

The French Revolution and the Idea of the Nation

The first clear expression of nationalism came with the French Revolution in 1789. France, as you would remember, was a full-fledged territorial state in 1789 under the rule of an absolute monarch.

The political and constitutional changes that came in the wake of the French Revolution led to the transfer of sovereignty from the monarchy to a body of French citizens.

The revolution proclaimed that it was the people who would henceforth constitute the nation and shape its destiny.

From the very beginning, the French revolutionaries introduced various measures and practices that could create a sense of collective identity amongst the French people.

- ❑ The ideas of *la patrie* (the fatherland) and *le citoyen* (the citizen) emphasised the notion of a united community enjoying equal rights under a constitution.**
- ❑ A new French flag, the tricolour, was chosen to replace the former royal standard.**
- ❑ The Estates General was elected by the body of active citizens and renamed the National Assembly.**
- ❑ New hymns were composed, oaths taken and martyrs commemorated, all in the name of the nation.**
- ❑ A centralised administrative system was put in place and it formulated uniform laws for all citizens within its territory.**
- ❑ Internal customs duties and dues were abolished and a uniform system of weights and measures was adopted.**
- ❑ Regional dialects were discouraged and French, as it was spoken and written in Paris, became the common language of the nation.**

When the news of the events in France reached the different cities of Europe, students and other members of educated middle classes began setting up Jacobin clubs. Their activities and campaigns prepared the way for the French armies which moved into Holland, Belgium, Switzerland and much of Italy in the 1790s.

Within the wide swathe of territory that came under his control, Napoleon set about introducing many of the reforms that he had already introduced in France. In the administrative field he had incorporated revolutionary principles in order to make the whole system more rational and efficient.

The Civil Code of 1804 – usually known as the Napoleonic Code

- ❑ did away with all privileges based on birth, established equality before the law and secured the right to property.

- ❑ This Code was exported to the regions under French control. In the Dutch Republic, in Switzerland, in Italy and Germany, Napoleon simplified administrative divisions, abolished the feudal system and freed peasants from serfdom and manorial dues.

- ❑ In the towns too, guild restrictions were removed. Transport and communication systems were improved. Peasants, artisans, workers and new businessmen enjoyed a new-found freedom.

- ❑ Uniform laws, standardised weights and measures, and a common national currency facilitate the movement and exchange of goods and capital from one region to another.

If you look at the map of mid-eighteenth-century Europe you will find that there were no 'nation-states' as we know them today. What we know today as Germany, Italy and Switzerland were divided into kingdoms, duchies and cantons whose rulers had their autonomous territories. Eastern and Central Europe were under autocratic monarchies within the territories of which lived diverse peoples. They did not see themselves as sharing a collective identity or a common culture. Often, they even spoke different languages and belonged to different ethnic groups. Such differences did not easily promote a sense of political unity.



Industrialisation began in England in the second half of the eighteenth century, but in France and parts of the German states it occurred only during the nineteenth century.

In its wake, new social groups came into being: a working-class population, and middle classes made up of industrialists, businessmen, professionals. It was among the educated, liberal middle classes that ideas of national unity followed.

What did Liberal Nationalism Stand for?

Ideas of national unity in early-nineteenth-century Europe were closely allied to the ideology of liberalism. The term 'liberalism' derives from the Latin root *liber*, *meaning free*. *For the new middle classes* liberalism stood for freedom for the individual and equality of all before the law.

Politically, it emphasised the concept of government by consent. Since the French Revolution, liberalism had stood for the end of autocracy and clerical privileges, a constitution and representative government through parliament. Nineteenth-century liberals also stressed the inviolability of private property.

In the economic sphere, liberalism stood for the freedom of markets and the abolition of state-imposed restrictions on the movement of goods and capital.

A New Conservatism after 1815.

Following the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, European governments were driven by a spirit of conservatism.

Conservatives believed in establishing traditional institutions of state and society – like the monarchy, the Church, social hierarchies, property and the family – should be preserved. And it could make state power more effective and strong.

A modern army, an efficient bureaucracy, a dynamic economy, the abolition of feudalism and serfdom could strengthen the autocratic monarchies of Europe . Conservative regimes set up in 1815 were autocratic. They did not tolerate criticism and dissent, and sought to curb activities that questioned the legitimacy of autocratic governments.

Most of them imposed censorship laws to control what was said in newspapers, books, plays and songs and reflected the ideas of liberty and freedom associated with the French Revolution.

The memory of the French Revolution nonetheless continued to inspire liberals. One of the major issues taken up by the liberal-nationalists, who criticised the new conservative order, was freedom of the press.

The Revolutionaries

During the years following 1815, the fear of repression drove many liberal-nationalists underground. Secret societies sprang up in many European states to train revolutionaries and spread their ideas. To be revolutionary at this time meant a commitment to oppose monarchical forms and to fight for liberty and freedom.

Most of these revolutionaries also saw the creation of nation-states as a necessary part of this struggle for freedom.

One such individual was the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini. Born in Genoa in 1807, he became a member of the secret society of the Carbonari. As a young man of 24, he was sent into exile in 1831 for attempting a revolution in Liguria.

He subsequently founded two more underground societies, first, Young Italy in Marseilles, and then, Young Europe in Berne, whose members were like-minded young men from Poland, France, Italy and the German states.

