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### **Citation**

Storm, H. J. (2022). The rise of the nation-state during the Age of Revolution: revisiting the debate on the roots of nations and nationalism. *Nations And Nationalism*, 28(4), 1137-1151. doi:10.1111/nana.12857

Version: Publisher's Version

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3443699>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## ARTICLE

# The rise of the nation-state during the Age of Revolution: Revisiting the debate on the roots of nations and nationalism

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**Abstract**

Recent historical studies tend to confirm the antimodernist interpretation, emphasizing the strong premodern roots of nations and nationalism. However, a broad comparative analysis of the rise of the nation-state during the Age of Revolution shows that earlier notions of nationhood did not have a significant role in the creation of nation-states in Europe and the Americas. They were not the consequence of a glorious national revolt, but of a clash between the Old Regime and new ideals of political legitimacy. Many of these conflicts led to civil wars and the survival of the nation-state was mostly determined by the geopolitical constellation. The boundaries of the nation were defined in terms of civilization, whereas language and culture were largely irrelevant. Within these new nation-states, a universalist nationalization process began. In many instances, citizenship was awarded easier to foreigners than to “uncivilized” inhabitants, while Classical Antiquity was preferred over the national past.

**KEYWORDS**

age of revolution, citizenship, modernism, nationalism, nation-state

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The question of origins is one of the most controversial issues within the field of nationalism studies. It has been the topic of heated discussions, such as the famous Warwick debate between Ernest Gellner and Anthony D. Smith (1996) or more recently on the occasion of the publication of polemical antimodernist interpretations by Caspar Hirschi or Azar Gat (Grosby et al., 2014; Hutchinson et al., 2015). Although the modernist interpretation, arguing that nations and nationalism are a consequence of modernity, is generally accepted by most scholars who deal with modern forms of nationalism (Breuilly, 2019; Özkirimli, 2017), this is heavily contested by many experts who focus on earlier periods of history (Hirschi, 2012; Jensen, 2016; Lieberman, 2021; Moreno Almendral, 2021; Weeda, 2021). A growing number of scholars assert that forms of national identity existed before the 18th century and claim, explicitly or implicitly, that these early expressions are important for the understanding of modern forms of nationhood. Nonetheless, most opponents of the modernist view concede that the Atlantic Revolutions brought profound changes, particularly in the political realm. Yet they emphasize the many continuities that can be detected in the cultural domain (Gat, 2013, pp. 244–250; Gellner & Smith 1996, pp. 375–388). The antimodernists principally use three arguments to defend their focus on continuity. First, that there is widespread evidence of national consciousness before the rise of modernity. Second, that there are significant continuities in the use of national symbols, myths, popular memories and traditions. Third, that modern nationalism only resonates because it builds upon earlier identities (Gellner & Smith 1996, pp. 362–363, 372 and 383–385; Grosby et al., 2014, pp. 30–35; Jensen, 2016, pp. 14–15; Roshwald, 2019).

Nonetheless, other scholarly developments seem to subvert the new antimodernist consensus, while also undermining the linear view of many modernists. Thus, the rise of global and transnational history has made clear that ideas, peoples and practices travelled much more easily than previously thought and that influences from abroad should not be ignored when studying developments within one country (Colley, 2021; Polasky, 2015; Sivasundaram, 2020). Almost all existing case studies in the field of nationalism studies—and this is particularly true for those who defend the continuity thesis—examine the history of “successful” national movements and existing nation-states, while focusing on internal developments. This traditional historicist view, arguing that society can be understood by studying its past, in fact, leads to “internalist bias” and methodological nationalism (Berger & Storm, 2019; Breuilly, 2011; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002).

Other scholars have questioned the dichotomy between empire and nation-state. Actually most of the early (European) nation-states that inspired most of the theoretical writings on the origins of nationalism were empires and therefore hardly resembled the ideal type of a unified and ethnically and culturally homogenous nation-state. Thus, instead of being two opposite forms of statehood, empire and nation-state were thoroughly entangled and the imperial dimension of the early nation-states cannot be ignored (Adelman, 2008; Berger & Miller, 2015; Covo & Maruschke, 2021; Fradera, 2018).

Finally, a ground-breaking study by Wimmer (2013), based on big data, shows that geopolitical circumstances were much more important in explaining the rise of new nation-states than internal modernization processes, the ethnic homogeneity of the population or the actual strength of nationalist movements. Attempts to create nation-states primarily succeeded when there was a “window of opportunity” created by large scale wars, an imperial crisis or substantial shifts in regional power. As a consequence, new nation-states have generally been created in waves. Thus, implicitly also undermining the continuity argument.

Based on these recent insights, I will now reassess the rise of the nation-state during the Atlantic Revolutions. Was the modern idea of the nation really new or can many continuities be detected with earlier conceptions of nationhood? In order to answer this question I will adopt a broad comparative approach, while focusing on the new nation-states that were created on both sides of the Atlantic during the Age of Revolution. In a first section, I will analyse the nature and role of early modern conceptions of nationhood in Europe. Then I will make clear what the nation actually meant for the revolutionary activists and how they succeeded in creating dozens of new nation-states on both sides of the Atlantic. Another section will examine the boundaries of the nation in terms of space,

membership and support. Finally, I will outline the impact of the new nation-state model on the cultural realm. Such an overview cannot be exhaustive, nor do justice to each individual case, but rather aims to demonstrate broad patterns and trends.

