

# NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION: AN INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL LIE

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Men have suffered under a strange misconception for the past several thousand years: the idea that they are in need of political control - of being ruled by an elite group calling itself the State. This political elite has maintained its monopoly over the energies and properties of all men by developing a series of political lies to convince men of the necessity of rule and the justice of particular rulers.

## THE CONCEPT OF SELF-DETERMINATION

At one time the lie was that men's rulers were divinely ordained. In more recent centuries men have been taught that "just" states are the expression of the will of a majority of the people; and therefore, that such states are an exercise in self-determination. The actual history of this rationalization for state power has been somewhat less satisfying than the theory.

"The President of the United States and Prime Minister of Britain respect the right of all peoples to choose the form of government under which they will live."

The Atlantic Charter

Stalin, Churchill and Roosevelt met at Yalta on the Crimean coast, in February 1945. They had made and would continue to make national self-determination a war aim of the Allies. But at Yalta, the conquerors proceeded to divide the world: to apportion mankind without regard for the wishes of the inhabitants of any area. As in the First World War, the concept of self-determination of peoples became a rhetorical device concealing the imperial activities of the warlords.

Yet the concept of self-determination is grounded in human social relationships. Men do associate: it is in their interest to do so. From this basic fact of social cohesion, rulers have developed the concept of *national self-determination*: the idea that

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

involuntary associations of individuals, called “nations” or “peoples”, are entities capable of acting toward certain ends. Human beings are able to determine their own lives as they have the ability to engage in goal-directed activity. But can this concept be applied to groups of humans?

### THE COLLECTIVIST FALLACY

National and international politicians speak as though a group were able to determine its “life”. All political activity is based on this assumption. The very idea of a state presupposes that a group can behave like a single person. By that “single person” we mean one capable of rational, self-generated, goal-directed activity: a self-determining being. The attempt to apply this concept to “nations” or “peoples” rather than to individuals is an example of anthropomorphism. In the past, tribal groups ascribed human characteristics to natural forces. Today, in men’s mythologies, the Nation has taken the place of those unknown natural forces.

This anthropomorphism is understandable in primitive societies, but it is absurd in the modern world.

Collectives actually cannot have goals. A business corporation is spoken of as having certain goals or plans, but it is commonly understood that these goals, or plans, are those agreed upon by a majority of a group of individuals: a board of directors who control the assets of the corporation. In the case of a “people”, the same holds true: the most that can be said is that various individuals have certain goals which they intend to impose on all the inhabitants of a certain area. A corporation is a voluntary association for a limited goal. A “people” is an involuntary grouping whose mythical and mystical overtones are used to maintain or impose absolute political control in a particular area, for the benefit of a ruling elite.

The idea of national self-determination has had a major effect on men and their societies. Not all of the applications of this complex concept, developed over at least several centuries, have been as blatantly imperialistic as in the Second World War. By tracing the history of the concept, the final flowering of this idea in that war can be understood.

### **THEORY AND PRACTICE: A BRIEF HISTORY**

The American Declaration of Independence reflects the use of the principle of national self-determination:

“When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the Powers of the Earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature entitle them, a decent respect for the opinion of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to separation ...”

At this early date, three important factors are considered. Separation is justified when (1) divergent “peoples” are living under one government, which is oppressing one of these groups; (2) a right, granted by natural law, exists in each “people” to form a state; and (3) in some sense, the international community, “the opinion of mankind”, is involved. These characteristics of the principle of self-determination of peoples have not remained static, but are continuing themes in the history of the concept. The American revolt has been judged successful. The rulers appointed by, or somewhat subservient to, the British Crown, were replaced by native rulers. In the centuries that have followed, there have been many revolts. Many territories have been annexed to growing states, and in recent years many sovereign states have been created in colonial areas.

The actions of the French Revolutionary armies exemplify the first instances of a formalized recognition that the wishes of the inhabitants should be considered before a territory is added to a state. As the French armies conquered Europe after the French Revolution, various areas were incorporated into their state. These annexations were accompanied by plebiscites or other electoral acts. Of course, the nascent French Empire won all these elections. Who could refuse the blessings of Liberty, Equality and Fraternity offered by the massive French armies? Nonetheless, as the army entered each area it declared, “From this moment the French nation proclaims the sovereignty of the people ...” (the Proclamation of 1792). As the “French nation” turned ever more expansionist, the conquered populace’s self-determination became a concealment for imperial control: the French state sent commissioners after

its army to insure the success of annexation by plebiscite.

In the American experience, the concept of national self-determination was used to justify a change in rulers and as a new foundation to attempt to legitimize the authority of the state. The French rulers, on the other hand, used the *forms* of self-determination of peoples to legitimize the expansion of their power.

The “unification” of Italy also was accompanied by various forms of popular expression. Perhaps the most open explanation of this was given by Giuseppe Mazzini in his instructions to the secret society known as “Young Italy”:

“Every nation is destined ... to form a free and equal community ... all true sovereignty resides essentially in the nation ... a popular government is urged because when monarchy is not - as in the Middle Ages - based upon the belief, now extinct, in divine right, it becomes too weak to be a bond of unity and authority in the State ...”

Once more the concept of popular sovereignty - the right of the people to determine their own future - is used as a substitute for the divine right of kings, as a new excuse for state power. The rulers of the kingdom of Italy had little love for the republican Mazzini. They did, however, utilize the forms of popular consultation in each step of their drive for unification.

