“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?

*Ie Why did nationalism dominate much of the 19th century Europe*

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 and most nationalism argue that culture is distinctive better, but should come with its own state.

During the Napoleonic Wars, the French army steamrolled over much of Western Europe. As part of his rule, Napoleon implemented tremendous changes within these countries, both economically and politically and implemented policies in place of the original political establishments of these countries. Napoleon’s conquests also spread ideas of nationalism that emerged from the French Revolution. Nationalism provided individuals with an identity, and a connection with people of similar cultural and linguistic backgrounds. By conquering the countries and states surrounding France, Napoleon ‘contributed to a greater sense of unity’ amongst those he conquered. (Breunig, 94) Napoleon triggered ‘patriotic resentment among the peoples subjected to French domination’ (Breunig, 95) 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. The revolutionary and nationalistic sentiments introduced by Napoleon led to the disruption of the old dynastic regimes across Europe, despite an attempt at going back to the ‘legitimization’ of monarchs in the Congress of Vienna.

According to Norman Rich, the Agriculture Revolution and development of a more stable food supply led to the ‘greater availability of food in Europe’ and population growth reached exponential levels. (Rich, 15) 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. The need to unify and defend one’s country became greater. 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’ (*Bayley’s Pg. 203)The creation of ‘possessive individualism’ was heralded by the intense competition for limited jobs and increased social tensions. 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 and the creation of a middle class that was able to 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.[[1]](#footnote-1) Thus, he 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. [[2]](#footnote-2)* The creation of the Gutenberg printing press made the Reformation turn trans-national. Luther became what in today’s terms a celebrity author due to the popularity of his ideas. 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. (Anderson, Pg 40) Similarly, now that the printed word was widely available, ideas would freely spread, and the lowered cost of reading would in turn encourage the middle class to engage in ideas of nationalism rather than being limited to the intelligentsia. Where in the 15th to 16th century, elites in one country would have more in common with their foreign 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. 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”.* (Bayley, Pg. 205)

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[[3]](#footnote-3) because their former rulers were defeated, and their national denomination determined due to a European war.

Furthermore, the communication revolution allowed ideas to spread from one country to another through print, “*creating new opportunities for inter-regional communications and the transfer and adaptation of ideologies”* (Bayley, Pg. 205) Like the Reformation, the spread of ideas became international as cross-border communication lines are strengthened with the advancement of communication technology such as telegrams, and a formalized postal service. Nationalism became dominant due to the universality of its ideals across different countries. One such example was the Glorious Revolutions of 1848, where a series of revolutions rocked much of Western Europe, toppling a French king, turning Danish monarchy into a constitutional one and nearly eliciting a break-up of the Dual Monarchy of Austro-Hungary. While this culminated in little actual political change, it showed how one event in a country could easily provoke similar upheavals in its neighbors. Nationalism was not new; there were inklings of its existence from nation-building attempts such as during Elizabethan England, but it had truly strengthened in its cross-border appeal during the 19th century due to the advent of better communications within the continent.

The nation-state was nonexistent in Early Modern times, with political allegiance not determined by nationality. However, the creation of large, centralized states ruled by absolute monarchs destroyed the old feudal contract. The secularization of life and education weakened ties to the neighborhood church and focused on the vernacular languages. No longer was the king the state but the people became to focus of the nation with civilization being identified with national civilization. However, this provoked the disintegration of supranational states, such as the Dual Monarchy and the Ottoman Empire. Should the racial majority be patronized, *they might pull apart the whole façade of empire.* (Bayley, Pg. 208) Multi-ethnic empires were the biggest losers as they faced nationalist spokesmen with *widespread support* (Bayley, Pg. 212) 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.* (Bayley, Pg 218) 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, Italy and Romania were formed by uniting various regional states with a common ‘national identity’. Others, such as Greece, Poland, and Bulgaria, were formed by winning their independence. Nationalism better defined these countries. The creation of Serbia as its individual state provoked the diaspora in neighboring countries, most notably Austria Hungary to agitate for the borders to expand to include their settlements at the expense of the neighbor’s territories. A bureaucracy that was created to deal with an empire could not control a country with proto-nation states, leading to the break up of such extensive civilizations.

It is hard to separate nationalism with imperialism. As larger countries use their economic and military prowess to influence another nation, this provokes a backlash against the larger country as nationalism, or pride in one’s identity becomes cemented against the ‘oppressor’. There was a strong resistance against what was seen as foreign rule in Italy, Poland and Ireland with local hostility towards alien dynastic overlords culminating in protests for further autonomy and in Italy’s case, unification of previously disparate provinces.

Creating disharmony: Nationalism provoked the rise of ethnic tensions in previously harmonious states. This is a result of mistaking national identity to racial identity, leading to xenophobia both societally and politically. For the Jews

*“The strains of urbanization and the rise of capitalist production marked them out as targets for those who had failed to benefit.* Bayley’s Pg 255. & *Internal boundaries between supposed ethnicities were also reinforced* Bayley’s Pg. 227.

Anti-Semitism became a force after the Revolutions of 1848, especially in Germany after the Franco-Prussian war due to the strength of nationalistic pride uniting the ‘pure’ Germans.

Militia: The creation of national militaries would lead to the contribution of nationalistic pride and the solidifying of a common identity. *Nationalism defined itself against others.* The creation of a common military service led to basic literacy amongst the common foot soldiers, led to the promotion of peasants and workers to militaries. After the concert of Europe,

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1. http://www.abc.net.au/religion/nation-and-imagination-how-benedict-anderson-revolutionized-poli/10095810 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anderson Pg 46 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Crane Bag Vol. 2, No. 1/2, The Other Ireland (1978), pp. 183-188 (6 pages) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)