

Nationalism, a Destructive Force

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History 12

Term Paper

“The best lack all conviction and the worst are full of passionate intensity.”(W. B. Yeats, The Second Coming) this one sentence can describe the driving force that nearly crushed the 20th century: Nationalism. Nationalism started off as a fairly innocent form of patriotism but escalated to something so powerful it had the power to destroy nations and to kill thousands of innocent people. It used to be only religion that had the power to destroy nations, but now it seems that a new force has become the dominant cause for war and instability: nationalism, five examples can prove this: Austria-Hungary, Italy, Germany, Vietnam and Serbia.

In the early 1900's, just before the First World War, there were many the Serbs in the Austria-Hungarian, or Habsburg Empire, fighting to become a part of free Serbia. The Balkan Wars were over by 1913 and Serbia had emerged as a major power. Austria-Hungary, in the year of 1908 had extended her borders to the south by acquiring the province of Bosnia from the Turks. To the Serbs, especially to the nationalists, this was like a slap in the face since most of the people in Bosnia were Serbian Slavs. Serbia wanted Bosnia to be a free Serbia state and to be called Yugoslavia, or south Slavia, then they would have access to the sea because, they were at the time, land-locked. Russia sympathized with the Serbs because their people were of Slavic origin, plus they also wanted to increase their influence in the Balkans so they could gain an ice-free trading port. Austria-Hungary knew that the loss of 8 million Serbs would give Serbia the power crush the Austria-Hungarian Empire. However, Austria also had a powerful ally on her side, Germany. Since the Balkan Wars, Serbia had almost doubled in size and it appeared to both Austria and Serbia that the idea of an independent Yugoslavia may become true.

On July 28, 1914, in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia the Arch Duke Francis Ferdinand, the heir to the Austrian throne and his wife were shot dead. The man responsible for the killing was a Serb named Gavrilo Princip. Even though he was a Bosnian Serb, the Austria-Hungary government blamed Serbia for the killings, however it is more likely that they had nothing to do with it. Encouraged by Germany, Austria-Hungary decided to crush the homeland of Serbia nationalism. They gave them demands impossible to meet, and that is what they wanted Serbia to refuse, so they would have an excuse to crush Serbia. However, Serbia accepted all but one of these demands, which said they had to be refereed to international arbitrator. The refusal of that demand was enough of an excuse for Austria-Hungary. With Germany's famous Blank-Cheque support, Austria-Hungary declared war on July 28, 1914 on Serbia. Germany and Russia, the two allies, followed right behind starting the First World War.

The next example of nationalism turned for the worst harbored in the birthplace of fascism, Italy. After World War One Italy was torn by economic and inflation problems as well as political and social strife. Italians were mad at Orlando for not getting them the territory they were promised in 1915 when they joined Britain and France's side in the war. There was mass hunger and over population. Socialist in government spoke of revolution and soon the Italians were ready to abandoned democracy. Then Benito Mussolini came along and got support for his Fascist party he then told the Italian government to give him the government or he would March on, or attack, Rome. They gave him the government on October 24, 1922. Mussolini wanted to see Italy back in her glory days of the Roman Empire. He wanted this to be mostly in Africa so he defied the League of Nations by aggressively taking over Ethiopia in 1936. The League did virtually

nothing, had they extended the economic sanctions to include oil, Mussolini would have withdrawn from Italy, but they did not, so Mussolini was successful. In June of 1940, Mussolini with an agreement with the Nazi's joined Italy in the Second World War. The only reason Mussolini joined is because he saw that Germany had taken over almost all of Europe and Mussolini wanted to get more land to add to the Empire that he would become the new Caesar of. Mussolini tried to use nationalism aggressively gain land to bring Italy back to its glory days of the Roman Empire where he would be the new Julius Caesar, so they entered the 2nd World War.

The worst case of miss-used nationalism came in Germany by a man with the name of Adolf Hitler. The Treaty of Versailles had left Germany humiliated and penniless. The people of Germany blamed the Weimer Republic for all their problems even though the republic had been trying hard and fairly successfully to rebuild Germany. Hitler, in the twenties, tried to overthrow the government with his, at the time, not very popular Nazi party and Lunderdorff, a German General. He was unsuccessful and spent time in jail. However, with the coming of the Great Depression all that changed. The United States withdrew their loan that was helping build Germany up again and Germany was back in its economic slump with the rest of the world. Hitler was able to gain support and loyalty using nationalism. He said that the Great Depression was a Jewish and Communist plot. Through the promising of jobs and national glory he won enough votes to become chancellor of Germany and coalitioned with a small nationalist party to become the majority. He led the Germans to believe that they were a superior master race that was destined to rule the world. He wanted to create a Third Reich or Empire for Germany. This lead to Hitler's extreme nationalism demanding the domination of any

country which Germany had any grievance against. Also concentration camps were set up to house and eventually exterminate all those who did not fit the description of Hitler's "superior race." This included Jews, Gypsies, Communists, the handi-capped or anyone who opposed Hitler's views. The German's wanted so badly to see their country do well again that they stood by well millions of people were murdered including 6 million Jews. Hitler's army conquered most of Europe and North Africa after the invasion of Poland, which had began World War 2.

Starting just after the Second World War the next flare up of dangerous nationalism was in Vietnam. Vietnam had struggled for independence from France in the Indochina war of 1946-1954 and at the end was successful in doing so. Temporarily Vietnam was divided in to North and South Vietnam. The North was under the communist rule of Ho Chi Minh; the South was anti-Communist and had collaborated with the French. Ho Chi Minh wanted to see Vietnam united under one government and that government was communism. This lead to civil war in 1959, which the United States got involved with. They believed that if communism was successful in taking over Vietnam, it would spread to Southeast Asia and beyond soon all of Asia would be under communist rule. This theory was known as the Domino Theory. The U.S. joined the South and was successful in beating the North, overthrowing communism. However yet again nationalism had lead to war in this case it was the desire to see Vietnam united under a communist government.

Despite the horrors of past extreme nationalism causing instability and war it continues to be a potent force today. Ever since Serbia became a free state it has wanted Slavic unity, this meant gaining Bosnia. Slobodan Milosevic, who became president of Serbia in 1989,

knew this. He continued to add even more fuel to the nationalism fire in the Balkans and he did it completely to serve his own purposes. He wanted to create and be the leader of a greater Serbia, which would include areas of Bosnia where Serbians were a majority. He may have even wanted the rest of the country where Serbs were a minority. It did not take much effort to stir up nationalism because this is what Serbia had wanted for decades. They were still upset about the battle of Kosovo in 1348 where they had been defeated and wanted more than any thing to re-unite their people. What followed was a bloodletting not seen in Europe for 50 years. Wherever there was a group that threatened the Serbs they were removed. They did an ethnic cleansing in any areas that Serbs claimed as their national ground removing any non-Serbs. Thousands of non-Serbs were tortured, raped and murdered. This led to the Kosovo War because many of the Albanians living in Kosovo were killed or discriminated against by the Serbs. Once again extreme nationalism caused war and instability.

In all these examples nationalism brought to the extreme has led to war and the slaughter of tens of millions of people. It seems in order to stamp out extreme nationalism the world will have to take on an international view of the world where instead of being only concerned with the well-being of our own country we are concerned with the whole world. So many situations have proved that nationalism does not work. Many people such as Albert Einstein have criticized it calling it “an infantile disease.... The measles of the human race” (Albert Einstein 7) and “the last revenge of a scoundrel” (Samuel Johnson 7). It is either we adopt a concept of Internationalism, or we prepare for the next dominant source for war: Natural resources.

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