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The Ingathering Storm of Nationalism

Isaiah Berlin, Carlos Fuentes, Yelena Bonner, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Federico Mayor

In only two short years,
the hopes of Berlin's
fallen wall have been
transformed into the
rubble of Babel by
nationalist explosions.

Whence this ingath-
ering storm? What kind
of world order will be
left in its wake?

We asked some of the
world's more eminent
thinkers and writers to
respond to these questions.

Return of the Volksgeist

Isaiah Berlin *Perhaps the West's foremost political philosopher, Sir Isaiah Berlin is a fellow at All Souls' College, Oxford. Born in Riga, Latvia in 1909, he is author of Karl Marx, The Age of Enlightenment, Four Essays on Liberty, and Vico and Herder. A selection of Sir Isaiah's essays, entitled The Crooked Timber of History: Chapters in the History of Ideas, was published in 1991.*

NPO | According to Harold Isaacs, author of *Idols of the Tribe*, today we are witnessing a "convulsive ingathering" of nations. Open ethnic warfare rages in Yugoslavia. The Soviet Union has been rent asunder by resurgent nationalist republics.

The new world order built from the rubble of the Berlin Wall has already gone the way of the Tower of Babel. What are the origins of nationalism? Whence this ingathering storm?

Isaiah Berlin | The Tower of Babel was meant to be unitary in character; a single great building, reaching to the skies, with one language for everybody.

The Lord didn't like it.

There is, I have been told, an excellent Hebrew prayer to be uttered when seeing a monster: "Blessed be the Lord our God, who introduceth variety amongst Thy creatures." We can only be happy to have seen the Soviet Tower of Babel collapse into ruin, dangerous as some of the consequences may turn out to be—I mean, a bitter clash of nationalisms. But, unfortunately, that would be nothing new.

In our modern age, nationalism is not resurgent; it never died. Neither did racism. They are

the most powerful movements in the world today, cutting across many social systems.

None of the great thinkers of the nineteenth century predicted this. Saint-Simon predicted the importance of industrialists and bankers. Fourier, who understood that if glass was made unbreakable there could be no business for the glazier, grasped the contradictions of capitalism. Karl Burchardt predicted the military-industrial complex. Not very much of what Marx predicted turned out to be true, but the vitally important insight that technology transforms culture. Big Business and class conflicts are among its results.

They all thought that the imperial regime of the great states was the central problem of the twentieth century. Once these tyrannical conglomerations—the British Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Russian Empire—were, together with colonialism, destroyed, the peoples under their heels would live peacefully together and realize their destiny in a productive and creative manner. Well, they were mistaken.

Although most liberal philosophers of the nineteenth century opposed the cruel exploitation of the *dark masses* by imperialism, in no case did any of them think that black, Indian, or Asian men could ever have states, parliaments, or armies—they were completely Eurocentric.

That, I suspect, changed with the Russo-Japanese war of 1904. The fact that an Asiatic nation defeated a great European power must have produced an electric shock in the minds of many Indians, Africans, and others, and given a great fillip to the idea of anti-imperialist self-assertion and national independence. In the twentieth century, no left-wing movement succeeded in

Asia or Africa—in Indo-China, Egypt, Algeria, Syria, or Iraq—unless it went arm in arm with nationalist feeling.

Non-aggressive nationalism is another story entirely. I trace the beginning of that idea to the highly influential eighteenth-century German poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.

Herder virtually invented the idea of belonging. He believed that just as people need to eat and drink, to have security and freedom of movement, so too they need to belong to a group. Deprived of this, they felt cut off, lonely, diminished, unhappy. Nostalgia, Herder said, was the noblest of all pains. To be human meant to be able to feel at home somewhere, with your own kind.

Each group, according to Herder, has its own *Volksgeist*, or *Nationalgeist*—a set of customs and a lifestyle, a way of perceiving and behaving that is of value solely because it is their own. The whole of cultural life is shaped from within the particular stream of tradition that comes of collective historical experience shared only by members of the group.

