most women from the political people it announced. It still demonstrated that colonists could become a sovereign people by declaring separation from an empire.

In the French colony of Saint-Domingue, the contradiction was slavery. An uprising of enslaved people began in 1791 amid struggles involving white colonists, free people of colour and rival imperial powers. The participants did not begin with one programme for an independent nation. Abolition,

emancipation and control of the colony developed through war and shifting alliances. Toussaint Louverture emerged as a leading commander, while the French expedition sent by Napoleon in 1802 threatened the political order built after emancipation. Resistance eventually defeated French rule, and Jean-Jacques Dessalines proclaimed Haiti's independence in 1804. Freedom from enslavement had become bound to freedom from the colonial state.

Recognition did not follow on equal terms. France made its recognition of Haiti in 1825 conditional on an indemnity for former colonists. The United States withheld diplomatic recognition until 1862. Haiti was not cut off from all commerce or diplomacy, but the new state faced a hostile international hierarchy. Its history makes a European origin story inadequate: people excluded by imperial republicanism forced a different meaning of freedom into the Atlantic world.

Spanish American independence also produced several republics, not one state of all Spanish speakers. Colonial jurisdictions helped shape new units, while Simón Bolívar struggled to sustain wider union. Locally born elites of European ancestry, Indigenous communities and enslaved people entered these settlements with unequal power. The national claim could break an empire without resolving the hierarchy within its successor states.

Revolution names the sovereign

In France, the revolution reorganised territory into departments, attacked corporate privilege and legislated for a unified nation. It converted a claim about legitimate authority into administrative practice. The republic could then demand resources for a political community presented as the source of the laws it enforced.

Napoleon carried parts of the revolutionary settlement across Europe through conquest: legal reform, administrative centralisation, conscription and the end of some old privileges. Occupied populations also learned to oppose French rule in national terms. Spain's resistance, German cultural mobilisation and later memories of occupation made empire a school for

nationalism on both sides. France demonstrated the force of a nation in arms, then gave rivals reasons to imitate it.

Poets, teachers and conspirators

After Napoleon's defeat in 1815, restored dynasties faced movements using culture to challenge rule. Collectors gathered folk songs; writers constructed national literary traditions. Herder had defended the worth of distinct cultures without prescribing a state for each. Later nationalists turned cultural claims into political programmes he had not designed.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte's addresses in occupied Berlin linked education, language and national regeneration. Mazzini organised for an Italian republic and presented national independence as a duty within a future association of free peoples. Secret societies, exiles and newspapers carried programmes across borders. Students and professionals often moved first, but movements survived only when their claims connected to wider grievances about taxation, land, religion, language or foreign rule.

Greek independence in the 1820s attracted European supporters who imagined ancient Greece reborn, while Orthodox religion, local military networks, commerce and Ottoman politics shaped the struggle on the ground. Belgium separated from the Netherlands in 1830 through a coalition that joined religious and political grievances. These cases showed that national movements could break an imperial or composite state, but they also showed how much recognition by great powers affected the outcome.

1848 and the roads not taken

Revolution spread across Europe in 1848. Liberals demanded constitutions, workers raised social claims, and national movements challenged imperial rule. In the Habsburg lands, Hungarian, Czech, German, Italian, Croatian, Slovak, Romanian and other projects did not align. A nation seeking freedom from Vienna could fear demands from minorities within the territory it claimed. The structure of the later problem was visible before most nation-states existed.

The revolutions largely failed in the near term. Monarchies recovered, and divisions among their opponents helped military power prevail. Yet rulers increasingly used nationalism themselves. Unification could advance through royal diplomacy and war instead of republican insurrection.

Italy was not made by national enthusiasm alone. Garibaldi's volunteers and republican agitation created openings that Piedmontese power and Cavour's diplomacy could exploit. War and foreign intervention changed what was possible. The result in 1861 was a kingdom, not the republic some nationalists wanted. Regional languages, economic divisions and limited participation remained. Creating a state was one achievement; making its inhabitants experience it as their common political home was another.

Prussia reached German unification through military victories and a federal settlement under its leadership. The German Empire was proclaimed in 1871. Cultural nationalism helped make unity desirable; customs integration and state power helped make a particular version possible. Neither Italy nor Germany was a united people waiting peacefully for its state. The struggle also decided which rulers would inherit national authority.

Making nationals from inhabitants

After political unification came the slower work of common government. A compulsory school could make children literate in the language of public employment, while a conscription office could move young men far beyond their locality. The same institutions imposed obligations and opened opportunities. Their nationalising effects depended on what people made of them, not merely on what a minister intended.

A standard language might become useful without immediately displacing speech at home. Administrative integration, cultural change and identification with the nation proceeded at different speeds.

Eugen Weber's account of rural France, centred on 1870-1914, showed how transport, schools, markets and military service widened participation in a French national life. It did not establish that villagers had previously possessed no sense of France. Nor was its sequence universal. Japan's

Meiji government, after 1868, pursued centralised education and military service while recasting the emperor's place in public loyalty. Britain had developed a different combination of state institutions, Protestant identification, warfare and empire. The instruments travelled; their relationships and starting conditions differed.

Nation and empire

Nation-building coincided with imperial expansion. European powers presented colonies as national possessions and evidence of prestige. Racial hierarchies justified withholding self-government abroad while citizenship expanded at home. A national public could demand freedom for itself without conceding the same principle to the people its state ruled.

