

“Wretched Nurseries of Unceasing Discord”: Nationalism, War, and the Project of Peace*

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Is there an intimate connection between nationalism and war? Does the right to national self-determination invariably lead to bellicose relations with others? These have been central concerns in the literature on nationalism and war. They have also been concerns of political thinkers/activists who have worried about these connections and have sought to fashion a conception of national identity free of its warlike proclivities. This essay explores the link of war, nationalism, and national self-determination with reference to the founding of the state of Israel. And it reflects on the views of Martin Buber whose writings on Zionism constantly engaged these questions in searching for a peace-oriented nationalism.

“But what are nations? What are these groups which are so familiar to us, and yet, if we stop to think, so strange?”
— WALTER BAGEHOT, PHYSICS AND POLITICS (1872)¹

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¹ WALTER BAGEHOT, PHYSICS AND POLITICS: OR THOUGHTS ON THE APPLICATION OF THE PRINCIPLES OF NATURAL SELECTION AND INHERITANCE TO POLITICAL SOCIETY 83 (2nd ed. 2010).

“Dying for one’s country, which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur which dying for the Labour Party, the American Medical Association, or perhaps even Amnesty International can not rival.”

— BENEDICT ANDERSON, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES*²

“Israel’s function is to encourage the nations to change their inner structure and their relations to one another.”

— MARTIN BUBER, *ISRAEL AND THE WORLD* (1948)³

INTRODUCTION

The right to national self-determination is regarded by many as the precondition of many important values, such as the cultural flourishing necessary to the claims of individual and group identity. But alongside whatever blessings it has brought in modern times, that right and nationalism generally have brought unprecedented amounts of *warfare*. Sociologist of war Andreas Wimmer notes that nationalism “has provided the ideological motivation for the increasing number of wars fought in the modern era.”⁴ These conflicts have taken different forms. From roughly the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, nationalism was the framework by which entire populations were mobilized for the massive interstate wars that culminated in World Wars I and II. Nationalism allowed states to enlist the human and material resources of entire peoples, oftentimes in the name of securing more resources to pursue nationalist projects, as in the German/Japanese-initiated conflicts of World War II.⁵ Along with such interstate wars there have been two other forms of nationalist wars. One is wars of nation state *consolidation* where an existing state (or state-empire) contains different nationalities within it. The transition

2 BENEDICT ANDERSON, *IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: REFLECTIONS ON THE ORIGIN AND SPREAD OF NATIONALISM* 144 (rev. ed. 2006).

3 MARTIN BUBER, *ISRAEL AND THE WORLD* 170 (1948) [hereinafter: BUBER].

4 At the start of the 21st century, two thirds of all significant military conflicts involving more than 1000 people were driven by the claims of nationalism. ANDREAS WIMMER, *WAVES OF WAR: NATIONALISM, STATE FORMATION, AND ETHNIC EXCLUSION IN THE MODERN WORLD* 9 (2012).

5 On Germany and Japan, see NIALL FERGUSON, *THE WAR OF THE WORLD: TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONFLICT AND THE DESCENT OF THE WEST* 278–79 (2006). See also MICHAEL MANN, *THE SOURCES OF SOCIAL POWER V. 3: GLOBAL EMPIRES AND REVOLUTION, 1890–1945*, at ch. 14 (2012).

to a nation state involves privileging one group over others in ways that lead to repression, civil wars, or in the extreme genocide. Turkey’s genocide of the Armenians is a case in point. Another is wars of nation state *formation* where states are, as it were, grafted onto a previously politically amorphous region of jumbled nationalities. Post–World War I Middle East and post–World War II Africa are cases in point. But the lines between these types of conflict are blurry. Turkey’s consolidation into a nation state was itself an artifact of interstate war. The division of the Middle East into states was itself the result of interstate war and dictated by the perceived exigencies of future wars.

The link between nationalism and war has been noted and discussed by historians and social theorists. The two most prominent recent global histories of the 19th century devote extensive discussion to it—C. A. Bayly’s *The Birth of the Modern World 1780–1914*, and Jurgen Osterhammel’s *The Transformation of the World*.⁶ Political sociologists like Anthony Giddens and Michael Mann stress the connection.⁷ But I think that link has been minimized if not ignored by recent political philosophers of nationalism. It is not just that they do not address war as a central problem for nationalism, but what they say about nationalism does little to illuminate why it would be a problem.

Of course, it might be argued that there is no interesting connection here, that it is just a happenstance of history. But among those who have seen the link as deeply worrisome, we may identify two responses.

The more extreme view holds that nationalism and war have been twinned because nationalism is *inherently* bellicose. This is the view of our leading historian of war, Sir Michael Howard.⁸ Nationalism has been characterized “almost everywhere by some degree of militarism,” he writes. “Self-consciousness as a Nation implies, by definition, a sense of differentiation from other communities, and the most memorable incidents in the group memory usually are of conflict with, and triumph over, other communities. It is in fact very difficult to create national self-consciousness without a war.”⁹

6 See C. A. BAYLY, *THE BIRTH OF THE MODERN WORLD 1780–1914* (2004) (especially ch. 6, *Nations, Empire, and Ethnicity 1860–1900*, & ch. 8, *Imperial Systems and Nation States*). See also JURGEN OSTERHAMMEL, *THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE WORLD: A GLOBAL HISTORY OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY* (2014); ROBERT GILDEA, *BARRICADES AND BORDERS EUROPE 1800–1914*, at ch. 7 (1987).

7 Giddens stresses the “Janus-faced” character of nationalism as “generating both virulent forms of national aggressiveness, on the one hand, and democratic ideals of enlightenment, on the other.” ANTHONY GIDDENS, *THE NATION STATE AND VIOLENCE* 208 (1987). See also MANN, *supra* note 5; MICHAEL MANN, *FASCISTS* (2004).

8 MICHAEL HOWARD, *War and the Nation-State*, 108(4) *DAEDALUS* 101 (1979).

9 *Id.* at 102.

