

# Why did they win? Preconditions for successful national agitation

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## I.

This essay aims to offer an account of the preconditions for the development of successful European national movements, from the rise of scholarly interest in small nations over a phase of national agitation to the mobilization of mass support.

Allow me to first define my subject matter. Within the European context, we can clearly distinguish between two basic types of nation-forming processes, the first of which occurred within the framework of the Early Modern *state-nation*. Here we can see the transformation, through revolution and reform, of a society of disparate subjects and Estates into communities of equal citizens who eventually accepted a common national identity. These state-nations, which included the French, Dutch, Swedish, and English, each possessed a distinctive culture in the form of a common written language and an inclusive social structure, encompassing all classes and social groups corresponding to the nation's then stage of economic and social development. Most European nations, however, were formed through a second type of nation-forming process. This type consisted of a non-dominant ethnic group which organized itself in a national movement, that is, a sustained an organized effort aimed at achieving the status of a fully formed nation with all of its attributes. These national movements focused on the eradication of one or more of the three crucial shortcomings that distinguished their *ethnie* from contemporary state-nations: (1) a cultural defect in terms of language and literature; (2) a social defect, as exemplified through the absence of a fully-fledged society with 'national' elites; (3) a political defect in terms of self-government – leading to demands for autonomy and, eventually, a nation-state. While both forms of national movements are historically important, it is crucial to keep them separate in terms of the theorization of the preconditions for their success. In the context of this essay, I will only focus on nation-forming processes of the

second type; my findings should not be taken to apply to the nation-forming processes which took place within the framework of state-nations.

A second theoretical distinction should be made. This paper is by no means intended as an account of the success of *nationalism*. Throughout their history, national movements underwent a series of fundamental transformations. As with other social movements, these transformations can be described as a progression through three phases: the phase of scholarly interest (Phase A), the phase of national agitation (Phase B), and the phase of mass movement (Phase C). To summarize these three distinct phases under the single and undifferentiated term of nationalism appears to me as confusing and misleading – I would suggest to reserve the term solely for Phase C. The account of national movements presented here puts the question of success at two levels: first, why did national agitation start, and, second, why did national agitation succeed at achieving mass support, thus progressing to Phase C and acquiring the status of nationalism?

The debate on the genesis of nations is polarized between constructivists who consider the nation an invention, myth, or construct, and those who see the nation as a large social group emerging out of a very 'real' historical development which shaped its national identity. On the face of it, the two positions seem irreconcilable. From my point of view, however, the conflict is not as fundamental as many constructivists propose. My interpretation is based on a comparative analysis of empirical data about most European national movements. Although this macro-analytical approach may have its weak points, I prefer to derive observations from generalized empirical data, rather than starting from preconceived abstract theories which do not necessarily correspond with the historical reality. My analysis takes into account both the role played by national agitators and the personal decisions to accept a national identity, *and* the existence of 'real' social, political, economic and cultural ties and relationships – such as language, political institutions, and social change.

## II.

As mentioned before, the question of success of national movements can be put at two levels: (1) why did national agitation start; and (2) why did it succeed in achieving mass support? In this section, I wish to discuss the first of

these questions: what made patriots start their attempt at presenting a new national identity to their compatriots?

To begin to answer this question we need to first consider three groups of factors which existed independently of the patriotic wishes, but nonetheless informed their practices and provided the vocabulary in which they would formulate their demands. The first of these factors was the inherited heterogeneous complex of traditional and anti-traditional opinions, attitudes, values, ideas and loyalties which all somehow could be related to the idea of 'the nation'. The oldest among them was the Jewish-Christian tradition, in which ideas such as the 'promised land' and 'elected people' were routinely invoked, and opposition to Jewish enemies was seen as proof of 'national' solidarity. Other examples include baroque patriotism, related to a state or land and its specific religious traditions, the Early Modern idea of '*raison d'état*' or '*Staatsräson*', and enlightened secularization and rationalism.

