

The Nationalities Question

by [Murray N. Rothbard](#)

Upon the collapse of centralizing totalitarian Communism in Eastern Europe and even the Soviet Union, long suppressed ethnic and nationality questions and conflicts have come rapidly to the fore. The crack-up of central control has revealed the hidden but still vibrant "deep structures" of ethnicity and nationality.

To those of us who glory in ethnic diversity and yearn for national justice, all this is a wondrous development of what has previously lived only in fantasy or longing: it is a chance in Europe at long last, to begin to reverse the monstrous twin injustices of Sarajevo and Versailles. It is like being back in 1914 or 1919 again, with a chance for the map of Europe and near Asia to be righted and redrawn.

For the first time since the end of World War II, or arguably since Versailles, the world is in a "revolutionary situation." There are many problems and costs to such a revolutionary situation, costs that are well-known and need not be repeated here; but there are also many benefits: currently, not only the collapse of Socialism-Communism, but the sense that all things are possible, and that justice may come at last to a long-suffering area of the world.

Most Americans, however, are puzzled and disturbed rather than delighted at the re-emergence of the nationalities question. We can separate the worried or hostile reactions into four groups:

- a. the average American;
- b. Marxist-Leninists;
- c. global democrats, which include the liberal and neoconservative wing of the ruling American establishment; and
- d. modal libertarians.

Hostiles: The Average American

First, the average American is uncomprehending of the very problem. Why can't all these groups live-and-let-live, and join peacefully together as has the United States in its "melting pot" of varied immigrant groups? In the first place, this Pollyanna view of America overlooks the black question, which has scarcely settled into any melting pot, and is more mired in deep conflict now than at any time since the late nineteenth century.

But even setting that aside no peaceful "melting pot" existed in the nineteenth century. From the 1830s until after World War I, northern, "Yankee," mainstream Protestants (with the exception of old-style Calvinists and high-church Lutherans) were captured by an aggressive and militant post-millennial pietism whose objective was to use government to stamp out "sin" (especially liquor and the Catholic Church), and who made the lives of Catholic and German Lutheran immigrants miserable and put them under constant attack for nearly a century. Finally, the pietists succeeded in imposing immigration restrictions and national origin quotas after World War I.

But even setting all that aside, the United States of America was a unique development in the modern world: a roughly "empty" land (with the notable exception of American Indians), peopled by a large number of mainly European religious, ethnic, and national immigrant groups, within the framework of a mainly free, constitutional Republic under the rubric of English as the common, public language.

Other nations in Europe and Asia developed very differently, often with native nationalities conquered and dominated by "imperial" nations. Instead of one public language, the oppressor nationalities invariably tried to obliterate the languages and even the names of conquered nationalities. One of the most moving cries during last year's implosion of Communism came from the suppressed Turkish minority in Bulgaria and the conquered "Moldavians" (i.e., Romanians) in Soviet Moldavia, grabbed from Romania after World War II: "give us our names back!"

The Moldavians want to shed the hated Russian names imposed by the Soviet state, as well as the even more hated Cyrillic forced upon them in place of their Latin alphabet. And this national obliteration is not just a product of Communism. It is an age-old practice: "imperial" France still forbids the Celts of Brittany to name their children according to Celtic nomenclature; and the Turks, still not admitting their genocidal massacre of the Armenian minority during World War I, also refuse to acknowledge the very existence of their Kurdish minority, referring to them contemptuously as "mountain Turks."

Hostiles: The Marxist-Leninists

The Marxist-Leninists are a dying breed, but it is fascinating to consider their now vanishing role on this issue. Their reputation as "anti-imperialists" has nothing to do with classical Marxism. In fact, Marx and Engels, consistent with their pro-modernizing approach, aggressively favored Western imperialism (especially that of the Prussians as against the hated Slavs). This stance accorded with their view that the faster capitalism and "modernization" advance, the sooner the "inevitable final stage" of history, the proletarian communist revolution, will take place.

