

# Where did we get the idea of being a Nation?

## Where the idea of the nation state came about, and how it applies to Canada

**FRANKLIN FOSTER**

**A View From the West**

The modern idea of the Nation State came out of the French Revolution, about 200 years ago. In little more than a decade, people in France went from being subjects of a king to citizens of a republic. Even when the republic failed, Napoleon captured the energy and excitement that nationalism had unleashed by declaring himself Emperor of the French.

France pioneered much of what became the standard trappings of a nation state: the national anthem, the simple flag, the national motto, the celebration of national heroes, etc. France also had the population base, the geographic size, and more or less recognizable geographic boundaries, all of which made it easy to thrive as a new "nation state".

France exported nationalist feelings during Napoleon's days when enthusiastic, chauvinistic French soldiers prompted those in the areas they conquered to question who they were and why they were being conquered. This led to interest in the idea of the state apparatus serving to represent, as well as rule, the people. It also led some to recognize that political union was necessary to create the size of country which would be best able to thrive economically in the mid-nineteenth century. The

final missing piece in the creation of the modern nation state was the technology to bind the economic entity together and in the late nineteenth century that technology was the railroad.

In one of the great coincidences of history, five of the current G7 members "unified" almost simultaneously in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Japan saw the Meiji Restoration in 1868 and although it was called a "restoration" it was in fact a remarkable decision by a people to reinvent their political and economic institutions. German unification was completed in 1870 and Italy was proclaimed in virtually its present form in 1871.

Across the Atlantic, the United States concluded its bitter Civil War in 1865 with a victory by those who wanted to preserve the union rather than see it fragment. The next decade would see the United States "reconstruct" the Union and, with the purchase of Alaska in 1867 and the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, stake its claim to its current boundaries. Canada, as well, would begin its Confederation in 1867 and by 1873 gain jurisdiction over the remainder of British North America, with the exception of

Newfoundland.

Now Germany and Italy had overcome previous political divisions and used railroads to provide the economic sinews of the new nation state. As well, they joined France as now being economically viable in size. More importantly, the new nation state represented and embodies a population which already thought of themselves as a "nation". In all cases they shared common ethnicity, a common history, and, most importantly, a common language. Germany, in particular, would be carried away by the new energy of a unified German people, and spend the first half of the twentieth century in wars of aggression and ambition against its neighbours.

While the new European nation states had common language, ethnicity, and history to energize the new geographic and economic framework, the United States and Canada had to literally invent the nationalistic trappings of the new unions. The comparative successes and failures in that enterprise will form the basis for another article in this series.

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