This is because nationalism's principal function has been to mobilize people for war and the nation state's source of legitimacy has been its success in war.¹⁰ To adapt a well-known phrase of Charles Tilly's, war made the nation state and the nation state makes war (Tilly goes so far as to argue that states are best understood as a type of "protection racket." They demand our allegiance by claiming to protect us from threats which they themselves create.¹¹) The upshot of this "bellicist" view is that to create a nation state is inevitably to pick a fight.¹²

The more measured view holds that the problem is not nationalism itself but the *type* of nationalism that has predominated. Yes, nationalism can be agonistic, but there is nothing about national identity *per se* that means it must be bellicose. It depends on the type of nationalism we adopt. Hence proponents of this view have contrasted what they see as the peace-like nature of more liberal individualist nationalisms with the warlike nature of more authoritarian collectivist nationalisms.¹³ But this seems implausible on its face. The exemplar given of good nationalism is almost always the United States of America, but its history is one of unrelenting warfare, so much so that a prominent history of it is titled "A Country Made by War."¹⁴ What, then, would a less bellicose, more irenic nationalism look like?

The importance of the problem is evidenced in how we respond to political conflicts today.

Consider the Israel/Palestine conflict. The arguments that I most encounter take the right to national self-determination as the starting point. They assume that if this right and its bearing on the situation can just be sorted out, then the conditions of a just peace will be clarified. But two other responses are suggested by the foregoing. What I've termed the extreme view says that the conflict is inevitable as long as it is framed in terms of nationalism/nation states. You can't make peace by dividing the region into nation states any more than you can make peace by dividing a neighborhood into street gangs. This whole framework needs to be scuttled. What I've termed the measured view

10 Two works that develop this theme are PHILLIP BOBBITT, *THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES: WAR, PEACE, AND THE COURSE OF HISTORY* (2011); BRUCE PORTER, *WAR AND THE RISE OF THE STATE* (2002).

11 Charles Tilly, *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*, in *BRINGING THE STATE BACK IN* (Peter Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer & Theda Skocpol eds., 1985).

12 I have discussed this view more extensively in Cheyney Ryan, *War, Hostilities, Terrorism: A Pacifist Perspective*, in *PACIFISM'S APPEAL: ETHOS, HISTORY, POLITICS* 11 (Jorg Kusterman ed., 2017).

13 See, e.g., LIAH GREENFELD, *NATIONALISM: FIVE ROADS TO MODERNITY* (1992).

14 See GEOFFREY PERRET, *A COUNTRY MADE BY WAR* (1990).

would hold that the problem lies in the type of nationalism at work and the type of state to which it aspires. So, what the conflict requires is a fundamental *rethinking* of nationalism and the nation state—from the standpoint of their disturbing connection to war.

This is not a new suggestion. A robust discussion of the problem occurred in the post–World War I era, after that war had so dramatized nationalism’s bellicose potential. It was central to the concerns of America’s greatest antiwar thinker, Randolph Bourne.¹⁵ But the most significant discussion was by figures of “emerging” nations, for this reason: prior to World War I, anti–imperialism was generally internationalist in perspective, but the “Wilsonian moment” that emerged from that war saw “national self–determination” become the rallying cry of anti–imperialist movements.¹⁶ But in the shadow of the Great War, this prompted debate about how—or whether—any nationalism could be free of the toxic elements it possessed in the West. This was the disagreement between India’s Rabindranath Tagore and Mohandas Gandhi. Tagore eventually arrived at the “bellicist” view, that nationalism and nation states were inherently warlike; he was especially influenced by the negative model of Japan. Gandhi argued that a more “accommodating” form of nationalism, which he felt was exemplified by India, could be an agent of nonviolence.¹⁷

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My reference point here will be the debate within the Zionist movement and especially the views of Martin Buber. Buber commends himself to our attention because in writings that spanned almost fifty years, as well as his own political activism, he championed a form of what I’ve termed the measured response. Like others, he was deeply impacted by the pathologies of World War I. Nationalism, he warned, is forever in danger of slipping into “power hysteria.” And so he maintained that if the Zionist project, or any nationalist project, is not to perpetuate the cycle of war, it must take seriously

15 RANDOLPH BOURNE, *WAR IS THE HEALTH OF THE STATE* (2015). How World War I posed the problem of the state for American thinkers of this era is discussed in CASEY BLAKE, *BELOVED COMMUNITY: THE CULTURAL CRITICISM OF RANDOLPH BOURNE*, VAN WYCK BROOKS, WALDO FRANK, AND LEWIS MUMFORD (2000).

16 See EREZ MANELA, *THE WILSONIAN MOMENT: SELF–DETERMINATION AND THE INTERNATIONAL ORIGINS OF ANTICOLONIAL NATIONALISM* (2007).

17 RABINDRANATH TAGORE, *CRISIS IN CIVILIZATION* (2002); ASHIS NANDY, *THE ILLEGITIMACY OF NATIONALISM: RABINDRANATH TAGORE AND THE POLITICS OF SELF* (1994). MOHANDAS GANDHI, *HIND SWARAJ AND OTHER WRITINGS* (Anthony Parel ed., 1997). Their debate is discussed in PANKAJ MISHRA, *FROM THE RUINS OF EMPIRE: THE REVOLT AGAINST THE WEST AND THE REMAKING OF ASIA* (2012).

the “creation of new forms” in which to realize our communal aspirations.¹⁸ But what would those forms be?

The starting point for such a rethinking of nationalism must be: Why has nationalism had such a toxic character? The next three Parts sketch an answer to this by exploring the historical relation of war, nationalism, and states. This is a huge topic, so my account will be schematic to the extreme. Problems are compounded, to say the least, by the fact that no one agrees on what “nationalism” is.¹⁹ Benedict Anderson observes that “Nation, nationality, nationalism—all have proved notoriously difficult to define, let alone to analyze.”²⁰ Eric Hobsbawm states bluntly that while attempts have been made “to establish objective criteria for nationhood, or to explain why certain groups have become ‘nations’ and others not ... [a]ll such objective definitions have failed.”²¹ But this is further reason for a historical perspective, to see how these notions have developed over time. In the final Part I turn to some of Buber’s ideas about what the nexus of war and nationalism means for crafting a non-belligose nationalism. Here, too, my remarks are just a starting point. My discussion will succeed if it encourages political philosophers interested in nationalism to delve more seriously into its troubling connection with war—and to ask what it would mean to escape it.²²

18 The impact of World War I on Buber and his views on nationalism is detailed in MAURICE FRIEDMAN, *MARTIN BUBER’S LIFE AND WORK: THE EARLY YEARS 1878–1923* (1983). Buber’s critical perspective on nationalism developed at exactly the same time as his conception of the I–Thou/dialogic perspective.

