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0521367131 - The National Question in Europe in Historical Context - Edited by Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter

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The historical impact of national movements in Europe has been dramatic and continues to be an issue of major importance. This volume by leading historians discusses authoritatively the national question in Europe in its historical context.

The national question is not of course a specifically European phenomenon, but for reasons of space and intelligibility coverage has been limited geographically. The aim is that the essays should attract readers interested in a historical problem that has been difficult to encompass theoretically and to deal with practically. A glance at what is being shown or written in the media with regard to national and ethnical issues demonstrates the validity of this aim, not only with regard to the multinational former Soviet Union or former Yugoslavia in eastern Europe, but also (for example) to the four nations of the British Isles or binational Belgium in the West.

This volume forms part of a sequence of collections of essays which began with *The Enlightenment in national context* (1981) and has continued with *Revolution in history* (1986, 1987), *Romanticism in national context* (1988), *Fin de siècle and its legacy* (1990), *The Renaissance in national context* (1991), and *The Scientific Revolution in national context* (1992). The purpose of these and other envisaged collections is to bring together comparative, national and interdisciplinary approaches to the history of great movements in the development of human thought and action.

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THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN
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THE NATIONAL
QUESTION IN EUROPE
IN
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

EDITED BY

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IN view of the unforeseeable events in the late autumn of 1989 we may like to think of the contributions on the countries in eastern Europe as documents in their own right. Except for some revision by Walter Schmidt in mid-December 1989 and by Heinrich August Winkler in early 1991, the 'Eastern' authors left their texts unchanged. We should like to express our heartfelt appreciation to them, as well as to the other contributors, for their patient understanding of the delay in the appearance of this volume. For one thing, we had great difficulty in commissioning translators willing to undertake the challenging task of rendering texts originally written in Czech, German and Hungarian into English. For another, the prospective author on Spain withdrew, after repeated postponements over a period of at least two years. In this connection particular thanks are due to Simon Barton for accepting the invitation to contribute to the volume at very short notice indeed. Our colleagues (and contributors to previous volumes) Clarissa Campbell Orr, Alice Teichova and Joachim Whaley have helped to oversee manuscripts and translations for which we are truly grateful. Again we renew sincerest thanks to William Davies of the Cambridge University Press for consistently supporting the purpose of the sequence we are editing. Thanks are due also to Frieda Houser from the Academic Unit of the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine for her considerable help with correspondence, and Gillian Law for her copy-editorial suggestions.

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INTRODUCTION

MIKULÁŠ TEICH AND ROY PORTER

THE purpose of the sequence of collections of essays that we are editing is to bring together comparative, national and interdisciplinary approaches to the history of great movements in the development of human thought and action. Among them, by any reckoning, the historical impact of national movements has been immense, and it is the awareness of the enduring significance of the national question that leads us to offer a volume in which it is discussed authoritatively by specialist historians. It goes without saying that the national question is not a specifically European phenomenon, but for reasons of space and intelligibility the volume deals with the national question in a limited number of European countries. Reflecting recent research and ever-changing patterns of interpretation, the volume focuses on the role, underestimated time and again, of the national question in European history.

Our aim is that this collection should be of use to students of history as well as to a wide range of readers interested in a historical problem that has been hard to encompass theoretically and to deal with practically. A glance at what is being written in the contemporary press or shown on the screen, regarding national and ethnical issues, demonstrates the validity of this aim, not only with regard to the multinational former Soviet Union or former Yugoslavia in eastern Europe but also (for example) to bi-national Belgium or to the four nations of the British Isles in the West. Their 'stormy, often bloody history', from the Celtic beginnings to the present, is discussed by Victor Kiernan. In the concluding part of his essay, after giving the histories of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland a balanced, critical consideration, Kiernan writes warningly:

All today face complex difficulties; in a sense the most acute national problem of all is whether England itself can be expected to survive in any recognizable shape, physical or moral; not so much on account of issues of race and creed arising with the new ethnic minorities, residues

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of the days of empire, as of an unwholesome social-economic structure, and with it reckless fouling of air, water, landscape, culture. Wales and Scotland will not do England any good by continuing their actual relationship with it. That conservative blockages stood in the way of home-rule-all-round early in this century must be regretted. There are, at the same time, valid objections to a complete break-up; the world is quite sufficiently Balkanized already, and the conventional state, which evolved primarily for military purposes has become an anachronism, a cumbrous suit of armour for any nation to have to wear. Wales and Ireland, like Brittany or Catalonia, have proved that nationality, pride in ideas, feelings, memories, not shared by others, can live on unsupported by a state, and even in spite of efforts by a state power to banish it.

