Introduction

If the proverbial alien from outer space were to be placed, suddenly and unprepared, on the plaza overlooking the Western Wall in Jerusalem, what would he/she/it conclude about the prevailing political situation? One distinct ethnoreligious group would be seen beneath the wall, mourning their destruction and degradation against a meager ruin of what was clearly once a mighty structure. While above them, the location of what was, and indeed still is considered the holiest place in their religion was under the control of another ethnoreligious group, dominated by a glorious gold-plated dome enjoying its 14th century of existence on that spot. Which group would be presumed to be in control of the surrounding territory? Which would be presumed to have the larger army? Which would be presumed dominant, and which dominated?

Viewed in this light, the continued centrality of such a symbol to Israeli and Jewish national identity appears paradoxical. Indeed, one of the first acts of Israeli authorities upon conquering the site along with the whole of Jerusalem's Old City in the 1967 Six Day War was to raze 135 houses in the quarter immediately adjoining the Western Wall, summarily evicting its 650 inhabitants, so that a vast plaza could be constructed, comparable to the sort that a state might build to showcase a national cathedral or public building, so that Jews could mourn their powerlessness and degradation in larger numbers and relative comfort.[1] There is little question that this remnant of the Second Temple complex, destroyed by the Romans during the Judean revolt in 70 C.E., remains Judaism's holiest site – arguably the only holy place universally recognized

[1] Wasserstein 2001: 329–30.

as such in the otherwise iconoclastic Jewish religion – as well as Israel's most important national symbol. The only site that has ever contested this latter designation is Masada, the location of the last battle of the Judean revolt against the Romans that ended in 73 C.E., which prior to 1967 had been adopted as secular Zionism's most significant and inspirational monument.[2] A booklet titled "Facts About Israel," published in English by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, summarizes the Masada story as follows in a chapter titled "Roots":

> Nearly one thousand Jewish men, women and children who had survived the fall of Jerusalem refused to surrender to Rome. They took over King Herod's fortress on the steep rock-mountain of Masada by the Dead Sea. For three years they managed to hold their own against repeated Roman attempts to dislodge them. When the Romans finally broke through, they found that the Jews had committed suicide so as not to surrender to the enemy.[3]

No one, either within the national tradition or outside of it, would dispute that these are both symbols of defeat. Despite efforts made within the national mythology to transform military defeat into moral victory, both symbols represent a moment when history, according to the normative values of the national ideology, took a wrong turn, yielding disastrous results that would endure for centuries afterward and that the nation exists to reverse.

Israel is not the only nation that places such symbols at the center of its national mythology. The battlefield of Kosovo Polje is the most important symbol to the Serbian national ideology, and the battle that took place there in 1389, considered to be the moment when the Serbian Empire was defeated by the Turks, leading to five centuries of subjugation under the Ottoman Empire, is its most powerful national myth. The day of the battle, June 28 – St. Vitus' Day (Vidovdan) – is the Serbian national holiday, and Kosovo is frequently referred to in political discourse as the "Serbian Zion" or "Serbian Jerusalem."[4] According to the mythic narrative, the leader of the united Serbian forces, Prince Lazar Hrebeljanović, willingly chose to face death fighting against impossible odds rather than submit to Ottoman domination, though the betrayal of one of his key allies, Vuk Branković, was nonetheless a pivotal cause of his defeat. However, before the battle was over, Ottoman Sultan Murad I was killed by a heroic Serbian knight, Miloš Obilić, who was himself killed in the attempt. The

[2] Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983: 158.
[3] Quoted in Ben-Yehuda 1995: 13.
[4] Perica 2002: 8.

defeat led directly to the subjugation of the Serbs under Turkish rule, which they endured for centuries to follow. Virtually any expression of Serbian nationalism, even if it does not directly involve the territory of Kosovo, expresses itself in the language and symbols of this national myth, and appeal to the myth has proven to have tremendous potential for political mobilization at numerous points in modern Serbian history, up to the present day.