Settler states confronted Indigenous peoples whose land and authority did not disappear when newcomers proclaimed national sovereignty. In the Americas and Australasia, expansion involved dispossession, coercion and disputed treaties. Later citizenship reforms could widen legal membership without settling the original claims to jurisdiction and land.

Colonial schools, ports and administrative centres brought organisers into contact. Migrants and exiles compared conditions across empires. A person might gain an imperial education and use it to challenge imperial authority. These connections supplied political resources without prescribing one national future.

Imperial patriotism and anti-imperial organisation consequently developed together. Colonial subjects could first demand equal citizenship within an empire, then conclude that equality required leaving it. Others kept pursuing federation or autonomy. Foreign rule created shared grievances, but it did not decide how far the future political community should extend.

Total war and the promise of self-determination

The First World War brought national mobilisation into an imperial conflict. Governments conscripted millions, rationed food and redirected industry, demanding sacrifice in the name of survival. Colonial troops and labour served powers that did not grant them equal political standing. Nationalism alone did not cause the war: alliances, imperial competition, military planning and decisions during the July crisis were indispensable. National language helped justify the effort after war began, without proving that every soldier or civilian shared the same motives.

As the war destroyed empires, self-determination became a commanding language around the settlement. Lenin used it to attack imperial domination and defend a right of political separation. Wilson's Fourteen Points in January 1918 addressed particular territorial and imperial questions, though the famous phrase itself was absent. Audiences across Asia, Africa and the Middle East heard a wider promise than the victorious powers intended to grant.

War and its aftermath produced new or enlarged states in Europe. Poland regained independence. Czechoslovakia and the state later named Yugoslavia joined several peoples under new political institutions. Finland and the Baltic states emerged from the former Russian Empire. Strategy, language, popular votes and force influenced the settlements. No single principle discovered their borders, and large minorities remained within them.

The League of Nations, the new international organisation, supervised minority treaties in some states, but protection was selective and weak. Major powers kept empires while presenting European national reorganisation as a new order. Anti-colonial activists who had expected self-determination met mandates, repression and delay. Disappointed hopes helped intensify anti-imperial mobilisation in Egypt, India, Korea and China.

The nation purified

Interwar crises changed nationalism again. Fascist movements promised national rebirth through authoritarian unity, disciplined mass politics and violence against enemies. Italian Fascism subordinated plural institutions to a state claiming to embody the nation. Nazism defined the national community in racial terms, destroyed democratic opposition and cast Jews as an enemy beyond conversion or civic loyalty.

German grievances over Versailles, economic crisis, conservative collaboration and political violence all shaped Hitler's rise. Nationalism alone does not explain the dictatorship. Once in power, the regime built a system of racial exclusion and pursued conquest. During the Holocaust, Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators murdered six million European Jews. This was a targeted, organised project of persecution and destruction, not an unspecified excess of patriotic feeling. Other populations suffered persecution and mass murder under distinct Nazi policies. Collapsing them into a generic story of national hatred loses the particular ideological aims and machinery.

The Second World War ended with defeated fascist states, ruined empires and mass displacement. Borders shifted and millions were expelled or transferred, especially in central and eastern Europe. The resulting states were often more ethnically homogeneous than before, but the route to that appearance ran through murder, flight and coercion. A clean national map was not the starting reality. It was produced at catastrophic cost.

The United Nations Charter placed self-determination among its principles while protecting the sovereign equality and territorial integrity of states. The combination remains central. Peoples possess claims; existing states possess recognised borders. International politics lives inside the tension.

Independence, partition and the inherited state

India's independence in 1947 ended British colonial rule but arrived with partition into India and Pakistan, mass displacement and extensive violence. Congress had advanced a broad territorial nationalism, while the Muslim League claimed that Muslims required secure political power as a nation. Neither organisation exhausted the views of the populations it sought to represent. Partition answered rival claims by dividing mixed societies. It left national identity disputed on both sides.

Pakistan then exposed the limits of a shared religious foundation. Its eastern and western wings were separated by Indian territory. Many Bengalis resisted attempts to privilege Urdu over their language; police killed protesters in Dhaka during the language movement in 1952. Linguistic grievance combined with disputes about resources and political power. The Awami League won a majority of seats in the national election of 1970, but the promised transfer of power did not occur. In 1971, military repression, armed resistance and eventual Indian intervention led to Bangladesh's independence. The sequence was not inevitable from language difference. Decisions about representation and coercion made union increasingly untenable. A state created in the name of one national claim had generated a successful challenge in another.

Indonesia followed a different route. Independence was proclaimed in 1945; armed struggle and diplomacy preceded the Dutch transfer of sovereignty in 1949, which left West New Guinea unresolved. Indonesian, developed from Malay and promoted by the youth movement before independence, became a medium of national life without being most citizens' first language. Nation-building did not require replacing every local language with one inherited mother tongue. It did require institutions that made the shared language usable, while disputes about regional authority and coercion continued.

Ghana became independent in 1957 under Nkrumah, who treated national freedom as incomplete without African liberation and greater continental unity. Algeria won independence from France in 1962 after a brutal war

shaped by settler colonialism, guerrilla conflict, state repression and struggles within the nationalist movement. Different colonial structures produced different routes. There was no standard handover from empire to nation.

In 1960, United Nations General Assembly Resolution 1514 declared the need to bring colonialism to an end and affirmed self-determination. Decolonisation transformed the organisation's membership and made sovereign statehood the normal international form. Most new governments retained colonial frontiers, partly because reopening every boundary threatened wider war. The decision made territorial independence possible while leaving governments to create national membership inside inherited units.

