Violence and the Nation

Introduction: Fear and the Nation

The modern nation has a tendency to turn to violence of catastrophic proportions. The most horrific events of the twentieth century, from everyday ingrained hatreds to systematic ethnic cleansing and genocide, ultimately must be attributed to conflicts between nations. Something about the nature of the nation and the national identity of an individual motivates men to not only die for the nation, but to kill for the nation.

There is no question that the nation at the most basic level serves as a central source of identity, from the songs people sing, the legends people tell, the languages people speak, and symbols with which people associate. Nations define individuals, and so people come to love the nation. However, as Stuart Hall points out in his essay "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference," an inevitable step in the formation of a national identity is to conceptualize it with relation to difference (Hall 346). For example, one may say "I am a Communist *and not a Capitalist*"; the Capitalist does not have to directly harm the Communist in order to make this assertion so long as the Capitalist has an offensive presence within the imagination of the Communist. A more tangible example comes via a poll taken by the Belgrade Institute for Social Sciences in which "89 percent of [Serbia's] ethnic Serbs viewed ethnic Serbs favorably, compared to 81 percent disliking ethnic Albanians, 75 percent disliking Muslim Slavs, and 74 percent disliking ethnic Croats" (Ron 31). The love of one's self is made possible by the contempt of that which one is not.

This duality directly applies in discussion of the nation. If, as Ernst Renan writes, the nation is a "large-scale solidarity" between a people who share a past and desire a

shared future, then the people who share neither a common past nor a desire for a shared future must lack solidarity (Renan 53). While this is not so much a universal truth as it is a nationalistic perception, this perception breeds a fundamental tension between the nation and the outsider. This tension creates fear.

The tendency of the nation to resort to violence must ultimately be attributed to the fear posed by an outside threat. If one loves the nation and has regard for the continued preservation of the nation, then one cannot help but feel threatened by those who can either harm or destroy the nation. The Israeli Soldier fights not only because he or she loves the Jewish people and the state of Israel but because he or she fears the second coming of the Holocaust (that, and the state requires military service). The American will risk his or her life fighting in the Middle East because he or she loves western society and fears terrorism and the effects of radical Islamism. The nation turns to violence when it perceives its core existence to be under threat.

American Nationalism: "Emergency without End"

American nationalism originally felt a strong influence from a Protestant-based mindset that America was a new "chosen people," an utmost civil and modern society who would be the pioneers of the western world. This messianic self-imagining did not necessarily function to mobilize the American people, although appeals to morality ("fight evil," "promote freedom,") could inspire support for taking action (Lieven 34). Despite the sometimes religious qualities of American nationalism, post-manifest-destiny America lacked the thirst for empire and the stomach for long international conflict.

Only when the American national identity (or perhaps, the American national ideology) is under attack does American nationalism lend itself to conflict and violence.

Anatol Lieven, author of *America Right or Wrong*, points to the Cold War as a turning point in which an ideological threat motivated "permanent mobilization." The Soviet Union essentially launched an offensive against America as a nation with its attempts to globalize communism. Fighting international bourgeois society meant fighting capitalism and democracy, two hallmark traits of the western world. With an ideological threat constantly simmering in the background, America entered into a state of "emergency without end" to protect its way of life from the militant Bolsheviks (156). The Cold War was officially underway, with America partaking in several conflicts (including larger scale wars in Korea and Vietnam) directly related to keep Soviet communism from overwhelming Western-friendly societies.

The precedent set by the American experience in the Cold War appears to be repeating in the post 9/11 years. The September 11 attacks dealt a catastrophic blow to the American nation, a rude awakening of sorts that America was more vulnerable than originally thought. Following the grief and the shock of the event, patriotism and nationalism skyrocketed. A national sentiment that arose (and was voiced by the American elites) was that the public had the obligation to carry on living as they had prior to the attack as any sort of concession would be conceding a victory to the terrorists (24). More than ever, the Americans imagined themselves as a messianic figure amongst the nations and had a newfound obligation to fight terror.