19 Classic discussions of nationalism include ANTHONY D. SMITH, *NATIONALISM: THEORY, IDEOLOGY, HISTORY* (2013); ERNEST GELLNER, *NATIONS AND NATIONALISM* (1983).

20 ANDERSON, *supra* note 2, at 3.

21 They tend to be flatly circular. Hobsbawm endorses Masaryk’s definition of nationalism as “any outlook that treats the nation as the highest political value.” But this just defines “nationalism” in terms of “nation.” ERIC HOBSBAWM, *NATIONS AND NATIONALISM SINCE 1780*, at 10, 12 (2nd ed. 2012).

22 An overview of the nationalism/war problem is Stephen van Evera, who notes that “strikingly, the impact of nationalism on the risk of war has barely been explored”. Stephen van Evera, *Hypotheses on Nationalism and War*, 18(4) *INT’L SECURITY* 5 (1994). The entry under *Nationalism and War* in Louis Snyder’s 435–page *Encyclopedia of Nationalism* fills only two pages, and its bibliography lists no works focused on the topic. LOUIS L. SNYDER, *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF NATIONALISM* 248 (1990). The connection of nationalism and war has received more attention in the post–Soviet era. See Jack Snyder, *Nationalism and the Crisis of the Post–Soviet State*, 35(1) *SURVIVAL* 5 (1993); Barry R. Posen, *The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict*, 35(1) *SURVIVAL* 27 (1993).

I. DEBATING ISRAEL’S VIABILITY

To frame things, let me begin with some of the debates around the founding of Israel in 1948 that raised the problem of nationalism and war. I shall mainly reference the debate within the United States since I know more about it. But I will assume it echoed debates within the Zionist movement itself.

A decisive factor in affirming the international legitimacy of the State of Israel in 1948 was recognition by the United States.²³ But it was a matter of intense disagreement within the United States government, even after the United Nations General Assembly voted for the partition of Palestine. Indeed, it was one of the sharpest internal disputes of that era. At its center was George Marshall, who had been Chief of Staff of the American military in World War II and credited by Winston Churchill as the chief organizer of the Allied victory. After the war, Marshall was appointed Secretary of State by President Harry Truman, a role for which he is best remembered as the author of the Marshall Plan for postwar reconstruction, which garnered him the 1953 Nobel Peace Prize.

Marshall strongly opposed the partition of Palestine and United States recognition of the State of Israel, favoring instead a continued trusteeship for Palestine working towards some form of binational state. In this he was following the advice of the United States State Department and its senior figures Loy Henderson, George F. Kennan, and Dean Rusk (later Secretary of State under Kennedy and Johnson). I set aside an important factor here, namely that the State Department was traditionally the most anti-Semitic branch of the government, to focus on the arguments advanced. Henderson and the others maintained that the United States had no prior obligation to the creation of a Jewish state. The Balfour Declaration and the Mandate provided only for a Jewish national home. But their principal concern was the right to national self-determination. They held that it counted as much if not more against the creation of a Jewish state given the Arab population of Palestine. Moreover, the proposed Jewish state would be, in the words

23 U.N. Res. 181 (Nov. 29, 1947) was a nonbinding resolution recommending the partition of Palestine. The violent resistance it immediately generated from Arab states led many countries, including the United States, to reconsider abiding by the resolution. Israel declared itself a state on 14 May, 1948, the day before the expiration of the British Mandate. The United States’ subsequent recognition of it was crucial to its gaining international legitimacy. Israel was admitted as a member state of the United Nations on May 11, 1949.

of Loy Henderson, a “theocratic racial state” of a kind that conflicted with America’s liberal commitments.²⁴

Finally, there was the larger issue of carving out new states. The post–World War I settlement had sought to recognize the claims of nationhood by creating new states and readjusting borders to fit national groupings. This was generally felt to have been a disaster, engendering the conflicts that led to World War II. So the post–World War II settlement was generally committed to keeping existing borders in place. (There is a parallel with the Westphalian settlement: just as the latter took religion off the table as a source of conflict, the post–World War II settlement sought to take borders off the table.) So, there was a strong *prima facie* case for keeping the existing state of Palestine intact. True, the post–World War II settlement involved the partitions of some previously unitary states, most notably Vietnam, Korea, and India. But Vietnam’s partition was meant to be temporary, and the leaders of both North and South Korea saw its partition as temporary as well (a fact that led to the Korean War). The partition of India/Pakistan is the closest parallel, but the massive conflicts it portended were the background to the aforementioned debate between Tagore and Gandhi.

But Marshall, the former general, was swayed by military concerns. He focused on these in the decisive meeting with President Truman in the Oval Office on 12 May, 1948, a meeting vividly described in the memoirs of Truman’s main political advisor Clark Clifford, in a chapter titled “*Showdown in the Oval Office*.”²⁵ Marshall’s objection was, in sum, that a Jewish state was not militarily viable. It would be set upon by Arab enemies from all sides, for which Marshall did not believe it had the manpower or weapons to defend itself. He worried that, in his words, it would “come running to us for help,” assistance which the United States was in no position to provide (given the costs he anticipated of the Marshall Plan). The creation of a Jewish state would lead to “untold troubles in the future” which, if the United States endorsed it, would entangle it in “long–term international difficulties.” The concern with untold future troubles made perfect sense for someone who had just overseen America’s World War II effort.

Truman had asked Clifford to make the case for a Jewish state. Clifford stressed the moral case for a Jewish state in light of the Holocaust. He went on to stress that this was an area where “there is not now and never has been any tradition of democratic government, it is important for the long–range

24 FRANK W. BRECHER, *AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AND THE ISRAELI WAR OF INDEPENDENCE* 177 n. 73 (2013).

