

# The Curse of Nationalism

Lothar Luken

**I** think nationalism is a major force for evil... 'My country right or wrong', that kind of thing, is a major flaw in humanity and religionism is just another one" – Richard Dawkins.

After moving to Ireland in 1980, I soon learned: both nationalism and religionism were alive and well. Catholicism has since self-destructed, but nationalism is still going strong as an identity.

Here I'm giving a personal account of how Nationalism has impacted me. There's a copious literature debunking it as an artificial and dangerous construct arising from specific socio-economic conditions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Find the books if you want to learn about that. What I give you are their missing illustrations.

In the 1980s, I was taken aback when at an island-wide meeting on a progressive alternative magazine, a prominent eco activist burst into a chauvinistic tirade about 'the Brits' etc. Culture shock: I had never met an ardent nationalist in Germany and definitely not in left/green circles. This was disappointing – and threatening as I was just an immigrant. But greeting me with 'Heil Hitler' was, I learned, just a joke. People in Ireland simply didn't know they were nationalists – cos everyone was – what else could you be anyway: if you were born here and spoke the language – that defined you, made you proud.

What defined me was the opposite: a cultural shift/getting wise/brain-wash that meant anyone saying "I'm proud to be German" must be a fanatical fascist. The official line of the Bonn state fostered shame at being German and they didn't even let the words of the national anthem be sung... This inverted nationalism was confusing to those born into ruined cities to war-traumatised families. We hadn't done anything... Most of our parents hadn't done

anything either (though my mum was an ardent Hitler Youth leader – she'd been joined aged 9 – we'll get to her).

And yet, the doctrine of 'collective guilt' made us responsible for stuff that happened before our birth. That, if you think about it, is racism... and still leads to the Federal Republic donating a nuclear-capable submarine to Israel. Consider my daughters: both born in Co. Cork, one to a Swiss, one to an Irish mother. Are they half responsible now? Is the one who grew up in German-speaking Switzerland a bit more guilty? Judging people by their racial provenance was a Nazi thing, wasn't it... Or just a universal gut reaction? Remember how the Irish in England were blamed for IRA atrocities... as Jews are now for Israel's.

'Blood-relations'! My ex, a Dubliner, worked on our family tree and asked my mother – who had it all pat. Why? Because to become a leader in the 'League of German Maidens', mum had to get an Arian Certificate proving four generations of Jew-free ancestry. She did the research – all was nice and pure and Germanic (thank Wotan her Dutch grandpa counted as Arian).

You can imagine the mix of my ex's feelings about this Hitler-mandated trove of documents pertaining to her little Irish girl. Some cover letters were in Latin, because that's how parish priests could communicate in the 1930s. Some birth certs were in French even, with months like 'Brumaire', because in that misty past the Netherlands was occupied by Napoleonic troops.

My grandpa Emil's data came from the East of the Reich, from what's now the Czech Republic. He was one of those Sudeten Germans whom history dropped into different states now and then – and who were keen to join Hitler's Germany – and when they did, it meant 'peace

in our time'. Emil had already emigrated to Deutschland in 1912 and fought in the WW1.

All this shows how living on a small island makes it easier to feel like a nation than 'on the Continent', where there's a lot of cross-migration, wars with far away countries and constantly shifting borders. And once they seemed settled and safely under the EU umbrella, suddenly the USSR, Yugoslavia and Czechoslovakia fragmented. Now Britain has left the EU – ironically, therefore Scotland might yet leave the UK. And here take note how different Scots nationalism feels to us from that of the English.

It reminds me how I read a few poems at this year's Burns Night at a vegan café – and was rewarded with a plate of vegan haggis. Yes, nothing's sacred anymore, not even national dishes. Germany moved from regional types of Wurst with fries to first pizza and by now to kebab as their favourite fast food. All these things change and converge. Jeans & t-shirts or suits & ties are the universal uniform for men, Coca Cola and McDonald's are universal, cars from wherever look pretty much the same, and so do phones, fridges, toothbrushes, artillery...

So there's world-wide standardisation, international convergence, Globalisation. Yet - or therefore - a resurgence of Nationalism! Mostly of the nasty sort: all these recently emerging dictators invoke and foster and (ab)use it – Xi, Modi, Trump, Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Netanyahu, they're all at it, playing with and stoking fire. They've spotted people's need to have some sort of 'identity'. For rightwing leaders it's imperative that it should not be class or any other supranational identities or, God forbid, cosmopolitanism. So they promote (often mixed with a state religion) flags, parades, pledges, clichés, the military – and, eventually, war. →

My grandparents lived through WW1 and 2, losing siblings and friends. Emil's first wife died of malnutrition towards the end of the 'War to end all Wars'. He had his joinery burned out in 1943 when British planes dropped incendiary bombs and reduced 40 square km of Düsseldorf to a sea of fire. Emil dug through the debris for his tools and replaced the charred handles. They had to rebuild their half-levellied city.