America has mobilized itself once again, now justifying state-sanctioned violence by fighting an abstract war against the terrorists instead of the Bolsheviks. The

frightened American public essentially gave the Bush Administration a complete mandate to respond to the new terrorist threat with any sort of military action necessary. Bush capitalized on this,

> [instilling] in the American public a fear of much wider threats to the homeland from Iraq, Iran, and North Korea—states which had no connection to al Qaeda. By doing so, the administration created a belief that anything America does is essentially defensive and a response to "terrorism." (27)

At this point, the final steps to unlimited war and constant mobilization were finalized. The transition was complete: America converted the fear from international ideological attacks into an unlimited mandate to carry out a war.

Israel and the Middle East

Much like the aforementioned example of America, the link between a fearful nation and the escalation of violence can be found in the case of Israel. Ideological tensions are at the root of American action; the tensions felt by the Jewish nation are far more primal and subsequently graver. Whereas the anti-American seeks to forcefully promote a non-Western way of life, the anti-Zionist seeks the total destruction of the Jewish national homeland. Hence, the right to exist is at stake for Israel.

The foundation for this Jewish national fear lies deep, with the nearly two thousand year experience in Diaspora an essential factor. However, the threat of total annihilation became a very real possibility over the past century as modern anti-Semitism arose from the simmering anti-Jewish sentiments ingrained within several European societies. Norman M. Naimark goes into great detail how Nazi Germany sought initially to ethnically cleanse the Reich of the Jews as to avoid impure Jewish blood from infiltrating and tainting the Aryan gene pool; plans to expel the Jews to such places as

Palestine and Madagascar were seriously explored (Naimark 61-69). As World War II began to break out in full force, ethnic cleansing gave way to an attempt to completely eradicate the Jewish people. Six million lives later, the necessity for the Jews to have an autonomous homeland capable of defending the nation was very clear.

As a nation, the Jewish people told themselves "never again." The establishment of the state of Israel provided the much-needed homeland and wars fought in 1948, 1956, and 1967 showed the world that Israel had every intention of militarily protecting both statehood and the wellbeing of the nation inside. With the protection of the Jews from global anti-Zionist threats being the highest priority to Israel, tactics that were both proactive and aggressive became commonplace in Israeli policy.

To this end, James Ron points to the rise of the right wing Likud party in 1977 as a turning point in Israeli aggression. Ron spends considerable time writing about Israel and the state-sponsored violence that ensues following the rise of Likud in his book *Frontiers and Ghettos*. Ron goes so far in his criticisms of the policy and actions carried out by Israel during this period that he labels the trend as radicalized nationalism (Ron 115). While Ron is correct in his assertion that the Israeli public at large experienced a shift to the right during this period, he fails to credit this to a devastating event that rekindled old fears among the Israeli people.

The Yom Kippur War of 1973 was a catastrophic blow to Israel. Israel was caught off guard by Egypt and Syria and, although ultimately defeating the two Arab nations, sustained serious losses. The war served as a reality check that, despite the general goodwill garnered by the Six Day War, Israel was still a vulnerable state with enemies who sought complete destruction of the state (Rabinovich

http://info.jpost.com/C003/Supplements/30YK/art.23.html). Israel was shocked and fundamentally unprepared for the offense; the aftermath of the Yom Kippur war led to the realization that the continued existence of a Jewish homeland for the Jewish nation predicated on future proactive and aggressive military tactics.

A result of the Yom Kippur War was that Israel vowed never to let its guard down again. The Arab world essentially poses the same fundamental threat that Nazi Germany posed some sixty years earlier. This proactive and aggressive mindset in protecting the Jewish people translates into internationally unpopular tactics in matters of foreign policy, particularly the Palestinian conflict. However, the Jewish people learned the hard way that the preservation and protection of a Jewish state is the highest priority and that the means of doing so justify the ends.