25 My discussion draws on CLARK CLIFFORD & RICHARD HOLBROOKE, *COUNSEL TO THE PRESIDENT: A MEMOIR* (1991).

security of our country, and indeed the world, that a nation committed to the democratic system be established. The new Jewish state can be such a place.”²⁶ I think he could have made three further points. Marshall’s worry about “endless troubles” should be balanced against the fact that the history of the Jewish people was *already* one of endless troubles, so what was Marshall’s alternative? Moreover, the worry about the viability of a new Jewish state should be balanced against the fact that the viability of the existing Palestinian state was already in question, given the designs of Transjordan.²⁷ Finally, the *prima facie* case for existing borders needed balancing against the fact that the Middle East borders were basically recent artifacts of Western imperialism without the weight of history behind them.

Marshall, a famously even-tempered man who had weathered the vicissitudes of World War II calmly, concluded the meeting beside himself with anger. According to Clifford, his last words were ones of “barely contained rage,” and constituted “the most remarkable threat I ever heard anyone make directly to a President.” He stated, “If you follow Clifford’s advice and if I were to vote in the election, I would vote against you.” But Truman announced his support for the creation of a Jewish state the next day.²⁸

Marshall’s objection regarding the viability of the proposed state has been forgotten by Americans and perhaps others. One reason may be that his worries about Israel’s fate were refuted in the short term. The standard explanation is that he simply misjudged the balance of forces. The number of Israeli troops committed to battle on the eve of the Arab invasion was about

26 *Id.* at 7.

27 The ruler of Transjordan, Abdullah I bin Al-Hussein, hoped to create a Greater Syria that would include Syria, Lebanon, and the British Mandate for Palestine as well his own country, to be ruled by a Hashemite dynasty. Less than a week before the 1948 war, he is reported to have told Golda Meir, then a prominent figure in the Jewish Agency, “Why are you in such a hurry to proclaim your state? Why don’t you wait a few years? I will take over the whole country and you will be represented in my parliament. I will treat you very well and there will be no war”. He immediately occupied the West Bank at the outbreak of war, leading his country to be renamed Jordan. See EFRAIM KARSH, *THE ARAB-ISRAELI CONFLICT* 51 (2002).

28 See AHRON BERGMAN, *ISRAEL’S WARS: A HISTORY SINCE 1947*, at 22 (4th ed. 2016):

Declaring a state was a bold and courageous move, given the threat of Arab neighboring states to prevent by force the establishment of a Jewish state, even on that part of Palestine which had been allotted to the Jews by the UN. It also seemed, at the time, a suicidal move, given that US Secretary of State George Marshall had warned the Jews that America would not consider itself responsible for the consequences of their declaring a state and would not ‘bail you out’ if attacked by Arab neighbors.

equal to those of the Arabs, but as the conflict progressed Israeli numbers grew dramatically while Arab numbers increased only slightly. The same held for resources where the balance would tip in favor of the Israelis. Israel also had the traditional advantage of interior lines of communication. Finally, he underestimated the power of Israeli nationalism as a motivating factor.²⁹ But Marshall would seem to have been *right* in the long term: the creation of the new state did lead to endless “troubles” and the new state’s reliance on American assistance. Here too, he underestimated nationalism, specifically the power of nationalism to provoke opposing nationalisms thus motivating further conflict.

Indeed, it was the question of nationalism that led some in the Zionist movement to agree with Marshall’s viability concern. Those worries dated back to the 1920s. This was the wing of the movement associated first with Brit Shalom and later the Ihud party, founded in 1942 by Judah Leon Magnes, Martin Buber, and other former supporters of Brit Shalom. They feared that endless conflict would result if Zionist aspirations failed to take the proper form.

For Martin Buber, it was the prospect of such conflict that raised the questions: What *kind* of nation did Zionism hope to achieve, and what *kind* of state? He saw the viability question as an ancient one. In a 1934 essay, “*The Jew in the World*,” he wrote: “The striving for security is familiar to us from the history of the ancient Hebrew state” given how it was “[w]edged between Egypt and Babylonia, the two great powers of the ancient Orient.” And there have always been different responses to it. In a later essay, “*False Prophets*,” he sharply contrasted two of them.³⁰ One was to “overcome geographic political insecurity by employing power politics,” i.e., by playing by the existing rules of the game. He identified this with the “false” prophet because it promises what it cannot possibly achieve by staying within the procedures of power politics. On the contrary, its solution to the survival of the people (which are nothing more than “motley illusions”) will only result in the degradation of their soul.³¹ The “true” prophet understands that the terms of the problem must be reassessed, most importantly the question of what it *means* to be a “nation.” Buber felt that Zionism was in a unique position to pose this question because its ambiguous status *as* a nation had always been central to the identity of Judaism. Israel had never fit into the two categories most frequently invoked in attempts at classification: nation and creed. From

29 As Benny Morris notes, the Israeli effort was driven by a spirit of commitment and sacrifice in sharp contrast to that of the Arab forces. BENNY MORRIS, 1948: A HISTORY OF THE FIRST ARAB–ISRAELI WAR (2008).

30 These essays are in BUBER, *supra* note 3.

31 *Id.* at 117.

his first encounters with Zionism in 1918, Buber insisted that his conception of Zionism “knew nothing of a Jewish state with canon, flags, and medals.”³² But how should an alternative form of the “nation” be conceived?

I shall return to Buber’s positive recommendations and how they compare to those of like-minded thinkers like Gandhi who have taken the problem of war and nationalism seriously. But first I want to address the historical background to the war–nation state nexus. I begin with the viability issue and how it first arose prior to the nation state as part of what has been termed the *threshold problem*. From this arose a *threshold dilemma*—that anticipated some of the problems Buber and other perceived in modern nationalism. I then offer a sketch of the relation of nationalism and war starting in the 19th century.

II. THE THRESHOLD PROBLEM

Political philosophers often talk of both “nations” and “states” as if their meaning were unproblematic.³³ The following aims to provide some historical perspective on each.³⁴

A. War, Peace, and the Dynastic State

The threshold issue first appeared in the era of the *dynastic state* that preceded the nation state (roughly 1650–1815). It followed the wars of religion of the 16th–17th centuries whose massive social upheavals impressed upon the ruling classes the need to constrain war, at least in the European continent. This was the aim of the Westphalian settlement and the conception of public international law to which it gave rise. But it was also the era in which the state *per se* became the dominant political form, and Europe acquired its distinctive character as a society of multiple contending states. What was the nature of this “state”?