Questions such as what is meant by a nation have been repeatedly asked. Among the older treatments of major impact was *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* by the renowned French orientalist and historian of religion Ernest Renan. Though given as a lecture at the Sorbonne as far back as 11 March 1882,¹ it is still of interest to the historian, not least because of Renan's influential attempt, grounded in historical idealism, at systematic critical analysis of the phenomenon 'nation' – 'an idea, clear on the surface but lending itself to serious misunderstandings'. According to Renan, these arose from endeavours erroneously to attribute to nations, racial, linguistic, religious or physiographical connotations. Instead Renan conceived of a nation as a spiritual human community, endowed with a past and also a desire (wish) to uphold it through a day-to-day vote of confidence – *un plébiscite de tous les jours*. In Renan's terms this was a metaphor for the use of which he – curiously – apologized to the audience. While it has often been quoted, his further observation that nations are by no means eternal entities has hardly been commented on. It deserves to be cited:

Nations are not something everlasting. They have a beginning, they will have an end. Probably a European confederation will replace it. But this is not the law of the century in which we live. At the present time, the existence of nations is a good, even necessary thing. Their existence is a guarantee of liberty which would be lost if the world had only one law and one master.

Thirty years later a professional Georgian revolutionary travelled to Vienna, the imperial capital of a monarchy in the throes of national(ist) confrontations, to look for an answer to the very question posed for Renan. Here the primary concern with *Marxism and the National Question* (1913) is not that it was authored by Joseph Stalin,²

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neither is the historical and political context that had put its stamp on this work of particular moment. Rather the interest lies in the common ground, accepted by both Renan and Stalin when identifying the issues, and in the dissimilar conclusions they came to. Thus Stalin, like Renan, stressed that 'a nation, like every historical phenomenon, is subject to the law of change, has its history, its beginning and end'. He also examined the national question in systematic terms and to some extent looked at the same categories as Renan (race, language, religion, geography). But developing a materialist analysis, Stalin had arrived at a different answer than Renan: 'A nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture.'

From non-Marxists and, after Stalin's demise, also from Marxists this definition has come under strong criticism, the gist of which has been that there is more to a nation than the five canonical attributes he proffered. More in what way? After recently exploring the theme afresh, the Marxist Eric Hobsbawm has concluded that 'no satisfactory criterion can be discovered for deciding which of the many human collectivities should be labelled [as a (or the) nation]'.³ The point is made, especially if the inclination is to propound a normative concept of the nation, and in absolute terms to boot. In a sense what underlies Hobsbawm's rejection of Stalin's analysis is a shift in methodology. Like other contemporary Marxist writers, Stalin believed in the applicability of procedures in investigating nature to the social domain. This found reflection in his Linnaean-type classification, as it were, for a definition of what constitutes a nation. To Hobsbawm, writing seven decades later, such an exercise in classification of a social phenomenon appears distinctly simplistic and hence inadequate.

While a few contributors to this volume refer directly or indirectly to Renan and Stalin, they pay on the whole scant attention to the numerous general publications on the national theme that have appeared during the last twenty-five years or so.⁴ Overall the perspective of the authors of the essays in which assorted 'national questions' come under concrete scrutiny is different: concrete in the sense that the writers direct factual attention at the political, military, economic, social, linguistic, territorial and other aspects of the national question in the countries under review, including their relationship and historical role. Although, or perhaps because, the contributors in their effectively particular case histories vary in their approaches, emphases and chronological reach, certain pertinent points for scholarship in this area emerge.

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In a recent short piece, imaginatively entitled 'Were the English English?' Rodney Hilton has raised the question whether positive feelings of 'Englishness' existed in medieval England.⁵ Writing very cautiously, he believes that they surfaced by the time of the Anglo-Scottish border wars, and the Anglo-French wars; they were growing into something like national wars. Not surprisingly, Douglas Johnson in this volume also notes that the awareness of 'Frenchness' is discernible after the English invasion of 1415: 'The idea that one should be prepared to die for one's country . . . Patriotism was still linked to religion and to the idea of a virtuous death. It could be local or regional or restricted to a segment of society. But it had also become national.'

In the Middle Ages the growth of sensibility for national 'otherness' did not necessarily depend on warfare. Take the case of the Czech Lands, reviewed here by Arnošt Klíma. There it began to make itself felt in Czech noble and Church circles in the eleventh century. They did not like or approve of the disproportionate influence of German clergy in Church affairs. The happening that reinforced and in fact heightened 'Czechness' was the mass influx of German-speaking settlers during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. As a result of these population movements compact German-speaking areas were established in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia. The descendants of the settlers participated in turn as players, victors and victims in events of world historical significance that paved the road to Munich in 1938 and their expulsion from the Czech Lands after 1945.