## 2 | EARLY MODERN CONCEPTIONS OF NATIONHOOD

Those who oppose the modernist view do not agree on an alternative explanation for the rise of nations and nationalism. Even when dealing with particularly well documented cases opinions diverge. For example, it has been argued that a certain awareness of the English nation appeared in the early eighth century, while others situate the nation's origins variously in the Norman invasion of 1066, the growing opposition to Norman "oppression," in the wake of the loss of French possessions during the Hundred Years' War or else in the growing role of the English language or the destruction of the traditional feudal elite in the 16th century (Kumar, 2003, pp. 39–121). Nonetheless, it is clear that a division of the Western world into different peoples, with distinct but ill-defined characteristics, was taken for granted during the late medieval and Early Modern eras, but the terminology used to refer to peoples or the inhabitants of a state lacked coherence.

In a recent article, Moreno Almendral (2020, see also: Leerssen, 2006, pp. 25–82) argues that four different conceptions of nationhood can be found in Early Modern Europe. Two were primarily cultural and two political. First, the term "nation" was applied to a loosely defined group of people sharing the same geographical background or speaking similar languages, which, in the later Middle Ages, frequently occurred with communities of students, merchants and clergymen in a cosmopolitan setting. Second, there existed a more consistent classification of the civilized world into "ethnotypes" or "peoples," each with its own characteristics. These probably had their origin in the medieval ethnic slanging matches, but were later imbibed with the virtues Tacitus had ascribed to the various Germanic tribes or even systematized in *Völkertafel*. A third, more political concept of nation, was derived from the Roman idea of the *patria*, as a political community of citizens. This ideal of civic republicanism was revived during the Renaissance and applied primarily to city states and small republics. Fourthly, "ethnotypes" were often connected to a specific kingdom or realm. As a consequence, a kingdom's "national character" was supposedly reflected in its own peculiar institutions and corporate rights. One may add the "aristocratic nation" as a fifth conceptualization. It was particularly used to characterize the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, in which a large group of nobles elected the monarch. This term was also applied to the kingdoms of Hungary and Bohemia in which the nobility had a similar dominant position. Even in Western Europe, "nation" often only applied to those elite groups who were represented in the Estates General, Parliament or the Imperial Diet (Bahlcke, 2005; Schulze, 1995, pp. 116–118).

All these conceptions of nationhood were very different from modern day understandings. Not only did these communities lack clear boundaries, they also lacked internal unity due to a high degree of legal and linguistic pluralism, and they were embedded in a fundamentally religious cosmology. Legal pluralism, which was the norm in early modern societies, meant that one could be a citizen of a city, but not of a state. This also implied that in most cases local communities decided who belonged and who was a foreigner (Fahrmeir, 2007, pp. 9–26; Herzog, 2003). Moreover, nobles, clerics, burghers of towns, artisans, free farmers and serfs had different rights, obligations and privileges. Taxes, legal and administrative procedures also differed from province to province and from city to city, while military, political and religious districts often did not coincide. In addition, colonies, territories of chartered companies in the Americas and Asia, areas inhabited by indigenous populations and border zones often had a special status. Although many monarchs succeeded in centralizing their realms over time, most of this patchwork of territories and legal rights still existed at the end of the 18th century (Braddick, 2000, pp. 11–27; Mann, 1986, pp. 458–61).

Legally enshrined social differences were reinforced by linguistic pluralism. Almost everywhere the clergy used a dead "sacred" language for liturgical purposes: Latin for Catholics, Church Slavonic or Byzantine Greek for the Orthodox, Hebrew for Jews and classical Arabic for Muslims. These sacred languages were often also used in the scientific realm, at court and in the civil administration. In addition, Latin was the principal language of diplomacy until it

was displaced by French during the seventeenth century (Burke, 2004, pp. 43–60, 85–88, 127–129, 154; Kamusella, 2009, pp. 90, 139–40). The large majority of the population, in turn, used a multitude of dialects. It is true that in Western Europe vernacular languages rapidly became more important during the 15th and 16th centuries, as states replaced Latin with English, Italian, French and so forth. This process was reinforced by the invention of the printing press, which favoured the standardization of vernacular languages. However, this was not an automatic process and in many cases it took several centuries (Anderson, 1991, pp. 37–46; Burke, 2004, pp. 54, 91–110).

Furthermore, the worldview of early modern Europeans was dominated by a religious cosmology and a cyclical notion of time. Consequently, there was no conception of a distinct cultural realm that progressed along national lines (Anderson, 1991, pp. 12–36; Bell, 2001, pp. 22–50; Fisch, 1992, pp. 679–89; Shiner, 2001, pp. 79–140). With the rising awareness that contemporary society had surpassed earlier societies, both in technical knowledge and in the production of beautiful artefacts, a new overarching concept of human progress was needed. During the second half of the 18th century, enlightenment thinkers broadened the existing concepts of culture and civilization to signify an autonomous domain of human creativity. As a result, both terms were increasingly used to refer to the larger domain of collective human endeavour. Nevertheless, during the Age of Revolution most authors focused on human civilization. Language, culture and national identities would only become intimately connected during the Romantic Era (Fisch, 1992, pp. 679–740; Monnier, 2008).

### 3 | THE RISE OF THE NATION-STATE

The new nation-states of Europe and the Americas were not the result of a strong nationalist movement with a clear ideology. Rather, they appeared in response to a conflict over political legitimacy, brought about by weak monarchical regimes overwhelmed by imperial crises and the spread of new enlightenment political ideals. The Seven Years' War (1756–63) triggered a financial crisis in both Great-Britain and France, while conflicts over tax reforms would start off both the American and French Revolutions (Bender, 2006, pp. 61–88; Doyle, 2018, pp. 66–105; Mann, 1993, pp. 143–55 and 179–207). The Revolution in France, in turn, caused upheaval in its colonies, opening a window of opportunity for the Haitian Revolution. In Europe, many new nation-states appeared as a result of the intervention of French revolutionary or Napoleonic troops, while Napoleon Bonaparte's invasion of Spain and Portugal led to the War of Independence in Spanish America and, indirectly, to the independence of Brazil.

