**“How is it; you pretend to be Frenchmen, and yet you can neither speak nor write your own language?” (Daudet 1873) Was Daudet being overly melodramatic in “The Last Lesson”? How can one understand the dominion of Nationalism in 19th century European political discourse?**

Nationalism is the belief that there is an identifiable national culture that is measurably different from other cultures, with different values systems, art, and culture. *People saw the nation as a guarantor of rights, privileges and claims on resources. [[1]](#footnote-1)* Hence, we can see how the French Revolution ignited the need for a nation by its people, increased urbanization, the advent of communications, the role of the government as well as the use of war made the cry of nationalism so appealing to a previously apathetic mass.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the French army steamrolled over much of Western Europe. As part of his rule, Napoleon ran about writing new constitutions based off the French constitution, putting members of his family in place as kings and creating political and social upheaval.[[2]](#footnote-2) In doing so, the French Revolution became transnational by virtue of ideas of self-determination being carried with the army. *Nationalism provided individuals with an identity, and a connection with people of similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds.[[3]](#footnote-3)* By invading the countries and states surrounding France, Napoleon ‘*contributed to a greater sense of unity’ amongst those he conquered*[[4]](#footnote-4) and triggered ‘*patriotic resentment among the peoples subjected to French domination*’[[5]](#footnote-5)and we see that Western Europe experienced political upheaval far sooner than Eastern Europe. Distance gave Eastern rulers time to implement censorship controls along with national defense, leading to a greater delay from Western ideals penetrating Eastern autocratic rule.[[6]](#footnote-6) Despite the generous efforts of the Congress of Vienna in attempting to restore the original monarchs of the kingdoms Napoleon had taken over[[7]](#footnote-7), the nationalistic sentiments disrupted the old regimes across Europe, leading to an outbreak in nationalism in the 19th century.

According to Norman Rich, the Agricultural Revolution and development of a more stable food supply led to the ‘*greater availability of food in Europe’ and population growth reached exponential levels.*’[[8]](#footnote-8) An increased workforce led to migration from rural areas to city centers, providing a consumer market from previously self-subsistent communities. Transport and technology innovations led to the development of industrialization as they provided access to larger and more distant markets. With improvements in transportation on land, and most importantly water, railroads and other new and improved technologies, the need for nationalism became dominant as people who were once in separate societies became intertwined socially. As Bayley puts it, ‘*It was people congregated in new urban centers who were most likely to portray them as unified peoples and to demand statehood’[[9]](#footnote-9)* The creation of ‘possessive individualism’ was heralded by the intense competition for limited jobs and increased social tensions[[10]](#footnote-10). Industrialization in conjunction with growing urbanization released workers from the drudgery of menial labor and living in close contention to one another led to a political awakening[[11]](#footnote-11) and the creation of a middle class that could engage in what was previously the domain of elites: idea exchange.

Benedict Anderson questioned how society was imagined, and through this imagination given shape and solidarity.[[12]](#footnote-12) He thus introduced the idea of ‘*print capitalism* to show how *the convergence of capitalism and print technology created the possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation.’ [[13]](#footnote-13)* The creation of the Gutenberg printing press made the Reformation turn trans-national. What made the Reformation so different from previous attempts at heresy was the spread of ideas to a mass audience. The translation of previously sacrosanct texts and increased literacy rates aided in the propaganda war against the established Catholic church.[[14]](#footnote-14) Where in the 15th to 16th century, elites in one country would have more in common with their foreign, literate peers than with their nominally fellow countrymen, 19th century patriots pushed for a common tongue which provided solidarity and aided the formation of a national identity[[15]](#footnote-15). As nationalism was furthered within the country, ‘*The diffusion of books and newspapers across the world inscribed a sense of belonging in the minds of those elites and, later, ordinary people who led them’.[[16]](#footnote-16)*

