

Romantic nationalism

Romantic nationalism (also **national romanticism**, **organic nationalism**, **identity nationalism**) is the form of nationalism in which the state derives its political legitimacy as an organic consequence of the unity of those it governs. This includes, depending on the particular manner of practice, the language, race, culture, religion, and customs of the nation in its primal sense of those who were born within its culture. This form of nationalism arose in reaction to dynastic or imperial hegemony, which assessed the legitimacy of the state from the top down, emanating from a monarch or other authority, which justified its existence. Such downward-radiating power might ultimately derive from a god or gods (see the divine right of kings and the Mandate of Heaven).

Among the key themes of Romanticism, and its most enduring legacy, the cultural assertions of romantic nationalism have also been central in post-Enlightenment art and political philosophy. From its earliest stirrings, with their focus on the development of national languages and folklore, and the spiritual value of local customs and traditions, to the movements that would redraw the map of Europe and lead to calls for self-determination of nationalities, nationalism was one of the key issues in Romanticism, determining its roles, expressions and meanings.

Historically in Europe, the watershed year for romantic nationalism was 1848, when a revolutionary wave spread across the continent; numerous nationalistic revolutions occurred in various fragmented regions (such as Italy) or multinational states (such as the Austrian Empire). While initially the revolutions fell to reactionary forces and the old order was quickly re-established, the many revolutions would mark the first step towards liberalization and the formation of modern nation states across much of Europe.



Liberty Leading the People embodying the Romantic view of the French Revolution of 1830, also known as the July Revolution; its painter Eugène Delacroix also served as an elected deputy



Brudeferden i Hardanger (Bridal procession in Hardanger), a monumental piece within Norwegian romantic nationalism. Painted by Hans Gude and Adolph Tidemand.

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Brief history

The ideas of Rousseau (1712–1778) and of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) inspired much early Romantic nationalism in Europe. In 1784 Herder argued that geography formed the natural economy of a people, and that their customs and society would develop along the lines that their basic environment favored.

From its beginnings in the late 18th century, romantic nationalism has relied upon the existence of a historical ethnic culture which meets the romantic ideal; folklore developed as a romantic nationalist concept. The Brothers Grimm, inspired by Herder's writings, put together an idealized collection of tales, which they labeled as authentically German. The concept of an inherited cultural patrimony from a common origin rapidly became central to a divisive question within romantic nationalism: specifically, is a nation unified because it comes from the same genetic source, that is because of race, or is the participation in the organic nature of the "folk" culture self-fulfilling?



Romanticized painting of the Battle of Rancagua during the Chilean War of Independence by Pedro Subercaseaux

Romantic nationalism formed a key strand in the philosophy of Hegel (1770–1831), who argued that there was a "spirit of the age" or *zeitgeist* that inhabited a particular people at a particular time, and that, when that people became the active determiner of history, it was simply because their cultural and political moment had come. Because of the Germans' role in the Protestant Reformation, Hegel (a Lutheran) argued that his historical moment had seen the *Zeitgeist* settle on the German-speaking peoples.

In continental Europe, Romantics had embraced the French Revolution in its beginnings, then found themselves fighting the counter-revolution in the trans-national Imperial system of Napoleon. The sense of self-determination and national consciousness that had enabled revolutionary forces to defeat aristocratic regimes in battle became rallying points for resistance against the French Empire (1804–14). In Prussia, the development of spiritual renewal as a means to engage in the struggle against Napoleon was argued by, among others, Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814), a disciple of Kant. The word *Volkstum*, or "folkhood", was coined in Germany as part of this resistance to French hegemony.

Fichte expressed the unity of language and nation in his thirteenth address "To the German Nation" in 1806:

The first, original, and truly natural boundaries of states are beyond doubt their internal boundaries. Those who speak the same language are joined to each other by a multitude of invisible bonds by nature herself, long before any human art begins; they understand each other and have the power of continuing to make themselves understood more and more clearly; they belong together and are by nature one and an inseparable whole. (Kelly, 1968, pp. 190-91)

Only when each people, left to itself, develops and forms itself in accordance with its own peculiar quality, and only when in every people each individual develops himself in accordance with that common quality, as well as in accordance with his own peculiar quality—then, and then only, does the manifestation of divinity appear in its true mirror as it ought to be; and only a man who either entirely lacks the notion of the rule of law and divine order, or else is an obdurate enemy thereto, could take upon himself to want to interfere with that law, which is the highest law in the spiritual world! (Kelly, 1968, pp. 197-98)