Thus one could not, for example, fully understand the great Scandinavian sagas unless one had oneself experienced (as he did on his voyage to England) a great tempest in the North Sea.

Herder's idea of the nation was deeply non-aggressive. All he wanted was cultural self-determination. He denied the superiority of one people over another. Anyone who proclaimed it was saying something false. Herder believed in a variety of national cultures, all of which could, in his view, peacefully coexist.

Each culture was equal in value and deserved its place in the sun. The villains of history for Herder were the great conquerors such as Alexander the Great, Caesar, or Charlemagne, because they stamped out native cultures. He did not live to see the full effects of Napoleon's victories—but since they undermined the dominion of the Holy Roman Empire, he might have forgiven him.

Only what was unique had true value. This is why Herder also opposed the French universalists of the Enlightenment. For him there were few timeless truths: time and place and social life—what came to be called civil society—were everything.

NPO | Of course, Herder's *Volksgeist* became the Third Reich.

And today, the Serbian *Volksgeist* is at war with the Croatian *Volksgeist*, the Armenians and the Azeris have long been at it, and, among the Georgians and Russians—and even the Ukrainians and the Russians—passions are stirring.

What transforms the aspiration of cultural self-determination into nationalist aggression?

Berlin | I have written elsewhere that a wounded *Volksgeist*, so to speak, is like a bent twig, forced down so severely that when released, it lashes back with fury. Nationalism, at least in the West, is created by wounds inflicted by stress. As for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet empire, they seem today to be one vast, open wound. After years of oppression and humiliation, there is liable to occur a violent counter-reaction, an outburst of national pride, often aggressive self-assertion, by liberated nations and their leaders.

Although I am not allowed to say this to German historians, I believe that Louis XIV was principally responsible for the beginnings of German nationalism in the seventeenth century.

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While the rest of Europe — Italy, England, Spain, the Low Countries, above all France — experienced a magnificent renaissance in art and thought, political and military power, Germany, after the age of Dürer, Grünewald, and Rembrandt, became with the exception of architecture, a relative backwater. The Germans tended to be looked down upon by the French as provincials, simple, slightly comical, beer-drinking yokels, literate but ungifted.

At first, there was naturally much imitation of the French, but later, as always, there was a reaction. The pietists asked, "Why not be ourselves? Why imitate foreigners? Let the French have their royal courts, their salons, worldly abbés, soldiers, poets, painters, their empty glory. It's all dross. Nothing matters save a man's relation to his own soul, to God, to true values, which are of the spirit, the inner life, Christian truth."

By the 1670s a pietist national counter movement was under way; this was the spiritual movement in which Kant, Herder, Hamann, the sages of East Prussia, grew up. The pietist attitude was, "We don't require what Paris offers. It is all but worthless. Only inner freedom, purity of the soul, matter." It was a grand form of sour grapes.

That is when nationalist self-assertion begins. By 1720 Thomasius, a minor German thinker, dared to give university lectures in his own tongue, in German, instead of Latin. That was a major departure.

The corresponding consequences of the deeper German humiliations — from the Napoleonic wars to the Treaty of Versailles — are only too obvious.

Today Georgians, Armenians and the rest are trying to recover their submerged pasts, pushed into the background by the huge Russian imperial power. Persecuted under Stalin, Armenian and Georgian literature survived: Isakian and Yashvili were gifted poets; Pasternak's translations of Vaz Pshavela and Tabidze are wonderful reading — but when Ribbentrop went to see Stalin in 1939, he presented him with a German translation of the twelfth-century Georgian epic *The Knight in the Tiger Skin* by Rustaveli. Who, in the West, knew of later masterpieces?

Sooner or later, the backlash comes with irrepressible force. People tire of being spat upon, ordered about by a superior nation, a superior class, or a superior anyone. Sooner or later they ask the nationalist questions: "Why do we have

to obey them?" "What right have they..." "What about Us?" "Why can't we..."