The Age of Revolutions: 1830-1848

As conservative regimes tried to consolidate their power, liberalism and nationalism came to be increasingly associated with revolution in many regions of Europe such as the Italian and German states, the provinces of the Ottoman Empire, Ireland and Poland. These revolutions were led by the liberal-nationalists belonging to the educated middle-class elite, among whom were professors, schoolteachers, clerks and members of the commercial middle classes.

The Romantic Imagination and National Feeling

The development of nationalism did not come about only through wars and territorial expansion. Culture played an important role in creating the idea of the nation: art and poetry, stories and music helped express and shape nationalist feelings.

The emphasis on vernacular language and the collection of local folklore was not just to recover an ancient national spirit, but also to carry the modern nationalist message to large audiences who were mostly illiterate.

Germany – Unification.

Germany and Italy came to be unified as nation-states. As you have seen, nationalist feelings were widespread among middle-class Germans, who in 1848 tried to unite the different regions of the German confederation into a nation-state governed by an elected parliament.

This liberal initiative to nation-building was, however, repressed by the combined forces of the monarchy and the military, supported by the large landowners (called Junkers) of Prussia.

From then on, Prussia took on the leadership of the movement for national unification. Its chief minister, Otto von Bismarck, was the architect of this process carried out with the help of the Prussian army and bureaucracy. Three wars over seven years – with Austria, Denmark and France – ended in Prussian victory and completed the process of unification.

In January 1871, the Prussian king, William I, was proclaimed German Emperor in a ceremony held at Versailles.

On the bitterly cold morning of 18 January 1871, an assembly comprising the princes of the German states, representatives of the army, important Prussian ministers including the chief minister Otto von Bismarck gathered in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles to proclaim the new German Empire headed by Kaiser William I of Prussia.



Italy Unified

Like Germany, Italy too had a long history of political fragmentation. Italians were scattered over several dynastic states as well as the multi-national Habsburg Empire.

During the middle of the nineteenth century, Italy was divided into seven states, of which only one, Sardinia-Piedmont, was ruled by an Italian princely house.

The north was under Austrian Habsburgs, the centre was ruled by the Pope and the southern regions were under the domination of the Bourbon kings of Spain. Even the Italian language had not acquired one common form and still had many regional and local variations.

During the 1830s, Giuseppe Mazzini had sought to put together a coherent programme for a unitary Italian Republic. He had also formed a secret society called Young Italy for the dissemination of his goals.

The failure of revolutionary uprisings both in 1831 and 1848 meant that the mantle now fell on Sardinia-Piedmont under its ruler King Victor Emmanuel II to unify the Italian states through war.

In the eyes of the ruling elites of this region, a unified Italy offered them the possibility of economic development and political dominance.



Before unification

After unification



The Strange Case of Britain

In Britain the formation of the nation-state was not the result of a sudden upheaval or revolution. It was the result of a long-drawn-out process. There was no British nation prior to the eighteenth century. The primary identities of the people who inhabited the British Isles were ethnic ones – such as English, Welsh, Scot or Irish.

All of these ethnic groups had their own cultural and political traditions. But as the English nation steadily grew in wealth, importance and power, it was able to extend its influence over the other nations of the islands. The English parliament, which had seized power from the monarchy in 1688, was the instrument through which a nation-state, with England at its centre, came to be forged.

The Act of Union (1707) between England and Scotland that resulted in the formation of the ‘United Kingdom of Great Britain’ meant, in effect, that England was able to impose its influence on Scotland. The British parliament was henceforth dominated by its English members.

The growth of a British identity meant that Scotland’s distinctive culture and political institutions were systematically suppressed. The Catholic clans that inhabited the Scottish Highlands suffered terrible repression whenever they attempted to assert their independence.

The Scottish Highlanders were forbidden to speak their Gaelic language or wear their national dress, and large numbers were forcibly driven out of their homeland.

Ireland suffered a similar fate. It was a country deeply divided between Catholics and Protestants. The English helped the Protestants of Ireland to establish their dominance over a largely Catholic country.

Catholic revolts against British dominance were suppressed. After a failed revolt led by Wolfe Tone and his United Irishmen (1798), Ireland was forcibly incorporated into the United Kingdom in 1801.

A new 'British nation' was forged through the propagation of a dominant English culture. The symbols of the new Britain – the British flag (Union Jack), the national anthem (God Save Our Noble King), the English language – were actively promoted and the older nations survived only as subordinate partners in this union.

Visualising the Nation

While it is easy enough to represent a ruler through a portrait or a statue, how does one go about giving a face to a nation?

Artists in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries found a way out by personifying a nation. In other words they represented a country as if it were a person.

Nations were then portrayed as female figures. The female form that was chosen to personify the nation did not stand for any particular woman in real life; rather it sought to give the abstract idea of the nation a concrete form.

That is, the female figure became an **allegory of the nation**. during the French Revolution artists used the female allegory to portray ideas such as Liberty, Justice and the Republic.

The attributes of Liberty are the red cap, or the broken chain, while Justice is generally a blindfolded woman carrying a pair of weighing scales.

Similar female allegories were invented by artists in the nineteenth century to represent the nation.

In France she was christened **Marianne**, a popular Christian name, which underlined the idea of a people's nation. Her characteristics were drawn from those of Liberty and the Republic – the red cap, the tricolour, the cockade.

Statues of Marianne were erected in public squares to remind the public of the national symbol of unity and to persuade them to identify with it.

Marianne images were marked on coins and stamps.

Similarly, **Germania** became the allegory of the German nation. In visual representations, Germania wears a crown of oak leaves, as the German oak stands for heroism.



Germania