Nationalism and revolution

In the Balkans, Romantic views of a connection with classical Greece, which inspired Philhellenism infused the Greek War of Independence (1821–32), in which the Romantic poet Lord Byron died of high fever. Rossini's opera William Tell (1829) marked the onset of the Romantic Opera, using the central national myth unifying Switzerland; and in Brussels, a riot (August 1830) after an opera that set a doomed romance against a background of foreign oppression (Auber's La Muette de Portici) sparked the Belgian Revolution of 1830–31, the first successful revolution in the model of Romantic nationalism. Verdi's opera choruses of an oppressed people inspired two generations of patriots in Italy, especially with "Va pensiero" (Nabucco, 1842). Under the influence of romantic nationalism, among economic and political forces, both Germany and Italy found political unity, and movements to create nations similarly based upon ethnic groups. It would flower in the Balkans (see for example, the Carinthian Plebiscite 1920), along the Baltic Sea, and in the interior of Central Europe, where in the eventual outcome, the Habsburgs succumbed to the surge of Romantic nationalism.^[1] In Norway, romanticism was embodied, not in literature, but in the movement toward a national style, both in architecture and in *ethos*.^[2] Earlier, there was a strong romantic nationalist element mixed with Enlightenment rationalism in the rhetoric used in British North America, in the colonists' Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution of 1787, as well as the rhetoric in the wave of revolts, inspired by new senses of localized identities, which swept the American colonies of Spain, one after the other from the May Revolution of Argentina in 1810.

Conservatism and revolution in the 19th century

Following the ultimate collapse of the First French Empire with the fall of Napoleon, conservative elements took control in Europe, led by the Austrian noble Klemens von Metternich, ideals of the balance of power between the great powers of Europe dominated continental politics of the first half of the 19th century. Following the Congress of Vienna, and subsequent Concert of Europe system, several major empires took control of European politics. Among these were the Russian Empire, the restored French monarchy, the German Confederation under the dominance of Prussia, the Austrian Empire and the Ottoman Empire.

The conservative forces held sway until the Revolutions of 1848 swept across Europe and threatened the old order. Numerous movements developed around various cultural groups, who began to develop a sense of national identity. While initially, all of these revolutions failed, and reactionary forces would re-establish political control, the revolutions marked the start of the steady progress towards the end of the Concert of Europe under the dominance of a few multi-national empires and led to the establishment of the modern nation state in Europe; a process that would not be complete for over a century and a half. Central and Eastern Europe's political situation was partly shaped by the two World Wars, while many national identities in these two regions formed modern nation states when the collapse of the Soviet Union and the multinational states Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia led to numerous new states forming during the last two decades of the 20th century.

Language

Romantic nationalism inspired the processes whereby folk epics, retold legends and even fairy tales, published in existing dialects, were combined with a modern syntax to create a "revived" version of a language. Romantic nationalists expected patriots to then learn that language and raise their children speaking that language – as part of a general program to establish a unique identity. "Landsmål", which is the foundation of a form of Norwegian used by 10% of the population, mostly in western Norway, was, along with modern Czech, the first language to follow this program, and it was joined by modern Slovak, Finnish and later by Hebrew as nationalizing languages. Katharevousa Greek was constructed as a form of Modern Greek drawing on classical Greek morphology and vocabulary in an attempt to purify the existing demotic Greek.



John Gast, *American Progress*, (circa 1872) celebrates U.S. romantic nationalism in the form of westward expansion – an idea known as Manifest Destiny".

The linguistic processes of romantic nationalism demanded linguistic culture models. Romantic historiography was centered on biographies and produced culture heroes. The modern Italian of *Risorgimento* patriots like Alessandro Manzoni was based on the Tuscan dialects sanctified by Dante and Petrarch. In English, Shakespeare became an iconic figure (though not a modern linguistic model).

Folk culture

Romantic nationalism inspired the collection of folklore by such people as the Brothers Grimm. The view that fairy tales, unless contaminated from outside literary sources, were preserved in the same form over thousands of years, was not exclusive to Romantic Nationalists, but it fit in well with their views that such tales expressed the primordial nature of a people.

The Brothers Grimm were criticized because their first edition was insufficiently German, and they followed the advice. They rejected many tales they collected because of their similarity to tales by Charles Perrault, which they thought proved they were not truly German tales; *Sleeping Beauty* survived in their collection because the tale of Brynhildr convinced them that the figure of the sleeping princess was authentically German. They also altered the language used, changing each "Fee" (fairy) to an enchantress or wise woman, every "prince" to a "king's son", every "princess" to a "king's daughter".^[3] Discussing these views in their third editions, they particularly singled out Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone* as the first *national* collection of fairy tales, and as capturing Neapolitan voice.^[4]



"Good evening, uncle!" said the boy".
A drawing by John Bauer on
Swedish folklore

The work of the Brothers Grimm influenced other collectors, both inspiring them to collect tales and leading them to similarly believe that the fairy tales of a country were particularly representative of it, to the neglect of cross-cultural influence. Among those influenced were the Russian Alexander Afanasyev, the Norwegians Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, and the Australian Joseph Jacobs.^[5]

Many artists and writers also drew on their native countries folklore and folktunes for their own work to express their nationalism.