Moreover conflicts over the nature of the new regime in many instances led to civil war, while the actual fate of new nation-states was mostly determined by outside forces. This was the case in the 13 colonies, where British troops and colonial “Loyalists” confronted the “Patriots,” the latter of whom gained the upper hand thanks to the military intervention of France, Spain and the Dutch Republic. In France, large scale uprisings against the new regime occurred in the Vendée and in many provincial cities during the most radical phase of the Revolution. Meanwhile, the Second Partition of Poland, which began in January 1793, diverted the attention of Russia and Prussia away from the revolutionary developments in Paris, thus avoiding an early military intervention that might have brought the new French nation-state to its knees (Doyle, 2018, pp. 198, 220–47). The civil war in Haiti was complex and only ended in 1804, but during various phases, Spain and Great-Britain intervened on the side of the rebels (Dubois, 2005, pp. 91–301). The Wars of Independence in Spanish America were similarly convoluted, but violence between different groups in society was endemic. A large part of their success was due to the fact that King Ferdinand VII of Spain failed to get military support from the Holy Alliance (Hamnett, 2017, pp. 107–304; Pérez Vejo, 2019).

The Age of Revolution began in a peripheral part of the 18th century world: The 13 colonies on the north-east coast of North-America. The introduction of new taxes, such as the stamp duty of 1765, was seen as a break with tradition and the slogan “no taxation without representation” resonated among the settlers. The situation escalated when British authorities took repressive measures after the Boston Tea Party of 1773 (Bender, 2006, pp. 82–87; Colley, 1992, pp. 133–145; Mann, 1993, pp. 137–148). When open hostilities began, the rebels charged that a

despotic king had infringed on the “rights of Englishmen” (Breen, 1997, pp. 19–34). However, they did not follow the customary script by merely requesting the restoration of their traditional liberties, as had been done during earlier rebellions such as the Dutch Revolt or the Glorious Revolution (Baker, 2015). Delegates of the colonies, meeting in Philadelphia in 1775, advocated enlightenment ideals, such as natural rights and a social contract. By appealing to the “people,” the leaders of the rebellion tried to mobilize support for the war effort, while extending the electoral franchise to include between 60 and 90% of the white male population. The Second Continental Congress issued a Declaration of Independence that stated that “all men are created equal” and are endowed with certain “unalienable rights.” Subsequently, each of the 13 states drew up a constitution. Legitimate government required the “consent of the governed” and therefore the “people” had the right to throw off an unjust government and institute a new one. Thus, the new revolutionary leaders solemnly proclaimed that “these United Colonies are ... Free and Independent States” (Greene, 2006; Mann, 1993, pp. 149–155).

In order to create some sort of political unity, in 1777 the Second Continental Congress drafted Articles of Confederation. However, the weak central government did not function well as it had difficulties in paying off its war debts, which limited its ability to act as a serious partner in the international arena. Moreover, the inhabitants' primary loyalty remained with their state (Bender, 2006, pp. 88 and 102–105; Trautsch, 2015, p. 294). In order to avoid a collapse of the union, Congress decided to draft a constitution, which was adopted in 1788. Historians, such as Hendrickson (2006), doubt whether the country can be described as a unitary nation-state, maintaining that full sovereignty still rested with the states and that the Constitution was merely a kind of international “peace pact.”

The nation-state that was created as a consequence of the revolution in France constituted a less ambiguous case. Like Great Britain, the French state had accumulated huge debts due to almost continuous warfare during the 18th century. After several attempts to introduce new taxes had failed, King Louis XVI convened the Estates General in 1789. The revolution began when the Third Estate renamed itself the National Assembly and declared all taxes unlawful. The implication was clear. Sovereignty was no longer invested in Louis XVI, King by the grace of God, but in the nation as represented by the members of the Assembly (Doyle, 2018, pp. 97–105).

Three days later, the representatives swore not to disband until a constitution was adopted. If the nation is sovereign the state should treat all its members equally and enable them to control the government through an elected parliament. In August the remnants of feudalism were abolished, while 3 weeks later the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen enumerated the natural and universal rights that now applied to all citizens of France. During the next few years the corporate rights of the Church and the guilds were abolished. The political transformation of the country was completed by the adoption of a constitution in September 1791 (Doyle, 2018, pp. 112–159). Where once corporate, social and religious identities had predominated over territorial identifications, the revolution turned nationality into the principle legal category.

The long-lasting success of the nation-state model that was created during the first years of the French Revolution has depended not only on the popularity of the notion of the sovereignty of the nation, but also on the related practice of the nation in arms. Although plans for a national army had been voiced before, they were only realized after the Revolutionary Wars began. In April 1792 France declared war on the Austrian Emperor; in response, Prussia joined with the Austrians and an army of French émigrés and invaded France. The French armies were in disarray. Many aristocratic officers had gone into exile while those who remained were distrusted. Provisioning was difficult in a country in turmoil and the new volunteers lacked military training. Setbacks on the battlefield were compensated for through new recruitment efforts. In February 1793, 300,000 men were drafted and 7 months later the National Convention decreed the first *levée en masse*, arguing that until “our enemies have been chased off the territories of the Republic, all Frenchmen are on permanent requisition for military service” (Blanning, 1996, pp. 82–105; Quote from Howard, 2009, p. 80). This national call to arms aimed to mobilize the entire population for the war effort.