To begin with, sovereignty in the dynastic state was vested in a traditional ruling family. Hence wars were inordinately about matters of succession. This defined the distinctive relation between the ruler and the territory and

32 From a letter to Stefan Zweif, *cited in* FRIEDMAN, *supra* note 18, at 227.

33 I think this reflects the reification of the “nation state” that occurred in 20th century and most notably after World War II.

34 Along with the aforementioned works by Hobsbawm, Giddens, Mann, Bobbitt, and Porter, my discussion draws on CHARLES TILLY, *COERCION, CAPITAL AND EUROPEAN STATES* (1992); JOHN BREWER, *THE SINEWS OF POWER: WAR, MONEY, AND THE ENGLISH STATE, 1688–1783* (1989).

the population ruled. The territory was conceived as basically the private possession of the ruler. (The term “state” derives from the ruler’s “estate.”) And the population was conceived as basically the ruler’s tenants. So, there was no strong natural affinity between rulers and their territory/population, any more than there is a strong natural affinity between landlords and their property/tenants. A territory and its population mainly served as sources of wealth for rulers. Plus, a ruler’s territory could be scattered in different places, just as any property owner’s holdings can. While some states had a modicum of geographical coherence due to how they emerged, others did not. There was no assumption as there is today of a single unified country.

War as we know it emerged when conflicts between princely landowners over property rights (of their estates) were transformed into conflicts over commercial and security interests (of their states).³⁵ There was no presumption that wars were about higher “values.” The success of the dynastic state, indeed the triumph of the state as an institution, rested on a kind of bargain between the monarchs and the nobility, or more generally the possessors of substantial wealth. The latter provided money and resources for the waging of war, primarily to hire soldiers, in return for the monarch’s providing security. “Rights” against the state initially emerged as concessions granted by the ruler in return for war resources.³⁶ This is the first variant of what I have elsewhere termed the “war contract.”³⁷ Today we think of the “government” and the “state” as the same thing. But the rise of the state via this logic involved the *appropriation* by the state of government functions that were previously dispersed and localized. As Anthony Giddens notes, prior to the nation state the state did little governing. Its principal business was making war, which is why theorists of the dynastic state identified sovereignty first and foremost with the “war power.”³⁸

As noted above, the problem after the religious wars was how to maintain a modicum of peace in such a system. War was bad for commerce, the principal

35 The purely commercial nature of warfare was acknowledged in Benjamin Constant, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*, address at the Royal Athenaeum of Paris (1819), in *POLITICAL WRITINGS* (Biancamaria Fontana ed., 1988), where he wrote that war and commerce “are merely two different ways of achieving the same end — namely, coming to own what one wants to own.”

36 See Charles Tilly, *Where Do Rights Come From?*, in *COLLECTIVE VIOLENCE, CONTENTIOUS POLITICS, AND SOCIAL CHANGE: A CHARLES TILLY READER* 168 (Ernesto Castañeda & Cathy Lisa Schneider eds., 2017).

37 Ryan, *supra* note 12; CHEYNEY RYAN, *THE CHICKENHAWK SYNDROME: WAR, SACRIFICE, AND PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY* (2009).

38 GIDDENS, *supra* note 7, at ch. 4.

concern of the state, plus it generated social unrest from below.³⁹ One solution was to remove religion from political conflict by making it the decision of each individual ruler. Liberal political philosophies have made much of this, too much in fact. The so-called religious wars were as much about which political form, empire or states, would prevail in Europe; their harshness was not just due to sectarian passion but also to purely military concerns such as the need of armies to pillage the populace just to survive.⁴⁰ In any event, the main solution was found in the notion of the “balance of power.” European states were constrained in waging war against other European states by the equal strength of any state they would attack. This was not a collective security regime in which all states respond to the actions of an aggressor. Rather, it was one in which the potential aggression of any particular state was checked by the potential response of any state it might attack.

This was the origins of the threshold principle, because it meant that, insofar as rulers of every state shared an interest in constraining war, they shared an interest in having the power of all states being roughly equal. This is crucial for understanding the attitude towards borders at the time. The legitimacy of dynastic states rested mainly on custom, just as the legitimacy of property claims generally rested on customary possession. But borders were constantly *redefined* so as to maintain the balance of power. Even if a losing state had obviously been in the wrong, the resolution of the conflict would not subtract territory from it if it upset the general balance of power. Thus, states sometimes *gained* territory after losing wars and they sometimes *lost* territory after winning them. This explains why the principle of “self-defense” played so little role compared with today. Conflicts around borders were conceived as akin to civil disputes in law. The question of who initiated the dispute, i.e., who attacked first, was of little consequence in judging the fair resolution of the dispute, where maintaining the balance of power was a primary concern. All of which explains why wars between European states were measured affairs (wars against non-European peoples were another matter). Wars cost money that had to be raised, wars were best fought by minimizing the number and extent of battles, and their stakes were limited: they were not about existential survival, as they would become in wars between peoples, but about access

39 This is the place to recommend as relevant to all my discussion of the state, GIOVANNI ARRIGHI, *THE LONG TWENTIETH CENTURY: MONEY, POWER AND THE ORIGINS OF OUR TIMES* (2010).

40 See WILLIAM T. CAVANAUGH, *THE MYTH OF RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE: SECULAR IDEOLOGY AND THE ROOTS OF MODERN CONFLICT* (2009); KAREN ARMSTRONG, *FIELDS OF BLOOD: RELIGION AND THE HISTORY OF VIOLENCE* (2014).

to ports, allocations of fishing rights, or trivial matters of dynastic prestige, such as who cut off the ear of Captain Jenkins.

B. The Threshold Dilemma

The transition from the dynastic state to the nation state began with the American Revolution and the founding of the United States. The logic of that founding can be understood as a response to what I'll term the *threshold dilemma*.