National epics

The concept of a 'national epic', an extensively mythologized legendary work of poetry of defining importance to a certain nation, is another product of Romantic nationalism. The "discovery" of *Beowulf* in a single manuscript, first transcribed in 1818, came under the impetus of Romantic nationalism, after the manuscript had lain as an ignored curiosity in scholars' collections for two centuries. *Beowulf* was felt to provide people self-identified as "Anglo-Saxon" with their missing "national epic",^[6] just when the need for it was first being felt: the fact that Beowulf himself was a Geat was easily overlooked. The pseudo-Gaelic literary forgeries of "Ossian" had failed, finally, to fill the need for the first Romantic generation.

The first publication of *The Tale of Igor's Campaign* coincided with the rise in Russian national spirit in the wake of the Napoleonic wars and Suvorov's campaigns in Central Europe. The unseen and unheard *Song of Roland* had become a dim memory, until the antiquary Francisque Michel transcribed a worn copy in the Bodleian Library and put it into print in 1837; it was timely: French interest in the national epic revived among the Romantic generation. In Greece, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* took on new urgency during the Greek War of Independence. Amongst the world's Jewish community, the early Zionists considered the Bible a more suitable national epic than the Talmud.^[7]

Many other "national epics," epic poetry considered to reflect the national spirit, were produced or revived under the influence of Romantic nationalism: particularly in the Russian Empire, national minorities seeking to assert their own identities in the face of Russification produced new national poetry – either out of whole cloth, or from cobbling together folk poetry by resurrecting older

narrative poetry. Examples include the Estonian Kalevipoeg, Finnish Kalevala, Polish Pan Tadeusz, Latvian Lāčplēsis, Armenian Sasuntzi Davit by Hovhannes Tumanyan, Georgian The Knight in the Panther's Skin and Greater Iran, Shahnameh.

Claims of primacy or superiority

At the same time, linguistic and cultural nationality, colored with pre-genetic concepts of race, bolstered two rhetorical claims consistently associated with romantic nationalism to this day: claims of primacy and claims of superiority. Primacy is the claimed inalienable right of a culturally and racially defined people to a geographical terrain, a "heartland" (a vivid expression) or homeland. The polemics of racial superiority became inexorably intertwined with romantic nationalism. Richard Wagner notoriously argued that those who were ethnically different could not comprehend the artistic and cultural meaning inherent in national culture. Identifying "Jewishness" even in musical style,^[8] he specifically attacked the Jews as being unwilling to assimilate into German culture, and thus unable to truly comprehend the mysteries of its music and language. Sometimes "national epics" such as the Nibelunglied have had a galvanizing effect on social politics.



"The Bard" by John Martin: a romantic vision of a single Welsh bard escaping a massacre ordered by Edward I of England, intended to destroy Welsh culture

Arts



Church of the Savior on Blood St Petersburg, 1883–1907

Main articles: Musical nationalism and National Romantic style (architecture).

After the 1870s "**national romanticism**", as it is more usually called, became a familiar movement in the arts. Romantic musical nationalism is exemplified by the work of Bedřich Smetana, especially the symphonic poem "Vltava". In Scandinavia and the Slavic parts of Europe especially, "national romanticism" provided a series of answers to the 19th-century search for styles that would be culturally meaningful and evocative, yet not merely historicist. When a church was built over the spot in St Petersburg where Tsar Alexander II of Russia had been assassinated, the 'Church of the Savior on Blood', the natural style to use was one that best evoked traditional Russian features (*illustration, left*). In Finland, the reassembly of the national epic, the Kalevala, inspired paintings and murals in the National Romantic style that substituted there for the international Art Nouveau styles. The foremost proponent in Finland was Akseli Gallen-Kallela (*illustration, below right*).

By the turn of the century, ethnic self-determination had become an assumption held as being progressive and liberal. There were romantic nationalist movements for separation in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, the Kingdom of Bavaria held apart from a united Germany, and Czech and Serb nationalism continued to trouble Imperial politics. The flowering of arts

which drew inspiration from national epics and song continued unabated. The Zionist movement revived Hebrew, and began immigration to Eretz Yisrael, and Welsh and Irish tongues also experienced a poetic revival.