NPO | All these bent twigs in revolt may have finally overturned the ideological world order. The explosion of the Soviet system may be the last act of deconstruction of the Enlightenment ideals of unity, universality, and liberal rationalism. That's all finito now.

Berlin | I think that that is true.

And Russia is an appropriate place to illuminate the misapprehensions of the *lumières*.

Most Russian westernizers who followed the eighteenth-century French thinkers admired them because they stood up to the church, stood up to reactionary tendencies, stood up to fate. Voltaire and Rousseau were heroes because they enlisted reason, and the right to freedom, against reaction.

But even the radical writer, Alexander Herzen, my hero, never accepted, for example, Condorcet's claims to knowable, timeless truths. He thought the idea of continuous progress an illusion, and protested against the new idolatries, the substitute for human sacrifice — abstractions, like the universal class, or the infallible party, or the march of history; the victimization of the present for the sake of an unknowable — future, that would lead to some harmonious solution.

Herzen regarded any dedication to abstract unity and universality with great suspicion. For him, England was England, France was France, Russia was Russia. The differences neither could nor should be flattened out. The ends of life were life itself.

For Herzen, as for Herder and the eighteenth-century Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico, cultures were incommensurable. It follows, though they do not spell it out, that the pursuit of total harmony, or the perfect state, is a fallacy, and sometimes a fatal one.

Of course, nobody believed in universality more than the Marxists: Lenin, Trotsky, and the others who triumphed saw themselves as disciples of the Enlightenment thinkers, corrected and brought up to date by Marx.

If one were to defend the general record of communism, which neither you nor I would be willing to do, it would have to be defended on the basis that Stalin may have murdered forty million people — but at least he kept nationalism down and prevented the ethnic babel from anarchically asserting its ambitions. Of course,

Stalin did keep it — and everything else — down but he didn't kill it. As soon as the stone was rolled away from the grave it rose again with a vengeance.

NPO | Herder was a *horizontal critic*, if you will, of the French *lumières* because he believed in the singularity of all cultures. Giambattista Vico also opposed the Enlightenment idea of universality but from a *vertical*, or historical, perspective.

As you have written, he believed each successive culture was incommensurable with others.

Berlin | Both rejected the Enlightenment idea that man, in every country at every time, had identical values. For them, as for me, the plurality of cultures is irreducible.

NPO | Does the final breakup of communist totalitarianism, a creature of the ideal of universality, suggest that we are living out the final years of the last modern century?

Berlin | I accept that, almost. The ideal of universality, so deeply perverted that it would utterly horrify the eighteenth-century philosophers who expounded it, evidently lives on in some form in the remote reaches of Europe's influence: China, Vietnam, North Korea, Cuba.

NPO | One can only imagine how differently the twentieth century would have turned out had Vico and Herder prevailed rather than the French philosophers, or Hegel and Marx; if the local soul had not been overrun by the world soul. We might have had a century of cultural pluralism instead of totalitarianism.

Berlin | How could that have happened? Universalism in the eighteenth century was the doctrine of the top nation, France. So everyone tried to emulate its brilliant culture.

Perhaps it is much more the rise of the natural sciences, with the emphasis on universal laws, and nature as an organism or a machine, and the imitation of scientific methods in other spheres, which dominated all thinking.

Fuelled by these ideas, the nineteenth-century explosion of technology and economic development isolated the intellectual stream deriving from such non-quantitative — indeed, qualitative — thinkers as Vico and Herder.

The temper of the times is illustrated in a story told in one of Jacob Talmon's books. He writes of two Czech schoolmasters talking with each other around the early 1800s. "We're probably the last people in the world to speak Czech,"

they said to each other. "Our language is at an end. Inevitably, we'll all speak German here in Central Europe, and probably the Balkans. We're the last survivors of our native culture."

Of course, such survivors are today in the saddle in many lands.