The second important factor underlying the beginning of the national movements is the breakdown of old identities and traditional value systems in the wake of the crisis of the *Ancien Régime*. Doubts were cast, not only upon long-established patriarchal, patrimonial and seigniorial ties, but also upon accepted religious legitimacies, both at the level of political power and the level of social dependence. The questioning of the old society of Estates, where each individual's social position and privilege was predestined at birth, brought with it a feeling of insecurity. Very often, this feeling was aggravated by the disintegration of old regimes and political structures, and the emergence of new ones. The Holy Roman Empire disappeared, Austria was declared to be an Empire, the Southern Netherlands changed their state-affiliation four times during forty years, Norway lost its ties with Denmark, and Finland with Sweden. Under these conditions, an increasing number of individuals, mostly among the educated, attempted to redefine their identity through new ties and loyalties. This redefinition was originally expressed through a 'revival' or in an altogether new combination of terms, ideas and attitudes inherited from the past.

The third factor to be considered is the privileged position of enlightened patriotism as a point of departure for the forging of new identities. Enlightened patriots placed themselves under the obligation to look after the wealth of 'their' region and its inhabitants. This obligation was translated into two essential activities: first, to look after the people's prosperity and education, and second, to study the region's culture, geography, language, habits, and

history. The first activity was the realm of politicians and bureaucrats while the second was the duty of enlightened scholars.

Many of these scholars became almost infatuated with the objects of their study, and the discovery of distinctive features or values intrinsic to their region and its people filled them with great pride. Since regional variations of language and culture lend themselves perfectly to separating groups of people, language and literature became favourite topics of research. If their subject was a non-dominant ethnic group, the scholars consciously defined the literary language, the borders and history of the nation-to-be. Not all scholars interpreted their object of research in relation to the crisis of identities, but those who did, regarded the inhabitants of their region as an important projection of solidarity and identity. Initially, Herder's ideas on the nation as a supreme value of Humanity were influential with regard to the definition of this new solidarity-group, in a later stage it was especially the concept of a nation as a community of equal citizens which gained ground. In some cases, the latent aversion of a province against the center, represented by the local Diat in the case of Hungary, also played an important role. Under such conditions, it was only a matter of the time before the enlightened patriots would begin their national agitation.

One more precondition had to be met if national agitation were to take off: only those intellectuals who regarded themselves as members of the 'nation', whether on the basis of ethnic, religious or land identity, could instigate the potential national agitation. This meant that only if some members of the non-dominant ethnic group were able or permitted to engage in higher education, they would be in a position to redefine their regional enlightened patriotism into a national identity. This was done by relishing the difference between "Us" and "Them" as an opportunity for mobilization, an approach which also included an increasing aversion of the non-privileged people (ethnic group) to the privileged (members of the establishment).

The transition from Phase A to Phase B of the successful national movement was usually a matter of different generations. It was the younger, educated generation – who regarded themselves as pupils of, successors to and opponents of the older generation of enlightened scholars and regional patriots – who were the pioneers of national agitation.

### III.

Now that we understand the driving force behind national agitation, we can focus on our second question: why did the national agitation successfully achieve mass support? It is clear, first of all, that starting national agitation was in itself not a guarantee for success, as is well illustrated by the failed national movement that was 'Illyrism', as well as the Welsh, Scottish, Serbian, and Byelorussian national agitation. Moreover, there are instances in which Phase B lasted for only three to four decades whereas in other cases it would take a century or more before mass support could be gathered.

In order to understand why and how certain nationalist movements gained support, we must compare the circumstances under which different movements developed and succeeded. Through this comparison, five groups of mobilizing factors and circumstances can be distinguished. No single one of these factors could in itself significantly influence national mobilization of the masses; it could only occur given the combination of two or more factors. The notion, implicitly included in many recent works on nation-building, that the nation is, above all, an invented construct produced by active transmission of 'nationalist' symbols, myths, celebrations and festivities does not stand up to the empirical data available.