Twentieth-century political developments

In the first two decades of the 20th century, Romantic Nationalism as an idea was to have crucial influence on political events. Following the Panic of 1873 that gave rise to a new wave of anti-Semitism and racism in the German Empire politically ruled by an authoritarian, militaristic conservatism under Otto von Bismarck and in parallel with a wide revival of irrational emotionalism known as *Fin de siècle* (also reflected to a degree in the contemporary art movements of symbolism, the Decadent movement, and Art Nouveau), the racist, so-called völkisch movement grew out of Romantic nationalism during the last third of the 19th century, to some extent modelling itself on British Imperialism and "the White Man's Burden". The idea was that Germans should "naturally" rule over lesser peoples. Romantic nationalism, which had begun as a revolt against "foreign" kings and overlords, had come full circle, and was being used to make the case for a "Greater Germanic Empire" which would rule over Europe.



The Defense of the Sampo Akseli Gallen-Kallela

The nationalistic and imperialistic tensions rising high between the European nations throughout the irrational, neo-Romantic *Fin de siècle* period eventually erupted in the First World War. After Germany had lost the war and undergone the tumultuous German Revolution, the völkisch movement drastically radicalized itself in Weimar Germany under the harsh terms of the Treaty of Versailles, and Adolf Hitler would go on to say that "the basic ideas of National-Socialism are völkisch, just as the völkisch ideas are National-Socialist".



Frog Tsarevna, by Viktor Vasnetsov, 1918.

Outside of Germany, the belief among European powers was that nation-states forming around unities of language, culture and ethnicity were "natural" in some sense. For this reason President Woodrow Wilson would argue for the creation of self-determining states in the wake of the Great War. However, the belief in romantic nationalism would be honored in the breach. In redrawing the map of Europe, Yugoslavia was created as an intentional coalition state among competing, and often mutually hostile, southern Slavic peoples, and the League of Nations' mandates were often drawn, not to unify ethnic groups, but to divide them. To take one example, the nation now known as Iraq intentionally joined together three Ottoman vilayets, uniting Kurds in the north, Sunni Arabs in the center, and Shia Arabs in the south, in an effort to present a strong national buffer state between Turkey and Persia: over these was placed a foreign king from the Hashemite dynasty native to the Hijaz.

Because of the broad range of expressions of romantic nationalism, it is listed as a contributing factor from everything from the creation of independent states in Europe, to the rise of Nazi Germany. As an idea, if not a specific movement, it is present as an assumption in debates over nationality and nationhood even today, and many of the world's nations were created from principles drawn from romantic nationalism as their source of legitimacy

See also

- Conservatism
- Scandinavism
- Norwegian romantic nationalism
- German question
- Slavophiles
- Pochvennichestvo
- Britishness
- Ethnic nationalism
- Civil religion

- Polytheistic reconstructionism
- National epic
- National treasure
- National anthem
- Nationalism
- Patriotism
- Rise of nationalism in Europe
- Historiography and nationalism
- Musical nationalism

Sources

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2. Oscar Julius Falnes, *National romanticism in Norway* 1968.
3. Maria Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales*, p31, ISBN 0-691-06722-8
4. Benedetto Croce, "The Fantastic Accomplishment of Giambattista Basile and His Tale of Tales", Jack Zipes, ed., *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm* 888-9, ISBN 0-393-97636-X
5. Jack Zipes, *The Great Fairy Tale Tradition: From Straparola and Basile to the Brothers Grimm* 846, ISBN 0-393-97636-X
6. The section "III. Early National Poetry" of *The Cambridge History of English and American Literature* (1907–21) begins "By far the most important product of the national epics is *Beowulf*..
7. Moshe Halbertal (1997), *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority* (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=7ewY9764Wv8C&pg=PA132>), p.132: "With the rise of Jewish nationalism, the relation of many Jews to the Bible and the Talmud took another turn. The Zionists preferred the Bible to the Talmud as the national literature, for the Bible tells a heroic story of the national drama whose focus is the Land of Israel. While they objected to the Haskalah politics of emancipation, Zionist thinkers also stressed the role of the Bible, but they thought of it as an element in building a particular national consciousness rather than as the basis of a shared Judeo-Christian heritage enabling the integration of Jews in Europe. Unlike the Talmud, they held, the Bible had the potential to become a national epic. Its drama unfolded in the hills of Judea, and it connected the national claim to the land with a historical past. Nothing in the Talmud, in contrast, appealed to the romanticism vital to national movements. It does not tell the glorious story of a nation, it has no warriors and heroes, no geography which arouses longing in the reader or a sense of connection to an ancient home."
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External links

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This page was last edited on 17 March 2018, at 20:37.

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