## THE MODERN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The modern history of national self-determination began with the First World War. At least the American President considered it to be a peace aim of the Allies:

“National aspirations must be respected ... ‘Self-determination’ is not a mere phrase. It is an imperative principle of action, which statesmen will henceforth ignore at their own peril ...”

Indeed, he considered it “the central principle fought for in the war”. Writing a generation or more after the War, Revisionist historians question Wilson’s assertion:

“In general, this principle was stretched to the limit whenever it would work to the disadvantage of the defeated powers and disregarded when it would operate in their favor. So there was no self-determination for six-and-a-half million Austrians ... or for three

million Sudeten Germans ... or for other ethnic minorities belonging to the defeated powers ...”

William Henry Chamberlin  
*America's Second Crusade* (Regnery, 1950)

The Allies carved up the defunct empires of Austria, Germany, and Russia, to some degree along linguistic and cultural frontiers. It was certainly in the interests of the Allies to dismember these empires. Nevertheless, the statements of the American President and the nation-creating result of the Allies’ dissections firmly established national self-determination as an element in international discussion, if not in international practice.

The Allied leaders during the Second World War clearly made self-determination of peoples a major war aim. The Atlantic Charter indicates this, as does the communique issued by the Big Three after the Teheran Conference:

“We look with confidence to the day when all peoples of the world may live free lives untouched by tyranny, and according to their varying desires and their own consciences.”

Perhaps not even the German National Socialist propagandists could have equalled the hypocrisy of the Big Three. There is only slight evidence that national self-determination was ever a guiding principle in any of their decisions. Not only were the people in annexed areas not consulted, not only were their interests not considered, but tens of millions (14 million in East Europe alone) were forced from their homes by the arbitrary realignment of borders which followed the war. Thus, it is evident that the concept of national self-determination became a rhetorical device to convince people that they would benefit. This was a necessary propaganda ploy for the Allies: some crumbs had to be tossed to conquered people across the world if American-Soviet hegemony was to be achieved.

The present status of self-determination extends directly from the decrees of the conquerors at the end of World War Two. The principle is included in the United Nations Charter, the basic document of the international organization created by the victors to maintain the peace they had imposed by force of arms:

“Article 1. The purposes of the United Nations are .... To develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples ...”

The principle of national self-determination is coupled with the principle of equal rights. At first, this was thought to mean that a right to self-determination for dependent peoples or minorities within states had not necessarily been recognized: the principle “conformed to the purposes of the Charter only insofar as it implied the right of self-government and not the right of secession ...”. (UNICO Documents VI, 296)

By 1960, with the gathering strength of anti-colonial movements among native elites throughout the world and especially in Africa, the attitude of those in control of the world organization seemingly changed dramatically. In the Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, the General Assembly proclaimed that the subjugation of a people to alien rule constituted a denial of human rights, was contrary to the Charter, and endangered world peace; it declared: “All peoples have the right to self-determination ...” Unfortunately, as the people in Biafra, murdered by the millions with weapons supplied by both Britain and the USSR, “all peoples” does not mean *all* peoples. Merely fitting the definition of a “people” (a common culture, etc.) is not enough. The Declaration stated:

“Any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity of a country is incompatible with the Charter ...”

This guarantee of political stability to the emerging empires was first tested in the Congo when the Katangese (justified by the usual claims to peoplehood and desperate to escape the madhouse of the Congo) seceded and a United Nations army suppressed their revolt. As with Latin America a century and a half before, new nations built on the ruins of colonial empires were to be coextensive with the former colonial possessions, regardless of the actual characteristics of the populace. The concept of national self-determination has, again, played its historic role. International jurist Harold Johnson suggests in his book, *Self-Determination Within the Community of Nations*:

“The existing political frontiers bear little relation to ... cultural frontiers ... There are no ‘nations struggling to be free’ but only political parties struggling for control of administrations ...”

New nations are not created because of a supposed right to national self-determination, but

rather because of the various political forces revolving around the clash and crash of empires. From the beginning of the concept’s development in political thought, it has been thus. It is so now. In fairness, though, it should be noted that in the case of white-minority dominated southern Africa, the international community has taken a stand on “principle”; it supports the “leaders” of the black majority as opposed to the “leaders” of the white minority. But this slight departure from total support for elitist, imperial rule is not sustained when the interests of the major imperial powers are involved. Witness the inaction of the world organization in the face of American intervention in south east Asia, or the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

Perhaps the only time “national self-determination” is an operative principle is when the empires are in conflict in an area where none have absolute power. The revolt which created Bangladesh is a prime example. With the Americans, and, uncharacteristically, the Chinese, supporting the oppressing power, Pakistan, and the Russians supporting the Bengali - with India’s army, a new state was created. But, as with all states, it came into being by force of arms. Thus, the principle is always coupled with the gun.

## THE REALITY OF NATIONAL SELF-DETERMINATION

The concept of national self-determination (the idea that the majority of a “people” have a right to impose a state on a given area) has always been subservient to the reality of international power politics. The idea fails to exert real influence because it is based on irrationality: on the twin error that a “people” is (1) an entity capable of having goals such as statehood, and that (2) grouping individuals together into states has other beneficial effects beside the most widely known effect of states - limitation of population through war and oppression. A concept constructed on invalid premises and implemented within a world order based on brute force - a world in which principles serve as rationalizations for imperial excesses - can have no compelling significance. Indeed, can *any* principle have binding force in such a world?

Self-determination on the part of the individual, not of “peoples” is the only principle which can ensure men of a world in which brutish coercive politics does not make a mockery of their best hopes.