1. The first factor to take into account is, obviously, the pivotal role of the imaginative 'nation-builders' and their personal commitment to the cause. Within any explanation of the success of national movements, there must be room for a consideration of the personal aspirations, fantasies, and creativity of its leaders. We should not neglect the 'structural' aspects of the position of the educated agitators either: their existence depended on the degree of vertical social mobility, and thus, the potential for social and educational advancement among members of the non-dominant ethnic group.

2. The role played by the educated elite obviously falls far short of fully explaining successful national agitation: the concept of the new national identity also had to reach its intended audience, the members of the *ethnie*. Here a second factor, the dissemination of information, comes into play. The basic precondition for this was a sufficiently dense network of social communication. This condition was independent of the agitators and could not be artificially modified or produced by them.

Several factors determined the intensity of social communication. Most importantly, it was influenced by the horizontal mobility of the population: the establishment of continuous contacts across domanian, municipal and provincial borders in the forms of seasonal labor, military service, the frequenting of local markets, etc. Obviously, stronger ties of communication developed between those who shared the same language or mutually understandable dialects (vernaculars). Another important factor was the literacy rate, which in turn depended on the school system. Contrary to what some have argued, the literacy rate cannot be seen as a simple consequence of increased economic prosperity. Due to the existence of a state school policy, for example, elementary schools became obligatory in Austria and Prussia earlier than in Belgium or England. In some other regions, however, economic backwardness was indeed accompanied by widespread illiteracy (Russia, Balkans).

Literacy became nationally relevant only where the new national identity entered the pages of journals and newspapers which were accessible to the members of the non-dominant ethnic group. Interestingly, this did not necessarily depend on the degree of constitutionalism. Authoritarian systems, such as the Metternichs in Austria or the tsars in Russia, for example, permitted the cultural activities of the Czech, Finnish and Estonian national movements. School attendance could also become nationally relevant when the school program included geography, history and literature, courses containing elements inherent to national identity. Since the schools were usually under state control, this information was selected and monitored by the ruling class to favor the state-nation or the ruling dynasty. From their side, the protagonists of national movements tried to achieve the opposite, thus making the struggle for the 'nationalization' of schools a central part of the demands of the national movement.

Besides schooling and literacy, we must not forget the importance of the 'classical' media of social communication which were facilitated by railways, postal services, shipping and roads. Accordingly, those national movements which began later, during the proliferation of rail lines and postal services, could more easily disseminate the national agitation. Yet, even these vehicles of social communication could only become tools of national agitation if the state system remained sufficiently tolerant towards the national movement and allowed it to print its demands and ideas, permitted the use of the vernacular language in education and constitutionally recognized patriotic societies. Social communication, then, was an important factor in the process

of forming a nation, but it could not be more than one of many factors facilitating it. Moreover, its role could be highly ambivalent, especially if improved communications intensified contacts with the center. In the case of Southern Wales, for example, a part of the territory inhabited by the Welsh *ethnie* was increasingly oriented, due to migration to the English industrial regions, towards the English state-nation.

3. The third group of factors facilitating the transition from Phase B to Phase C relates to a set of processes which can be summarized under the term 'modernization'. Contrary to what E. Gellner has argued, I do not wish to reduce these processes to industrialization, especially as no proof exists that industrialization was – in itself – a decisive force in the development of national movements. Only if we broaden our understanding of industrialisation to new forms of non-industrial manufacturing and to its indirect influence on food production and market relations, can we consider it as an additional favorable condition for the success of national movements. Note that the increasing social communication discussed in the previous section can be seen, to a certain degree, as a function of this process.

