

Nationalism & the Twentieth Century

Nationalism has been the dominant political and social phenomenon of our time—so argues John Lukacs in *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*. Throughout the European continent and in the former Soviet Union, nationalist forces are today placing heavy strains on traditional multiethnic states. Lukacs analyzes the fundamental role of nationalism in Europe and North America through the twentieth century.

***The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age.*
by John Lukacs. Ticknor & Fields., 1993. \$29.95.**

by Jeffrey Thomas Kuhner

Professor John Lukacs, author of seventeen previous books on twentieth century American and European history, has written a timely and incisive book. In his work, *The End of the Twentieth Century and the End of the Modern Age*, Lukacs argues that the twentieth century is, for all intents and purposes, over.

Beginning in 1914 with the onset of the First World War and ending in 1989 with the collapse of Communism in Central-Eastern Europe, the twentieth century was marked by two watershed events: World Wars I and II. Everything else—the Russian Revolution, the dissolution of colonial empires, the establishment of Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe, the division of Europe and Germany, and the Cold War—was a direct result of the wars. With the retreat of the Soviet Union from Europe, the resulting reunification of Germany and the end of the Cold War, the historical consequences of the World Wars have ended—and with them, so has the “twentieth century”.

Lukacs goes on to assert that this century’s dominant political and social force has been nationalism. It has not been, as many analysts have argued, an age of ideology, pitting totalitarianism, be it Communism or Fascism, against liberal democracy.

Stalin and the Origins of the Cold War

Lukacs argues that American policymakers misunderstood Stalin’s actions and

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intentions following the Second World War—a result of their inability to comprehend the phenomenon of nationalism. The Soviet leader was essentially a Great Russian nationalist who desired a Soviet sphere of security in Central-Eastern Europe. However, the Truman administration mistakenly believed that Stalin, after imposing Communist states in Eastern Europe, wanted to spread communist ideology further and conquer Western Europe.



John Lukacs, author of The End of the Twentieth Century. [Jerry Bauer]

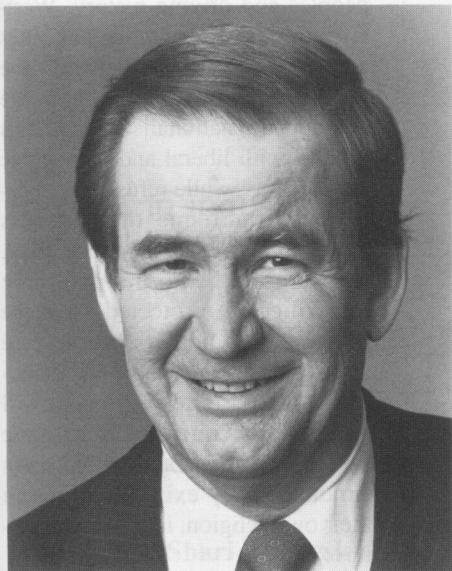
In Lukacs’ opinion, Stalin correctly understood the limits of Soviet power and desired only to advance Russia’s historic national interests. International Communism was peripheral to the Soviet dictator’s geopolitical objectives. A Russian

nationalist, Stalin understood that Communism had a weak appeal outside of the Soviet Union. As a result, he forcibly imposed subservient regimes in Central-Eastern Europe and would not accept Roosevelt’s proposal that East European governments remain pro-Russian but non-Communist (as in Finland).

For Lukacs, it was precisely because the appeal of Communism was weak in Eastern Europe that Soviet control of the region could not endure for a protracted period of time. The incongruence between means and objectives, and the overextension of their sphere of interest, slowly compelled the Soviets to retreat from Europe. Yugoslavia under Tito’s guidance broke with the Soviet Union in 1948. The U.S.S.R., along with the United States, withdrew from Austria in 1955.

Furthermore, after Stalin’s death in 1953 the Soviet leadership was periodically plagued by “violent disgorgements” such as the revolts in East Berlin (1953) and Poland (1956), the massive Hungarian rebellion in 1956, and the Czechoslovak uprising of 1968. Gradually, the independence of Eastern European governments increased until, finally, Gorbachev was compelled to relinquish control of Central-Eastern Europe.

I believe that Lukacs’ interpretation of Soviet Cold War intentions towards the West as non-threatening is highly problematic. However, his work is important because it identifies the fundamental role played by nationalism throughout the Cold War and the twentieth century. Not only was Russian nationalism the driving force behind Stalin, but throughout the Cold War “tribal nationalisms” erupted in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. (Viet-



Pat Buchanan: "America First".
[CNN]

nam serves as an excellent case in point). For that matter the United States—"embodiment" of liberal democracy—frequently conjugated the cause of anti-Communism with American nationalist sentiment. In the end, the enduring power of nationalism represented a primary reason for the collapse of Soviet hegemony in Central-Eastern Europe, a region which rejected not only Communist ideology but Russian imperialism as well.