Lenin, however, pragmatically junked Marxism to side with the Third World and other peasantry, which he saw perceptively as far riper for revolution than the advanced capitalist nations. In practice, however, Leninism, while giving lip-service to the right of national self-determination (enshrined on paper in the Soviet Constitution but always ignored in practice), was a centralizing universalist creed transcending nationalities. More important, the actual Leninist cadre in every country were deracinated intellectuals (often colonials educated by Marxist-Leninist professors in the imperial centers of London, Paris, and Lisbon), who were generally ignorant of, and contemptuous or hostile toward, ethnicity, religion, and culture. The official compulsory atheism of Marxist-Leninists was only the most overt example of this hostility.

This riding roughshod over national cultures in the name of universalist Leninist ideology is most starkly evident in the regimes of Africa. The Marxist centralizing governments of Africa are descendants of the regimes of Western imperialism established in the late nineteenth century.

Britain, France, and Portugal marched into Africa and carved it up into provinces totally heedless and uncaring of the realities of the varied and highly diverse

tribes which constituted the African polity. Many tribes, most of which hated each other's guts, and had nothing — neither culture, language, customs, nor tradition — in common, were coercively incorporated into "colonies" with arbitrary borders imposed by the imperial Western powers. In addition to this forced marriage, many of the artificial borders split tribal regions into two or more parts, so that tribesmen seasonally migrating into age-old occupied regions, found themselves stopped at the border and accused of being "illegal immigrants" or "aggressors."

The tragedy of modern Africa is that the imperial powers did not simply withdraw and allow the natural tribal formation to resume their original occupation of the continent. Instead, the coercive centralizing regimes of these so-called "nations" were turned over to the deracinated Marxist intellectuals educated in the imperial capitals, who soon became a parasitic bureaucratic class taxing and oppressing the peaceful peasantry who constitute the bulk of the actual producers in Africa.

Hostiles: The Global Democrats

The most significant negative reaction to the recent eruption of the nationalities question is that of our "global democracy" establishment. Theirs is the most significant because they constitute the dominant opinion-molding force in American life. Essentially theirs is a far more sophisticated version of the reaction of the average American. The concerns and demands of nationalities are dismissed as narrow, selfish, parochial, and even dangerously hostile *per se* and aggressive toward other nationalities. Above all, they interfere with the most sanctified value in the global-democratic canon: "the democratic process," which inherently means "majority rule," albeit sometimes limited by the restraints of "human" or "minority" rights. Therefore, the ultimate curse leveled against nationalities and their demands is that they are *perforce* "undemocratic" and hence not suitable for the modern world.

Thus, there is a deeper reason than *realpolitik* for the seemingly strange coolness of the Bush administration toward the heroic national independence movement of the Lithuanians and the other Baltic nations. It's not just that the United States is supposed to sacrifice them on the altar of "saving Gorby." For there was unalloyed joy at the liberating of Officially Accredited Nations, such as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, from Soviet and Communist yokes. But the Baltic nations, after all, are different: they are "part" of the Soviet Union, and therefore their unilateral secession, against the will of the majority of the USSR, becomes an affront to "democracy," to "majority rule," and, last but far from least, to the unitary, centralizing nation-state that allegedly embodies the democratic ideal.

The fact that the United States had never recognized the forcible incorporation of the Baltic nations into the USSR in 1940, is now demonstrated to be a Cold War sham to win the votes of East European ethnics living in the United States. For when push comes to shove, how can little parts of a great nation be permitted to secede in opposition to the "democratic will" of the larger nation? Not only the Bush and establishment coolness toward the Baltics, but also their palpable relief when Gorby sent troops in to Azerbaijan, allegedly to stop Azeris and Armenians from killing each other, shows that far more is at stake here than helping Gorby against the Stalinists.