By the end of 1793, the Republic had over one million soldiers and went onto the offensive. However, the string of victories achieved by the revolutionary and Napoleonic armies was not so much caused by the nationalist fervour of the recruits and the skill of a new, meritocratic officer class—as the myth of the nation in arms suggests—but by a number of tactical innovations. Instead of relying on a defensive line, the revolutionary armies launched targeted

attacks by massive columns of soldiers with the bayonet as their most effective weapon. As a consequence, the strength of the revolutionary army depended largely on the sheer number of recruits, thus providing a clear incentive to extend the boundaries of the nation (Blanning, 1996, pp. 116–128; Howard, 2009, pp. 75–86).

The Revolutionary Wars also served to export the nation-state model. However, this did not mean that revolutionary innovations were merely imposed from the outside. There were many people who sympathized with the ideals of the Revolution and news about developments in France spread quickly (Polasky, 2015). In the Dutch Republic, local revolutionary agitation anticipated the political transformation of France. Already in the mid-1780s revolutionary “patriots” had taken power in several Dutch cities, holding out until 1787 when the Prussian King sent in troops to restore the old order (van Sas, 2004, pp. 175–275). The French Revolution clearly inspired activists elsewhere to take matters in their own hands. In August 1789, the so-called Happy Revolution forced out the Prince-Bishop of Liège, turning the principality into a republic. Shortly after, people in the Southern Netherlands rose up, proclaiming their independence from the Habsburgs and establishing the United States of Belgium, before Austrian troops reconquered the rebellious provinces (Judge, 2018). In Poland, “patriots” collaborated with the enlightened King Stanisław II Augustus to adopt a liberal constitution in 1791. Once again, this served as an excuse for the great powers to intervene. Five years later, another French inspired rebellion, by the United Irishmen, was fiercely put down by the British army (Doyle, 2018, pp. 165–166, 198 and 342–344).

Although the French revolutionaries initially did not assist their foreign comrades, they quickly radicalized their foreign propaganda. At the end of 1792, the National Convention declared that “it will grant fraternity and assistance to all peoples who wish to recover their liberty” (Blanning, 1996, pp. 91–92). French revolutionary armies helped the “liberated” areas by establishing “free and popular” governments and abolishing aristocratic privileges. However, many of the assemblies in the liberated territories “demanded” to be incorporated into the French State. Between 1791 and 1795, such demands had been made by Avignon, the Duchy of Savoy, the County of Nice, the Republic of Mainz and the Southern Netherlands (Doyle, 2018, pp. 197–219; Dumont, 1988). Even after Napoleon came to power, the abolition of feudal privileges, the introduction of written constitutions, legal equality and elected parliaments all remained part of the package bestowed upon newly conquered territories. This, for instance, is what happened in the Batavian, Ligurian, Cisalpine and Helvetian Republic and in vassal states, such as the Kingdoms of Italy, Naples, Westphalia and Spain (Broers et al., 2012).

At the same time as the revolutionary nation-state model was being taken up throughout Europe it also began to appear in Latin America, beginning on the island of Saint-Domingue, the first Caribbean colony to become independent, taking the name Haiti. The revolution had a direct impact on this French plantation colony. In 1790 a colonial assembly was elected by the white male population. The local “patriot” faction, mainly representing poor whites, adopted a constitution, declared autonomy and opened the harbour to foreign ships. Many large property owners and the excluded free people of colour, however, opposed the “patriots.” The conflict rapidly escalated into a full-scale civil war. The large enslaved majority of the population subsequently rose up to liberate themselves with Toussaint L'Ouverture as their leader. Within a few years he controlled the entire colony. In 1802, Napoleon sent a large expeditionary force to the island to re-establish order, while reintroducing slavery. Although L'Ouverture was arrested, the Napoleonic army was defeated by the troops of Jean Jacques Dessalines and the colony declared its independence in 1804. The next year Haiti adopted a constitution, effectively becoming the first independent nation-state in Latin America (Dubois, 2005).

In Spanish America there was widespread discontent about trade restrictions, as well as about the centralizing reforms of King Charles III. One of his most controversial measures was the exclusion of American born residents—the so-called *criollos*—from the highest functions of the colonial administration. However, the example of Haiti's emancipation of the mulatto population and that island's successful slave revolt made Spanish American *criollo* elites wary of revolutionary experiments (Zeuske, 2016). The establishment of new nation-states in the Iberian world therefore was only triggered when Napoleon invaded Portugal and Spain, beginning in 1807. The Portuguese royal family fled to Brazil, turning Rio de Janeiro into the de facto capital of Portugal and implicitly ending the colonial status of the various, largely disconnected Brazilian provinces (Hamnett, 2017, pp. 107–110 and 115–119).

Meanwhile, Napoleon used a dynastic conflict between King Charles IV and Crown Prince Ferdinand to take control of Spain. In 1808, he summoned the Spanish royal family to Bayonne, where he pressured both the King and his son to abdicate. Napoleon put his own brother, Joseph, on the throne and convened a parliament of Spanish notables, which adopted the Statute of Bayonne, a constitution largely written by the French Emperor. The new King of Spain was immediately confronted with a widespread uprising. After a few months, a Central Junta was established to coordinate the war against the Bonapartist regime. In order to strengthen their legitimacy, the Central Junta summoned a Cortes, which was elected by all male house-owners from both the Spanish metropole and the colonies (Sobrevilla Perea, 2019, p. 303). The new Cortes, which—protected by the British navy—convened in the city of Cádiz, immediately began to write a liberal constitution. Thus, soon after the implosion of the Bourbon monarchy, there were three more or less legitimate regimes vying for power: the Bourbon King, who was effectively a prisoner in France, King Joseph Bonaparte, who attempted to govern from Madrid, and the newly elected Cortes in Cádiz (Pérez Vejo, 2019). This caused great confusion in Spanish America.