The outcome was not preordained. In French Africa, politicians debated equal citizenship and forms of federation as alternatives to separate sovereignty. In the Caribbean and Africa, regional projects sought enough collective power to resist external economic dependence. Their failures and compromises belong in the history alongside independence ceremonies. Otherwise the institutions that survived are mistaken for the only future anyone seriously wanted.

The ordinary national world

After decolonisation, governments expanded education, broadcasting and development programmes. Whether these created shared loyalty depended partly on access and political inclusion. An institution perceived as one group's property could strengthen rival identities instead. National cohesion was neither a reward for having an old culture nor an automatic product of spending on a school.

The late twentieth century supplied integration and break-up. European states pooled some authority without abolishing their governments. The Soviet Union dissolved in 1991; Yugoslavia's disintegration involved wars and ethnic cleansing; Czechoslovakia separated peacefully in 1993. Existing federal institutions and boundaries gave some national claims an

organisational base. Economic crises, leadership decisions and coercion helped determine what followed. A shared label, national self-determination, cannot explain why these separations took such different forms.

Nationalism also persists without a break-up. Citizenship laws classify membership, public debate addresses nationally framed audiences, and international organisations bring state representatives together. Finance, migration and digital communication cross borders, but they also supply new objects for arguments about national control. Cooperation can be defended as serving the country; withdrawal can be defended in the same language. The enduring national question is who has authority to decide, not one permanent answer about whether cooperation is desirable.

The history has produced institutions more durable than the enthusiasm that launched them. A school continues teaching when the founding movement has divided. A national opposition may inherit the government's language while rejecting its story. A flag-raising ceremony cannot sustain that public life by itself. Institutions need continued use and acceptance, and their meaning can change in the process.

How we know

A constitution records an authorised claim about a people. It does not prove that everyone accepted the claim. Schoolbooks, censuses, military records and party programmes show institutions attempting to shape membership. Letters, petitions, language choices and local disputes reveal people using, resisting or ignoring those attempts. The gap between a programme and its reception matters as much as the programme itself.

National histories often describe the past using identities that became dominant later. A bilingual family may disappear into a census total; a defeated federal proposal may disappear from a story ending at independence. Reading against that outcome requires evidence from the alternatives, not an assumption that every unsuccessful project was equally plausible.

Comparison also needs care. Weber's account of rural France cannot

supply a timetable for Indonesia. A survey answer about pride does not measure the same thing as willingness to pay taxes, support a war or grant rights to a minority. Institutions can promote identity while identities reshape institutions, making causal direction difficult to separate. The strongest account joins specific historical sequences to a clear distinction between what participants claimed, what people did and what the surviving evidence cannot establish.

What People Get Wrong

“Nations are ancient and natural”

The mistake begins with continuity. A language, sacred tradition or name may survive for centuries, so the modern nation is imagined as the same body finally waking into statehood. National histories encourage the picture because a long pedigree makes present claims look inevitable.

Continuity is real, but continuity of what? A name, religious institution, language and claim to political rule can have different histories. Earlier English, Armenian or Jewish identities need not have involved the same citizenship rules or territorial ambitions as later national movements. Nor does the absence of modern institutions make earlier belonging unreal. The mistake is to treat every change as the unfolding of one already completed national personality. It replaces evidence about particular communities with an assumption that they always wanted the state claimed in their name today.

The correction is not that nations appeared from nothing. It is that old identities and modern nationalism answer different political questions. An ancient community can become the material for a modern nation, while a recent state can build strong national attachment. Treating national borders as nature hides the decisions that made them and turns later conflict into destiny. It also lets present majorities describe minorities as late intruders even when both communities have long histories in the same place.

“Nations are invented, so they are fake”

The phrase imagined community is often heard as an accusation. If most members never meet, and if schools, newspapers and governments help create belonging, the nation must be a confidence trick played on the public.

This applies the wrong test. Large communities require representation. A currency, court, university or company exists through rules and shared expectations, not because every participant meets. National membership produces passports, taxes, elections, military duties, welfare entitlements, grief and solidarity. Its institutional effects are not imaginary.

Constructed does not mean freely adjustable by whoever holds office. People can use national membership to challenge a ruler claiming to speak for them. A government promising equality may face demands to honour it from people it meant to exclude. The claim has acquired a life beyond its official use. Its makers cannot keep it to themselves.

Construction explains how national reality is maintained. It does not settle whether a claim is truthful, inclusive or just. Calling the nation fake avoids the harder task of examining who built its rules and whose lives those rules govern. Disbelief does not cancel an institution when officials, neighbours and markets continue to act through it.

“National conflict is ancient hatred waking up”

A long history of difference provides an appealing explanation for a sudden conflict. The communities appear to have been waiting to fight, with political events merely removing a lid. Stories of past injuries then seem to explain the present by themselves.

They cannot explain timing. Why did neighbours trade, intermarry or cooperate during some periods and become threats to one another during another? A change of border can put one group in charge of schools or public employment. Discriminatory law can make an identity newly consequential. Leaders can present a loss of office as a danger to collective survival. Existing memories supply material for mobilisation, but institutions

and decisions help turn that material into conflict.

The breakup of an empire is especially revealing. People need not change language or move house to find themselves newly classified as an unreliable minority. Fear may then be grounded in real exclusion rather than inherited hostility alone. Conversely, a claim of national danger can exaggerate or manufacture an enemy.

This correction neither excuses violence nor declares cultural difference irrelevant. It directs attention towards what changed, who gained power, what protections failed and which choices remained open. Ancient-hatred explanations make preventable acts look inevitable and leave their organisers conveniently out of the account.