Other cases can be found in which the image of defeat, though perhaps less central or overtly commemorated in monument and ritual, nonetheless plays or has played a crucial role in the national construction of history and memory. In France there are, or were during key periods of national mobilization, multiple symbols of universal appeal, if contested meaning, that generated a sense of spiritual victory and moral fortitude out of a moment of political failure and martyrdom. The most enduring and iconic is Joan of Arc, burned as a heretic at Rouen. As Robert Gildea has observed, despite the divided nature of French political culture, with the cult of the Revolution cutting across that of the united nation, virtually all manifestations of French national expression throughout the modern period have had to come to terms with Joan of Arc as their symbolic representative: the royalist, republican, and revolutionary; the Catholic and the anticlerical; even the fascist and the communist.[5] Other symbols of defeat, less contested because they were less central, also came to be elevated in French national consciousness at around the same time, including the epic hero Roland, killed by a horde of Saracens defending Charlemagne's empire, and the historical defeat of Vercingetorix, ruler of the Gauls, at the hands of Caesar's Roman legions.[6]

It has long been recognized that Greek national identity is divided between two sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary, narratives: the classical model, which associates modern Greek identity with the civilization of the ancient city-states focused on Athens, and the Byzantine model, which connects it to the medieval Christian successor to the Roman Empire centered on Constantinople. As Greek nationalism coalesced into the ideology known as the "Great Idea" toward the end of the 19th century, the moment of the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453 developed into a unifying image, elevated as a focal point in folklore, literature, and constructions of historical memory, one that retains at least some of its salience even today.

[5] Gildea 1994: 154, 165.
[6] Schivelbusch 2003: 142–6, 166–7.

Although the key martyr–hero figures of Czech national mythology, such as Jan Hus and St. Wenceslas, are identified with the high points of sovereignty and cultural achievement of the Kingdom of Bohemia, the Battle of White Mountain of November 8, 1620, the moment identified as the final defeat of the kingdom at the hands of the Habsburg Empire – along with the cruel public execution of 27 Protestant Czech aristocrats that followed in Prague's main square, and the "300 years of darkness" that ensued for the Czech nation as a consequence – nonetheless holds a prominent and crucial place in the construction of Czech national history.

Examples can be found, as well, among nations that do not enjoy state sovereignty. France's loss to Britain in the Battle of the Plains of Abraham on September 13, 1759, the decisive battle that brought Quebec under British control, provided a later Québécois nationalism a moment from which the struggle to maintain political and cultural sovereignty for a distinct French-Canadian nation could be dated. And the Catalan national movement adopted September 11 as their national day, the date of the fall of Barcelona to the forces of Philip V in 1714, marking the final incorporation of Catalonia into a united Spain under Castillian rule. This moment is described by Montserrat Guibernau as one of the two most emotive historical events for Catalan national consciousness, the other being the War of the Reapers (1640–1652), another national defeat that inspired the Catalan national anthem, *Cant dels Segadors*.[7]

Commemorations and narratives of national defeat display wide variation. Some will be marked in time by national days commemorating pivotal battles, elevated into recurring rituals of the civic calendar such as *Vidovdan* for Serbia or *La Diada* for Catalonia. Some are commemorated in space by means of monuments or landmarks, such as Masada or the battlefield of Kosovo Polje. Some are commemorated through historical or literary narrative, such as in the epic–poetic tradition surrounding the Battle of Kosovo or the fall of Constantinople. Any of these mechanisms for commemoration may be sufficient to elevate a defeat myth to a point of centrality in the national construction of history and identity, though no single one is necessary. Indeed, there are numerous cases in which a sense of tragic defeat pervades national history and identity, without the need for its being localized and commemorated through a specific moment, place, or narrative. Poland's sense of being a "crucified nation," associated primarily with the era of partition, does not

[7] Guibernau 2004: 30; Balcells 1996: 13.

require the elevation of any particular battle or tragic hero,[8] nor does the Arab conception of a period of "stagnation," nor does the Chinese notion of "centuries of humiliation." The Hungarian national anthem is rife with allusions to a nation torn apart "for our sins" by multiple enemies, besieged by "Mongol's arrows" and beaten under "the Turks' slave yoke"; and Slovak history, in turn, contains a pervasive sense of subjugation to Hungarians.[9]