Serbia and the Crisis of Identity

The last case study to look at is the case of post-Communist Serbia in the years immediately following the dissolution of the Yugoslav Republic. Unlike America, where a threat to the Western democratic way of life is an ideological struggle that has reignited following the September 11 attacks and Israel, where international anti-Zionist hostility threatens the continued existence of the Jewish nation, the existence of the Serbian nation never seemed to face direct assault. Undoubtedly there was tension in the 1990's Balkans, but with the possible exception of Tito's Yugoslavia, ethnic tension has been a constant in the region for ages.

The ideological currents running through Serbia were producing a dangerous form of fervent patriotism. Norman Naimark relates the assessment of U.S. ambassador

Warren Zimmermann on the rise of a pan-Serbian voice, writing "In the Balkans, intellectuals tend to be standard bearers of nationalism; in Serbia, this is carried to fetishistic lengths" (Naimark 149). The Serbian elite, led by Slobodan Milošević, had just experienced the frustration of having a fragmented and disproportionately small voice within the Yugoslav Federation and vividly remembered the past glories of the old Serbian kingdom. Hence, an agenda in which Serbia would expand and expel the non-Serbs (mainly Bosniaks, Croats, and Kosovar Albanians) was undertaken.

The question of how the Serbian nation could support the catastrophic violence in the Bosnian Frontiers, Sandžak, Vojvodina, and Kosovo comes back to a latent fear to which the Serbian elites appealed. The fear was not so much a fear of being attacked, despite the serious tensions felt by ethnic Serbs living in Bosnia and Kosovo and the rise of the Kosova Liberation Army (KLA) between 1996 and 1998 (Ron 95). Instead, the Serbian identity that was at stake.

Serbia felt the need to exert themselves in order to strengthen an identity that had taken a shot during the end of the Yugoslav years. The Serbian national idea demanded that all historically-Serbian lands be unified with Serbia proper. This expansionist idea not only aimed to create a state that would encompass all ethnic Serbs but would also homogenize the population. While the first conflicts took place to the West (Bosnia) and North (Vojvodina), Kosovo held a special significance to the Serbs as it is a focal point in Serbian history. The land, which has attained an almost-holy stature amongst the Serbs, was the site of the historic 1389 battle with the Ottomans that fortified the Serbian identity (28). That some 90 percent of modern Kosovars were not Serbs but Muslim Albanians was unacceptable to the Serbs and an affront to the Serbian nation. If a people

and their shared history are two fundamental components to the conceptualization of a nation, then the Serbian nation was threatened by the fact that Serbs had become ethnic minorities in historically significant Serb lands.

It is insufficient to credit a national identity crisis to justify the ethnic cleansing efforts that killed hundreds of thousands and displaced millions more. However, the public was susceptible to be swayed by radical elites who were able to play off of Serbian insecurities to implement drastic measures. The fear of losing a distinctly Serbian identity posed a threat to the people that Serbian authorities converted into extreme violence.

Conclusion

Perhaps it is accurate to say that the tendency of the nation to turn to violence is a defense mechanism, a primal instinct for self-preservation. A threat to the nation demands action, whether that threat is directed towards a political ideology, a sense of identity, or simply at a people at large. Just as a mother bear will fight to the death to prevent her cubs from harms way, a nation will resort to any means to protect the nation. The love of a people and a way of life, combined with the fear of losing those cherished factors, will continue to motivate drastic acts of violence for the foreseeable future.

Works Cited

Hall, Stuart. "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference" *Becoming National*. Ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 339-349.

Lieven, Anatol. *America Right or Wrong: An Anatomy of American Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Naimark, Norman M. *Fires of Hatred: Ethnic Cleansing in Twentieth-Century Europe*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Rabinovich, Abraham. "Yom Kippur War: Shattered Heights." *Jerusalem Post Archives*. September 25, 1988. http://info.jpost.com/C003/Supplements/30YK/art.23.html

Renan, Ernest. "What is a Nation?" *Becoming National*. Ed. Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. 42-55.

Ron, James. *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.