“Civic nationalism includes while ethnic nationalism excludes”

The contrast is attractive. Civic nations supposedly admit anyone who accepts laws and values; ethnic nations inherit membership through blood and culture. One is open and western, the other closed and dangerous.

Real systems mix both. A citizenship law may be territorial while public institutions assume one language, history and religion. A state that praises universal values can demand cultural conformity from minorities and migrants. An ancestry-based nation can naturalise newcomers, accept mixed families and redefine its membership. Colonial republics often announced civic equality while withholding it through race.

The labels compare emphasis; they are not moral certificates. Can outsiders join? Are minorities treated as co-owners? Can citizens reject dominant customs without losing recognition as compatriots? These operational questions test claims of inclusion more effectively than a movement's preferred description.

Calling one's own nationalism civic can become a way to hide exclusion inside the claim that only neutral values are being defended. Neutrality is credible only when minorities can help define the public culture rather than

merely comply with it.

“Nationalism and fascism are the same thing”

Fascism makes the association plausible. It glorified national unity, rebirth, hierarchy and violence, destroyed plural politics and targeted internal enemies. Nazism made racial domination and antisemitic persecution central to a project that culminated in genocide. Any account that softens this connection is evasive.

Equivalence is still wrong. Nationalism has accompanied constitutional independence movements, democratic reform, conservative monarchy, socialism, religious politics and anti-colonial liberation. It supplies the claim that the nation has political priority; fascism adds dictatorship, mobilisation against pluralism, leader rule and a myth of cleansing rebirth. Not every nationalist accepts those additions. Some national movements have fought fascist occupation, defended plural citizenship or made constitutional limits part of their account of national freedom.

The correction matters in both directions. Calling every national claim fascist prevents distinctions needed to resist the real thing. Calling fascism ordinary patriotism hides its attack on equal citizenship and opposition. The proper question is what kind of national community a movement proposes, which institutions may restrain it, and what it permits itself to do to people outside its definition.

Nationalism contains authoritarian possibilities. Possibility is not identity, and it is not innocence. A movement's treatment of courts, opposition, minorities and political defeat tells more than its preferred label.

“Anti-colonial nationalism was a European copy”

Imperial institutions supplied visible instruments: school systems, administrative territories and languages of government. Because anti-colonial movements used these instruments, their politics can appear to be a copy of the system they opposed. That reading gives the equipment an author and leaves its users without agency.

The conclusion erases the argument. Indian nationalism had to address caste and religious community; Indonesian organisers had to imagine common political life across many languages. Copying a European constitution would not settle either problem. African and Caribbean federalists asked whether separate small states could provide the freedom their flags announced. Some movements sought equal imperial citizenship before separation; others treated independence as a step towards changing international power.

Nor did the alternatives concern flags alone. Debates about who would control land, employment and external trade altered what independence was expected to deliver. A movement seeking economic autonomy was challenging the conditions under which sovereignty would operate, not merely requesting a national version of colonial administration.

Borrowing is not obeying. Anti-colonial thinkers selected and changed available ideas while pursuing futures empire had not authorised. Their states' later success or failure does not determine how original those arguments were. Judging ideas by ancestry alone would make almost every political tradition a copy.

“Globalisation is making nationalism disappear”

Goods, money, media, disease and climate effects cross borders.

Companies organise production through several countries, and many people hold layered identities. The nation can therefore look like an obsolete container leaking into a global society.

Cross-border connection has not removed the institutions that allocate most political rights and duties. Citizenship, taxation, welfare, elections, criminal law, military service and passports remain organised mainly through states claiming to represent national publics. International organisations usually act through member governments. During crises, the demand is commonly that national authorities protect, compensate or control.

Globalisation can weaken some national tools and intensify national politics. Economic change may create arguments over who deserves protection.

Migration makes membership visible. Digital networks connect diasporas and separatist movements as easily as cosmopolitan publics. Regional integration can layer authority without erasing national elections or budgets.

Nationalism may change vocabulary, target or emotional temperature. Its disappearance should be judged by institutions, not by the number of flags at a rally. The national frame is strongest when it is treated as the normal place where political answers must arrive. A borderless supply chain can still end in a nationally framed demand for jobs, security and compensation.

Use It

Separate the nation from the state

When a government speaks for the country, ask which part it means. It may be defending state institutions, invoking a national community or protecting the people currently in office. Those claims can coincide. They can also come apart when loyalty to the country is made to mean loyalty to its ruler.

This distinction clarifies arguments that otherwise slide past one another. A separatist may accept the state's administrative existence while denying that it represents the right national people. A minority may identify with the nation and distrust the government. A ruler may describe criticism of the state as hatred of the country. None of those positions can be assessed while state, government, territory and people are treated as one object.

Ask four questions: Which institution is acting? Which population is said to authorise it? Which territory is claimed? Which cultural identity is being attached to the decision? National rhetoric often gains force by answering one and borrowing legitimacy from the rest.

Ask who gets to say we

The word we is a political technology. It can describe a documented group, invite a coalition or conceal disagreement. A minister, newspaper, movement or historian uses it as though millions have already authorised the sentence.

Do not reject the pronoun. Interrogate its speaker. Was the national position reached through an election, survey, negotiation, party programme or assertion? Are dissenters treated as part of the we who lost an argument, or as people outside the nation? Does a regional majority count? Do citizens abroad count? Are future generations being enlisted without a voice?