Another, perhaps more important, component of the modernization process can be found in the political sphere. Within certain contexts, the demands of the national movement could be grafted on the 'modern' political ideas of constitutionalism, freedom of speech, and the equality of all citizens, thus allowing national movements to present themselves as advocates of the more general idea of liberalisation. If the national movement demanded equality of languages, this could be presented as an aspect of the idea of the equality of citizens, or, *vice versa*, if linguistic demands included elements of civic freedom, these would also become more attractive to the population. From this perspective, one of the difficulties the Flemish movement had to deal with might have been that it developed under a constitutional and largely liberalised regime, so that its national program could not unambiguously be presented as part of the struggle for political liberalisation.

4. The fourth mobilizing factor is the existence of conflicts of interest that could be translated into national terms. Pioneers of any social movement claim the right to speak on behalf of the larger group they claim to represent, and feel entitled to develop and unite this group's interests into a coherent agenda. These interests need not necessarily be material in character; they could also be related to prestige and power. The existence of an overarching group interest requires that members of the group share the same fundamental

value system, have similar needs, and maintain at least a subconscious awareness that in satisfying those needs they are mutually dependent on one another. The overarching group interests presented by national movements was situated on the level of collective values shared (or needing to be shared) by the national community – insofar as these values could be related to ethno-cultural differences, in which case they could easily be translated into national terms.

Conflicts between different interest groups could acquire a specific nature if they coincided with a 'cultural division of labour', which means that one party within this conflict was composed out of members of the non-dominant ethnic group while the other consisted of members of the dominant *ethnie*, or representatives of the state-nation. Where cultural differences thus coincided with diverging social and economic interests national agitators could strengthen their case by presenting the social conflict as part of the national struggle. This connection can also be interpreted from the opposite perspective: differences between (parts of) ethnic groups often corresponded more or less to different group interests (or could be interpreted in this sense). Whichever was the case, the opinion emerged that the interests of one group, as it appeared within a specific conflict, represented the interests of the nation. The existence of such nationally relevant interest conflicts constituted a further factor in the nation forming process and were a further precondition for the success of national agitation.

The point I am trying to make can be best illustrated with some concrete examples of the most important conflicts of interest that could gain national importance. Only one among these was present in all national movements: the conflict between the privileged representatives of the state-nation and the protagonists of national movements themselves, who demanded real equality for the members of their ethnic group. This conflict was often combined with tension between the center and the provincial elite. In those places where Phase B proceeded under a constitutional system, the struggle for political power could also be regarded as an omnipresent nationally relevant conflict of interest. However, several other conflicts can be observed in different combinations only within certain national movements. The conflict between property owners and tenants (serfs) was translated into national terms in the Estonian, Latvian, Irish and some other cases. The Lithuanian, (West-) Ukrainian and Slovenian national movements used the tension between urban and rural regions in a similar fashion. In some cases artisans and small shopkeepers belonging to an ethnic minority felt threatened by the growing power



of industrial production and the market-dominance of members of the state-nation. More widespread was the conflict of interest which stemmed from the uneven opportunity for social ascension of the educated strata, a conflict which sooner or later (under conditions of mass movement) presented a mobilizing factor in nearly all national movements. The more of these nationally relevant interest conflicts a national movement could mobilize, the higher the degree of national mobilization it was able to achieve.

5. The fifth and final group of mobilizing factors is the 'external factor'. A wide variety of external forces could shape the success of national movements in different ways. The first of these forces could be the existence and behaviour of an external national enemy. By declaring national solidarity, protagonists of national movements contributed to the awareness of an opposition between "Us" and "Them". The Other, represented usually by the state-nation, was thus often defined as a national enemy and it was of great importance for the national movement in how far it really behaved as such. A second external factor was the support national movements could get from similar movements abroad. In Phase B, this support was mostly of a moral and ideological nature. The Finns enjoyed the moral support of their Magyar "brethren" (in the sense of the Ugro-Finnish concept), the Flemish movement received German support, and Slovenes and Slovaks were supported by the Czechs, who themselves developed the concept of austroslavism (as mutual support of Slavs living in Austria). The final external factor that needs to be taken in account is the behaviour of the European Great Powers – France, Great Britain, Russia, and (later) Germany. Most national movements which succeeded in achieving statehood depended on the support of at least one of these Great Powers. The Greek, Serbian, Bulgarian, Czechoslovakian, Polish, Finnish and Baltic states might have never come into existence if not for the support their national movements received from the Great Powers.