Central-Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Union

It is a great, although inevitable, irony of history that the forces of nationalism not only dislodged Soviet power from Eastern Europe, but also caused the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself. As Lukacs notes, the First World War—"midwife" to the Soviet revolution—refuted Marx's premise that classes, and not nations, were the dominant forces of history. When German workers voted to go to war in 1914, they demonstrated a greater communality with German industrialists than with their French laboring counterparts. From its inception, says Lukacs, the Soviet/Marxist emphasis on class was doomed to end in failure.

Today, nationalist geopolitical tremors shake the entire European continent. As Lukacs argues, the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia reveals that nationalism is still the dominant political force of our time. It has gained strength, while Communism has been extinguished and liberalism has weakened.

From the rubble of the former Soviet empire, numerous nation-states have emerged which are plagued by ethnic conflict. An important example is the Ukraine. Lukacs believes that ultimately Russia will not allow Ukraine to maintain its independence and territorial integrity. There is a very strong temptation for radical Russian nationalists to demand the incorporation into a single unitary state of ethnic Russians living outside the borders of Russia proper. For this reason, the attempt of Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic to create a Greater Serbia in the Balkans establishes an ominous precedent for the post-Communist European order. Success leads to imitation, and if Serbia is allowed to enlarge its borders, other ultra-nationalists—perhaps Russia—may be encouraged to do the same.

In Lukacs' eyes, the Russian retreat from Eastern Europe produced a power vacuum in the region that will increasingly be filled by a resurgent and economically dynamic Germany. German influence will prove to be not only financial, but also political and cultural. Anti-Russian states such as Ukraine, Poland and Slovakia will increasingly come to depend on Germany's power.

Lukacs does not see Germany's expansion throughout the region as inherently dangerous. Germans have repudiated their Nazi past and Germany today is a stable democracy with well-established bourgeois traditions. Nonetheless, it means that Germany is once again the dominant power on the European continent. More importantly, Germany's political and economic resurgence in Central-Eastern Europe likely signifies the end of a United States of Europe.

The "Fantasy" of a European Federation

Many commentators have stated that the inability of the European Community (EC) to intervene effectively in the war in Bosnia

revealed the illusion of a federal European state. In reality, it was the previous war in Croatia in 1991 which not only destroyed Yugoslavia, but also delivered a fatal blow to the establishment of a United States of Europe. The question of Croatia's and Slovenia's independence, and of a coherent and common foreign policy towards the Serb-Croat war, created deep fissures within the EC. Germany's decision to grant Croatia and Slovenia recognition against the wishes of the United States, Britain, and France demonstrated German desire to enlarge her historic sphere of influence in south-eastern Europe. As well, it indicated her refusal to subordinate her geopolitical imperatives to Brussels.

Here we come to the heart of the matter. Lukacs argues that the EC's attempt to construct itself politically based on the model of the United States is destined to fail. The American system depends on the majority of its inhabitants speaking English—a powerful homogenizing factor—and on political and constitutional structures that are abstract, legalistic, and mechanical.

In Europe there exist profoundly different nations each predicated on different national characters. According to Lukacs, it is the distinct and particular



Joseph Stalin: *Great Russian Nationalism or Communist Expansionism?* [Metro Toronto Reference Library]

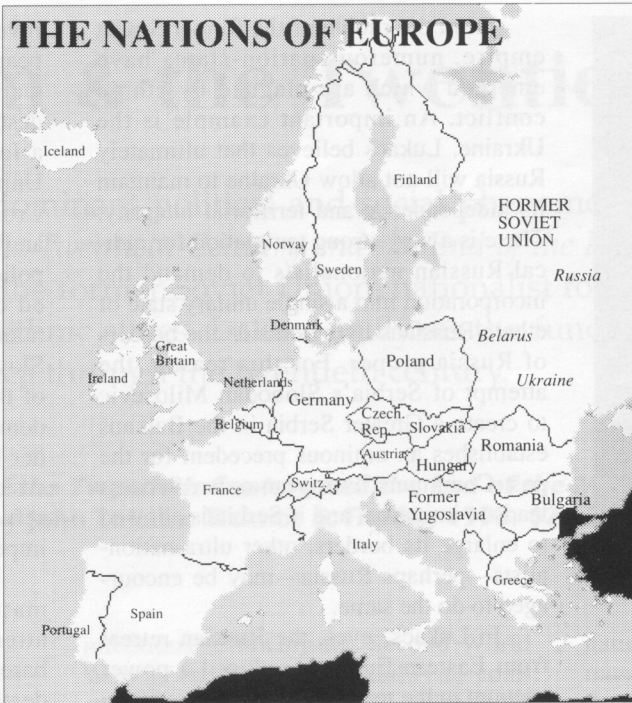
character of a people that molds their institutions, values, and political systems. The differences between European nation-states are historical and organic, and any attempt to create a common European federation or confederation must of necessity be based on a highly decentralized model such as Switzerland. The multiethnic and multilingual Swiss state has evolved organically and historically, taking over six hundred years to develop. The forces of history are presently fracturing and sweeping away the dream of a bureaucratic, highly centralized continental European super-state.