In most parts of Spanish America opposition to the Central Junta and the resident viceroys came from city councils led by *criollo* elites. Only in the Viceroyalty of New Spain, where Spaniards retained firm control of Mexico City, was opposition concentrated in the provinces. The first uprising broke out in New Spain in 1810 when Miguel Hidalgo, a conservative priest, gathered a large army, mostly made up of poor farmers, to combat the dominance of the Spanish-born elite, while at the same time claiming to defend the rights of both King Ferdinand and the Catholic Church. Elsewhere in Spanish America, city councils created their own, more enlightened juntas and in 1810 several regional councils convened to respond to the situation. In 1811 the first constitutions and republics were proclaimed in cities like Caracas, Cartagena de Indias, Santa Fé de Bogotá, Buenos Aires and Santiago, which, in many instances led to civil strife with neighbouring cities and the surrounding countryside. Most liberal “patriots,” however, still wavered between a Spanish constitutional regime and outright independence. The refusal of the Cortes to grant the American colonies equal representation, some form of municipal or provincial autonomy and free trade seriously undermined their loyalty to the new regime in Spain (Hamnett, 2017, pp. 119–144 and 176–208; Sobrevilla Perea, 2019).

Further political uncertainty was caused by the return of Ferdinand VII in 1813. He immediately abrogated the liberal constitution and restored the absolutist monarchy. This and the violent repression of “rebels” by royalist armies further alienated many Spanish Americans. A liberal interregnum between 1820 and 1823 added to the confusion, while temporarily reversing sympathies and alliances. By 1826, all parts of the Spanish American mainland had become independent nation-states, each with a constitution and an elected parliament. (Hamnett, 2017, pp. 209–304) Another liberal revolution in Portugal, which took place in 1820, provided the opportunity for Brazilian elites to declare the independence of Brazil. Prince Pedro, who had been left behind as regent when the royal family returned to Portugal, became Emperor of Brazil in 1822 and shortly after a constitution was adopted (Elliott, 2006, pp. 325–403; Hamnett, 2017, pp. 244–249, 254–264 and 274–276).

## 4 | THE BOUNDARIES OF THE NATION

The nation-state, thus, was a product of the Age of Revolution. But what actually constituted the nation that now had become sovereign? First of all, one element that the early nation-states lacked were fixed boundaries. For example, beginning with the Treaty of Paris in 1783, the United States received a huge swath of land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi—including the so-called Indian Country. In 1802 the United States bought Louisiana from France, and in 1819 it acquired Florida from Spain. The new French nation-state also annexed a number of territories, initially to achieve natural borders along the Rhine, but later the Illyrian Provinces, parts of Italy, the Kingdom of Holland, North-West Germany and Catalonia were added as well, while the inhabitants of these territories received French nationality and thus could serve in the French army (Fahrmeir, 2007, pp. 41–42). In Spanish America, the demarcations between the various new nation-states would take several decades to crystallize. Many



provincial cities were not willing to subordinate themselves to regimes in new capitals such as Bogotá or Buenos Aires and tried to create separate republics. Prominent revolutionary leaders, such as Simón Bolívar and José de San Martín, attempted to form larger states, such as the United Provinces of South America or Gran Colombia (Sobrevilla Perea, 2019). Even Haiti did not have stable borders during the first decades of its existence. Two years after achieving independence the country was split in two after Dessalines was killed during a coup. In 1820, the new strongman in the South, Jean-Pierre Boyer, unified the country, and two years later annexed Santo Domingo, bringing the entire island of Hispaniola under his authority (Girard, 2005, pp. 60–64, 67). So there was no clearly delimited national entity, with a fixed territory, that had to be preserved.

Shared language and culture were also largely irrelevant when defining a nation (this point was already made by Hobsbawm, 1990, pp. 18–20). Neither a common language nor common culture played a significant role in the creation of the United States, or in the independence of the Latin American states. In these colonial revolutions both metropole and colonies used the same standard language, while cultural differences between the elites on both sides of the Atlantic were minimal. Moreover, the inhabitants of newly acquired territories more often than not spoke other languages. Even ignoring dialects and languages that were seen as “uncivilized,” the United States had to integrate a considerable number of French and Spanish speakers, French-speaking Haiti annexed Spanish-speaking Santo Domingo, while, at an early stage in the revolution, France incorporated territories where most inhabitants spoke German, Dutch or Italian. Neither were cultural or linguistic differences a factor in drawing borders between the new states of South and Central America.

However, while cultural and linguistic boundaries did not play a significant role in the creation of new nation-states, political borders did. The geographic extent of national communities was determined by existing borders, although these were changed in many instances. Surprisingly transatlantic empires were often even defined as one nation. We have already seen that early American “rebels” defended their “rights as Englishmen,” yet this was even more apparent in the case of the Spanish and Portuguese empires. Late 18th-century reformers had already presented the European metropolis and its American colonies as a “single national body” (Hamnett, 2017, pp. 72–104) and when these early modern monarchical empires became nation-states, their “national” assemblies represented the inhabitants of all territories, including American possessions and colonies elsewhere, such as the Philippines and Macao. The first Spanish and Portuguese constitutions accordingly defined the nation as consisting of “the sum of all Spaniards” or Portuguese “of both hemispheres.” Likewise, the French constitutions of 1793 and 1795 encompassed the nation’s overseas territories (Fradera, 2018, pp. 61–71). Smaller territories and micro-states that adopted a constitution or proclaimed independence also defined themselves as a nation. This was the case, for instance, with the Republic of Mainz in 1792—which declared itself a Rhenish-German nation, Lombardy in 1796, Naples in 1799 and the Province of Cartagenas de Indias in 1811. In the Batavian Republic, some politicians opposed the formation of a unitary nation-state, arguing that the ancient Dutch provinces constituted nine distinct “nations” (Doyle, 2018, p. 360; Duggan, 2008, pp. 26–27; Dumont, 1988, p. 163; Hamnett, 2017, p. 142; Rutjes, 2012, pp. 29–57).