National defeat myths are not restricted to a particular region nor to nations with a particular common antecedent. Beyond Europe and the Judeo-Christian framework, we find, in Ghana, the figure of Nana Yaa Asantewaa, often explicitly described as an African Joan of Arc,[10] and the war that she led as the last failed rebellion of the Asante against British colonial rule. In India, images of various heroes such as Shivaji Maharaj and Lakshmibai, the Rani of Jhansi – depicted as having heroically fought ultimately unsuccessful wars against Muslim or British conquerors – have been known to mobilize either national, regional, or religious–communal sentiments, depending on how they are interpreted and presented. And in Mexico, Peru, and other nations of Latin America, the sense of continuity with the defeated civilizations of the Mayas, Aztecs, and Incas rests uneasily with the reality that modern Latin American culture is actually a hybrid between that of the conquered indigenous peoples and their Spanish conquerors.

Myths of defeat can manifest in figures as overtly legendary as Roland or the Latvian epic hero Lāčplēsis, or as scrupulously historical as Yaa Asantewaa. Nor can these memories be said to stem from the common experience of a particular historical era. The destruction of the Temple and the fall of Masada took place in antiquity, as did the defeat and death of Armenian tragic hero Vardan Mamikonian at the hands of the Sasanids at the battle of Avarayr in 451. The fall of Constantinople and the battle of Kosovo Polje took place in late medieval times. The Battle of

[8] The concept of the "crucified nation," in the Polish case along with others, is examined in Davies 2008.

[9] Although the centrality of the defeat motif to the construction of history and identity for such nations serves to further highlight the widespread salience of the phenomenon, the lack of empirical material resulting from a relative lack of concrete focal points for commemoration hinders any detailed examination of these as case studies, further to constructing an explanatory model.

[10] For example, in the *Daily Mirror*, June 5, 1950 (cited in Boahen 2003: 115); Asirifi-Danquah (2002: vii) identifies her as well with "Boudica (leader of the British struggle for independence from the Roman Empire), and Ida B. Wells (leader of the crusade against racism in the U.S.)."

White Mountain and the fall of Barcelona occurred in the early modern period. The Ghanaian national myth refers to a defeat suffered during the colonial period at the turn of the 20th century, and Arab and Palestinian nationalisms mobilize around a sense of grievance symbolized by defeats that occurred within the last century.

Both insiders to these nations and scholars examining particular national traditions tend to view this phenomenon as a trait exceptional to the nation in question. But how many of these exceptions must we encounter before we consider that what we are observing is, in fact, a common phenomenon demanding a common explanation?

Contrary to the expectations of both liberalism and Marxism, nationalism, at the beginning of the 21st century, remains one of the most powerful social and political forces in the modern world. It remains the basis of relations within the international system, even as states seek closer economic and political ties in an age of globalization. It has spread to every country in every part of the world, both as a movement of self-assertion against existing distributions of power and as the most compelling basis for state legitimacy. It is perhaps a testament to the pervasiveness of nationalist thinking that the immense power of symbols of defeat in national ideologies is widely recognized, yet there has been little critical inquiry into the reasons why such symbols should wield such power. Why would a national ideology, whose purpose is to reinforce the strength and legitimacy of the nation and its efficacy as a means to identity and political autonomy, mould itself around an image of conquest and humiliation?

Speaking specifically about the importance of Kosovo to Serbian identity, Ernest Gellner, in his last book on the subject of nationalism, recognized the immense problems involved in settling an ethnic dispute in which such symbols were a factor. "Can a nation be expected to separate itself from a piece of land which witnessed its greatest national disaster, even if that land is now largely inhabited by aliens?"[11] Indeed, the problematic nature of such a symbol of national disaster is so obvious to the reader that there is no need for Gellner to explain this point any further; a fact that is itself of interest, as it indicates the extent to which we have internalized the nationalist hierarchy of values. It would be considered unusual, indeed pathological, for an individual to revere and idealize memories and symbols of a past trauma. The expected individual response would be repression. Why, then, do we not presume that

[11] Gellner 1997: 105.

a nation should be similarly inclined to repress moments of defeat from its collective memory and to distance itself from the symbols and territories associated with those defeats? Instead, we take it as a given that such symbols and territories are more likely than any others to acquire a sacred quality to the national ideology, and that it is over such symbols and territories that even avowedly secular national movements are most likely to come to blows. Why should this be so obvious?