On a side note, Daudet’s *The Last Lesson* takes place after the Franco-Prussian war. Alsace and Lorraine became Prussian, with the titular ‘last lesson’ taking place in Alsatian territory as the Prussians discontinued the use of French in schools. As such, Mr. Hamel, the French teacher gave his lesson with his captive audience of his usual class and the addition of the old people from the village. This story is meant to tell us about the significance of one’s language in one’s life for the very existence of a race and how important it is to safeguard it. It raises the question of linguistic and cultural hegemony of the colonial and imperial powers and identities. If a nation is a state, then why do a people that primarily speaks French and think of themselves as French are forced to change their tongue in lieu of a government far away? Inter-country politics overrode one’s right to self-determinism apparently. We see similar examples in Norway and Finland where they had attempted to strengthen their national consciousness by instituting their own languages[[17]](#footnote-17) because their former rulers were defeated, and their national denomination determined due to a European war.

The nation-state was nonexistent in Early Modern times, with political allegiance not determined by nationality. However, industrialization had turned an agrarian society into a politically centralized nation-state[[18]](#footnote-18). This provoked the disintegration of supranational states, such as the Dual Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire where devolvement to autonomous states were no longer applicable[[19]](#footnote-19). Should the racial majority be patronized, ‘*they might pull apart the whole façade of empire’[[20]](#footnote-20).* Multi-ethnic empires were the biggest losers as they faced nationalist advocates with ‘*widespread support’[[21]](#footnote-21)* and politicians who attempted to industrialize and modernize their governments galvanized’ *regional leaderships, which cherished a history of cultural difference, into a new assertion of their separatism and claims to nationality’.[[22]](#footnote-22)* With the onset of more assertive nationalists in these large empires, the governments which once quelled such rebellious sentiments are forced to give greater autonomy to some of its minorities. For example, Germany and Italy were formed by uniting various regional states with a common ‘national identity’. Nationalism better defined these countries.[[23]](#footnote-23) The creation of Serbia as its individual state provoked the Serbian diaspora in neighboring countries, most notably the Dual Monarchy to agitate for the borders to expand to include their settlements at the expense of that country’s lands in the Greater Serbia movement[[24]](#footnote-24). A bureaucracy that was created to deal with an empire could not control a country with proto-nation autonomous states, leading to the break-up of multiracial empires. Nationalism dominated 19th century Europe because of the fear that it would upset the balance of power once established by the Congress of Vienna in a bid to prevent future devastating wars.

In the 19th century, the form of individualization and personal rights became formalized, hardening social lines along ethnic and racial backgrounds. There was a shift from a universal brotherhood and empire to that of nation-states along long held, or constructed backgrounds, with England being the former, and Germany being the latter. Previously coexisting racial sub-groups found themselves alienating their peers of different racial or ethnic background[[25]](#footnote-25), either through discriminatory practices or outright xenophobic attacks. Furthermore, minorities became conscious[[26]](#footnote-26) of their differences and sought what they felt to be more equal treatment, driving the second phase of nationalism in the 19th century.

However, ‘*the state, urbanization and print capitalism all played a part, but war was the origin of nationalism’[[27]](#footnote-27)*. The previously divided territories were formed via iron and blood; for Greece, it meant throwing off the Ottoman yoke and having its monarchy selected by the Great Powers as part of a power sharing agreement. For Germany and Italy, it meant the military aggression of Prussia in Austrian territory, and conflicts against the preeminent military force on the continent, France. War provided a common space for members of different social classes to interact and fight in remote battlefields.