What mattered most when determining who deserved full membership of the nation was not language or culture, but the supposed level of “civilization.” This was particularly evident in France, even though laws and regulations changed frequently. The National Assembly, in declaring France a nation of citizens, held to the principle that each enfranchised individual had to be in a position to freely determine his vote. This meant that only autonomous, rational individuals would receive the vote. As a consequence, the Assembly excluded minors, the mentally disabled, criminals, vagabonds, domestic servants—who were thought to be dependent on their masters—and members of monastic orders. Women enjoyed only passive citizenship as they were not viewed as autonomous individuals. This was based both on their supposedly inferior mental capacities—an argument that was rejected by revolutionaries such as Olympe de Gouges and Marquis of Condorcet—and for being a subordinate part of the family. Married women were taken to be represented by their husbands. On the other hand, male foreigners who resided 5 years in the country could acquire French citizenship and be enfranchised by swearing an oath of loyalty. After some debate, French Jews were also awarded citizenship (Graetz, 1996, pp. 17–41; Rosanvallon, 1992, pp. 11–195). Many of these provisions, including the exclusion of women from active citizenship and the emancipation of religious

minorities, were also introduced into the constitutions of other nation-states established during the revolutionary and Napoleonic era (Feros, 2017, pp. 253–256; Palmer, 2014, pp. 629–635; van Sas, 2004, pp. 114–115).

The exclusion of people who did not match the image of a “civilized” male was more obvious in the United States. Citizenship was awarded by the individual states, but slaves were excluded everywhere. Voting rights were also denied to women and, in most cases, to free people of colour. Native Americans who paid taxes were citizens and were included in the electoral rolls. Most Native Americans, however, were considered to belong to “foreign nations” and did not possess American citizenship. The first Naturalization Act, which was adopted in 1790, explicitly awarded American nationality only to “free white people” of “good character” (Fahrmeir, 2007, pp. 28–37; Fradera, 2018, pp. 57–59).

The Spanish and Portuguese constitutions of 1812 and 1822 also excluded slaves. However, in Spain there was an additional concern: the population of the American colonies was greater than that of metropolitan Spain. This implied that the American representatives would control a majority in the Cortes. In order to avoid this, the constitution denied voting rights to free blacks and mulattos (Fradera, 2018, pp. 65–71). Most constitutions in Spanish America awarded citizenship to free blacks and mulattos (although slavery was generally maintained); a policy that was also followed in Brazil. However, property qualifications were generally needed to qualify for the vote and in some cases proof of literacy was required. In this way, large sections of the population throughout Latin America—including nearly all blacks, mulattos and Indians—were effectively excluded from political participation (Hamnett, 2017, pp. 225, 258, 283, 301, 308).

The French constitutions of 1793 and 1795 were relatively generous. They conferred citizenship to free people of colour. Under the constitution of 1799, Napoleon limited the remit of the liberal constitutional regime, proclaiming that “the regime of the French colonies will be determined by special laws.” Fradera (2018, pp. 61–64, 82–88 and 233–242) forcefully argues that this kind of legal separation between the metropole—a nation-state with a written constitution—and its colonies—with “special,” more restrictive laws—would become the dominant model in the nineteenth century. As a consequence, although the new nation-states replaced the legislative pluralism of the *ancien régime* with legal equality and written constitutions, they also created new, formal boundaries to distinguish insiders—mostly white male property-owners—from outsiders—including women, free people of colour, native Americans and the inhabitants of the colonies. Strikingly, none of the boundaries delimiting membership in the nation were fundamentally determined by language or culture.

But who actually did identify with the new nations? Did the earlier “ethnotypes” play a role? First, it is clear that those who lost their privileges, such as the nobility and large parts of the clergy, opposed the new revolutionary settlement, as did many royalists. On the other hand, there was widespread popular support for many of the radical reforms, such as the introduction of equality before the law, the recognition of the sovereignty of the nation and the adoption of a constitution, in particular among urban elites. Also, the abolition of feudal dues and manorial rights was generally hailed by the peasantry. However, measures against the Catholic Church were far more controversial and quickly alienated a wide section of the population, while provoking suspicion of the “godless” revolutionaries in most parts of Europe and the Americas. The radicalization of the French Revolution after the proclamation of the Republic in 1792 served to weaken support for the new regime. Thus, after the initial triumphant exhilaration, interest in revolutionary politics began to wane. Indeed, turnout at elections—organized through local assemblies—dropped so rapidly that in September 1792 it stood at a mere 10% (Rosanvallon, 1992, p. 194). Enthusiasm in volunteering for the army also dwindled, most notoriously in the Vendée where the 1793 levy of new soldiers caused a large-scale rebellion. There was also wide-spread conscription dodging and many soldiers deserted at the first opportunity (Forrest, 2001).

