

## Nationalism in Comparison: Palestine and Poland; A Personal Perspective

Gregory P. Rabb  
 Professor of Political Science  
 Jamestown Community College

### INTRODUCTION

Defining and understanding nationalism in general can be difficult when done without referencing a particular nation or people. This paper is an attempt to understand nationalism in a comparative perspective as recommended by Benedict Anderson in his work entitled “Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism” (2016). Mr. Anderson also recommends understanding nationalism by focusing on the western hemisphere (or so called “new world”) rather than analyzing nationalism in the context of the so-called “old world” from a Euro-centric perspective. I am no Benedict Anderson, but I hope I met his recommendation by understanding nationalism from a personal perspective which I will explain shortly.

### NATIONALISM

When introducing these concepts to my students I talk about the nation-state as the way in which we have organized the world since the Treaty of Westphalia—a Euro-centric perspective. The state is the government, however that is organized, and the nation is the people who are held together by any one or more of the following characteristics: common language, religion, history, ethnicity, and/or national identity including a commitment to a certain set of values (e.g. the emphasis on individual rights and the Constitution as our civil religion as seen in the US) and symbols (e.g. the monarchy and currency in the UK and the flag in the US). We then discuss the “stresses” from above, below, and beside (without) which may be heralding the end of the so-called nation-state era. *Above stresses* refer to nation-states giving up some of their sovereignty (which I define as the basis on which a government has the right to rule) to supra-national organizations such as the European Union. *Below stresses* refer to groups of people or nations who find themselves in the “wrong” nation-state and want to pull out and create their own country (e.g. the Kurds promised their own state by Woodrow Wilson and wish to separate from both Turkey and Iraq). *Beside stresses* (without or outside) would be terrorist groups which have as integral to their mission the destruction through violence of the nation-state with or without a replacement method of politically organizing the world. Added to this list can be forces from within, specifically nationalism, which—when it becomes “overheated”—can result in the destruction of the very nation-state it seeks to celebrate and protect. This would include Americanism (exceptionalism) taken to the extreme. National-Socialism (Nazi-ism) was/is a form of nationalism which became overheated in the Third Reich and ended up destroying the people (the volk) and the state (the reich) it was attempting to protect and promote. Nationalism is an emotional concept which can bring people together, but it can also tear people apart, especially depending on how the “people” are defined.

### POLAND

I refer to my approach as a personal perspective for many reasons. I was born and raised on the east side of Buffalo, New York, at that time the second biggest Polish-American community in the US. The largest was in Chicago. I grew up near the end of this era in American and Buffalo history, but for a very

long time, Polish-Americans in Buffalo could live and work and thrive in a community dominated by Polish and Polish-American institutions including schools, churches, libraries, fraternal organizations, newspapers, etc. I spent a considerable amount of my time with my immigrant grandparents. They often spoke to me in Polish, and I responded in English. When I was there, and it was often, I spent time with them listening to a Polish language radio program understanding a word here and there. My grandmother, who had difficulty walking, listened to the Polish language Mass from St. Stanislaus on the radio before we had Sunday dinner. Polish language instruction in my grade school was mandatory through the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and because I was an altar boy in our Catholic church, I learned our prayers in Polish and Latin and eventually English.

Poland did not have its own country from the late 1700s through the end of World War I, having been divided between Austria, Germany, and Russia. The Polish state was re-constituted between the world wars, but then after World War II it was under the control of the Soviet Union and the Communist party. When the USSR ceased to exist Poland was “free” again. Polish nationalism should have died during all this time but it didn’t. Polish nationalism was kept alive during the diaspora of Poles in the US through the Roman Catholic Church. My grandmother’s church in Buffalo, Corpus Christi, is both a beautiful monument to their faith as immigrants and their pride in being Polish. On many Sundays I was just as likely to hear the Polish national anthem (“There will always be a Poland”) as I was to hear the American national anthem. The church is still there lovingly restored by the “new” diaspora (those who grew up there but are scattered about in the US). It is the one shining light in an otherwise economically devastated neighborhood in an economically distressed city. I go back every chance I get to bathe in the warm water of nostalgia and Polish pride. I keep the trunk my great grandmother packed to come to the US in my living room to remind me of the courage of what I like to call “my” people boarding ships to go to a strange new land thousands of miles away. Nationalism is emotional and Polish nationalism was kept alive without a nation-state for about two hundred years. Polish nationalism was kept alive by Polish Catholics in the new world. In fact, Poland—because of all the tragedies it has endured—is sometimes referred to as the “Christ among nations.” Poland was destroyed in World War II but Polish nationalism lived on. Poles can be stubborn, as the Soviets found out. Faith and music defines the Polish people, as can be seen in the Polish national anthem entitled “Poland is Not Yet Lost:”

Poland has not yet died

So long as we still live.