War ignited racial tensions due to the migration of enclaves from previously uncontested territory. For example, Alsatian Jews moving to Paris after the Franco-Prussian War made the Jewish enclave increasingly prominent[[28]](#footnote-28); the fact that the Jewish were removed from the rest of Gentile society made their increasing numbers threatening to those competing for the same resources and jobs. Finally, wars made national security imperative, as the possibility of espionage and treason became threats to the government's hold. We can see this culminating in the Dreyfus Affair, where an Alsatian Jew is put on trial for passing secrets to the Germans. This scandal deeply divided France not just over the man himself, but involved politics, religion and national identity. [[29]](#footnote-29)

The quest for national identity eventually ignited ‘some damn foolish thing in the Balkans’, as eminent German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck quips. The underlying causes which drove nationalism played their role inflaming the First World War; Europe in the early 20th century was a continent that was tense with accumulation of arms, with rivalling economic and political interests between Germany and England, with young men learning that it is sweet to fight and die for one’s country. Thus we can see that nationalism was a product of the modernization of the nation-state, urbanization fueled by industrialization, and the friction between countries as the Concert of Europe broke down.

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1. Bayley, Pg. 243 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Kohn, Pg. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Slawson, Larry, *Imperialism, Revolution, and Industrialization in 19th Century Europe, Retrieved 29 September 2018, from* https://owlcation.com/humanities/Imperialism-Revolution-and-Industrialization-in-Nineteenth-Century-Europe [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Breunig, Pg. 94 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Breunig, Pg. 95 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *“When the Grand Army crossed the borders of Russia in 1812, Frenchmen formed less than half its numbers.”* Kohn, Pg. 33 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Langhorne, Pg. 313 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rich, Pg. 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bayley, Pg. 203 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *‘The Ruritanian peasants were drawn to seek work in the industrially more developed areas, and some secured it, on the dreadful terms prevailing at the time.* Gellner 2006, Pg. 59 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ‘*but when mobility and context-free communication come to be the essence of social life, the culture in which one has been taught to communicate becomes the core of one’s identity.’* Gellner 2006, Pg. 61 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Calhoun, Craig, *Nation and Imagination: How Benedict Anderson Revolutionized Political Theory,* Retrieved 28 September 2018, from http://www.abc.net.au/religion/nation-and-imagination-how-benedict-anderson-revolutionized-poli/10095810 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Anderson, Pg. 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Anderson, Pg. 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ‘*Universal literacy carries the potential of nationalism’* Gellner 1b, Pg. 758 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Bayley, Pg. 205 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. The Crane Bag Vol. 2, No. 1/2, The Other Ireland (1978), pp. 183-188 (6 pages) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. ‘*But the centralization of industrial society is not optional, and it is far more complete and pervasive, qualitatively and territorially.’* Gellner 1981, Pg. 755 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. ‘*A state as described – centralized, with an inescapable central economic steering mechanism – is doomed to conflict… But the way it points will affect the fortunes of sub-groups in the community. Hence they must struggle for control or influence over it.’* Gellner 1981, Pg. 764 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bayley, Pg. 208 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Bayley, Pg. 212 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Bayley, Pg. 218 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. ‘*possessed of a perfectly viable culture, and generally the equals of those to whom they oppose, they merely needed to attain an equality of power, a state machine capable of protecting, promoting and being co-extensive territorially with that culture* Gellner 1981, Pg. 774 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *‘The Greater Serbia movement called for the reclamation of Serbian territory from the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires. Pan-Slavism called for the liberation of millions of Slavs still trapped under Austrian rule.’ J. Llewellyn et al, ‘Serbia before World War 1’ at Alpha History,* Retrieved 1 October 2018 fromhttps://alphahistory.com/worldwar1/serbia/ [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *“The strains of urbanization and the rise of capitalist production marked them out as targets for those who had failed to benefit.* Bayley, Pg. 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. “*Internal boundaries between supposed ethnicities were also reinforced”* Bayley, Pg. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Bayley, Pg. 243 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bayley, Pg. 225 [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *“the time came slowly when the Dreyfus affair turned into the affair (without Dreyfus).”* Bredin Pg.265. *Taken from* Jacquet, J.T , *The Significance of the Dreyfus Affairs on Politics in France from 1894 to 1906.*, Retrieved 30 September 2018, from https://www.e-ir.info/2012/06/06/the-significance-of-the-dreyfus-affairs-on-politics-in-france-from-1894-to-1906/ [↑](#footnote-ref-29)