In neighbouring countries, small groups of enlightened “patriots” continued to support revolutionary reforms and often welcomed French troops as “liberators.” In general, inhabitants of the countryside were far more hesitant to accept the new revolutionary regimes and in many instances opposed them outright. Indeed, Broers (2010, pp. xi–xii) argues that revolutions in many parts of Europe and Spanish America degenerated into a civil war between well-educated urban elites and the conservative countryside. In Catholic countries, while it was supposed that peasants

would profit from the abrogation of the tithe and the sale of Church lands, in practice most were unable to buy new land, while higher rents had a detrimental effect on their economic position. The replacement of traditional channels of self-government with elected assemblies was also not appreciated. To top it off, the new nation states raised the tax burden, interfered directly in local affairs and conscripted a large part of the young men. Finally, the new form of unreserved warfare meant that armies had to live off the land, resulting in frequent requisitions and billeting which imposed a heavy toll on the countryside. From about 1793 on, large-scale rural uprisings occurred not only in the Vendée, but also in Brittany, the Southern Netherlands, Switzerland, the Tyrol, Italy, Spain and its American colonies (Broers, 2010; Doyle, 2018, pp. 224–226, 308–318, 342–343 and 350–370; Hamnett, 2017, pp. 145–176).

Various rural rebels were turned into national heroes by later nationalists. They were presented as champions against the “foreign invaders” and “oppressors,” and were lionized as leaders of a war of “independence” or “liberation.” However, many such heroes hardly qualify as nationalists. Most refused to fight outside of their own region or even their home village. These peasants were apparently not bothered about their fellow “nationals” (Doyle, 2018, pp. 317–318; Planert, 2002, pp. 55–56; Tone, 1999, pp. 77, 83–85). In Spanish America, patriotic armies that introduced conscription were forced to impose heavy penalties on dodging and desertion, while in many areas peasant communities easily switched sides or continued to support the dynastic legitimacy of the Crown and the time honoured rights of the Catholic Church (Hamnett, 2017, pp. 150, 171–173, 284–285; Van Young, 2006, pp. 192–198).

Revolutionary officials and Napoleonic officers, for their part, often refused to see uncivilized peasants as rightful members of the nation. Many even compared these “backward bandits” with barbarians or beasts. Broers (2015, pp. xi–xiv and 127–132) argues that many officers distinguished between core parts of the Empire, such as Northern France, Holland, the Rhineland and Northern Italy, where “civilized men” behaved decently and accepted the new laws, from more remote areas—including large parts of rural France—where “wild communities” were in need of taming by a “civilizing mission” and brutal repression.

This attitude explains the Jacobin campaign to substitute a rationalized and purified form of French for the many regional languages and dialects then in use. Speaking a local patois was seen as a sign of backwardness and evidence of a reactionary mentality. Thus, promoting linguistic uniformity was not done as part of an effort to stimulate a cultural attachment to the historic French nation but rather was a measure aimed at removing obstacles to communication, civilizing the local population and combatting counterrevolutionary tendencies (Bell, 2001, pp. 169–197). Thus, neither traditional ethnic solidarities, nor loyalty to the existing state were enlisted in support of the new nation-states. Rather, traditionalist sentiment more often led to resistance among the population, while support for the nation-states primarily came from a small group of liberal elites, eager to implement their radical political ideals. The division between the supporters and opponents of the first nation-states was not based on ethnicity, language or culture, but was political and ideological.

## 5 | A NEW PROCESS OF UNIVERSALIST NATIONALIZATION

Although the identification of the population with the modern nation was limited at first, the Age of Revolution set off a process of nationalization in the newly created nation-states that would help to create such a link. This can best be demonstrated by focusing on France, where the revolutionaries had the time, power and means to more fully apply their ideas. During the French Revolution state and society were largely reconstructed from scratch by applying rational and uniform rules in almost every domain of life. The irregular mosaic of provinces, cantons and cities was substituted by a rational grid of departments of almost equal size, with new names that did not refer to the past (Aston, 2004, pp. 106–118). The nation itself was not conceived of as a continuation of the royalist past, the memory of which was to be erased. All signs of “feudalism” were removed from the physical landscape. Streets, cities and villages with names derived from royalty, the nobility or the Church were given new names taken from the repertoire of the revolutionary nation-state. In 1793, a new, secular calendar was adopted in which all names were based on the natural world (Bergdoll, 2000, pp. 105–107).

The nationalization of the inhabitants of France did not only proceed because the national framework became more prominent in daily life—through elections, conscription and taxes—there were also proactive attempts to link the sentiments of the population to the new nation-state. However, nearly all the symbols that were used to mobilize the population, such as the tree of liberty, the patriotic altar or the liberty cap, celebrated the revolution itself rather than a culturally distinct French nation. The same was true with memorabilia, such as stones from the Bastille. The many elaborate festivals that were organized throughout the country also focused on revolutionary themes (Auslander, 2009, pp. 113–149; Hunt, 2004, pp. 52–87). Only the red, white and blue cockade, the tricolour flag and Marianne were included as rather abstract references to France, but elsewhere these were easily substituted, changing some minor details. Even the *Marseillaise* was widely adopted by revolutionaries outside of France. In nearly all cases, the aim of these nation-building efforts was not primarily to stimulate existing French national feeling, but to create a new, enlightened citizen (Hunt, 2004, pp. 19–86).

A similarly universalizing process of nationalization can be seen in the cultural sphere. Many cultural treasures became the property of the community of French citizens, thus in fact creating a national heritage. The confiscation of the properties of the Church, the émigrés and the monarch resulted in the foundation of four national museums: the Louvre, the Museum of French Monuments, a Conservatory of Arts and Crafts and a Museum of Natural History (Loyer, 1999, pp. 24–27; McClellan, 1994, pp. 13–124). Nevertheless even this physical patrimony was made to serve a universal mission. In the Louvre the “marks of superstition, flattery, and debauchery” were obliterated by arranging works of art in a rational, aesthetic order presenting them as “a continuous and uninterrupted sequence revealing the progress of the arts and the degrees of perfection attained by various nations that have cultivated them.” By also integrating the artistic treasures of the conquered territories, the Louvre could become a “universal” source of inspiration for artists from all over the world. In a similar way, the revolutionaries aimed to remake Paris as the Neo-Classical successor to Rome as the world’s “capital of the arts” (McClellan, 1994, pp. 109–123; Swenson, 2013, pp. 37–41). Thus, although the artistic past was rearranged along national lines, the ideals that revolutionary elites were promoting through the arts were not distinctively national but “universal” in nature.