Ironically, it is often individuals within the national tradition who have confronted this question more critically than do scholars studying nationalism as a phenomenon. Rachel Yanait Ben-Zvi, an early Zionist leader and the wife of Israel's second president, on a visit to the Western Wall in the 1920s, reacted against the mourning, fasting, and lamentation she observed, given the implied resignation, passivity, and expectation of divine salvation that conflicted with Zionist values. "A desire to cry out to the wall in protest against the weeping arose within me," she wrote, "... to cry out against the unfortunate verdict of fate: no longer will we live in the land of destruction, we will rebuild the ruins and regenerate our land."[12] Milovan Djilas once lamented, in a more general sense, the Serb tendency to glorify their defeats. "A strange destiny to be an unlucky people with a great spirit. A people who reckon their defeats as victories ... A people who sing songs of their defeats. That is the Serbian Idea. A song of misfortune. How long must it be so?"[13]

This work examines the question of why so many nations elevate symbols signifying their own defeat to the center of their national mythology. It is argued that this is a phenomenon that distinguishes nationalism and the nation as a modern ideology and form of social organization, as opposed to earlier and coexisting modes of cultural identity. What's more, these symbols enable the nation to compete with other forms of identity construction insofar as they successfully resolve basic human psychological dilemmas of the sort that any social system must in some way address. Under certain conditions, such myths can even serve as the very signifiers that give the system its structure and meaning and, therefore, the principal test distinguishing insiders from outsiders – the foundation myths of the nation.

Examination of the pivotal role of images of defeat in the mythology, symbolism, and civic ritual of many nations will serve to highlight and to at least partially fill a key gap in the literature on the study of nations

[12] Quoted in Liebman and Don-Yehiya 1983: 54.
[13] Quoted in Cohen 2001: preface.

and nationalism, relating to the centrality of violence and sacrifice to the maintenance of the nation as a form of social order. It is therefore necessary to examine and develop current theories of nations and nationalism at length before the question is to be satisfactorily answered. One of the key points of contention in the study of nationalism is the question of whether the nation is a recent construct, the product of a uniquely modern configuration of social forces, or whether it is dependent on continuity with durable ethnic antecedents. This work offers its own contribution to the debate, and the answer it offers, in short, is: yes. Yes, the nation is a wholly modern construct; and yes, it is dependent on continuity with premodern constructs. In framing my answer in this way, I am not claiming that these two views are reconcilable, nor am I attempting to find a "middle ground" between them. They are two mutually contradictory positions, and yet they are both, in their own ways, completely true. Hence we are left with the nation as a construct burdened with an inherent contradiction, and the strength of a given nation therefore lies in the extent to which the mechanisms that serve to resolve this contradiction are psychologically satisfying. I argue that the elevation of the defeat myth is a product of its unique ability to address this dilemma in the context of modern nation building.

It is my view that the prominence of such symbols first demonstrates the efficacy of theories that place mechanisms of sacrifice at the center of social order but also, more to the point, serves as a convenient way for nations in particular to manage the function that the sacrificial mechanism provides, essential to the cohesion of any social system or communal identity. Although not necessarily the only way, the unusual convenience of this method tells us something about the construct of the nation as it differs from other forms of social organization. Nations are modern entities, yet most identify as being in continuity with ancient predecessors. Images of defeat are able to resolve this apparent contradiction, rationalizing the notion necessary to the nationalist construction of history that current and ongoing national mobilization reflects continuity with a primordial but dormant ethnic solidarity, while at the same time resolving psychological ambivalence toward heroic symbols of the earlier, prenational cultures with which the modern nation identifies; symbols that serve simultaneously as ideals encapsulating the goals and values of the nation, and as obstacles to the modern, horizontal configuration of power necessary to a distinctly national form of social organization.

