This Time We Knew

Mestrovic, Stjepan, Cushman, Thomas

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A discussion of ethnicity in the post-Cold War world, as in any other time, must begin with the definition of the phenomenon. What we mean by ethnicity in the context of East European transformations, I think, is ethnic nationalism, that is, the type of nationalism distinguished by the manner in which it defines the nation, and by the nature of its criteria for national membership. The definition of the nation in ethnic nationalisms is collectivistic and authoritarian: the nation is defined in unitary terms, as a collective individual endowed with its own will, needs, and interests, which subsume the wills, needs, and interests of its individual members, and presupposes an elite of interpreters, specifically qualified to decipher this collective will, whom the masses who are not so qualified must obey. Ethnic criteria of national membership, in turn, imply that nationality is believed to be inherent and independent of the individual choice: one can neither acquire it if one is not born with it, nor change it, if one is.

Ethnic nationalism, which is the most widespread type of nationalism,
and is characteristic, among others, of East European societies, differs very significantly from other types of nationalism, and, in particular, represents the very opposite of the individualistic civic nationalism characteristic of Western liberal democracies, such as the United States or Britain. Within the framework of individualistic civic nationalisms, the nation is defined as a composite entity, an association of its members, whose aggregate—and always negotiable—wills and interests compose the interests of the nation. National membership is defined in civic terms, namely, terms identical with citizenship, which means that nationality is at least in principle open and voluntaristic: it can and sometimes must be acquired.

Ethnic nationalism has characteristic propensities in the sphere of internal politics as well as international relations that differ markedly from the parallel propensities of individualistic and civic nationalisms. For example, ethnically defined nations are more likely to engage in aggressive warfare than individualistic nations. This is so for several reasons. Individualistic nationalisms are not, in principle, particularistic, for they are based on the universalistic principle of the moral primacy of the individual. This goes for any individual, whether or not he or she belongs to the national community, and as a result, the borderline between “us” and “them” is frequently blurred. One’s nation is not perceived as an animate being that can nurture grievances; neither are other nations regarded as individuals harboring malicious intentions and capable of inflicting insults. The culprits and the victims in every conflict are specified, and sympathies and antipathies change with the issues and points of view. Moreover, individualistic nationalisms are by definition pluralisms, which implies that at any point in time there exists a plurality of opinions in regard to what constitutes the good of the nation. For this reason, it is relatively difficult, in individualistic nations, to achieve a consensus necessary for the mobilization of the population for war; it is especially difficult in the case of aggressive war, when no direct threat from the prospective enemy is perceived by the national population.

Ethnic nationalisms, by contrast, are necessarily forms of particularism. The borderline between “us” and “them” is relatively clear, the nations are seen as individuals capable of suffering and inflicting insults, and the national collectivity is essentially a consensual, rather than conflictual, pluralistic society. All these qualities facilitate mobilization.

In addition, during war, ethnic nationalism are more conducive to brutality in relation to the enemy population than civic nationalisms. This
is so because civic nationalisms, even when particularistic, treat humanity as one, fundamentally homogeneous, entity. Foreigners are not fellow nationals, but they are still fellow humans, and with a little effort on their part, it is assumed, they may even become fellow nationals. In ethnic nationalisms, by contrast, the borderline between “us” and “them” is in principle impermeable. Nationality is defined as an inherent trait, and nations are seen, in effect, as separate species. Foreigners are no longer fellow humans in the same sense, and there is no moral imperative to treat them as one would one’s fellow nationals (in the same way as there is no imperative to treat our fellow mammals or even fellow great apes as fellow humans). The very definitions of ethnic nations presuppose a double standard of moral (or humane, decent, etc.) conduct. The tendency to “demonize” the enemy population, considered a necessary condition for “crimes against humanity,” is built into ethnic nationalisms, for enemy populations within them are not necessarily defined as humanity to begin with.