For the US global democrats had gotten worried that Gorby might fail to carry out the alleged fundamental responsibility of a great modernizing nation: to use force and violence to settle disputes among its various regions and nationalities. That is, in fact, to maintain the unitary force of the central "imperial" power against the nationalities within its periphery.

The clinching argument of the global democrats in all this may be summed up as "after all, didn't Lincoln?" The most sanctified figure in American

historiography is, by no accident, the Great Saint of centralizing "democracy" and the strong unitary nation-state: Abraham Lincoln. It is fascinating and no accident, and reveals the vital importance of history and of historical myth even in as amnesiac a nation as the United States, that a major reason that the neocons and their stooges have tried to read such paleocons as Mel Bradford and Tom Fleming out of the conservative movement is that they are highly critical of "honest Abe."

And so didn't Lincoln use force and violence, and on a massive scale, on behalf of the mystique of the sacred "Union," to prevent the South from seceding? Indeed he did, and on the foundation of mass murder and oppression, Lincoln crushed the South and outlawed the very notion of secession (based on the highly plausible ground that since the separate states voluntarily entered the Union they should be allowed to leave).

But not only that: for Lincoln created the monstrous unitary nation-state from which individual and local liberties have never recovered: e.g., the triumph of an all-powerful federal judiciary, Supreme Court, and national army; the overriding of the ancient Anglo-Saxon and libertarian right of *habeas corpus* by jailing dissidents against the war without trial; the establishment of martial rule; the suppression of freedom of the press; and the largely permanent establishment of conscription, the income tax, the pietist "sin" taxes against liquor and tobacco, the corrupt and cartelizing "partnership of government and industry" constituting massive subsidies to transcontinental railroads, and the protective tariff; the establishment of fiat money inflation through the greenbacks and getting off the gold standard; and the nationalization of the banking system through the national Banking Acts of 1863 and 1864.

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It is particularly fascinating that many conservative defenders of Lithuania and the other Baltic nations, try themselves to preserve the Lincoln myth and the general US hostility to secession. They argue that since the Baltic states were forcibly incorporated by Stalin in 1940, they at least should be allowed to secede without the punishment of Lincoln-style repression!

Let us set aside the fact that most of the other incorporations of nations into the Soviet Union were just as compulsory albeit more venerable: e.g., the Ukraine, Armenia, or Georgia in the early days of the Bolshevik Revolution. Let us instead cut to the heart of the democratic political theory that is involved in the pervasive hostility to secession. For democratic theory, including the theory of most "minarchist" laissez-faire libertarians, holds that government, whether broadly social-democratic or confined to police, defense, and the judiciary, should be chosen by majority rule in free elections. Minority secession movements are accused of violating democratic majority rule. But the crucial and always unanswered question is: democratic rule over what geographical area?

Let us put the problem another way: minarchist or democratic theory says that the state should have a monopoly of force in its territorial area. Let us agree for the sake of argument. But then the big unasked, and unanswered, question arises: what should be the territorial area? To paraphrase a favorite gambit of Ayn Rand's, the near-universal response is: Blankout!

Nationalities secessionists are implicitly challenging this pervasive blankout as a serious response to their concerns. So far, whether under Lincoln or, to a much lesser extent under Gorby, their crucial question has been met only by violence and force majeure: by the unquestioned mystique of might-makes-right and the coercive unitary nation-state. But the inner logic of that mystique, and the basic

logic of minarchist political theory, is at once simple and terrifying: unitary world "democratic" government.

The minarchist argument against anarcho-capitalist libertarians is that there must be a single, overriding government agency with a monopoly force to settle disputes by coercion. OK, but in that case and by the very same logic shouldn't nation-states be replaced by a one-world monopoly government? Shouldn't unitary world government replace what has been properly termed our existing "international anarchy"?