It is not my contention that a narrative of defeat is an essential element to nationalism or to the nation, insofar as there are many nations that

do not place such symbols in a central role in their mythology and some that do not possess or commemorate them at all. However, it would be difficult, at this time, to discern any particular subset of nations most conducive to the phenomenon, as the elevation of symbols of defeat appears to occur across a vast diversity of nations at all points along the standard spectra of classification in the field. If a subset of nations conducive to the elevation of defeat had to be defined, it would conform to the "ideal-type" nation; those that are the most direct products of the very modernizing forces that ultimately served to transform the construct of the nation into the prevailing mode of sociopolitical organization on a global scale. It might therefore be more appropriate, at the conclusion of this work, to narrow the field by specifying subsets of nations that do *not* and would not be expected to significantly commemorate defeat because of their particular circumstances in relation to these modernizing forces.

For the purpose of this work, "defeat" will be defined narrowly to include only those myths or symbols that serve to commemorate a moment at which the nation, or a predecessor community with which the nation normatively identifies itself in continuity, suffered or is perceived to have suffered a military conquest represented as a historical turning point leading directly to a period of subjugation or domination, the effects of which are seen as enduring to at least some degree up to the present day. Note that it is *perception* that is key to the definition. As we will examine further, in many if not most cases, a valid historical argument could be made that the event in question was not in fact a pivotal defeat of long-term significance. The French were able to retake Paris only a few years after Joan of Arc's execution, and there remains an open debate among historians as to the actual outcome and immediate political significance of the Battle of Kosovo. What is important, however, is the pervasive if subjective impression threaded through the national tradition that these stand as symbolic moments of national weakness and subjugation. This would, however, still exclude images relating to lost battles or other military sacrifices viewed as part of a process culminating in victory. Hence, memories such as the Battle of Yorktown and the Alamo would not qualify, important though these are to American national mythology. Although such symbols may serve a similar functional purpose of commemorating and reinforcing national sacrifice or as images of violation, particularly for societies that do not commemorate defeat as such,[14] they

[14] See, for example, Roshwald 2006 (89–97) for discussion of the role of the Alamo as a pivotal image of sacrifice for Texan and American national mythologies.

nonetheless fall outside of the specific scope of this study. The same holds true for images relating to genocide and other instances of victimization not perceived as turning points in terms of their effect on the status of the community's self-determination, though again the function of such symbols within a national mythology as images of national sacrifice may be similar. The Holocaust and the Armenian genocide are not perceived as moments of transformation from a state of sovereignty to one of subjugation by their respective communities but serve rather to starkly reinforce a sense of ongoing, centuries-long defeat and subjugation. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, though certainly commemorated in the United States as a day of national victimization, galvanizing sacrifice and solidarity, are not perceived as moments of defeat, at least not according to this definition.

Neither is this work part of a recent literature examining the "culture of defeat,"[15] which explores the mythology and culture that develops in a nation as a consequence of the immediate and current experience of defeat and subjugation, such as in Germany after World War I. Indeed, many, if not most, of the nations examined in this work stand in positions of regional power, their political autonomy and independence of action fiercely defended. All the more reason why the centrality of images of conquest and humiliation to their mythology and identity appears paradoxical. It is my view that such symbols, even when so narrowly defined, are sufficiently common in national mythologies (in contrast to other forms of social organization), and unusually so (in the sense that, where such symbols are central to a nation, they can be shown to have been elevated in importance during the process of nation building and their meanings altered considerably as the group has morphed from an ethnic community into a national identity wedded to a political program) that an examination of this particular category of symbols has the potential to offer unique insights into "the nation" as a general concept.

The first section of this work develops a theory of symbols of defeat, based on theoretical antecedents. Chapter 1 sets the groundwork from the existing literature on the theoretical study of nations and nationalism, primarily drawing from the discipline of political sociology. Chapter 2 explores the religious function that nations and their myths serve to fill in the context of modernity, developing a model to explain how symbols of defeat, in particular, contribute to resolving basic human dilemmas that enable the sort of social cohesion and mass mobilization the nation

[15] For example, Schivelbusch 2003.