These five factors could be observed and proved in all national movements, some, however, occur in only some of them. Most, but not all, national movements used the common past and the loss of statehood as an argument in favour of achieving some acceptance. In some cases, we also find the myth of a common past and a common descent as integrating factors. Similarly, religion played an important role in national movements where the ethno-national border corresponded to the religious one. In these situations, national agitation could use religion as an important argument of national mobilization of masses. Very often but not always, there was the integrating role of the linguistic difference between the ruling and the non-dominant nation.

To conclude, we can say that the success of national agitation could not be achieved without, but did not depend exclusively on the personal commitment of "nationalists". Only by combining their commitment with factors which did not depend on their wishes and demands, can we understand and answer the banal, but very central question: why did they win?

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#### REFERENCES

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This article resumes conclusions of some older publications of the author, above all "Social Preconditions of National Movements", Cambridge UP 1985, and "In the National Interest. Demands and Goals of European National Movements of the Nineteenth Century: A Comparative Perspective", Prague, Charles University Prague 2000. Some other articles were published in German, Czech and Catalan.

### **Waarom hebben ze gewonnen? Vereisten voor een succesvolle nationale strijd**

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#### SAMENVATTING

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De auteur tracht de beslissende factoren voor het succes van nationale bewegingen in Europa te achterhalen. Hij onderscheidt twee niveaus. In de eerste plaats moet de vraag gesteld worden waarom patriotten inspanningen beginnen te doen om te vechten voor hun natie-in-wording. In de tweede plaats moet men zich afvragen wanneer deze nationale agitatie de steun van de massa bereikt. Op het eerste niveau bepaalt de auteur drie voorwaarden: de impact van de traditionele waarden van het religieuze gedachtegoed en het barokke patriottisme, de crisis van de oude identiteit en de erfenis van het verlicht patriottisme. Het succes van de nationale agitatie hangt af van het engagement van de voortrekkers. Hun toewijding kan de massa echter enkel aanspreken als er voldoende sociale communicatie voorhanden is (inclusief alfabetisering, relationele netwerken, sociale mobiliteit). De publieke aan-

trekkingskracht hangt ook af van de mogelijkheid om aan de belangenconflicten een nationale relevantie te geven. Daarnaast zijn externe factoren als het politieke regime en internationale voorwaarden (die gedomineerd worden door de belangen van de grootmachten) van belang.

### **Pourquoi ont-ils gagné? Conditions préalables pour une agitation nationale réussie**

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#### RÉSUMÉ

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L'auteur tente d'identifier les facteurs décisifs qui ont fait le succès des mouvements nationaux en Europe. Il distingue deux phases. En premier lieu, il s'agit de déterminer ce qui pousse les patriotes à lutter pour le devenir de leur nation. Dans un second temps, on peut se demander à quel moment le mouvement d'agitation nationale obtient le soutien de la masse. Selon l'auteur, trois conditions définissent la première étape: tout d'abord, l'impact des valeurs religieuses traditionnelles et le patriotisme baroque, ensuite la crise de l'ancienne identité, enfin l'expérience du patriotisme reçu en héritage. La seconde étape, à savoir le succès de l'agitation nationale, dépend de l'engagement des chefs de file. Leur dévouement à la cause ne peut attirer la masse que si la communication sociale est satisfaisante. Cette dernière inclut l'alphabétisation, les réseaux relationnels et la mobilité sociale. La force d'attraction envers la population jouera dans la mesure où une portée nationale peut être attribuée aux conflits d'intérêts. Ajoutons des facteurs externes tels le régime politique et les conditions internationales, évidemment dominées par les intérêts des grandes puissances.