

Nationalism's Impact on 20th Century World Wars: Insights and Implications

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Abstract. This essay addresses the research question of the role nationalism played in the two 20th-century world wars, which resulted in the deadliest conflicts in human history. The essay employs scholarly reports and war documentaries to shed light on the influence of nationalism in these wars. The conclusion drawn from this research is that nationalism indeed played a significant role in both world wars, with a more crucial impact on World War I and a vital yet distinct role in making World War II the bloodiest war in history. This research serves as a compelling reminder of the need to grasp the complexities of nationalism, recognize its potential for devastating outcomes, and promote open discourse on this critical topic.

Keywords: World War I, World War II, Nationalism.

1. Introduction

In an era of relative global peace, it can be challenging to fathom the horrors of war. However, the 20th century witnessed two world wars that left an indelible mark on history due to their immense impact and staggering casualty figures. These wars have been extensively documented and included in history textbooks, raising questions about why these conflicts resulted in over 120 million casualties combined. While multiple factors contributed to this devastating outcome, this essay delves into the role of nationalism.

In the 20th century, especially in Europe, there was a steady decrease in the number of wars occurring on the continent. However, to compensate for this decrease, the lethality of wars experienced a tremendous increase. As the facts demonstrate, during World War II, civilian lives were greatly endangered. Technically, there is no justification for deliberately harming civilians during wartime. However, considering the influence of nationalism, this phenomenon can be better understood. In many cases of nationalism, two ethnic groups harbor mutual animosity, which can lead to mass killings due to the presence of more advanced weaponry in the 20th century. Furthermore, nationalism in World War II not only intensified the conflict but also forged alliances (Axis powers) between countries seeking to expand their global influence and territories [1].

Nationalism is a multifaceted concept, encompassing identification with one's own nation and support for its interests, sometimes to the detriment of other nations. Depending on cultural nuances, nationalism can manifest as a source of pride or, alarmingly, as a motivator for people to commit heinous acts in the name of their nation. Regrettably, the latter interpretation aligns with the dynamics of the two world wars.

What role did nationalism play in these 20th-century conflicts that rendered them the bloodiest wars in human history? This question holds significant relevance because history serves not only as a narrative but as a repository of lessons for future generations. No one desires to witness the tragedies of the world wars repeated in their lifetime, as such events could potentially spell the end of humanity. Therefore, dissecting the factors that precipitated these conflicts and understanding why they became so devastating is an essential endeavor. It provides insights that may help humanity prevent the recurrence of such catastrophic events in the future.

2. World War II

2.1. Post-War Causes

Nationalism during World War II stands as a striking example of how this ideology can be taken to dangerous extremes [2]. This extremism was exemplified by numerous massacres and Adolf Hitler's persecution of Jews, leading to immense suffering for German citizens. However, while nationalism played a significant role, it was not the primary cause of the war; rather, it acted as a catalyst, intensifying the horrors inflicted upon Jewish people.

After World War I, Germany, which was then part of the Weimar Republic, faced the burden of heavy treaties [3]. These treaties imposed severe restrictions on Germany, making it challenging for the nation to recover from the war, meet its financial obligations, and rebuild its economy. The situation worsened with the onset of the Great Depression in 1930. Pressure from the United States on England and France to repay their debts led these nations to turn to Germany, further escalating the crisis.

When Adolf Hitler rose to power in 1933, Germany was in desperate need of change. Hitler perceived the Jews as a convenient scapegoat for Germany's problems. This decision was heavily influenced by Hitler's own experiences and nationalist beliefs, particularly those of a German nationalist named Georg Ritter von Schönerer. Von Schönerer advocated for the exclusion of Jews from being considered "true German citizens" and proposed the unification of nations with similar Germanic cultures, such as Austria and Hungary, to form a greater empire. Hitler was deeply influenced by these ideas [4].

Hitler himself can be viewed as a German nationalist. He participated in World War I in 1914 and received the Award of Courage. However, he did not witness the war's end, as his eyes were injured during a poison attack in Belgium. While recovering, he learned of Germany's surrender, a bitter pill for a nationalist like him to swallow. Myths circulated in post-war Germany, blaming the loss on betrayals at the home front, with Jews, social democrats, and communists singled out for blame. These narratives fueled Hitler's hatred towards Jews and served as a means to rally the nation for war [4].

2.2. During the War

Although nationalism was not the primary cause of the war, it played a significant role throughout World War II. As mentioned earlier, Hitler's hatred for Jews served as a unifying force for the nation, both physically and mentally, under a fascist regime. This nationalist fervor resulted in laws that restricted Jewish rights within Germany. As Nazi Germany expanded its influence across the continent, the pressure on Jews intensified, ultimately leading to widespread genocide.

The Nazis gained control over countries with significant Jewish populations, including Poland, Romania, parts of the Soviet Union, and even within Germany itself. This placed around 10 million Jews in grave danger. During the years of occupation, countless massacres occurred, and Jews were forced to live in concentration camps like Auschwitz, where they were treated inhumanely. Isolated and with no means of seeking help from the outside world, the Jews were powerless to fight back [4].

Over the course of the six-year war, an estimated 6 million Jews were killed by the Nazis, along with approximately 75 million total casualties, a significant proportion of whom were civilians. This war, with around 10% of its casualties being civilians of one race, transcended typical conflict [5]. It vividly illustrates how nationalism had a profound influence during this period.