Minarchist libertarians and conservatives balk at the inner logic of world government for obvious reasons: for they fear correctly that world taxation and world socialization would totally and irreversibly suppress the liberty and property of Americans. But they remain trapped in the logic of their own position. Left-liberals, on the other hand, are happy to embrace this logic precisely because of this expected outcome. Even the democratic establishment, however, hesitates at embracing the ultimate logical end of a single world democratic state, at least until they can be assured of controlling that monstrous entity.

Short of the world state of their dreams, how does our global democratic establishment deal with the crucial problem of where state boundaries should be? By sanctifying whatever state boundaries happen to exist at the time. Sanctifying status-quo boundaries has been the axiom of the foreign policy of every US administration since Woodrow Wilson, and of the League of Nations and its successor the United Nations, all based on the incoherent and disastrous concept of "collective security against aggression." It was that concept that underlay US intervention in World Wars I and II, and in the Korean War: first we determine (often incorrectly) which is the "aggressor state," and then all nation-states are supposed to band together to combat, repel, and punish that aggression.

The theoretical analogue of such a concert against "aggression" is held to be combating criminal action against individuals. A robs or murders B; the local police, appointed defenders of the right of person and property, leap to the defense of B and act to apprehend and punish A. In the same way, "peace-loving" nations are supposed to band together against "aggressor" nations or states. Hence, Harry Truman's otherwise mystifying insistence that the US war against North Korea was not a war at all but a "police action."

The deep flaw in all this is that when A robs or murders B, there is a general agreement that A is in the wrong, and that he has indeed aggressed against the person and just property rights of B. But when State A aggresses against the border of State B, often claiming that the border is unjust and the result of a previous aggression against country A decades before, how can we say *a priori* that State A is the aggressor and that we must dismiss its defense out of hand? Who says, and on what principle, that State B has the same moral right to all of its existing territory as individual B has to his life and property? And how can the two aggressions be equated when our global democrats refuse to come up with any principles or criteria whatsoever: except the unsatisfactory and absurd call for a world state or blind reliance upon the boundary *status quo* at any given moment?

Just Boundaries and National Self-determination

What, then, is the answer? What national boundaries can be considered as just? In the first place, it must be recognized that there are no just national boundaries *per se*; that real justice can only be founded on the property rights of individuals. If fifty people decided voluntarily to set up an organization for common services or self-defense of their persons and properties in a certain geographical area, then the boundaries of that association, based on the just property rights of the members, will also be just.

National boundaries are only just insofar as they are based on voluntary consent and the property rights of their members or citizens. Just national boundaries are, then, at best derivative and not primary. How much more is this true of existing state boundaries which are, in greater or lesser

degree, based on coercive expropriation of private property, or on a mixture of that with voluntary consent! In practice, the way to have such national boundaries as just as possible is to preserve and cherish the right of secession, the right of different regions, groups, or ethnic nationalities to get the blazes out of the larger entity, to set up their own independent nation. Only by boldly asserting the right of secession can the concept of national self-determination be anything more than a sham and a hoax.

But wasn't the Wilsonian attempt to impose national self-determination and draw the map of Europe a disaster? And how! But the disaster was inevitable even assuming (incorrectly) good will on the part of Wilson and the Allies and ignoring the fact that national self-determination was a mask for their imperial ambitions. For by its nature, national self-determination cannot be imposed from without, by a foreign government entity, be it the United States or some world league.

The whole point of national self-determination is to get top-down coercive power out of the picture and, for the use of force to devolve from the larger entity to more genuine natural and voluntary national entities. In short, to devolve power from the top downward. Imposing national self-determination from the outside makes matters worse and more coercive than ever. Moreover, getting the United States or other governments involved in every ethnic conflict throughout the globe maximizes, rather than minimizes, coercion, conflict, war, and mass murder. It drags the United States, as the great isolationist scholar Charles A. Beard once put it, into "perpetual war for perpetual peace."