What the foreign power has seized from us,

We shall recapture with a sabre

March, March, Dabrowski,

To Poland from the Italian Land.

Under your command

We shall rejoin the nation

We’ll cross the Vistula, we’ll cross the Warta,

We shall be Polish.

Bonaparte has given us the example  
 Of how we should prevail  
 Like Czarnecki to Poznan  
 Returned across the sea  
 To Save his homeland  
 After the Swedish partition.  
 The German nor the Moscovite will settle  
 When with a backsword in hand,  
 "Concord" will be everybody's watchword  
 And so will be our fatherland...  
 All exclaim in unison,  
 "Enough of this captivity!"

#### PALESTINE

Late in my academic career I had the opportunity to go to Palestine on a study tour grant which included visiting five different Palestinian universities meeting with their professors. This was after I had the opportunity to study Islam in depth in the US. It is a cliché to say that both opportunities changed my life but there is no doubt that they did. Reading a voluminous amount of material in preparation for going, as well as attending a long briefing session on how to conduct myself when going through Israel to go to Palestine, created a visceral reaction in me akin to my feelings as a Polish-American. I came back as a true Palestine-phile (to coin a word) in a way that I never imagined before going. At the end of our trip I asked what could I do when I got home to help the Palestinian cause: the right of return to live in an independent sovereign nation-state of their own. I was told: "Tell them what you saw." I have been doing that ever since despite being accused of being anti-Semitic, to which I always respond: "I am not anti-Semitic. I am pro-Palestine." The trip and my earlier studying of Islam inspired me to create materials on Islam for our global business class and eventually a Palestine Honors class at my college. Islam and Palestine absorbed me, as I like to say. Palestinian nationalism fascinated and inspired me.

Palestinian nationalism has been kept alive through the British mandate and the creation of Israel in the late 1940s through the "nakba" (the catastrophe) in which an estimated 750,000 Palestinians were removed from their home and land by violence, the threat of violence and the fear of violence. Golda Meir was famous for asserting that there was no such thing as a Palestinian people. I can assure you that there are and always have been Palestinian people as can be seen in Nur Mashala's "Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History" (2018). When I asked one of the very well educated Palestinians who could leave why they don't, the response was: "because it is our land." Land and literature defines the Palestinian people as can be seen in a poem entitled "Ever Alive" by the late Fadwa Tuqan ("the Poet of Palestine"):

My Beloved Homeland

No Matter How Long the Millstone  
 Of Pain and Agony Churns You  
 In the Wilderness of Tyranny,  
 They will never be Able  
 To pluck your eyes  
 Or Kill your Hopes and Dreams  
 Or Crucify your Will to Rise  
 Or Steel the Smiles of the Smiles of Our Children  
 Or Destroy and Burn,  
 Because Out from Deep Sorrows,  
 Out from the Freshness of Our Spilled Blood  
 Out from the Quivering of Life and Death  
 Life will be Reborn in you again