This dilemma was first identified by the 18th-century republican theorists that influenced America's founders. It was central to Montesquieu's anxieties about the capacity of republics to survive.⁴¹ It can be posed as the tension between self-governance and security. Insofar as a republic is defined by self-government, Montesquieu assumed that its *political* viability required that it be small enough so that citizens could be "present to each other" in the ways that self-government required. But this raised problems about its *military* viability insofar as such smallness meant it was forever vulnerable to the threats around it. To survive, then, it had one of two options. It could become heavily militarized, which for Montesquieu meant that the populace had to be imbued with the martial virtues. But this required a homogeneous citizenry that would regard any significant differences as threatening society's very survival—hence it would tend to be consumed by paranoid threats from within. (Alexander Hamilton spoke of becoming "wretched nurseries of unceasing discord."⁴²) The other option was to expand capacities, but this would only provoke endless conflicts in response—and paranoia about threats from without. Joseph Schumpeter provided a classic account of this logic with Rome, which might remind us of today's United States: "Rome was always being attacked by evil-minded neighbors, always fighting for a breathing space. The whole world was pervaded by a host of enemies, and it was manifestly Rome's duty to guard against their indubitably aggressive designs." Hence there was "no corner of the known world" where Rome was safe from attack—and its fighting "was always invested with an aura of legality."⁴³

And so, as Montesquieu put it, "If a republic be small it is destroyed by a foreign force, if it be large it is ruined by internal imperfection."⁴⁴

41 My discussion of republicanism is greatly indebted to DANIEL H. DEUDNEY, *BOUNDING POWER: REPUBLICAN SECURITY THEORY FROM THE POLIS TO THE GLOBAL VILLAGE*, at ch. 3 (1977).

42 THE FEDERALIST No. 9 (Alexander Hamilton).

43 JOSEPH SCHUMPETER, *IMPERIALISM AND SOCIAL CLASSES* 51 (2007).

44 DEUDNEY, *supra* note 41, at 88.

The American Revolution gave birth to *civic* nationalism, whose participants called themselves “patriots” (after the republics of antiquity) and for whom the nation was a *political* entity, something constituted and constantly reconstituted by the commitment of the people to shared political values. Nationalism as liberty, equality, and fraternity conceived itself as a participatory alternative to the hierarchical ordering of dynastic states and to the endless wars of those states. (Republicans like Kant in “*For a Perpetual Peace*” diagnosed war as the result of irresponsible, ambitious monarchs indifferent to its costs for society as a whole.) For figures like Thomas Paine, such nationalism was *anti-war*; America’s founders called it a “peace nation.” Hence the threshold dilemma was a serious concern. They were aware of Montesquieu’s skepticism about a republic’s surviving. After all, the Colonies had only achieved their independence by the intervention of France. Plus, they were concerned about the dangers of “corruption”/political degradation posed by militarization, which they identified with the “standing armies” of dynastic states. Indeed, opponents of the Constitution, the “Anti-Federalists,” advanced arguments paralleling those of Buber later that if the country became just another state it would relapse into the endless warfare of the European continent.⁴⁵

The most penetrating discussion was by Alexander Hamilton, the principal author of the *Federalist Papers*.⁴⁶ The heart of his argument, as I read it, was to distinguish the questions of government, the state, and sovereignty. I have alluded to today’s penchant for equating the government and the state. Hamilton distinguished them by identifying the government as the instrument of self-rule and the state as the instrument of self-protection.⁴⁷ The threshold dilemma, then, can be recast as the tension between the government and the state, the one identified with shared participation, the other with centralized violence. How to keep them in proper balance? One response to the dangers posed by the state was to decentralize violence by relying on popular militias and an armed citizenry. This was the “Anti-Federalist” solution. But Hamilton felt it was inadequate to the problem of outside threats. His further solution was two-fold.

One was federalism. Combining into federation meant that the states would be strong enough together to survive external aggression but independent

45 My discussion here is influenced by *id.*; DAVID C. HENDRICKSON, *PEACE PACT: THE LOST WORLD OF THE AMERICAN FOUNDING* (2003).

46 THE FEDERALIST No. 3 (Alexander Hamilton).

47 The distinction between the government and the state is implicit in IMMANUEL KANT, *ON PERPETUAL PEACE* (Ian Johnston trans., Brian Orend ed., 1957) (1902). It is now standard in peace literature. *See, e.g.*, JONATHAN SCHELL, *THE UNCONQUERABLE WORLD: POWER, NONVIOLENCE, AND THE WILL OF THE PEOPLE* (2004).

enough from each other to withstand internal corruption. The other solution was popular sovereignty. There is also the penchant today to identify sovereignty with the state, but this is not how Hamilton and others conceived things. Popular sovereignty means that the powers of the state are accorded to it by the citizenry as a whole and on the condition of their proper exercise. And one of those conditions is that the powers of the state *not* be used provocatively—to engender unnecessary conflicts with others. Hamilton was concerned that his country prevail in just wars. But he was equally concerned that it not provoke unjust wars. “The number of wars,” he wrote, “is in proportion to the number of their causes, whether real or pretended.” The problem of avoiding *needless* wars was central to the project of popular sovereignty.

In that regard, the project failed. The reasons are complex, but an important one was present from the start. For civic nationalism, the nation as a political entity derived its legitimacy from the consent of the people. But, starting with the American Revolution, that consent has been seen as most evidenced in the willingness of people to fight and die for it. Michael Walzer gestures towards this in his discussion of state legitimacy when he writes: “The moral standing of any particular state depends upon the reality of the common life it protects and the extent to which the sacrifices required by that protection are willingly accepted and thought worthwhile.”⁴⁸ And from this it has been a short step to the notion that war can be a *good* thing in affirming civic commitment. Thus, the American Republic, founded as a “peace nation” in 1789, found itself invading Canada two decades later to start the War of 1812, in a fit of nationalist frenzy.⁴⁹ By then, the identification of civic nationalism with martial sacrifice had been carried to even further extremes by the French Revolution and its “nation in arms.”

III. WAR, NATIONALISM, AND THE NATION STATE

The political settlement following the Napoleonic Wars reinstated the dynastic state but alongside the nationalism generated by that conflict. This gave rise to a century-long conflict over which principle would prevail—the dynastic or the nationalist—that was finally settled in 1918 with the demise of the last dynastic empires. And in the course of this, nationalism changed. The nationalism-driven imperialism waged by Napoleon gave rise to *counter*-nationalisms throughout Europe. Influenced by Romanticism, these assumed

48 MICHAEL WALZER, *JUST AND UNJUST WARS* 54 (1977).

49 An engaging discussion of this war is MICHAEL R. BESCHLOSS, *PRESIDENTS OF WAR: THE EPIC STORY, FROM 1807 TO MODERN TIMES*, at ch. 3 (2018).

an increasingly cultural form; i.e., the “nation” changed from a purely political entity to a cultural entity for which language became its privileged marker as the principal inheritance of some (largely mythical) past which the nationalist project would reclaim and nurture. This dramatically transformed ideas about peoples, territories, and borders. Territory became the “country,” or the “land,” with which the nation’s “people” had deep—to the point of spiritual—affinities. Borders, previously conceived as fluid products of political bargaining, now acquired a strong emotional resonance where “violating” the country’s borders was akin to violating the person of a loved one (typically one’s mother).