In England, France, the Czech Lands and, for that matter, also in Hungary (Emil Niederhauser) and Poland (Jerzy Tomaszewski) varieties of ethnic/national sentiment existed in the Middle Ages. What about Germany? It is the (East) German contributor Walter Schmidt, dealing with the German case, who discusses the issue from the Marxist standpoint. Accordingly, he views the Reformation and the Peasant War in Germany as early stages of the bourgeois revolution which was defeated during 1517–25 with far-reaching negative consequences for the growth of German national sentiment. The transformation of what Schmidt calls 'the medieval feudal German nationality' into a bourgeois German nation was halted, not least because of the ensuing German territorial state fragmentation, also acknowledged by the (West) German historian H. A. Winkler in his contribution as a profoundly nefarious factor in the German national development.

During the last few years before the reunification, historians in the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) and in the German Democratic

Republic (GDR) were deeply involved in debating the problem of German national identity. It is obvious that, although the issue stemmed directly from the existence of the two states, it has to be considered in the light of German history as a whole. This appears to have influenced the well-known (West) German historian K. D. Erdmann when he produced, in 1985, the controversial thesis regarding the existence of one German people (*Volk*), two nations (German, Austrian) and three states (FRG, GDR, Austria). The Austrian case is indeed complicated but Ernst Bruckmüller's long-term analysis abundantly clarifies why 'the Austrians have come to accept a sense of their identity which is no longer dependent upon the greater geopolitical context within which their history unfolded'. Although not perceived as such, the search for German identity was at the heart of the *Historikerstreit*, as perspicaciously pointed out by George L. Mosse at the height of the dispute.⁶ 'Above all the *Historikerstreit* should stimulate deeper reflection on the relationship between nationalism and national identity.'

In general, it is inadequate to make out of national identity the alpha and omega of the national question. Thus – Spain may serve as an example – it is necessary to appreciate the historical dimension of regionalist allegiances, rooted in the feudal politics and economy of the Middle Ages, that were at work against the formation of national unity and identity. Without moving our eyes backward into the medieval past, it is difficult to come to grips with national issues in post-medieval Europe.

The established opinion is that the actual impulses that gave rise to the national question in Europe in its modern sense were the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars respectively. This is the starting-point of the essay on Italy, but the view is reflected in other contributions as well. What also emerges is that the writers on Croatia and Finland, Poland and Belgium (for instance) take 'history from below' more seriously than has been the case in theoretical publications on the national theme of late.⁷ A by-product of this approach is, as it were, that they do not make light of bench-marks of nationhood such as language, peasantry and the economy but pay to them, at times complementary, scholarly attention.

We live in a world, like it or not, in which the national dimension of history haunts us in ways from which we are finding there is no easy escape. Therefore the following comment is of interest. It is by a sensitive observer of recent events not only in eastern Europe but also resurgent nationalisms and liberation movements of the Basques, the Kosovans, the Kurds and other suchlike 'peripheral' peoples:⁸

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Independence movements all make economic and territorial demands, but their first claim is of a spiritual order . . . All nationalisms are at heart deeply concerned with names: with the most immaterial and original human invention. Those who dismiss names as a detail have never been displaced; but the peoples on the peripheries are always being displaced. This is why they insist upon their identity being recognised, insist upon their continuity – their links with their dead and the unborn.

NOTES

- 1 E. Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1882). For quotations, see pp. 1, 28.
- 2 Actually when the piece was first published in the spring of 1913, it bore the signature K. Stalin. Cf. J. V. Stalin, *Works 1907–1913* (Moscow, 1953), vol. II, pp. 300–81. For quotations, see p. 307.
- 3 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990), p. 5.
- 4 Cf. 'in the opinion of the present author the number of works genuinely illuminating the question of what nations and national movements are and what role they play is larger in the period 1968–88 than for any earlier period of twice the length'. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 4. Hobsbawm offers a list of ten books 'which may serve as an introduction to the field'.
- 5 R. Hilton, 'Were the English English?', in R. Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity*, 3 vols. (London, 1989), vol. I, pp. 39–43.
- 6 G. L. Mosse, 'Die lückenlose Geschichte Ernst Noltes Antwort an seine Kritiker', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 January 1988.
- 7 E. Hobsbawm's one major criticism of E. Gellner's stimulating *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983) is 'that his preferred perspective of modernization from above makes it difficult to pay adequate attention to the view from below'. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism*, p. 10.
- 8 J. Berger, 'Keeping a rendezvous', *Review Guardian*, 22 March 1990.