This guy was a socialist, hated the Kaiser, hated the Nazis – but suffered for the politics of both. The family survived in their air raid cellar – all the council houses had one – while 93% of inner city buildings were damaged or destroyed.

My father, who'd wheedled his way out of the Hitler Youth – a rare feat! – was 18 when WW2 was started. Returning from Russia with an inoperable shard of shrapnel by his spine, they told him he'd be lucky to reach 50. That always hung over him. But at his 50<sup>th</sup> he threw a huge party, and the shrapnel went with him to his grave when he was 85.

The Nazis suppressed competing identities, and Catholicism in the Rheinland and also Communism in Düsseldorf. The local KPD always got an MP elected and the city had the lowest NSDAP vote outside Berlin. (Not that this made any difference to Churchill and his bombers).

The Communist problem was solved in extermination camps and the Church was co-opted and undermined. So one Corpus Christi, my mum refused to march in the parish procession. Granny lost against this rebellious Nazi teenager because the fascists had organised a countryside outing for the girls. Big deal? Yes – for my mother and many others from this working class suburb, it was the first time they'd ever left the city. Wasn't the Fuehrer wonderful! And wasn't he making the Reich great again...

She was to question this feeling a few years later when, walking home from work (the trams had been

knocked out) and passing a square, she noticed chaos and several tenements in flames. Her aunt and uncle lived there. Their house was gone. A row of corpses was laid out in the street. There she found them. And another half hour's walk before she could tell her mum that her brother was dead.

Next year, when she was sorting letters in the GPO with dozens of other young women, a bomb crashed through the roof, landed amidst them, and was a dud (otherwise you wouldn't read this now).

In the 80s I bought lots of trees from Mike Evans. We got friendly – and I learned he'd been a fighter pilot who'd flown with the bombing raids. Never felt 'you bastard British killer' and I was of course all for beating Hitler and finishing off his 1000-year Reich – but against having my folks and hometown erased.

***“Having a nation is not an inherent attribute of humanity, but it has now become to appear as such” – Ernst Gellner***

***“... although everybody is agreed that the nationalism of other countries is absurd ... the nationalism of one's own country is noble and splendid” – Bertrand Russell***

I didn't care much for this weird 'fatherland' – but I'm sure I'd have helped with those FLAK guns, shooting a few murderous Mike Evanses out of the sky.

There were 70 million Germans before WW2 and regional dialects and traditions were quite varied and important for one's identity. 7 million died. Millions were driven from their homelands. Those refugees were not very welcome in the starving war-ravished west. But the state managed to absorb them. Or rather the three 'Germanic' states now: Eastern Germany, calling itself a socialist nation; West Germany, thinking of itself as THE Germany; and Austria, trying to make the world forget how they had welcomed Hitler's takeover – well, he was born there (making Mozart only the second most famous Austrian).

All this may explain why most of our postwar generation spent hardly a thought on the reunification of 'their' unpleasant nation. Only the refugees did – they wanted their now Polish farms and villages back and aligned with the nationalist far-right. They never had a chance and have died out now. Back then they were just a spanner in the wheels of detente and European peace (but imagine an 'Iron Curtain' between Derry and Donegal).

When the Berlin Wall fell, many progressives were wary of the loud, flag-waving nationalism that ensued. Many wanted to prevent the social and economic takeover of the GDR by the FDR, hoped that positive achievements of the East could be salvaged and saved from Western capitalism and consumerism. They never had a chance either. The nation-idea prevailed – or rather: it veiled the total victory of the big corporations and NATO.

Thirty years later the East is still far behind economically, its declining population a breeding ground for fascists fanning xenophobia. Their rate of immigrants and asylum seekers is far below the German average. But their primitive 'us' needs an evil 'them'...

A dangerous outdated ideology is raising its ugly head again – not a country recovering confidence and pride – when underprivileged losers insult blacks, deface Jewish graves and beat up gays. Neo-Nazi gangs are nutters yet also on the spectrum of traditionalists, patriots and rednecks who exist in all countries. The alternatives? Internationalism, cosmopolitanism, scientism, religion-free spirituality? Lofty 'minority sports', it seems. Too much unquestioned old stuff clutters our system.

An example of this inspired me to write this article: the Humanist Summer Conference 2019, discussing Irish unity, a member names some institution and then: “or rather [xyz], as it's called in our real language.” He meant Gaelic – with 40,000 to 80,000 fully native speakers (compared to 120,000 Polish speakers here) and

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