#### POLAND AND PALESTINE COMPARED

Nationalism is alive and well in both Poland and Palestine but in different ways. It may be safe to say that nationalism in Poland is probably what I refer to as “overheated,” as witnessed by the most recent actions of the Law and Justice party and their full control of the nation-state of Poland, including interfering with both judicial and press freedom potentially leading to serious consequences with respect to its membership in the European Union (a stress from above). Catholicism is stronger than ever, especially in rural Poland, with Mary the Mother of Jesus officially reigning by decree of the Polish government as the Queen of Poland even though officially Poland is a republic. The head of state was recently re-elected by a small margin on clearly overheated political rhetoric claiming that western values, especially with respect to LGBTQ individuals, are a danger to Poland. The so-called LGBTQ agenda is described as “foreign” and as being more dangerous to Poland than communism ever was, with some small rural villages and towns passing resolutions claiming to be “LGBTQ free.” Poland and the Law and Justice Party see themselves as the bulwark to the threat from the west, especially secularization and Islam, which they see as destroying the “true” Christian nature of Europe. “Don’t let what happen in the rest of Europe happen here” is a rallying cry. It is clear that Poland sees itself as European, as evidenced by their membership in the European Union and any benefits that brings, while— at the same time—Poland tries to defend Europe from itself and cozies up to the style of overheated nationalism seen in the Trump administration. This tendency toward authoritarianism is something I personally witnessed among some Polish-American leaders, so it is not surprising to see it grow in Poland, however disturbing it may be. There also appears to be a rise in anti-Semitism in Poland despite there being very few Jews in Poland. Again, this is something I witnessed among some Polish-Americans. Sadly, lately, Polish nationalism seems to be defined as much as what they are not as by what they are.

An obvious difference between Poland and Palestine is that, of course, Palestine still does not have an independent sovereign nation-state for its people. From my perspective there is no doubt that the Palestinian people live in the occupied territories of the West Bank (a “swiss cheese” land with holes in Palestine created by illegal colonial settlements) and the Gaza strip, separated physically from each other in violation of international law. The Palestinians assert that they are occupied by the last vestiges of colonialism as first seen under the British mandate through the creation of the nation-state of Israel (so-called “Truman Land”) immediately recognized by President Truman in the late 1940s against the advice of his own State Department. The “temporary” occupation has been going on for several generations, ever since the “nakba” resulted in trans-generational trauma by denying the people of Palestine the right of return generously granted to Jewish people and ignoring their desire to return to what they call Judea and Samaria. Zionism interpreted the language of the famous or infamous vague Balfour declaration put forward by the British government to justify the creation of the State of Israel:

“His majesty’s government views with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

It never clearly states that there should be an independent sovereign nation-state for the Jewish people, but it was interpreted as such when the British had enough and quit Palestine and when President Truman recognized the right of Israel to exist. It also refers to civil/religious rights of “non-Jewish communities in Palestine” but never to the Palestinian people per se or their political rights. The famous Zionist phrase justifying a Jewish state while simultaneously erasing the Palestinian people was “A land without a people for a people without a land.” It is safe to say that the Palestinian people only lately have come to recognize the importance of good working relations with the dominant powers of the times, first the United Kingdom and then the US. It is also safe to say that historically there has been a dangerous division among the Palestinian leadership leading to a divide and conquer approach encouraged by its enemies. Poland experienced a similar problem between the world wars and after World War II with respect to division among its leadership.

Increasingly, water drawn from the Jordan River is being “taken” by the Israelis for their own use while they simultaneously sell expensive desalinated sea water to the Palestinians, ignoring the both the cultural significance of water in Palestine as well as its life giving qualities. Water is often shut off as a form of control, and rainwater collecting wells are covered and locked, as I personally witnessed in Bethlehem. Israel is using water as a form of control referred to as a Hydro-hegemon that is run (or mis-managed) by the Israeli military, making it the only place in the world where the military runs the water system. The land which defines the Palestinian people cannot support life without water.

#### CONTINUITIES AND CONVERGANCES

Poland and Palestine were and are “European problems” created by Europe. The European Union, to its credit, has played an important role in both Poland and Palestine. The European Union has admitted Poland as a member despite how tenuous that membership may currently be. The European Union has been the dominant contributor of aid to the Palestinian people and some members like the Kingdom of Sweden have clearly called for a creation of an independent sovereign nation-state. As one of my students once wrote: “The Europeans created the problem, the Europeans need to fix it.” By that my

student meant that anti-Semitism on the part of European powers (as well as the US) were reluctant to admit more Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, thus helping to create the conditions whereby 6,000,000 Jews are eventually killed in cold blood during the Holocaust, including 3,000,000 from Poland. The Nazi invasion of Poland, of course, was the ultimate reason for the UK and France declaring war on Germany. The British did everything they could to keep Arabs on their side during the war due to the need for oil. When the war was over, the British simply left Palestine and left the Palestinians to fend for themselves in the face of increasing legal and illegal movement of Jewish refugees into Palestine. The British adopting the attitude that the Palestinians were fungible, meaning that as a people there was no difference between them and other Arab populations; therefore, they could be moved anywhere and be happy, while Jewish people could only find safety and happiness in Palestine. Better, according to the UK, that these Jewish refugees find their way to Palestine rather than “overrun” Britain. The US simply took up where the British left off.