NPO | What political structure can possibly accommodate this new age of cultural self-determination, preserve liberty, and perhaps stem some of the impending bloodshed?

Berlin | Cultural self-determination without a political framework is precisely the issue now, and not only for the East. Spain has the Basques and Catalans; Britain has Northern Ireland; Canada the Quebecois; Belgium has the Flemings; Israel the Arabs, and so on. Whoever in the past would have dreamed of Breton nationalism or a Scottish national party?

Idealists like Herder evidently didn't consider this problem. He merely hated the Austro-Hungarian Empire for politically welding together incompatible elements.

In Eastern Europe they really do seem to loath each other: Romanians hate the Hungarians and Hungarians have for years disliked the Czechs in a way the Bretons can't pretend to hate the French. It is a phenomenon of a different order. Only the Irish are like that in the West.

Only in America have a variety of ethnic groups retained their own original cultures, and nobody seems to mind. The Italians, Poles, Jews, and Koreans have their own newspapers, books, and I am told, TV programs.

NPO | Perhaps when immigrants forsake their soil, they leave behind the passionate edge of their *Volkgeist* as well.

Yet even in America, a new multicultural movement has emerged in academia that seeks to stress not what is common but what is not in the curriculum.

Berlin | Yes, I know. Black studies, Puerto Rican studies, and the rest.

I suppose this too is a bent twig revolt of minorities that feel disadvantaged in the context of American polyethnicity.

Polyethnicity was not Herder's idea. He didn't urge the Germans to study Dutch, or German students to study the culture of the Portuguese.

In Herder, there is nothing about race and nothing about blood. He only spoke about soil, language, common memories, and customs. His central point, as a Montenegrin friend once

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said to me, is that loneliness is not just absence of others but far more living among people who do not understand what you are saying; they can truly understand only if they belong to a community where communication is effortless, almost instinctive.

Herder looked unkindly on the cultural friction generated in Vienna, where many nationalities were crammed into the same narrow space. It produced men of genius, but with a deeply neurotic element in a good many of them — one need only think of Gustav Mahler, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Kraus, Arnold Schoenberg, Stefan Zweig, and the birth of psychoanalysis in this largely Jewish — particularly defenseless — society.

All that tremendous collision of not very compatible cultures — Slavs, Italians, Germans, Jews — unleashed a great deal of creativity. This was a different kind of cultural expression from that of an earlier Vienna, that of Mozart or Haydn or Schubert.

NPQ | In grappling with the separatist Quebecois, Pierre Trudeau often invoked Lord Acton. He felt that wherever political boundaries coincided with ethnic ones, chauvinism, xenophobia, and racism inevitably threatened liberty.

Only individual constitutional rights — equal citizenship rights for all, despite ethnicity — in a federal republic could protect minorities and individuals. "The theory of nationality," Trudeau quoted Acton as saying, "is a retrograde step in history."

Berlin | Lord Acton was a noble figure, and I agree with him. Yet we have to admit that, despite Trudeau's efforts, the Quebecois are still seeking independence.

In the grand scale of things, one has to consider that, despite royal and clerical monopolies of power and authority, the Middle Ages were, in some ways, more civilized than the deeply disturbed nineteenth — and worse still, our own terrible century, with widespread violence, chauvinism, and in the end mass destruction in racial, and Stalin's political, holocausts. Of course, there were ethnic frictions in the Middle Ages, and persecution of Jews and heretics, but nationalism as such didn't exist. The wars were dynastic. What existed was the universal church and a common Latin language.

We can't turn history back. Yet I do not wish to abandon the belief that a world that is a

reasonably peaceful coat of many colors, each portion of which develops its own distinct cultural identity and is tolerant of others, is not a utopian dream.

NPQ | But of what common thread can such a coat be spun?

In a universe of autonomous cultural worlds, each in its own orbit, where is the sun that keeps the various planets from colliding with the others?

Berlin | The idea of a center can lead to cultural imperialism again.