So, if civic nationalism identified legitimacy with the fact that its members choose it, *cultural* nationalism, in construing nationhood as an inheritance, identified it with the fact that its members were chosen—beholden to the community of which they were a part. Nationalism of this sort was most championed in countries intent on catching up with the leading industrial states of their day—Belgium, Germany, Italy, Poland, and Hungary. This defined how the threshold problem was now understood. A nation had to be viable enough to hold its own against the larger states, especially those still hostile to the nationalist principle. This is why national identity was *not* regarded as sufficient to warrant one’s own state, even by nationalism’s most vocal proponents. The term “Balkanization” referred to nations that were too small to survive on their own. French republican Garnier–Pagès wrote in 1843 that it was “ridiculous” that Belgium and Portugal should be independent nations. When Mazzini drew up his map of the future Europe in 1857 it included barely a dozen states. The stakes were evident in the debate over Ireland. Arch-nationalists like Mazzini and Cavour opposed an independent Ireland because they regarded it as insufficiently viable for statehood. John Stuart Mill, whose views were a mixture of liberalism and Romanticism, endorsed Irish independence on the grounds that British oppression had generated a sufficiently strong spirit among them.

I think what we would now recognize as a full-fledged nation state only came into existence later in the 19th century, as nationalism became the reigning ideology of the major industrial states. The two main examples were Germany and the United States, both consolidated as nation states by wars. Its foundation was a new variant of what I have called the war contract, in which the notion of nationality was central. As Wimmer writes,

Increasing state centralization and military mobilization led to a new contract between rulers and ruled: the exchange of political participation and public goods against taxation and the military support by the population at large. The idea of the nation as an extended family of political loyalty and shared identity provided the ideological framework

that reflected and justified this new compact. It meant that elites and masses should identify with each other and that rulers and ruled should hail from the same people.⁵⁰

This is generally linked to late 19th-century imperialism, which generated conflicts within Europe that reinforced exclusivist nationalism in conflicts outside of Europe that reinforced ethnic nationalism.⁵¹ The result was what has been termed *organic* nationalism, where individuals were conceived as appendages of some larger national organism, itself construed in Social Darwinist terms. This identified legitimacy with something like submission to a pregiven destiny. Viability became a matter of growing or dying as the threshold principle was construed in purely relativist/militarist terms: one needed to be big enough to ward off any potential adversaries, meaning one could never be big enough.

Two world wars were, in key respects at least, basically conflicts between nation state empires generated by this logic. I see World War I as resulting from the hyper-paranoia this logic invariably produces. Germany was convinced that everyone was surrounding it, Russia was convinced that others were encroaching on it, etc. (Great Britain was motivated by its more traditional policy of maintaining a balance of power in Europe.) World War II saw the last attempt by a country (Germany) to found an empire in Europe, along with Japan (a paradigm case of reactive nationalism) seeking an empire in Asia, both clashing with the existing empires of Great Britain and the United States.

I have already contrasted the post-World War I and post-World War II political settlements. The first exalted the right to national self-determination, but without a clear sense of how the nation and the state should correspond. In contrast to the post-Napoleonic Wars settlement which decreased the number of states, the post-World War I settlement multiplied them by trying to match state borders to nations. This proved impossible given the crazy quilt situation, and the resulting instability did much to lead to World War II. It did so, in part, by inflaming the nationalisms of the disappointed powers Germany, Austro-Hungary, and for somewhat different reasons Italy and Japan. The post-World War II settlement on the one hand confirmed the nation state as the hegemonic political form while at the same time being quite skeptical of nationalism itself; indeed, it generated a relentlessly negative literature on nationalism in political philosophy, which saw fascism as its natural end

50 WIMMER, *supra* note 4, at 4. See also Ryan, *supra* note 12.

51 On the intimate relation of nationalism and late 19th-century imperialism, see BAYLY, *supra* note 6, at 230.

product. Hence, priority was now given to the state in holding that borders be kept in place and nations moved to fit them, if needed.⁵²

IV. BUBER, NATIONHOOD, AND PEACE

This historical sketch gives credence to Sir Michael Howard’s insistence on a link between war, nationalism, and the nation state. I do not think it shows that nationalism is inherently warlike because it suggests that nationalism is not inherently *anything*. But insofar as we can talk of nationalism as playing a consistent political function, we see, as Howard suggests, that its bellicosity reflects how it has served to differentiate communities in competitive/hostile ways and has served to mobilize people for war, more successfully than any previous idea including religion. At the very least, this shows that political philosophers of nationalism need to take the nationalism–war nexus seriously.

But why can’t nationalism serve to differentiate groups in cooperative/amicable ways? Why can’t it serve to mobilize people for peace? Such questions are sharpened by the fact that the one type of nationalism that has conceived itself as peace–like, civic nationalism, has proved anything but in my view. At the very least, the problems with civic nationalism are reason to consider other responses to the nationalism–war problem. Let me conclude with some remarks on one of them, Martin Buber’s.

Buber begins with the question of why nationalism has been so bellicose, emphasizing two points.⁵³ The first is its reactive nature, what he speaks of as arising from a sense of lack that needs to be filled. He seems to have in mind here the nationalism that has inspired states seeking to catch up with what

52 The relatively homogenous “nation states” that would become the reference point of political theorizing after World War II were mainly the result of genocides and forced population transfers that started during the war, if not before, and continued in the postwar years. Tony Judt writes, rather ironically,

Since 1989 it has become clearer than it was before just how much the stability of post–war Europe rested upon the accomplishments of Josef Stalin and Adolf Hitler. Between them, and assisted by wartime collaborators, the dictators blasted flat the demographic heath upon which the foundations of a new and less complicated continent were then laid.

After the war, the main group transferred was Germans. TONY JUDT, *POSTWAR: A HISTORY OF EUROPE SINCE 1945*, at 9 (2005).

