Honors 1120 Analytic Essay

Nationalism As a Unifying & Dividing Force & How It Leads To War & Moral Degradation

While reading *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning,* I was fascinated with Chris Hedges' points addressing nationalism in chapter two. Nationalism is an extreme form of patriotism and loyalty to one's country. Nationalists will often overvalue their country's importance and virtues, and place their interests before those of other countries. I assert that Hedges accomplished the goal of showing that nationalism simultaneously unifies and divides people. This can lead to wars which bring about the moral degradation of societies. Propaganda is at the core of disinformation used by nationalists to either divide or unite people.

Nationalists use propaganda to unify their people during times of war. They need to use propaganda to convince the people that their cause is honorable. At the same time, they portray the enemy as an evil force that must be stopped. This approach will inspire people that they need to help the nation fight back against the enemy. For instance, Hedges states that the Argentine military junta told the people that the outside world was seeking their destruction during their 1982 invasion of the Falkland Islands. On the other hand, "All that was noble and good was embodied, like some unique gene, in the Argentine people" (Hedges 44). The Argentine government needed to tell their people that their cause was honorable to gain their support for the war. They also needed to tell the people that outsiders sought their destruction to inspire them to do what's needed to protect the country.

Similarly, the United States used propaganda to promote public support to enter World War I. The Woodrow Wilson administration's Committee on Public Information (CPI) was

created to promote support for the war. The CPI, run by George Creel, used press releases disguised as news stories to "weld the people of the United States into one white-hot mass instinct and give them a war-will to win" (O'Toole). During the 20 months of U. S. involvement in WWI, the CPI had 6,000 press releases and more than 1,500 patriotic advertisements. Initially, the CPI avoided attacking American ethnic groups, German and Austrian, from the opposing side. However, the press releases with "salutes to American wartime achievements and American ideals" (O'Toole) did little to unify Americans into one white-hot mass.

Creel and President Wilson realized that press releases had fallen far from the goal of unifying Americans to join the war in Europe. On Flag Day, June 14, 1917, President Wilson made a call in support of the war in Europe to make the world safe for democracy. He painted Germany as a threat to democracy. With that, Wilson set the country's sights on the goal of destroying the German government, which was intent on world domination. Creel then changed CPI's strategy and began to portray German soldiers as ape-like beasts that needed to be destroyed. The CPI also funded movies such as *The Kaiser: The Beast of Berlin and The Prussian Curse*, which further dehumanized Germany and the German people. As a result of the propaganda, thousands of domestic vigilantes attacked German immigrants who were not citizens.

The violence went beyond German immigrants to any American who was opposed to entering the war. Even churches were not off-limits to such violence. Many churches with pacifist sects were burned by vigilantes. There were also incidents of suspected disloyal Americans being tarred and feathered and even lynched in some cases. The numbers of vigilantes grew as they dubbed themselves self-appointed guardians of American patriotism. Public sentiments then grew into the one white-hot mass needed to motivate Americans to fight

the war in Europe. Thus, the CPI propaganda achieved the goal of unifying the country by using patriotism as an excuse for war and violence.

Even though nationalists can use propaganda to unify people, they can also use it to divide them. One way propaganda can divide people is through the creation of myths. Hedges explains that all societies, ethnicities, and religious groups create myths around their nation or movement. These myths often are not harmful when the country is in a time of peace. However, the presence of these myths can be the catalyst that nationalists can use to start a war and divide the nation. For instance, Hedges states that "In the former Yugoslavia, it was the nationalist propaganda pumped out over television, far more than ancient hatreds, that did the most to provoke rivalry and finally war between ethnic groups" (Hedges 46). This statement shows that although ethnic rivalry was already present, these groups didn't hate each other enough to go to war. The people still needed to be convinced that other ethnic groups were so different that war was needed to eliminate them.

There are many other examples of such myths created in other recent wars. For example, German nationalists after World War I created the Stab-in-the-Back Myth. This false belief claimed that Germany wasn't defeated on the battlefield, but lost due to treachery on the part of communists, Jews, and socialists at home. This myth would eventually lead to the rise of extreme antisemitism, nationalism, and anti-communism in Germany during the inter-war period. This also set in motion the Nazi rise to power in 1933 and the events of World War II.

However, nationalist myths aren't the only causes of war. Other factors like the desire for independence can push a group of people to go to war. One such example is with the Slavic groups in the Balkans before World War I. In the nineteenth century, these Slavic groups came up with a political ideology called Pan-Slavism. This ideology said that the Slavs of eastern

Europe should have their own nation. This movement was most prominent in Serbia. Pan-Slavism was opposed to the Austro-Hungarian Empire's rule over the Balkans. To help drive out the Austro-Hungarians and obtain independence, many Serbs became part of nationalist groups such as the Black Hand. The rise of Pan-Slavism in Serbia led to the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary. This single act led to the outbreak of World War I, one of the most devastating wars in human history.

In many cases in history, nationalism has resulted in wars and violence if conditions existed to allow a given group to obtain power over a country's government. The change in government and the ensuing violence resulted in the moral degradation of a country's society. The rise of the Nazi Party in Germany during the 1930s is a classic example. The Nazis seized power by effectively using propaganda to seduce a wide spectrum of people across Germany. The appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor on January 30, 1933, set Germany on a path to World War II. Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, marked the beginning of six years of war, genocide, civilian massacres, and forced labor of prisoners. In addition, there was the stealing of property and wealth from the citizens of countries that Germany invaded. Germany's signing of the Convention relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War on July 27, 1929, legally obligated Germany to comply with the terms of the Convention. However, World War II is full of examples where the Wehrmacht murdered both civilian and military prisoners of war without trials or cause. Any prisoner deemed to be either a political or ideological enemy of Nazi Germany was subject to inhumane treatment and murder.

The Spanish Civil War is another example of moral degradation during war. This war was a civil war between the military-led Nationalist rebels and Republicans who ran the democratic government. The Nationalists were formed by monarchists (Carlists), fascists

(Falangists), and conservatives, while the Republicans were left-leaning. The war was characterized by several mass atrocities which aimed to eliminate ideological enemies on both sides. There were incidents of systematic killings, torture, and mob violence. The Nationalists even attacked the Catholic clergy because the clergy was viewed as an obstacle to reform. The clergy experienced attacks and murders from both sides during the war. The Nationalists were particularly brutal in the treatment of civilian Republican supporters, especially women. During the war, "women were raped or were publicly humiliated by having their heads shaved" (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum).

In *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, Hedges uses the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s as his example of the moral degradation of society during war. The Yugoslav Wars were a series of conflicts that led to the collapse and breakup of the former Yugoslavia. The breakup was due to economic collapse and ethnic tensions. The economic collapse resulted in hardworking people losing everything due to not being able to save money and buy basic necessities. Hedges stated that "The unscrupulous, who had massive debts, never had to repay them, lived off the black market or crime, used force to get what they wanted, and became fabulously rich and powerful" (Hedges 99). Criminals became wealthy through the looting of possessions belonging to displaced people, the selling of stolen clothes, drugs, and cigarettes, and the running of protection rackets and prostitution rings. To make matters worse, the government was using these same criminals to facilitate violence against other ethnic groups and political enemies.

Throughout history, nationalism has played a central role in either uniting or dividing people and nations over ideologies or ethnic lines. Nationalism has had the power to stir patriotic emotions strong enough to encourage war and violence. Propaganda has been a tool of disinformation that allows nationalism to persuade people to unite or divide over a cause.

Unfortunately, the result of nationalism has often been wars in which the moral degradation of

societies has been universal in time and location. This is a cycle that mankind seems to repeat.

Works Cited

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