

The Two Sides of Nationalism

Nationalism has recently made a resurgence in countries all around the world. Nationalism has the potential to be a unifying force that does good. Some forms of nationalism can bring groups of people together without discriminating or using violence against other groups. However, nationalism also can be a dividing and destructive force. Divisive and destructive forms of nationalism also bring groups of people together, but in a segregated manner. In the past, this segregated manner of unification has led to violence and discrimination against other groups of people. There have been plenty of examples of both unifying and dividing nationalism throughout history. We must look back at nationalism in history so that we don't allow nationalism to be divisive and destructive in the present.

One of the best examples of a unifying form of nationalism is Mahatma Gandhi's Indian independence movement. Gandhi and his followers resisted British colonial rule of India by practicing civil disobedience. Civil disobedience is the practice of resisting a government or occupying power without using violence. Gandhi's use of nonviolence to resist British control over India was based on a concept he created called Satyagraha. This word "is a compound of two Sanskrit nouns *satya*, meaning truth, and *agraha*, meaning *firm grasping*" (Basebang). The goal of Satyagraha is to find the truth and oppose untruth in a nonviolent manner. Satyagraha is the principle that Gandhi used to end British rule of India and make India an independent nation.

Gandhi was able to successfully achieve Indian independence due to his ability to bring Hindus and Muslims together. Gandhi believed that only religion would inspire people to pursue social change through nonviolence and peace. He also felt that religious dogmas were harmful because they tended to cause hostility towards other religions instead of creating dialogue. For

this reason, “Gandhi did not believe in rituals, customs, traditions, dogmas, and other formalities observed for the sake of religion” (Jahanbegloo). Gandhi’s beliefs allowed him to pursue an open dialogue with Indian Muslims. He thought that Hindus and Muslims were part of the same element in Indian society, not two different elements. This is proven by the fact that some of Gandhi’s colleagues, such as Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and Abdul Ghaffar Khan, were Muslims.

After achieving independence for India, Gandhi and his Muslim colleagues set about creating a secular Indian state. However, Azad had proposed a different definition of secularism. Azad’s definition of secularism was showing all religions the same respect, not having an absence of religion in the public realm. By using this secularist method, Azad brought different religious groups like Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and Muslims together in a tolerant and respective environment. Gandhi, Khan, and Azad also wanted “to ensure that the secular public sphere could uphold the constitutional rights of all religious minorities” (Jahanbegloo). Khan and Azad, along with other Muslim Gandhis, believed in the separation of the Indian state from religion. In their minds, religion was only a personal affair and that all religions should be given freedom, respect, and equal opportunities.

Although nationalism can easily be a unifying force that does good, it can just as easily become a dividing and destructive force. A great example of divisive and destructive nationalism is the rise of Benito Mussolini and the National Fascist Party in Italy before World War II. Mussolini and the Fascists were able to rise to power because of World War I and postwar economic issues. When World War I began in August of 1914, Italy remained neutral. However, Italy started to negotiate with powers on both sides of the conflict. Eventually, Austria-Hungary offered to give Trentino to Italy if Italy aligned itself with Austria-Hungary. However, Italy was

offered by the Triple Entente of Britain, France, and Russia “not only Trentino but also South Tirol, Trieste, Gorizia, Istria, and northern Dalmatia” (Berengo and others). Italy wanted to acquire huge amounts of territory, so they accepted the Triple Entente’s offer by signing the secret Treaty of London in April of 1915. Italy then entered World War I in May of 1915 by declaring war on Austria-Hungary. Italy won World War I in 1918, but the country paid a huge price in the process. Italy lost 600,000 soldiers, had 950,000 soldiers wounded, and the country was left divided over the cost of the war and the limited territory Italy received.

Trentino, Trieste, South Tirol, and parts of Gorizia and Istria were given to Italy after the Treaty of Saint-Germain was signed in 1919. However, Italy was not given other lands that they were supposed to acquire, such as Dalmatia, Fiume, colonies in Africa and Asia, and Albania. Since Italy was not given all the territory that was offered to them, “Nationalists therefore argued that Italy had been robbed of its rightful gains” (Berengo and others). The anger that Italians had as a result of the Treaty of Saint-Germain led to the rise of Italian nationalism in the interwar period.

Mussolini and the Fascists were also able to come to power due to the dire economic state of Italy after World War I. During the war, the government had printed money to pay for weapons, which led to inflation. At the end of 1920, the lira was a sixth of its value in 1913, and savings became worthless. In addition, the arms and shipbuilding industries went bankrupt after the conclusion of the war. As a result, “Unemployment rose to two million as returning soldiers searched for work” (Berengo and others). Due to the economic situation, workers began to go on strike. This led to instability in the country, as the postwar coalition governments were weak and could only stop the strikes by using force or working on concessions with the industrialists and

landowners. This situation gave Mussolini and the Fascists the opportunity they needed to take power in Italy.