Elsewhere, patriots did sometimes invoke the inheritance of their “forefathers” to give their own revolutions a distinct national flavour. The Batavian and Helvetic Republics, for example, were intentionally named after the tribes that had inhabited these territories in Roman times. In the Americas, revolutionaries integrated indigenous symbols and typical American animals into their national emblems and flags (Auslander, 2009, pp. 95–97; Earle, 2007, pp. 47–79). In Spain, the parliament that convened in Cádiz was not called the National Assembly but Cortes, as if it was a continuation of the medieval Estates General (Eastman, 2012, pp. 73–93; Moreno Almendral, 2021, pp. 91–105, 173–188, 218–236 and 257). Nonetheless, these national peculiarities only concerned the frills and not the structure of the new nation-states.

One could object that the transition to the nation-state did not always imply a radical break with the past. Great-Britain constituted the best example of a slow evolution. However, one could make the argument that Great Britain was a composite state that slowly morphed into a nationalizing empire without ever fully integrating its various components (Colley, 1992; Evans, 2015). Nevertheless, many of the trends we have analysed were also visible in the United Kingdom, such as growing political centralization, a demand for reform and a universalist conception of Western civilization. Moreover, as with the cases of revolutionary nation-state formation, language and cultural differences were irrelevant when the United Kingdom of Great-Britain was enlarged in 1801 by the incorporation of Ireland.

## 6 | EPILOGUE

In conclusion, it is apparent that the concept of the “nation” that was current when the first nation-states appeared during the Atlantic Revolutions was very different from the conception with which we are familiar today. These nations ranged from micro-states, such as the city of Mainz, to states that spanned continents, such as Spain with its

colonial empire. Their boundaries were not fixed, and in many instances, their territory was expanded without regard for cultural and linguistic differences. Citizenship in many early nation-states was easily awarded to foreigners, yet those who were seen to be lacking in “civilization,” such as women, native Americans and people of African descent, were excluded from political participation. Finally, the first nation-states did not appear as the result of glorious nationalist uprisings, but rather as the consequence of a conflict over political legitimacy. In many cases this conflict led to civil war, mostly between “enlightened” urban elites and a conservative countryside. Whether a nation-state was successfully created and remained sovereign depended more on the geopolitical situation than on the actual strength of the revolutionary movement itself.

The appearance of the nation-state not only led to the abolition of feudal remains and replaced royal absolutism with a concept of national sovereignty, but also initiated a new process of universalist nationalization. By proclaiming the legal equality of all citizens, the revolutionaries profoundly altered the hierarchy of identities. Until then social and religious identities had been more important than territorial identifications, but this was fundamentally reversed in the Age of Revolution. One's legal standing was now primarily defined by one's nationality. Whilst a conceptual framework for thinking about progress in the secular realm of human achievement had been created during the 18th century, it was not until revolutionaries began to establish national museums that this concept of progress was employed to chart the evolution of the nation's cultural heritage. The cultural life of the nation in this period, however, remained highly cosmopolitan, and Classical Antiquity continued to constitute the “universal” benchmark against which the progress of human civilization was measured. Indeed, the newly created nation-states made little reference to culture during their founding. On the contrary, the criteria for membership were defined in terms of civilization. French revolutionaries, who took this universalizing approach to the extreme, attempted to establish the new French nation by rationalizing all aspects of society and making a clean break with the past. This left little room for national peculiarities.

The only older concept of nationhood of relevance in this period was to be found in the rhetoric of the “patriots” and their ideals of civic republicanism. It is true that some “patriots” did use the language of national difference and tradition while defending their respective fatherlands, however, in no cases did they wish to return to old forms of oligarchic or absolutist rule, rather they sought to establish modern, egalitarian nation-states after the new model (Fernández Sebastián, 2019; Manin, 1997, pp. 42–93; Thom, 1995). While references to traditional “ethnotypes” continued to appear in daily speech (Moreno Almendral, 2021), they did not play a significant role in the main decisions of the enlightened revolutionaries and would only be taken up again by a younger generation of Romantic nationalists.

Based on these findings, one can argue that the understanding of the nation as an ethnically and/or culturally homogenous community—as implied in the antimodernist interpretation—does not correlate with the conceptions of the nation that played such a crucial role during the Atlantic Revolutions. Indeed, there is good reason to think that the current cultural understanding of the nation is a normative ideal that is largely unrelated to reality. Ever since the rise of the nation-state model there has been a profound mismatch between existing nation-states and culturally defined communities. According to Connor (1972, pp. 320–321), in 1971 only 9% of nation-states—12 out of 132—could be defined as ethnically homogenous and since then this number has in all likelihood decreased further. Gellner (1983, p. 44), moreover, estimates the number of languages—and thus potential nations—at 8000. With such a mismatch and an unrealistic number of potential “nations,” why should we continue to take the myth of the ethnically or culturally homogenous nation-state, based on a handful of largely distorted European cases, as a meaningful point of departure? Why not adopt a more neutral definition of the nation—as a sovereign community of equal citizens—that also encompasses the birth of the nation-state during the Atlantic Revolutions.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Diederik Smit, Jeroen Duindam, Matthijs Lok and Raúl Moreno Almendral for their very useful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

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**How to cite this article:** Storm, E. (2022). The rise of the nation-state during the Age of Revolution: Revisiting the debate on the roots of nations and nationalism. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12857>