Modern World History: Historical Summary: Nationalism

Modern countries are organized around the idea of nationalism. The concept of nationalism holds that the people in a country should be united in speaking the same language, having a common religious identity and sharing a common history and culture. The borders between countries are based on separating groups with different national identities. For example, the border between France and Germany separates the people who have a French identity from those that have a German identity. On one side of the border people speak French and on the other side they speak Germany. The fact that this statement seems so obvious shows how common the idea of nationalism is in the modern world. It has not always been that way. Historically, a French person on the living on the border with Germany would not feel as if they had anything in common with a French person living on the border with Spain. Instead, they would feel they had more in common with their German speaking neighbors. The process of organizing countries based on national identity began in Europe during the French Revolution and spread first to the rest of Europe and then to the rest of the world.

The concept for using nationalism to organize countries began during the French Revolution. Before the French Revolution, the countries of Europe were ruled by monarchs who often spoke different languages from the people they ruled. For example, there were times when Spanish kings ruled the Netherlands and Italy or when a German prince became the king of England. Simply put, historically people accepted being ruled by a monarch who spoke a different language and living in a country with people who spoke other languages. In addition, there was always the reality that the borders of a country could change when the monarch died. The different European royal families married each other to form alliances and gain more land to rule. Overtime, this resulted in the formation of larger countries, like Spain and France, where strong monarchs had build large kingdoms that united people of a common language and cultures. The ability of absolute monarchs, like Louis XIV, to centralize power in these countries united these countries and made them powerful and strong. However, other parts of Europe, such as the areas that are now the countries of Germany and Italy, were divided into many different little kingdoms which were typically weak and poor.

The French Revolution demonstrated the power of the idea of nationalism. After Louis XVI was overthrown the country was no longer united by the rule of a monarch. Instead, the French Revolutionaries used the idea of nationalism to unite the people of France in one country. The idea was that the people who spoke French and shared a common French culture and history of being part of France should all live in France. The Revolutionary government used the idea of nationalism to motivate the French people fight to protect “France” from the armies of the other European countries during the revolution. The French revolutionaries created a national flag (the red, white and blue tri-color French flag) and a national anthem (the Marseillaise) to help create this sense of national identity in people. The success of the French Revolutionary Armies and later Napoleon’s French Armies in putting the effort of the entire population into defeating the other countries of Europe demonstrated the power of a population united by the idea of nationalism. However, Napoleon’s conquests had the effect of spreading the idea of Nationalism across Europe. In fact, the countries most affected by the idea of nationalism were the ones defeated and ruled by Napoleon - Italy, Germany and Austria. The people in these countries resented being dominated by the French. After the defeat of Napoleon, many people in these parts of Europe began to use the idea of nationalism to organize their own people to build strong countries.
The idea of nationalism was used to turn regions like Italy and Germany, which were made up of many small kingdoms, into new united countries. Both countries had been battlegrounds during the Napoleonic Wars and the people who lived in these regions wanted to prevent that from happening again. They thought that the idea of nationalism provided a way to bring the small kingdoms together into single countries. The challenge for nationalist leaders in making this idea a reality was that neither Italy nor Germany had a history of being united countries. Both regions had populations that spoke a common language (Italian or German), but did not think of themselves as part of a larger country. In both regions, nationalist leaders first had to create the idea of nationalism and unite people in nationalist political organizations. In the area of Germany, the Brothers Grimm helped form a national identity through documenting national fairy tales told in villages and writing a dictionary. In Italy, Giuseppe Mazzini organized Italian nationalism into a political movement. The work of democratic and nationalist leader contributed to a series of revolts across Europe, particularly in the areas of Germany, Italy and Austria, in 1848. In these revolts, democratic and nationalist leaders challenged the traditional monarchs and tried to create new governments before they were suppressed by the monarchs’ armies. While these revolts did not directly result in the formation of new countries, they demonstrated that nationalist ideas had become very popular.

In the decades after the Revolts of 1848, both Italy and Germany became modern united countries through wars. In 1860, Giuseppe Garibaldi organized an army called the Red Shirts to fight against local nobles and foreign control to form the nation of Italy based on the goal of uniting a country based on Italian language and culture. A few years later, Otto von Bismarck, a leader in Prussia, one of the largest of the kingdoms in the region of Germany, realized that it needed to become larger to stand up to French power. Bismarck led Prussia to victory in a series of wars to bring the entire region of Germany under Prussian control – which then became the country of Germany. These wars made the united country of Germany the strongest military power in Europe. This became a factor caused the outbreak of World War One.

The idea of nationalism also had the power to tear countries apart. The country of Austria was a kingdom where a German speaking emperor ruled many different types of people who spoke different languages and had different religions and cultures. Hungarians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenians, Ukrainians, Romanians, Serbians, and Croatians all lived in Austria. Austria was also defeated by Napoleon and after the Napoleonic Wars, many of people ruled by the German speaking Austrians wanted to break away from Austria to form their own countries. Beginning in the 1800’s and going all the way up to World War One, these different nationalities would try to get their independence from Austria. The Austrian leader Klemens von Metternich worked with the other countries of Europe to prevent nationalism, but the success of nationalists in Italy and German inspired nationalism in Austria. The desire of non-Austrians to create their own country would become major cause of World War One in 1914.

While the idea of nationalism created conflicts that tore countries apart and built new countries, the idea spread around the world. This was because Europeans spread the idea through their colonies around the world. Many of the people living under European rule adopted the idea as a way to resist European rule. They adopted nationalism for the same reasons Europeans had - because it was an idea that united people for form powerful countries. As a result, most countries around the world are organized based on the idea of nationalism.