When Mussolini became prime minister of Italy in 1922, he turned Italy into an autocracy by removing the safeguards in place to prevent it. He abolished elections, took away free speech and association, and forced parties and unions that opposed the Fascists to dissolve. Mussolini also used his position as prime minister to crush dissent. To deal with his political opponents, “A Special Tribunal for the Defense of the State, run by militia and army officers, was set up to try anti-Fascist *subversives*” (Berengo and others). This body imprisoned or exiled thousands of Mussolini’s political opponents, and others were either executed or killed by Fascist thugs.

After consolidating his power, Mussolini’s foreign policy became increasingly imperialistic and aggressive. Mussolini sought to expand Italian rule to lands in Africa and the Mediterranean. This expansion began when Mussolini invaded Ethiopia in October of 1935. The war ended when Italian forces conquered Ethiopia in May of 1936 and made Victor Emmanuel III, the king of Italy, emperor of Ethiopia. The next country that Mussolini sought to conquer was Albania. In 1939, Zog, the king of Albania, had refused to sign a trade agreement with Mussolini. Therefore, “the Italian army took control of the main strategic centres of the country and installed Italian loyalists in the civil service” (Berengo and others). Mussolini also made Victor Emmanuel III the Albanian king. However, Mussolini’s aggressive foreign policy led to sanctions being imposed on Italy by the League of Nations and diplomatic isolation. To continue pursuing his imperialistic aims, Mussolini formed a military alliance with Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany in May of 1939. This turned out to be a fatal decision, as Italy joined the Axis powers in World War II. Mussolini was dismissed as prime minister in July of 1943 and was ultimately killed by communist Italian partisans in April of 1945.

Another example of divisive and destructive nationalism is the rise of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist German Workers' (Nazi) Party in Germany. This is one of the most well-known and extreme forms of nationalism. Hitler and the Nazis, like Mussolini and the Fascists, were able to rise to power because of World War I and post-war economic issues. Germany had been on the losing side of World War I. Thus, Germany was forced to sign the Treaty of Versailles on June 28, 1919. The terms forced upon Germany by the Allies were particularly harsh. Germany had to give up ten percent of its territory and all of its colonies. The Rhineland region of Germany was demilitarized and taken over by the Allies. The Allies imposed limits on Germany's army and navy and prevented them from being able to have an air force. Germany was also forced to put their leaders, such as Kaiser Wilhelm II, on trial for war crimes. In addition, "Article 231 of the treaty, better known as the *war guilt clause*, forced Germany to accept full responsibility for starting World War I and pay enormous reparations for Allied war losses" (History.com Editors). The German people hated the Treaty of Versailles' terms, and their resentment led to the rise of nationalism in Germany.

Hitler and the Nazis were also able to rise to power by exploiting the economic issues that arose after the war. In addition to having to pay reparations to the Allies, Germany had to pay for pensions owed to soldiers and compensation for war widows. As a result, Germany acquired huge amounts of debt, and no country was willing to loan Germany any money. Germany's central bank printed money and then loaned it to the government to make these payments. Thus, Germany experienced a huge spike in inflation. The spike in inflation caused the mark to decrease dramatically in value. The mark eventually lost so much value that "it was used as wallpaper in German bathrooms" (Kenney and Chace). These economic issues, along

with World War I and the Treaty of Versailles, allowed Hitler and the Nazis to come to power in Germany in 1933.

Hitler based his form of German nationalism on ethnic and racial concepts. Hitler believed that the German Volk, or people, had “Aryan nuclei that represented the pure breed of the German people” (Weaver). In addition, Hitler also felt that the state was needed to preserve the racial characteristics that make up the human species. Based on this idea, Hitler thought that the human species was divided into superior and inferior races. Hitler used this racial ladder to convince the German people that they were superior to all other people. Hitler used these concepts to justify obtaining Lebensraum from Slavic countries in Eastern Europe and unify pure Germans into a single Reich, or empire. Hitler wanted to cleanse Germany of anything that he considered foreign or that would potentially harm German purity. One group that was a target of such cleansing was the Jews. Hitler attributed the degradation of the German people and the weakness of the Weimar Republic, the democratic German government that took power after World War I, to the Jews. Eventually, Hitler decided that only the systematic murder of all the Jews could purify Germany.

During Donald Trump’s campaign and presidency, he consistently used nationalist language. He pursued “America First” policies that placed U.S. interests before those of other countries. Trump also insisted that we must look after ourselves since other nations treated us poorly. Americans must be cautious to ensure that nationalism remains only a positive unifying force. History has shown us just how dangerous divisive nationalism can be.

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