53 My account of his views draws on the essays in BUBER, *supra* note 3. See also A LAND OF TWO PEOPLES: MARTIN BUBER ON JEWS AND ARABS (Paul Mendes–Flohr ed., 2005). His politics are extensively discussed in FRIEDMAN, *supra* note 18; PAUL MENDES–FLOHR, *MARTIN BUBER: A LIFE OF FAITH AND DISSENT* (2019).

they perceived as more advanced states. Such nationalism has a competitive dimension that Buber identifies with a kind of resentment. The second point is how it has sought to compete/catch up with others: by creating a strong state capable of defending/asserting claims against other states. Nations do not just want to be on a par with others, they want to be equal as political powers. The first point suggests that identity will be competitive as long as it is comparative, as long as national self-consciousness rests on comparing itself with other nations. Somewhat ironically, Buber characterizes this nationalism as a form of assimilationism, meaning any true identity will ultimately be lost—"true identity" being one that comes from within oneself rather than from the outside. But the main problem pertains to the second point, nationalism's aspiration to political power construed as the possession of its own state.

Buber provocatively frames the problem here in terms of a conflict between the false prophet and the true prophet.⁵⁴ The preoccupation with political power, of nationalism with statism, characterizes the *false prophet*. Buber has in mind the political Zionists he opposed from the start of his involvement with Zionism, but posing it as he does implies that the problem is an ancient one. The concern of the *true prophet* is not power but "revelation." A feature of Buber's thought is problematizing the notion of "power" itself; this is one of the many ways his thinking parallels Gandhi's.⁵⁵ But what does it mean to contrast it with "revelation"? Two things. One refers to the previous point about how a community conceives of its identity. For Buber, the identity of the Jewish people always rested on a calling that stands at the center of its religious faith. The other refers to the nature of that calling, which is an ethical one. In the terminology employed above, we might characterize Buber's nationalism as a form of cultural nationalism but where the defining feature of the culture is a form of ethical self-consciousness.

At the heart of that self-consciousness lies the principle of *dialogue*. It is a significant fact about Buber, important for understanding both aspects of his thought, that he arrived at the I-Thou/dialogue principle at exactly the same moment as he was first engaging with the question of good and bad nationalism.⁵⁶ If we had to summarize his conception of "good nationalism," it would be one grounded on the principle of dialogue. But left there, it is hard to see much difference between this and civic nationalism whose contractualist underpinnings also privilege talking to one another. But I think Buber's notion of dialogue is quite different. This, too, is not easy to summarize, but we might begin by noting that for Buber dialogue is first and foremost not a

54 See Martin Buber, *False Prophets*, in BUBER *supra* note 3, at 113.

55 See Martin Buber, *Plato and Isaiah*, in BUBER *supra* note 3, at 103.

56 FRIEDMAN, *supra* note 18, at 178–231.

way of talking with others, but a way of *being* with others (he often remarks that dialogue does not require words being said).⁵⁷ He characterizes this way of being with others as being responsive to others, available to others, open to others, etc. What these all suggest is that being in dialogue with others is being at peace with others. For civic nationalism, the dialogue is one that occurs within one’s own national grouping. For Buber, dialogue achieves its highest expression with one who is outside one’s own community. The others to whom one is responsive, available, or open are truly *others*, which is one reason for Buber why dialogue is so truly difficult. A nation founded on dialogue is first and foremost one that is at peace with other nations.

Gandhi held similar views, which he put in terms of nonviolence. India had to put nonviolence at the center of its national identity for otherwise it would become just another warlike enterprise. Now the response to all this will be: Isn’t this profoundly *unrealistic*? Isn’t the idea of nationhood built around peace/nonviolence just a lot of woolly-eyed idealism? Buber has a lot to say about the nature of “realism” in such matters. My own view is that appreciating the durability of the nationalism–war nexus compels us to envision radically new types of nationhood if we are to escape this endless cycle. (Every form of new political thinking is initially dismissed as woolly-eyed idealism, including that of the first nationalists.) In any event, the problem Buber raises was no different than Alexander Hamilton’s, hardly a utopian dreamer. It is a variation of the threshold dilemma: how does a community secure its physical safety without losing its political soul? Hamilton’s response was not unlike Buber’s in saying that a first priority must be fashioning a non-agonistic form of sovereignty that does not result in endless fights with others.

CONCLUSION

As I write this, there is much talk of a revival of nationalism under the name of “populism”, by which is meant nationalism in its most toxic, bellicose form. It is hard to resist the conclusion that believers in nationalism’s inherently warlike nature have been basically right, and that proponents of an irenic nationalism have been basically naïve, however admirable their aspirations. This seems to argue for scuttling the notions of nation/nationalism/national

57 MARTIN BUBER, *I AND THOU* 31–32 (Ronald Gregor Smith trans., 1958):

Only silence before the Thou—silence of all tongues, silent patience in the undivided word that precedes the formed and vocal response—leaves the Thou free, and permits man to take his stand with it in the reserve where the spirit is not manifest, but is. Every response binds up the Thou in the world of It.

self-determination, yet this has proved exceptionally difficult to do both practically and theoretically. My own view is that part of the problem has been the failure to take war seriously enough as a problem in its own right. Ideals of community are sketched, then the problem of war is addressed as an afterthought. So we must begin with a thought we find in Buber and like-minded thinkers like Gandhi—that the first requirement of a political community is to be at peace with others.

Buber himself ended up profoundly disappointed that his vision of a Jewish homeland was rejected. But he resisted the despair of like-minded friends like Hans Kohn who left the Zionist movement after concluding that its direction would lead to ceaseless conflicts with Arabs. Despite his rejection of Zionism “built in blood,” he accepted the new State of Israel in what he termed a “politics born of faith.” As he wrote in a 1932 essay, “*If Not Now When?*”

We make peace, we help bring about world peace, if we make peace wherever we are destined and summoned to do so: in the active life of our own community and in that aspect of it, which can actively help determine its relationship to another community. The prophecy of peace addressed to Israel is not valid only for the days of the coming of the Messiah. It holds for the day when the people will again be summoned to take part in shaping the destiny of its earlier home; it holds for today.⁵⁸

58 BUBER, *supra* note 3, at 239.