According to the characteristic psycho-logic of ethnic nationalisms, in which both one’s own nation and other nations are defined in terms of inherent traits, the evil other (whoever that may be) is always harboring malicious intentions ready to strike against the innocent nation at an opportune moment. For this reason, ethnic nations tend to feel threatened and to become aggressive, both to preempt perceived threats of aggression against them and because the evil nature of the adversary justifies aggression, even if no immediate threats are perceived, at the same time as it justifies brutality in relation to the enemy population. All these tendencies of ethnic nationalisms are well demonstrated by Serbian nationalism today. But they are also characteristic of other ethnic nationalisms, even though under certain circumstances they may be hidden from view.

Is there any change in the nature of ethnic nationalisms as a result of the end of the Cold War? I would say no. The greater salience of nationalist sentiments and the reactivation of national conflicts in Eastern Europe (which, by the way, are related to the end of the Cold War only as simultaneous but independent effects of the same cause, the collapse of the Soviet Union) cannot be attributed to the change of identity or even crisis of identity as a result of the abandonment of communism, but solely to the disintegration of imperial systems that held these sentiments and hostilities in check without modifying them in the least. The ease with which former communist bosses transform into right-wing nationalists (in the former constituent republics of the Soviet Union, as well as in
Yugoslavia—for example Milosević—and elsewhere) attests to the deep affinity between communism and ethnic nationalism. The former, as I have argued in another context, is in fact a metamorphosed variety of the latter. Ostensibly an internationalist and a universalist doctrine, communism only thinly camouflaged the nationalist character of the regimes in the Soviet bloc, particularly the regime in the Soviet Union itself. In fact there, at least since World War II, it hardly camouflaged anything at all. The main ideological premises of the Soviet regime after World War II were those of Russian great power nationalism, and if this not-so-subtle change of ideological direction or political orientation escaped the attention of the West, it was certainly felt by the hundred-million-strong non-Russian population of the Soviet Union. The great war, Vassilii Grossman wrote perceptively, "gave Stalin the possibility to openly declare the ideology of state nationalism." "Soviet, Russian people began to understand themselves in a new way, and to relate in a new way to people of other nationalities... From the element of form, the national transformed into the content, and became the foundation of a new worldview [historical consciousness]."  

This post-World War II historical consciousness was based on the original Russian ethnic nationalism, and its perpetuation was the chief reason for the fragility of the Soviet Union, however monolithic it looked from the outside. Since nationalities were defined in terms of inherent traits, they were seen as mutually impermeable, and thus ethnic nationalism, on the one hand, made true Russification (i.e., incorporation and assimilation) of originally non-Russian populations inconceivable, and, on the other hand, prevented the integration of the constituent populations in a common new nationality, or the formation of the Soviet nation. A Soviet nation never existed (the phrase itself sounds absurd in Russian, which allows for the existence of a "Soviet state," "Soviet land," or "Soviet people"); it was a grave mistake to assume that it did, an error of perception that left Western observers and policy makers completely unprepared for the developments of the last several years and conceptually ill equipped to deal with them. The Soviet Union was a union of separate nations, held together by the might of Russia, or, in other words, an empire. The social structure of the Soviet Union reflected this political reality: immutable ethnic nationality was the basis of a rigid hierarchy, which determined people's life chances in the allegedly classless society. It is to this fact, clearly stamped in the consciousness of Soviet citizens, that the notorious fifth point in their passports corresponded.
In the framework of Russian nationalism, loyalty to the nation took precedence over loyalty to the state. The Soviet state recognized the legitimacy of loyalty to the Russian nation. Moreover, it recognized the legitimacy of loyalty to the other nations within the union as well (with one possible exception—the Jews—who, however, were defined not as a full-fledged nation, but only a nationality). This recognition was not consistent, because it went contrary to the Russian imperial interests. But, given the nature of Russian nationalism, neither could it be consistently withheld. In fact, the Soviet government sponsored the development of several inchoate non-Russian nationalities, and, in general, through its support of national cultures and bureaucracies in the republics, cultivated dual loyalties that would eventually prove so dangerous to it, and contributed to the formation of nationalist sentiments.