In conclusion, while nationalism was not the root cause of World War II, its extreme manifestations intensified the war's devastation. The war's underlying causes were complex political constructs, but nationalism's influence led to the persecution and death of millions of Jews. The toll of the war serves as a stark reminder of how extreme nationalism can exacerbate conflicts and human suffering.

2.3. Wars in Asia

Long before World War II, nationalism was developing in Asia. This was evident during the Japanese expansion aimed at creating a "New World Order" [6]. After achieving remarkable success in the Sino-Japanese and Russo-Japanese Wars, annexing the Korean Peninsula, and establishing the puppet state of Manchukuo, the Japanese army had everything in their favor, even as other aspects of Japan were collapsing. However, this did not deter the Japanese military from further expansion; in fact, it amplified their image, especially in comparison to the struggling economy [7].

Becoming part of the Japanese military was seen as the "last hope" and the "best hope," and it became an honor for Japanese youth to join the ranks. Their goal was to assist the Yamato race in overthrowing the "European world order" and establishing their own "New World Order." With this ideology taking root within the military, nationalism began to flourish. Fueled by a sense of superiority as the future leaders of the world, the Kwantung army pushed deeper into northern China. In 1937, they captured Nanking, which was the capital of China at that time and would later become the site of unimaginable horrors.

Following the capture of Nanking, Japanese soldiers unleashed a wave of brutality upon the city, committing unspeakable acts known as "The Rape of Nanking". Citizens were rounded up and executed, while others were doused in oil or buried alive. Experts estimate that around 260,000 noncombatants lost their lives in this massacre [8]. The actions of the Japanese army can be attributed to their sense of nationalism. They believed fervently in their nation's imperialist ambitions, which in their minds justified their ruthless actions, resulting in devastating consequences. It was their desire to expand their empire and elevate the Yamato race that led to this massacre.

3. World War I

World War II is undoubtedly an event where nationalism came to the forefront and exacerbated the situation. However, the situation differs when it comes to World War I, where nationalism played a crucial role, not in worsening the war, but in escalating it from a regional conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia into a bloody global war. It can be argued that nationalism is not the sole factor that led to this great war; complex alliances and tension caused by the spread of militarism also contributed. This is particularly true for the Western Front. However, on the Eastern Front, nationalism played a more significant role, influencing the Russian Empire's involvement in the war.

3.1. A Brief Context

The beginning of World War I was nothing more than a conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Following the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand in the Serbian city of Sarajevo, tensions rose between Austria-Hungary and Serbia. Demands were sent to Serbia but were all rejected. Later, on July 28, 1914, Austria-Hungary invaded Serbia, marking the beginning of the second bloodiest war ever recorded in human history. However, alliances were formed before the war, and escalating tensions triggered a chain reaction of nations declaring war on each other [9].

3.2. Serbia

Nationalism played quite a different role in Serbia during World War I, being at the root of the Great War due to the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand. During the post-war period, nations were enthusiastic about gaining and keeping their independence as a nation. Serbia was no exception. Austria-Hungary had long sought to annex Serbia, using propaganda and other means to pose a great threat to Serbia's independence, which incited nationalist sentiments.

In June 1914, Archduke Ferdinand decided to visit Sarajevo in Serbia to observe military maneuvers in the region. However, a nationalist group called "The Black Hand," originating in Belgrade, saw an opportunity. Members of this group, mostly youths, decided to assassinate Franz Ferdinand to end his continued threat to Serbia's independence. They successfully assassinated Franz

Ferdinand, without knowing what was about to come next. Less than a month after the assassination, Austria-Hungary launched the war and invaded Serbia.

Nationalism is the sole reason for this assassination, regardless of which side is considered. Austria-Hungary's desire to expand its empire and threaten the independence of other nations demonstrated its own form of nationalism. Similarly, Serbia's determination to maintain its independence was so strong that it resorted to assassinating the Archduke of Austria-Hungary.

3.3. Russian Empire

The role of nationalism in the Russian Empire's decision to join the war can be interpreted in different ways. Some might say that it was driven by self-interest, such as annexing land from Austria-Hungary [10]. However, nationalism likely played a role in the decision-making process. Before the war, relations between European countries had already reached a dangerous point. While there was no formal alliance between Russia and Serbia, the Russian Empire joined the war on Serbia's side only days after Austria-Hungary invaded. Nationalism could provide an explanation for this swift response.

As demonstrated in World War II, nationalism can involve a sense of superiority or unity when facing other races. This was the case for the Russian Empire. Serbia, as their "Eastern European friend," had quite a substantial Slavic population. The Russian Empire, with its substantial Slavic population, felt motivated to fight against a "common enemy," a nation with a different racial majority.

In conclusion, nationalism in World War I is indeed very different from its appearance in World War II. It mainly contributed to facilitating the war instead of manifesting during the war itself. This shows that nationalism can manifest in many ways, sometimes not easily recognizable, while still leading to significant and negative consequences.

4. Summary

In conclusion, the role of nationalism in facilitating and worsening the two world wars of the 20th century cannot be ignored. The wars could have been influenced by other factors as well, but without the presence of nationalism, the world wars would likely have resulted in fewer casualties.

Does this mean that nationalism is inherently bad and should always be avoided at any cost, considering it caused two bloody wars? However, this is not the case, as evident from the two world wars. Nationalism can be a powerful force for unifying a nation or a race. The world wars serve as examples where nationalism went too far and was used for conquering and annexation. These wars have taught everyone a valuable lesson about how far nationalism can go when taken to extremes.

Nationalism itself is not something to be feared, but it must be kept within controllable boundaries. When harnessed responsibly, it has the potential to benefit humanity.

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