In Herder's universe, you didn't need a sun. His cultures were not planets, but stars that didn't collide. I admit that at the end of the twentieth century, there is little historical evidence for the realizability of such a vision.

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Nothing has been more horrible for our civilization. In my life, more dreadful things occurred than at any other time in history. Worse even than the days of the Huns.

One can only hope that after the peoples get exhausted from fighting, the bloody tide will subside. Unless tourniquets can be applied to stop the hemorrhaging, and bandages to the wounds so that they can slowly heal, even if they leave scars, we're in for the continuation of a very bad time.

The only nations about which one need not wring one's hands are the sated nations, unwounded or healed, such as the liberal democracies of North America, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and one hopes, Japan.

NPQ | Perhaps the two futures will live, decoupled, side by side. A civilization of the soil, so to speak, and a civilization of the satellite.

Instead of the violent splintering of nations, the sated nations will become a small world after all, with the passions of blood and soil drained away by homogenizing consumerism and mass entertainment.

Perhaps that is the price of peaceful integration. As Milan Kundera has recently written, frivolous cultures are anthropologically incapable of war. But they are also incapable of producing Picassos.

Berlin | As for that, I don't believe that only tragic events and wounds can create genius. In Central Europe, Kafka and Rilke bore wounds.

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But neither Racine nor Molière nor Pushkin nor Tolstoy — unlike Dostoyevsky — bore deep wounds. And Goethe seems completely free from them. The fate of the Russian poets of our century is another, gloomier, story.

Without doubt, uniformity may increase under the pressure of technology, as is already happening with the Americanization of Europe. A great many people hate it, but it clearly can't be stopped.

As we discussed, it is possible, as in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to have political and economic uniformity, but cultural variety.

That is what I ultimately visualize. A degree of uniformity in the sated nations, combined with a pleasing degree of peaceful variety in the rest of the world. I admit that the present trend is in the opposite direction: sharp, sometimes aggressive, self-assertion on the part of some very minor human groups.

NPO | What about the emergence of a new set of common values — ecological rights and human rights — that can to some degree unite all these erupting cultures without cramping their style?

Berlin | At the present, there don't seem to be accepted minimum values that can keep the world straight. Let us hope, one day, that a large minimum of common values, such as the ones you mention, will be accepted. Otherwise we are bound to go under.

Unless there is a minimum of shared values that can preserve the peace, no decent societies can survive.

NPO | The liberal dream of cosmopolitanism, even in the sated world, is not on the agenda as far as you are concerned?

Berlin | Like Herder, I regard cosmopolitanism as empty. People can't develop unless they belong to a culture. Even if they rebel against it and transform it entirely, they still belong to a stream of tradition. New streams can be created — in the West, by Christianity, or Luther, or the Renaissance, or the Romantic movement — but in the end they derive from a single river, an underlying central tradition, which, sometimes in radically altered forms, survives.

But if the streams dried up, as, for instance, where men and women are not products of a culture, where they don't have kith and kin and feel closer to some people than others, where there is no native language — that would lead

to a tremendous desiccation of everything that is human.

NPO | So, for you, Vico and Herder, the apostles of cultural pluralism, are the philosophers of the future?

Berlin | Yes, in the sense that we are all affected by a variety of values to some degree. From the Greeks and the Hebrews to the Christian Middle Ages to the Renaissance and the Enlightenment of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, unity was the great virtue. Truth is one, many is error.

Variety is a new virtue, brought to us by the Romantic movement, of which Herder and Vico, whom I regard as the prophets of variety, were an important part. After that, variety, pluralism (which entails the possibility of many incompatible ideals that attract human devotion), sincerity (not necessarily leading to truth or goodness) — all these are thought to be virtues. Once pluralism of ways of life is accepted, and there can be mutual esteem between different, uncombinable outlooks, it is difficult to suppose that all this can be flattened — *gleichgeschaltet* — by some huge, crushing jackboot.