A dangerous national claim can contain a substitution. A government becomes the nation, a party becomes the government, and a leader becomes the party. By the end, opposition to one person is described as betrayal of everyone. Democratic nationalism keeps the national public larger than any office-holder. The test is whether defeat remains compatible with belonging.

Inspect the membership test

Every national community has routes in, conditions of membership and ways of marking doubtful members. The rules may be written in citizenship law or carried through accents, names, religion, ancestry and expectations about behaviour.

Imagine a naturalised citizen with equal legal status who is still treated as a guest. Now imagine a resident minority described as protected, but never as a co-owner of the state; or someone abroad admitted by descent while a long-term resident faces a harder route. These are illustrative possibilities, not descriptions of one country's law. Comparing them exposes the gap between being admitted to a territory, holding citizenship and being accepted as part of the national public.

Then test whether the criteria can be met. Learning a public language is different from proving ancestry. Accepting constitutional rules is different from adopting a majority's private customs. A membership standard becomes coercive when success is always postponed because the applicant's difference is the evidence against them.

Follow the infrastructure of belonging

A census form offers a practical test. Does it permit several identities, demand one, distinguish language from nationality, or leave people to describe themselves? Before using its totals in a national argument, inspect what respondents were allowed to say. An administrative classification is evidence made through a procedure, not a photograph of the nation's inner life.

When a national conflict looks ancient, examine the institutions carrying it now. Which language opens access to university or government employment? Do public services reach regions evenly? Are historical anniversaries shared or competitive? Does the electoral system reward parties that cross community lines? Can a citizen deal with the state without passing through a dominant ethnic network?

Test the scale of self-rule

A demand for self-determination does not specify the unit that should decide. The village, region, nation, state and federation may produce different majorities. Each can claim that a larger authority dominates it or that a smaller separation threatens shared interests.

When a movement seeks independence, ask what problem requires a new state rather than autonomy, federal reform, language rights, representation or equal enforcement of existing law. Then ask the reverse question: would those alternatives leave the group permanently dependent on a majority that has already broken its promises? The answer depends on history and institutions, not on a universal preference for unity or separation.

Apply the same test inside the proposed new unit. Which minorities would independence create? What rights, borders, resources and security arrangements would they receive? Self-rule is most credible when it can explain how people who reject the project remain full members after it succeeds.

Watch what solidarity asks in return

Imagine two proposals for the same benefit. One offers it to everyone who meets the need; the other adds a cultural-membership test. Both are defended as help for compatriots. The difference is not the amount of national feeling, but the rule it is being asked to support. Common identity can justify sharing while leaving its boundary fiercely disputed.

Examine the bargain too. Sacrifice may be demanded in the nation's name while benefits remain concentrated. A universal programme may be discussed as if some recipients are suspect outsiders. Nor does a national welfare system prove that national feeling caused support for it. People may cooperate from self-interest, principle or trust in the administration. Common fate is a claim to investigate, not an account already settled.

Trace both sides of the exchange: who pays, who receives and who decides. Then ask what happens when a member objects to the distribution. A defensible standard allows criticism without treating it as refusal of the community. Gratitude demanded from some members, while others assume ownership, is evidence that the supposedly common undertaking has acquired different classes of belonging.

The limits

Nationalism is not a master key. It does not explain every war, border or prejudice. Leaders can use national language while pursuing security, wealth, office or personal survival. People can fight beside co-nationals because of coercion, employment or fear rather than belief. Institutions described as nation-building may work through state capacity, class compromise or ordinary convenience.

The concept also risks over-reading. A flag outside an office does not establish what caused the decision inside. Evidence of national framing still needs to be distinguished from evidence of its effect.

Moral judgement cannot be outsourced to the label. Self-government can protect a vulnerable community or strengthen a local majority's domination.

The assessment requires attention to coercion, consent, available alternatives and the rights of those who would live with the decision.

No national story gives everyone equal space. The practical requirement is that omissions can be challenged without expelling the challenger from the community being described.

The one thing to keep

A nation can be real without possessing a single voice.

The young organisers in Batavia asserted an Indonesian community before an independent Indonesian state existed. Their claim helped make a common future imaginable across differences that did not disappear. It was neither the discovery of a perfectly unified population nor a fraud because agreement was incomplete. It was a political commitment whose meaning would have to be worked out through institutions and conflict.

The distinction changes what a flag means. It can name a shared undertaking, but it cannot demonstrate that everyone accepts the speaker's version of it. A government may enjoy legitimate authority without owning the nation. A defeated party can remain part of the public. A minority can demand changes without needing to establish that it has stopped belonging.

Nationalism's extraordinary power lies in connecting intimate attachment to authority over strangers. That connection can make self-government and common obligation possible. It can also let a leader turn a disagreement about policy into a verdict on who counts as one of the people. Recognising the difference requires more than deciding whether national pride feels attractive or alarming. It requires following the claim into the powers, duties and protections it creates.

The promise of self-rule is not fulfilled merely when the right flag reaches the pole. It faces its harder test afterwards, when someone who helped raise it objects to what is being done beneath it. A national community that can hear that objection as the voice of a compatriot has kept something the ceremony alone could never guarantee.

Terms

Nation

A community whose members understand themselves as sharing a politically significant identity, history or culture. Nations need neither cultural sameness nor a state, but nationalism gives membership political claims.

State

Institutions ruling a territory through law, administration, taxation and coercive authority. A state may contain several nations, claim one national identity, or lack broad national loyalty.