Referring back to political theory, since the nation-state has a monopoly of force in its territorial area, the one thing it must not do is ever try to exercise its force beyond its area, where it has no monopoly, because then a relatively peaceful "international anarchy" (where each state confines its power to its own geographical boundary) is replaced by an international Hobbesian chaos of war of all (governments) against all. In short, given the existence of nation-states, they should

- a. never exercise their power beyond their territorial area (a foreign policy of "isolationism"), and
- b. maintain the right of secession of groups or entities within their territorial area.

The right of secession, if fearlessly upheld, implies also the right of one or more villages to secede even from its own ethnic nation, or, even, as Ludwig von Mises affirmed in his [*Nation, State, and Economy*](#), the right of secession by each individual.

If one deep flaw in the Wilsonian enterprise was its imposition of national self-determination from the outside, another was his total botch of redrawing the European map. It is difficult to believe that they could have done a worse job if the Versailles rulers had blindfolded themselves and put pins arbitrarily in a map of Europe to create new nations.

Instead of self-determination for each nation, three officially designated Good Guy peoples (Poles, Czechs, and Serbs) were made masters over other nationalities who had hated their guts for centuries, often with good reason. That is, these three favored nationalities were not simply given ethnic national independence; instead, their boundaries were arbitrarily swollen so as to dominate other peoples officially designated as Bad Guys (or at best Who-Cares Guys): the Poles ruling over Germans, Lithuanians (in the Lithuanian city of Vilnius/Vilna), Byelorussians, and Ukrainians; the Czechs ruling over Slovaks and Ukrainians (called "Carpatho-Ruthenians"); and the Serbs tyrannizing over Croats, Slovenes, Albanians, Hungarians, and Macedonians, in a geographical abortion called "Yugoslavia" (now at least in the process of falling apart).

In addition, the Romanians were aggrandized at the expense of the Hungarians and Bulgarians. These three (or four if we include Romania) lopsided countries were also given the absurd and impossible task by the United States and the Western allies of keeping down permanently the two neighboring great "revisionist" powers and losers at Versailles: Germany and Russia. This imposed task led straight to World War II.

In short, national self-determination must remain a moral principle and a beacon-light for all nations, and not be something to be imposed by outside governmental coercion.

Partition and Referendum

One practical way of implementing self-determination and the right of secession is the concept of a partition referendum in which each village or parish votes to decide whether to remain inside the existing national entity or to secede or join another such nation. The much disputed area of Nagorno-Karabakh, for example, would undoubtedly vote overwhelmingly to leave the hated Azerbaijan Republic and join Armenia. But what of the fact that Nagorno-Karabakh is not contiguous with greater Armenia, that there is a sliver of ethnically Azeri land inbetween? But surely good will on both sides (which of course is obviously non-existent at this point) could permit a free zone or free entry across that zone. Not only an airpath, but also a road corridor proved to be viable for decades after the explosive Berlin crisis.

Partition referenda were used fitfully after World War I; the most renowned case was the separation of Northern Ireland from the rest of the country. Unfortunately, the British deliberately promised referendum for a second partition was never carried out by the British government. As a result, a large amount of Catholic territory in the north was forcibly incorporated into the Protestant state, and the existence of that Catholic minority, which undoubtedly would vote to join the South, has been responsible for the tragic and unending violence and bloodshed ever since. In short, a genuine partition based on referenda, would probably lop off from Northern Ireland the territories of counties Tyrone and Fermanagh (including the city of Derry) and South Down. Essentially, Northern Ireland would be much reduced in land area, and left with a belt around Belfast and county Antrim. The only substantial Catholic minority would then be in the Catholic section of Belfast.

One criticism of partition by referendum is that parishes and villages are often mixed, so that there could not be a precise separation of the nationalities. In the vexed region of Transylvania, for example, Hungarian and Romanian villages are intermixed in the same region. No doubt; no one ever said that such referenda would provide a panacea. But the point is that at least the degree of voluntary choice would be enlarged and the amount of social and ethnic conflict minimized, and not much more can be achieved. (Transylvania, by the way, is largely Hungarian, especially the northern part, and the wrong done to Hungary after World War I should be rectified.)