On this score, let me make a prophecy for the twenty-fifth century.

Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* could perhaps be established, in part as an irresistible response to the endless ethnic violence and nationalist rivalry at the turn of the millennium.

Under this system everyone would be clothed and fed. All would live under one roof, following one single pattern of existence.

But, sooner or later, somebody will rebel, somebody will cry for room. Not only will people revolt against totalitarianism, but against an all-embracing, well-meaning, benign system as well.

The first terrible fellow to kick over the traces will be burned alive. But other trouble-makers will be sure to follow.

If there is anything I'm certain about, after living for so long, it is that people must sooner or later rebel against uniformity and attempts at global solutions of any sort.

The Reformation was such a rebellion against claims to universal authority. The domination of the vast territories of the Roman Empire collapsed in due course. So, too, the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The sun set on the British Empire. And now the Soviet empire.

There is a Russian story about a sultan who

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decided to punish one of his wives for some misdeed and ordered her sealed up, with her son, in a barrel with little holes for air. The sultan set them afloat at sea to perish.

After several days the son said to the mother "I can't bear being so cramped. I want to stretch." "You can't," she responded, "you'll push out the bottom, and we'll drown."

Several days later, the son protested again, "I long for room." The mother said, "For God's sake don't do it, we'll drown." The son then said, "So be it, I must stretch out, just once, and then let it come." He got his moment of freedom, and perished.

The Russian radical Herzen, whom I greatly admire, applied this to the condition of the Russian people. They were bound to strike out for freedom — no matter what came after.

NPO | In Herder's day, we might have been unable to grasp the masterpiece of a Scandinavian saga without experiencing a North Sea

tempest, but today, through MTV, teenagers from Beijing to Moscow to Los Angeles can share the same thrill of watching a Madonna concert. What can cultural self-determination mean in such an age?

Berlin | All the same — past differences take their toll: The spectacles through which the young of Bangkok and Valparaiso see Madonna are not the same. The many languages of the islands of Polynesia and Micronesia are said to be totally unlike each other; this is also true of the Caucasus. If you think that all this will one day give way to one universal language — not just for learned purposes or politics or business, but to convey emotional nuances, to express inner lives — then I suppose what you suggest could happen: this would not be one culture, but the death of culture. I am glad to be as old as I am.



The Decay of Nations

Carlos Fuentes — The acclaimed Mexican author whose most recent novel is Christopher Unborn, Carlos Fuentes writes here about the decay of the nation and the rise of nationalism around the world. Translated from Spanish by Betanina Allen.

There is a general tendency to use the term *nation* as if it were ancient, consecrated, unquestionable. This says a great deal about the legitimizing force of both the *nation* and its derivative, *nationalism*. All the contemporary theorists on the subject — Isaiah Berlin, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm — point out to us, however, that *nation* and *nationalism* are two very recent expressions, nonexistent and inconceivable in the ancient world or in the Middle Ages.

Nationalism and *nation* are terms of modernity, created to provide ideological justification and political legitimation to certain ideas of unity — territorial, political, cultural — which were necessary for the integration of the new

European States born of the Renaissance, colonial expansion, and religious wars. This need produced nationalist ideology, which in turn created the nation itself. Ernest Gellner indicates that nationalism made nations, and not vice versa. Nationalism took preexisting cultures and converted them into *nations*. Culture precedes the nation, and culture can be organized in many different ways: as a clan, tribe, family, society, reign. . . .

"What is a nation?" Ernest Renan asked himself half a century ago, in a famous lecture at the Sorbonne. His answer: "A daily plebiscite." That is, day to day adherence to a certain territorial, political, and cultural unity, a sum of values which inform and justify the ideas of *nation* and *nationalism*.

But what is it that elicits the appearance of these notions? Emile Durkheim speaks of the loss of old centers of identification and adherence — precisely those I just mentioned: clan, tribe, family, etc. — and of the imperative need, when this

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