At the same time, the Soviet government (like any government) was often moved by instrumental, rather than ideological, considerations, and it was suspicious of the populist, anti-authoritarian, and potentially oppositional undercurrents of Russian nationalism, in the framework of which a Marxist party, or any party wielding absolute power, might look more like a foreign usurper than a legitimate government. It was also suspicious of the anti-Russian undercurrents of the non-Russian nationalisms, which it could not help but encourage. (This ambivalent position was also characteristic of the tsarist government in the days of “official nationality,” and I would expect to find parallels in any nonrepresentative government in the age of nationalism.) As a result, during the Soviet period, nationalism, while by no means suppressed, was held in check: its expressions were controlled, special channels were provided for them, and the spillovers of the national sentiments outside these channels were tolerated only in certain areas (such as everyday life), where they did not threaten the interests of the ruling elite.

With the dissolution of the imperial structures, such controls became impossible. All the levees built to hold nationalism within specific channels broke down, and, with communism gone, it flooded the area. Although I know less about Yugoslavia, I have an impression that the situation there was quite similar. The reason the nationalist spillover has so far been so much more tragic in Yugoslavia may be that Russia, in contrast to Serbia, is too prohibitive in its size and strength in relation to other republics to allow events similar to the discrimination against Serbs in Croatia or in Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1990. Another reason may be
that no Russian leader so far was willing to capitalize on such provocations that did take place and involve the country in military conflict, as Milosević apparently did in Yugoslavia.4

The relationship between community, identity, and political change in the new era is, I would therefore argue, very similar to what it was in the old one, only now it is open to view, while earlier it appeared hidden. This, however, does not mean that we should not raise this question; it is a question of utmost importance and it is better to raise it later than never. I already mentioned the implications of ethnic nationalism for aggressive behavior, specifically war. I would now like to touch on its implications for peaceful political change.

To begin with, the collectivistic and authoritarian features of ethnic nationalism make it antithetical to liberal democracy at the same time as they ensure its deep affinity to socialist-type regimes. Not only does this explain the nationalist (rather than communist) character of the opposition to democratization in the postcommunist societies, but it means that so long as national identity and consciousness in these societies remain ethnic, the emergence of liberal democracies in them will be highly improbable. In other words, a successful democratization of these societies presupposes no less than a change of identity. While this is not an impossibility, such a change of identity in societies formerly constituent of the Soviet Union and the Soviet bloc is very unlikely. This is so chiefly because the respective social elites of these societies have a vested interest in ethnic nationalism, while democratization is emphatically contrary to the interests of these elites, perhaps even more so than was communism.

The position of the social elite in East European societies belongs to the intelligentsia, which under communism was the mainstay of dissident movements and today represents the main pool for political leadership, both pro- and antireform. The intelligentsia—in Russia, as much as in Serbia, the Baltics, or elsewhere in Eastern Europe—has been the carrier of nationalist ideas, the standard-bearer of ethnic nationalism. Nationalism, transmitted through high culture much more than through folklore, permeates the intelligentsia's entire way of thinking and way of life, forming the medium in which, cognitively, they exist, as fish do in water, defining their perspectives, shaping their vision and aspirations. This is true of the so-called democrats, as much as of the self-proclaimed "nationalists," and it goes a long way to explain the general disaffection of the intelligentsia today from the reform process. It should be remem-
bered that “nationalists” and “democrats” were equally opposed to communism in the past, and that, in fact, most prominent dissidents of the late Soviet period are found today among the former.

Within the framework of ethnic nationalism, culture is seen as the expression of the spirit of the nation and has the pride of place among social values. The intelligentsia, the creators and disseminators of culture, as a result enjoy immense social prestige. They are the interpreters of the nation’s will, the mirror of its soul, the representatives and wielders of the supreme authority, to whom the masses owe their respect and obedience. In Russia, for example, the intelligentsia, already in the middle of the nineteenth century, assumed the place of the aristocracy, which redefined itself as “the educated class” at the same time as it embraced national identity. The social hierarchy became conceptualized in terms of the distinction between the intelligentsia and “the people.” This distinction was preserved throughout the entire Soviet period—reflected in language (which conventionally distinguishes between members of the intelligentsia and the “simple” or “common” people) and in social arrangements—and became established in those of the Soviet republics in which it had not emerged independently.