There is one criticism of the referendum approach that is far more cogent and troublesome. The Azeri claim to Nagorno-Karabakh rests on the thesis that, while the Armenians are now admittedly in the overwhelming majority, the region was, centuries ago, a center of Azeri culture. This claim from history may properly be dismissed as the dead hand of the past ruling the living, perhaps with the proviso that ancient Azeri shrines be protected under Azeri care.

But more troubling is, say, the current situation in Estonia and Latvia, where the Soviets deliberately

tried to swamp and destroy native culture and ethnic nationalism by shipping in a large number of Russians after World War II to work in the factories. In Latvia, the Russian minority is only slightly under fifty percent. Here, I believe the recency of this migration and its political nature tip the scales in favor of maintaining native nationalism. In fact, libertarians believe that everyone has the natural right to self-ownership and ownership of property, but that there is no such thing as a natural "right" to vote. Here, it would make sense not to allow Russians to vote in Latvia and Estonia, to treat them as guests or immigrants of indefinite duration, but not with the voting privileges of citizenship.

Hostiles: The Libertarians

Libertarians are, by and large, as fiercely opposed to ethnic nationalism as the global democrats, but for very different reasons. Libertarians are generally what might be called simplistic and "vulgar" individualists. A typical critique would run as follows:

"There is no nation; there are only individuals. The nation is a collectivist and therefore pernicious concept. The concept of 'national self-determination' is fallacious, since only the individual has a 'self.' Since the nation and the State are both collective concepts, both are pernicious and should be combated."

The linguistic complaint may be dismissed quickly. Yes, of course, there is no national "self," we are using "self-determination" as a metaphor, and no one really thinks of a nation as an actual living entity with its own "self."

More seriously, we must not fall into a nihilist trap. While only individuals exist individuals do not exist as isolated and hermetically sealed atoms. Statists traditionally charge libertarians and individualists with being "atomistic individualists," and the charge, one hopes, has always been incorrect and misconceived. Individuals may be the only reality, but they influence each other, past and present, and all individuals grow up in a common culture and language. (This does not imply that they may not, as adults, rebel and challenge and exchange that culture for another.)

While the state is a pernicious and coercive collectivist concept, the "nation" may be and generally is voluntary. The nation properly refers, not to the state, but to the entire web of culture, values, traditions, religion, and language in which the individuals of a society are raised. It is almost embarrassingly banal to emphasize that point, but apparently many libertarians aggressively overlook the obvious. Let us never forget the great libertarian Randolph Bourne's analysis of the crucial distinction between "the nation" (the land, the culture, the terrain, the people) and "the State" (the coercive apparatus of bureaucrats and politicians), and of his important conclusion that one may be a true patriot of one's nation or country while — and even for that very reason — opposing the state that rules over it.

In addition, the libertarian, especially of the anarcho-capitalist wing, asserts that it makes no difference where the boundaries are, since in a perfect world all institutions and land areas would be private and there would be no national boundaries. Fine, but in the meantime, in the real world, in which language should the government courts hold their proceedings? What should be the language of signs on the government streets? Or the language of the government schools? In the real world, then, national self-determination is a vitally important matter in which libertarians should properly take sides.

Finally, nationalism has its disadvantages for liberty, but also has its strengths, and libertarians should try to help tip it in the latter direction. If we were residents of Yugoslavia, for example, we should be agitating in favor of the right to secede from that swollen and misbegotten state of Croatia and Slovenia (that is, favoring their current nationalist movements), while opposing the desire of the Serb demagogue Slobodan Milosevic to cling to Serb domination over the Albanians in Kosovo or over the Hungarians in the Vojvodina (that is, opposing Great Serbian nationalism).

There is, in short national liberation (good) versus national "imperialism" over other peoples (bad). Once we get over simplistic individualism, this distinction should not be difficult to grasp.