Near the end of the war in the final days of FDR’s presidency both Palestine and Poland were on his mind. FDR, in his waning days as his health deteriorated, has been accused of selling out Poland and giving in to the Soviets at Yalta despite his concern about Polish-American voters concentrated in major urban areas in electoral vote rich states. He also had similar concerns about what eventually becomes Israel for the same basic reason. Whatever FDR was, and he was many things, he was a successful politician who knew his supporters and how they voted. His successor, President Truman, when asked why he was so quick to recognize the existence of Israel while ignoring the warning of his State Department, was purported to say that he had many Jewish voters but no Palestinian voters. Poland has emerged from the injustices done to it and now seems to be dangerously heading in the wrong direction. The future of Palestine is still not clear. But to paraphrase my student: “America created the problem, the Americans need to fix it.”

## CONCLUSION

Obviously, this was not meant to be as exhaustive an exploration of the topic as can be seen by my extensive bibliography. It was meant, as the title says, to be a personal perspective based on my own experiences and studies, only some of which I have discussed here. Polish nationalism is fading in the US as Polish-Americans become more assimilated in the mainstream American culture. I am among the last generation to have enjoyed the pleasure of growing up this way, and as I get older I find more and more pleasure in learning about and keeping my heritage alive. My interest in and fascination with Palestinian culture is not waning but increasing. I do my best to understand Palestine and Palestinian culture not from the perspective of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, however important it may be, but from the perspective of the thousand years of a rich Palestinian culture, history, and literature. My nostalgia for Polish culture and its fight to survive feeds my comfort in urgently advocating for the Palestinian people as best as I can often in the face of adversity. When speaking about Palestine I have often been accused of being anti-Semitic by strangers on the street who notice my “Free Palestine, End Israeli Apartheid” bumper sticker on my car, as previously stated. I am always reminded that there is another side to this, including recently at a presentation I did at a Unitarian Universalist Congregation—something which hardly ever happens when I present on any other topic. My hope with this paper is to encourage all of us, especially my students, to dig deeper into the concept of nationalism in order to bring about a better, more just world; otherwise, we will have to live with what the other side wants.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abraham, Nabeel et al., eds., "Arab Detroit 9/11: Life in the Terror Decade," Detroit, Wayne State University, 2011.
- Anderson, Benedict, "Imagined Communities: Reflections of the Origin and Spread of Nationalism," Brooklyn, Verso Books, 2016.
- Baime, A.J., "The Accidental President: Harry S Truman and the Four Months that Changed the World," Boston, Mariner Books, 2018.
- Baroud, Ramzy, "The Last Earth: A Palestinian Story," London, Pluto Books, 2018.
- "The Cairo Review of Global Affairs," The American University of Cairo, Winter 2019.
- Cleveland, William L. "A History of the Middle East," third edition, Boulder, Colorado, Perseus Books, 2004.
- Khalidi, Rashid, "The Hundred Years' War on Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917-2017," New York, Metropolitan Books, 2020.
- Masalha, Nur, "Palestine: A Four Thousand Year History," London, Zed Books, 2018.
- Michener, "Poland: A Novel," New York, Ballantine Books, 1983.
- Pienkos, Angela T., "Ethnic Politics in Urban America: The Polish Experience in Four Cities," Polish American Historical Association, 1978.
- Sokol, Laura Klos, "Shortcuts to Poland," Warsaw, ABE Dom Wydawniczy, 2015.
- Sykes, Christopher Simon, "The Man Who Created the Middle East: A Story of Empire, Conflict, and the Sykes-Picot Agreement," London, William Collins, 2017.
- Szemraj, Edward R., and Wanda Slawinska, eds., "The Polonian Legacy of Western New York: Stories of the Lives, Accomplishments, and Contributions of Four Prominent Polish-Americans," Buffalo, Canisius College Press, 2005.
- Vinen, Richard, "A History in Fragments: Europe in the Twentieth Century," London, Time Warner Books, 2000.
- Woolner, David B., "The Last Hundred Days: FDR at War and at Peace," New York, Basic Books, 2017.