Still, during the Soviet period, and in particular from the 1960s on, the Soviet intelligentsia was not satisfied with its position. While its social superiority was not challenged, it was denied political influence and prevented from assuming the role of national leadership to which, given the nature of its national consciousness and identity, it considered itself entitled. It was because of this that the Soviet intelligentsia turned away from communism and certain sectors in it became openly anticommunist. (The reasons for its disaffection with the communist regime, I should mention, were identical to the reasons that turned the Russian intelligentsia against the tsarist regime and brought the communist regime about.) The initial enthusiasm of the intelligentsia for democratic reform melted away, when it became clear that democracy, with its implication of social equality, will make the assertion of the intelligentsia’s superior status at least as, if not more, unlikely. Nationalism, in distinction, implies such an assertion, and so even the “progressive” intelligentsia drifts in the direction of increasingly nationalist positions.

The chief source of nationalism’s potential influence in postcommunist politics is the fact that it defines and serves the interests of the most articulate, organized, and influential class in postcommunist societies. The intelligentsia’s superior status and group identity are wrapped up in ethnic
nationalism and cannot be sustained outside its framework. The intelligentsia, therefore, has a vested interest in cultivating ethnic nationalism, which means cultivating exactly the complex of values that is most unfavorable for the development of liberal democracy.

In ethnically defined nations, the elites entrusted with the interpretation of the nation’s will are by and large independent of the population at large and exercise disproportionate influence on the political orientation and development of their societies. The masses, in distinction, have very little say in this and are restricted to adjusting themselves to the choices made by the elites. Nevertheless, as the case of Yugoslavia makes patently clear, it is the participation of the masses that makes ethnic nationalism murderous. What is the source of appeal of nationalism to the masses? A very large role in this is played by ideological indoctrination — through literature, film, television — which gives form and direction to the people’s inarticulate discontent, anger, and hopes for a better life. The intelligentsia should be held directly responsible for the ways these sentiments are expressed. At the same time, ethnic nationalism also fulfills an important independent function for the people: it guarantees them a level of dignity and self-respect that cannot be negated even by the most degrading personal circumstances. Since in ethnic nationalisms such dignity and self-respect are but reflections of the collective dignity (or prestige) of the nation, the masses have a direct interest in protecting this collective dignity. Often the easiest way to do this is at the expense of the other and through the humiliation and degradation of the other.

Nothing short of transforming ethnic nationalism into civic, which implies a change of the people’s identity, can guarantee against the realization of its dangerous propensities. To effect such a transformation from without requires very strong measures, as strong as a long-term occupation or partition. Unless the international community is willing to commit itself to such measures, its efforts to restrain this brutal force in any particular case, I am afraid, will be largely in vain.

This brings us to a crucial question: does the post-Yugoslav crisis portend wider chaos? I do not think so. The Yugoslav civil war may spill over to other countries, particularly if Russians define the Serbian cause as their own, but it is unlikely that in the present conditions they would do so, and so the current Balkan crisis may well remain contained within the borders of the former Yugoslavia. This does not mean that very similar conflicts will not flare up in other East European countries and the territories of the former Soviet Union. But if they do, this will be an
independent development. The Yugoslav crisis does not portend anything, but it gives us a clear idea of the dangers concealed in postimperial situations, when the constituent parts of the disintegrating empires are defined as ethnic nations.

NOTES

1. Some of the issues discussed below have been discussed at length in Liah Greenfeld and Daniel Chirot, “Nationalism and Aggression,” Theory and Society 23, no. 1 (February 1994): 79–130.


4. Ibid.