Nation-state

A state claiming to represent a national community. This does not require one language, ancestry or opinion. The ideal of matching political territory to national membership remains difficult where peoples overlap.

Nationalism

Beliefs and movements holding that nations matter politically, members owe special duties to compatriots, and a nation deserves collective self-determination, sometimes through a sovereign state or autonomy.

Patriotism

Attachment to a country, its institutions or way of life. It can exist without demanding that culture and state coincide, though ordinary speech often blends it with nationalism.

Citizenship

Formal membership in a state, carrying rights, duties and access. It may follow birth, descent, residence or naturalisation, while legal equality can coexist with unequal national recognition.

Sovereignty

Supreme public authority within a political order and independence from external rule. Nationalism locates legitimate authority in the nation, while constitutional institutions distribute powers and place limits on their exercise.

Popular sovereignty

The principle that authority comes from the people rather than monarch, conqueror or divine title. It supports democracy and nationalism while leaving open who counts and how they decide.

Self-determination

A people's claim to decide its political status and development. It can mean independence, autonomy or federal participation. The claim alone does not establish an automatic right to secede or a fixed territorial remedy.

Ethnicity

Collective identification organised around perceived ancestry, culture, language, religion or shared history. Ethnic boundaries are socially maintained and can change without becoming unreal or politically unimportant.

National indifference

Limited interest in, or resistance to, demands for exclusive national identification. It matters because nationalists' categories may misdescribe people who prioritise family, work, religion or bilingual connections over choosing one national side.

Civic nationalism

National membership defined mainly through citizenship, institutions and political commitment. The category marks an emphasis, not guaranteed inclusion, because civic states can embed majority language and culture.

Ethnic nationalism

National membership defined mainly through ancestry, inherited culture, religion or language. It can be more or less open, so the label cannot replace examining law and practice.

Cultural nationalism

A movement preserving or reviving language, literature, memory and custom, sometimes before seeking independence. Cultural work can prepare political mobilisation, remain separate, or support several political futures.

State nationalism

National identity promoted through government institutions such as schools, administration, military service and ceremony. It may integrate diverse citizens or identify the state with a dominant group.

Anti-colonial nationalism

National mobilisation against foreign imperial rule. It can seek independence, equal imperial citizenship, federation or wider international change, and has combined with liberal, socialist and religious programmes.

Diaspora

A population dispersed from an actual or remembered homeland while maintaining cross-border connections. Diasporas may influence homeland politics, sustain culture, seek return or develop identities beyond territorial control.

Homeland

Territory represented as the historical, cultural or sacred home of a nation. Homeland claims can support protection and return, but become combustible where several peoples claim the same place.

Irredentism

A claim to territory outside current borders because co-nationals live there or the land is considered historically national. It turns diaspora or minority membership into a territorial demand.

Secession

An attempt by part of a state to leave and form or join another state. It can answer oppression while raising questions about borders, resources, recognition and new minorities.

Autonomy

Protected self-government for a territory or community within a larger state. It may cover language, education, taxation or law, offering recognition without independence while requiring credible guarantees against unilateral removal by the centre.

Federalism

A constitutional division of authority between central and regional governments. Federal systems can accommodate several nations, though they may reduce conflict, entrench divisions or supply recognised institutions and boundaries that later assist separation.

Assimilation

The process by which people adopt a dominant language, identity or culture. It may occur through opportunity and interaction, or coercively when equal membership requires abandoning difference.

Integration

Participation in shared institutions without necessarily erasing distinct identities. National integration concerns access, representation, public goods and common loyalty, and should not become a polite synonym for one-way cultural assimilation.

Minority

A non-dominant population distinguished by nationality, ethnicity, language or religion within a state. Status is political as well as numerical: a large group may still lack institutional power, security or recognition.

Nationalising state

Rogers Brubaker's term for a state whose leaders treat it as belonging to a core nation, then use policy to strengthen that nation's position over minorities, disputed regions or rival national projects.

Imagined community

Benedict Anderson's description of a nation whose members picture shared communion without meeting most compatriots. Imagined identifies the scale and means of connection, not fabrication, delusion or insincerity among its members.

Print capitalism

Anderson's term for commercial printing that created mass vernacular reading publics. Books and newspapers helped standardise language and synchronise attention, though print was one mechanism among several and worked differently across societies.

Invented tradition

A practice presented as old and continuous but created or formalised more recently to teach values and membership. The concept does not imply that participants are fools or that every inherited custom is recent.

Banal nationalism

Michael Billig's term for routine reminders that make the nation the unmarked frame of politics: flags, pronouns, maps, news categories and habits that reproduce national belonging quietly, often without explicit nationalist argument.

Go Deeper

Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Revised edition, Verso, 2006. Begin with the opening explanation of a community whose members cannot all meet. It supplies an inviting question rather than requiring specialist knowledge: how do strangers come to picture themselves as one people? Anderson follows print, political inheritance and changing conceptions of time through the Americas and Southeast Asia as well as Europe. The later chapters require more historical attention, and the book is an interpretation rather than a neutral survey. Read it for the connections it makes, while testing how much print alone can explain.

Ernest Renan, *What Is a Nation? and Other Political Writings*. Edited and translated by M. F. N. Giglioli, Columbia University Press, 2018. The 1882 lecture named in the title is the primary source to read first. Renan asks whether race, language, religion or geography can establish national membership, then turns towards shared inheritance and continuing consent. Reading the argument in full is more useful than repeating its famous comparison with a daily vote. Giglioli's introduction and annotations place it within Renan's wider politics. That context matters: the lecture's appeal to consent should not be mistaken for a comprehensive modern commitment to racial equality or anti-colonial freedom.

Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination*. Princeton University Press, 2019. This is a different account of what liberation could promise. Getachew follows Black Atlantic thinkers and leaders who wanted to alter international hierarchy, including through federation and economic transformation. Their projects make independence appear as an opening question rather than the last page of decolonisation. Read it to recover alternatives hidden by the map of states that survived. The argument is demanding and deliberately centred on a particular intellectual and political field; it is not a survey of every Asian or African independence movement. Its narrower focus is what permits serious attention to those ambitions.

Andreas Wimmer, *Nation Building: Why Some Countries Come Together While Others Fall Apart*. Princeton University Press, 2018.

Wimmer makes the comparative question concrete: why do some states develop political relationships that cross existing divisions while others struggle to do so? His account connects organisations and alliances to public goods and communication, using paired histories as well as quantitative comparison. It is the most methodologically demanding recommendation here. Read it after the others to test whether a persuasive idea also explains differences between cases. Its findings are an argument about institutional development, not a recipe guaranteeing cohesion or proof that national pride causes generous welfare provision.

Notes and Sources

The claim and its limits

The working definition concerns a nation's political significance and claim to collective self-rule. It does not require every nationalist to demand an independent state, cultural homogeneity or a particular economic programme. Breuilly's political account, Anderson's theory of imagined community, Brubaker's relational approach and Mylonas and Tudor's review provide different ways of explaining the claim. David Miller's 2025 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry distinguishes philosophical arguments about national value and obligation from historical and empirical questions. Its defence of some national obligations is an argument, not a consensus finding about welfare provision.

The subtitle makes a comparative historical judgement about explanatory reach, not a measurable ranking. No dataset establishes nationalism as stronger than capitalism, religion, democracy or socialism. The book argues for its importance through legitimacy, mobilisation, citizenship, empire, independence and ordinary government, while refusing nationalism as a sufficient explanation for each outcome.

Indonesia and the proposed national public

Museum Sumpah Pemuda's account supplies the date, setting and language of the Second Youth Congress in October 1928. The pledge affirmed one homeland and nation and upheld Indonesian as a language of unity; it did not state that every local language should disappear. Sneddon's history explains the Malay basis and development of Indonesian. A congress resolution establishes a programme, not unanimous opinion across the population. The classroom in *Why You Should Care* is explicitly illustrative, not an observed scene.

Sovereignty, revolutionary obligation and women's agency

Article 3 of the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen locates sovereignty in the nation. De Gouges' 1791 declaration revises that formulation to include women and men. Her intervention demonstrates a challenge to exclusion within the revolutionary language of authority; it does not mean that women had acquired equal political rights. The translations reproduced by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media identify their published sources.

Bell's study of France places revolutionary national claims within developments before 1789. The National Gallery's account of Valmy confirms the battle on 20 September 1792 and the substantial presence of trained former royal troops. French National Assembly materials distinguish abolition of monarchy on 21 September from the decision on 22 September to date acts from the republic's first year. The decree of 23 August 1793 assigned wartime duties across society; the manuscript paraphrases its instructions rather than inventing compliance or soldiers' motives.

Inherited identities and modern institutions

Gellner's explanation connects industrial society, communication and mass education. Smith gives older ethnic identities and symbols greater explanatory weight. Their disagreement cannot be settled by defining every nation as modern or every old community as a nation-state in waiting. The manuscript focuses on modern national claims to authority while allowing substantial earlier continuity. Hobsbawm and Ranger's concept of invented tradition concerns practices created or formalised to establish continuity, not a proof that every tradition is recent.

Renan's 1882 lecture combines common inheritance, selective forgetting and continuing willingness to live together. The Giglioli edition supplies the text and its wider political context. Consent in this lecture should not be expanded into a claim that Renan held a comprehensive egalitarian or anti-colonial position.

Print, schools and national indifference

Anderson's imagined community describes mediated connection among people who cannot all know one another. His account of print capitalism is a mechanism, not a sufficient cause for every nation. The separate Spanish American republics also prevent language from being treated as a rule determining the number of states.

Weber's Peasants into Frenchmen concerns rural France and the transformation associated especially with 1870-1914. Its instruments cannot be exported as a universal timetable, and the book does not infer that earlier villagers had no French identity. Colley's account of Britain supplies a contrasting combination of religion, warfare and empire. Neither account is used as a controlled experiment proving one necessary cause.

The specific example of bilingual family exchanges in the Czech-German borderlands follows Zahra's archival study, Kidnapped Souls. It illustrates practical choices at odds with nationalist demands over children. It is not evidence that all Bohemian families were nationally indifferent. Billig supplies the account of routine national cues in ordinary language and

public life; routine does not mean harmless or causally decisive in every situation.

Membership, gender and political variety

Brubaker supports distinguishing nationalising states, national minorities and external homelands. A minority's political position is not reducible to its share of the population. Civic and ethnic nationalism are treated as contrasting emphases rather than pure types or moral certificates. Current citizenship laws are not compared country by country, and the illustrative membership cases in *Use It* are not reports of one jurisdiction's rules.

Yuval-Davis supplies the analysis of gender in national reproduction, culture and citizenship. The book preserves women as political actors as well as people assigned symbolic and reproductive roles. Diaspora, autonomy and federalism describe varied relationships, not policies with guaranteed outcomes.