Not only are nationalisms erupting throughout the former Soviet Union and Central-Eastern Europe, but they are resurfacing throughout the West as well. Ethnic, nationalist, and regionalist passions plague Corsica, Ulster, Basques Spain, Belgium, Scotland, Italy, and Canada. As Lukacs notes, the strong showing by the "America Firster" Patrick J. Buchanan in the Republican Presidential primaries in 1992, attests to the upsurge of nationalism in the United States.

Buchanan is neither a neo-isolationist nor a genuine American conservative. Rather, he is a nationalist who throughout his campaign called for a "new nationalism", seeking a moratorium on immigration, the repudiation of continental free trade, and the termination of American globalism and foreign military intervention. Buchanan also strongly supports Lithuanian, Slovak, Croat, and Ukrainian independence and backs Quebec's drive for secession. Many political pundits believe that Buchanan has a strong chance of seizing the Republican party candidacy and perhaps the presidency in 1996. His victory would be celebrated by nationalists throughout Europe.

Lukacs' Oversight: Differing Types of Nationalism

If the principle strength of Lukacs' interpretation is his emphasis on the power and relevance of nationalism throughout our age, the central flaw in his work is his characterization of all nationalisms as destructive and antithetical to civilization. Lukacs argues that the greatest threat to present-day Europe is the continued existence of nationalism because national self-determination frequently leads to a



[Electromap, Inc.]

state of perpetual warfare and conflict.

The first problem is that this argument is but a superficial analysis of nationalist ideology; an oversight not endemic to Lukacs alone. The study of nationalist ideology has generally been ignored by scholars who have instead concentrated their energies on other political ideologies such as conservatism, liberalism, socialism, or fascism. As such, there is a lack of understanding among the political and intellectual elites on the topic of nationalist ideology and an inability to recognize the phenomenon of nationalism.

Lukacs is right to argue that one of the reasons there is no first-rate work on the history of nationalism is *because* nationalism differs from country to country. However, he fails to understand that it is precisely because nationalism varies from country to country, that it is logically flawed and empirically invalid to pronounce sweeping negative generalizations. The fact that Slovak nationalism differs from American nationalism or from Polish nationalism should mean that judgement of each particular brand of nationalism must be based on its political and historical merits.

Normative political, legal, and moral standards should be applied when judging the validity of different types of nationalism. Besides appreciating and respecting the power of nationalism in motivating

peoples and driving history, Western political and intellectual elites should discriminate between the variants. They should encourage and support nationalist movements infused with liberal and democratic components, while refusing to sanction nationalisms that possess authoritarian or irredentist qualities. As long as the rights of ethnic minorities are protected—and the principle that borders can only be altered through peaceful and democratic means is respected—it will only enrich our world to have numerous nations and nation-states simultaneously existing each with their own religion, identity, and culture.

Part of a Larger Movement

Moreover, as Lukacs himself mentions, a major reason for the contemporary nationalist forces shaking the Western world is a recognition that large bureaucratic units are inefficient and undemocratic. Diminished prestige and faith in the effectiveness of weighty, centralized political entities is a reflection of the popular desire to make government more local, accountable, and responsive to the electorate.

Hence, the nationalist eruptions that have led to the breakup of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia, and which are now threatening well established countries in Western Europe and North America, form part of a larger democratic revolution that seeks to create self-governing and efficient political units. For some nations such as Canada, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Belgium, however, the solution to their separatist problems does not have to be the granting of outright independence. Indeed, a variety of decentralized federation or confederation in which political power is dispersed to regional and local authorities is certainly an option.

Nevertheless, nationalism will remain a powerful political and social phenomenon for the foreseeable future. The challenge for our time is to distinguish between the different forms of nationalism; to encourage the progressive and democratic nationalist movements, while discouraging and, if necessary, repelling the authoritarian, xenophobic or revanchist ones.