Mazzini's *Duties of Man* links national duty to duties towards humanity. Fichte's *Addresses* connect education and language with regeneration under occupation. Lenin's 1914 text distinguishes a right to separate from advocacy of separation in every case. These are political programmes, not descriptions of every follower's conduct. Herder's cultural pluralism is not equated with a blueprint for homogeneous states. Article 11 of the German Empire's 1871 constitution assigns the federal presidency to the king of Prussia under the title German Emperor, establishing the monarchical arrangement used in *The Core Ideas*. Brubaker's *Nationalism Reframed* analyses the Soviet state's institutionalisation of nationality in territorial and cultural forms.

The solidarity argument is deliberately narrow. Wimmer examines institutional integration, alliances, communication and public goods. His work is not cited as proof that raising national pride increases redistribution. Mylonas and Tudor review findings whose settings and measures differ. A response about national identification, an attitude towards a benefit and actual tax compliance are not interchangeable outcomes.

The Atlantic and European sequences

The United States Declaration of Independence establishes the consent claim made in 1776; it does not establish equal participation in the polity that followed. Dubois supplies the Haitian sequence, including the 1791 uprising, shifting alliances and the distinction between emancipation and eventual independence. The US Office of the Historian records French recognition conditioned on an indemnity in 1825 and US recognition in 1862. Those restrictions must not be inflated into complete diplomatic and commercial isolation.

Breuille provides the comparative setting for nineteenth-century national movements, failed revolutions and state-led unification. The Italian kingdom of 1861 and German Empire of 1871 are political settlements, not dates on which their inhabitants became culturally uniform. Cultural mobilisation, dynastic interest and military power could reinforce or frustrate one another. The composite empires are not treated as culturally neutral or uniformly tolerant alternatives to nation-states.

War, self-determination and racial persecution

Wilson's address of 8 January 1918 does not contain the phrase self-determination, although the National Archives' explanatory introduction uses it. The speech and later description must be kept separate. Manela examines the appropriation of Wilsonian language particularly in Egypt, India, China and Korea. That bounded research does not prove identical reactions across every colonial society.

Wimmer's *Waves of War* and Brubaker's interwar and post-communist comparisons inform the relationship between state transformation, national claims and conflict. The Russian, Habsburg and Ottoman imperial orders collapsed differently; Germany lost its monarchy and substantial territory without undergoing the same kind of territorial dissolution. Nationalism alone is not offered as the cause of either world war or of all later secessions.

Griffin's account of fascism emphasises national rebirth. This is an influential analytical definition, not the whole history of fascist rule. The Holocaust

account follows the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, including the murder of six million European Jews by Nazi Germany and its allies and collaborators. The figure is an established historical estimate, not a newly measured 2026 total. The manuscript distinguishes that genocide from the persecution and murder of other groups under distinct Nazi policies.

Decolonisation and alternative futures

Chatterjee challenges the reduction of anti-colonial national thought to European imitation. Cooper documents debates about citizenship and federation in French Africa. Getachew examines Black Atlantic projects to transform international hierarchy. Their geographical and intellectual fields are different. The book does not turn any one into a representative sample of all decolonisation, nor assume that failed federations were certain to succeed under different leaders.

The Indian partition passage is limited to competing accounts of political membership, British withdrawal, displacement and violence. Provincial politics, caste, princely states and the internal differences within Congress and the Muslim League require fuller histories. Bangladesh then supplies a distinct example: the language movement, electoral exclusion and coercion changed the basis of union. The National Archives' 1971 document collection and US diplomatic records support the political sequence. The 1970 majority refers to National Assembly seats, as recorded in the attachment to the Davis memorandum of 3 March 1971 (FRUS, volume E-7, document 123). The language-movement account is also documented by Banglapedia. No contested war-death estimate is used, and the account does not infer an inevitable secession from the events of 1952.

For Indonesia, the 1945 proclamation and 1949 transfer of sovereignty are distinct events. A 1961 US State Department memorandum records that West New Guinea was excluded from that transfer. Sneddon supplies the linguistic history. Ghana and Algeria illustrate different colonial structures and routes to independence; they are not offered as a complete comparative history.

International law, Indigenous authority and numbers

The UN Charter's Article 1(2) includes self-determination among the organisation's purposes. Article 2 addresses sovereign equality and protection against force directed at territorial integrity or political independence. General Assembly Resolution 1514, adopted on 14 December 1960, addresses colonial independence while also containing a territorial-integrity provision. These instruments require interpretation; they do not make any self-described national movement's preferred remedy automatic.

The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted in 2007, affirms self-determination in Article 3 and autonomy in Article 4. Article 46 contains the territorial-integrity safeguard. Indigenous claims may concern continuing land, treaty and jurisdictional rights alongside questions of cultural recognition and political status. The declaration is not presented as a treaty or as a general licence for unilateral secession.

The UN listed 193 member states when checked on 5 September 2026. This is an institutional count, not a count of nations, ethnic groups or identities. The number cannot establish how many peoples possess, lack or claim political self-rule.

Applications and scope

The lenses in Use It are analytical questions and normative standards, not legal advice or experimentally validated interventions. The classroom, job, membership and public-benefit illustrations are hypothetical. Institutional records can establish a rule or an action without establishing the motives and national feelings of everyone affected by it.

The ending's standard is that disagreement should remain compatible with equal membership. This is a judgement about legitimate national self-government, not a claim that every national movement accepts it. Detailed border operations, electoral systems, immigration policy, individual territorial disputes and country histories belong to neighbouring books. The

comparative account retains limits of coverage without converting those limits into a claim that all nationalisms are fundamentally the same.

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