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George Orwell: ‘Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.’ George Orwell, 1984.

The centenary of the end of the First World War falls in 2018, though we can still feel the repercussions of this momentous event today. To mark the occasion, the Bundeswehr Museum of Military History in Dresden is planning an exhibition on the theme of ‘Myths of Nations. The Clash of Futures. 1914–1945’.

This will be the third (or in terms of historical chronology the second) in a series of thematic exhibitions on the subject of Nationhood. Whilst the first exhibition, ‘Myths of Nations. A European Panorama’ (1998) looked at nation-building in the 19th century, in the period after the end of the French Revolution and establishment of the new Napoleonic order, ‘Myths of Nations. Arena of Memories’ (2005) examined how the European nations, including Israel and the USA, created a peaceful world order after the great crisis caused by the two World Wars.

‘Myths of Nations. The Clash of Futures. 1914–1945’ is intended to provide the missing link between these two earlier exhibitions and will focus on the deep crisis for the concept of nationhood during this period.

Countries:

Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, The Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Romania, Russia/Ukraine/Belarus/Soviet Union, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Turkey, United Kingdom, USA, Serbia/Croatia/Bosnia and Herzegovina/Slovenia (former Kingdom of Yugoslavia).

The Concept

Nations, in the form in which we know them today, are the product of a process of modernisation1 that began with the French Revolution and has continued down to the present day. Nations were invented in response to the crises triggered by modernisation, and were an attempt to find a solution to these.

The first exhibition on the theme of ‘Myths of Nations’2) was devoted to the great crisis of modernisation around 1800 and the consequences it had for the different nations in the 19th century; whilst the new exhibition, ‘Myths of Nations. The Clash of Futures. 1914-1945’, will focus on the great crises of nationhood between 1914 and 1945.


The First World War was a war conducted by the most modern means and marked a complete break with anything any of the participants had experienced before. The world after the end of the First World War had entirely changed. And the ‘concert of nations’ had been altered significantly by the Paris Suburban Treaties: the old empires had been defeated, civil war raged in many countries, and new national states were established. The treaties that were agreed upon in Paris led to fundamental changes in many people’s lives. Many lost their homeland, whilst others suddenly found themselves in a new, quite different country, without ever moving an inch. Thus, some Hungarians suddenly found they were living in Romania, and Germans that they were living in Poland. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, many Turks found they were living in newly established states, such as Bulgaria, and Greeks, that they were living in the newly created Kingdom of Albania. For others, such as the Poles and the Estonians, the experience was rather different, as they finally witnessed the realisation of their century-old dream of national sovereignty.

In countries such as France and Great Britain there was no break with tradition, though in the end no nation was altogether spared the massive upheavals in Europe, the destruction of the previous power structures, or the social, ideological and economic conflict that accompanied this. The expectations of the European peoples, in going to war, were completely at odds with their actual experience. Ultimately the violence of war turned into a commonplace feature of everyday life, after the War was over. The new situation that resulted from this was fittingly described by Reinhart Koselleck, in the following terms: ‘Not only did the gap between past and future become greater, but also the difference between experience and expectation had to be constantly and ever more rapidly bridged to enable one to live and act.’ ³ Despite the general longing for peace, no solution to the crisis could be found between 1918 and 1945. On the contrary, the collapse of the old empires precipitated civil wars in some of the nation states in the West; and the end of the monarchies in the East likewise brought civil war in its train.⁴

The vision of the future as a better world gained added significance, as a means of bridging the gap between experience and expectation. Ever since the French Revolution, there had been an expectation that ‘that the future would not only change society at an increasing rate, but also improve it’.⁵ This was ‘characteristic of the horizon of expectation outlined in the later Enlightenment.’⁶ And no political doctrine or “Weltanschauung”, of whatever complexion, was immune to this allure.’

‘If the declarations of the American, French, and Russian revolutions are taken literally, there is no doubt that their “achievements” are intended to be to the advantage of all mankind. In other words, all modern expressions of “Revolution” spatially imply a world revolution and temporally imply that they be permanent until their objective is reached.’⁷

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⁵ Koselleck, Futures Past, p. 270.

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Koselleck, Futures Past, p. 52, emphasis in the original. Reinhart Koselleck mentions the Russian and the French revolution in one breath to emphasize the fact that the future is in any case depicted as a brighter, better one, even though the political systems describing it may be completely different.
The Russian Revolution of 1917, and the other revolutions of 1918, were once more accompanied by promises of the dawn of a brighter, and better, future. Yet what the good life in the future would look like, and even how it was to be achieved, remained open to question. Since 1918, at least three different projections of a possible future were opposed to each other in deadly animosity – communist social projects, orders based on nationalist or authoritarian principles, and approaches rooted in bourgeois, liberal and democratic values. All three ways of thinking and strategies of legitimation played on the theme of a better future, but there could be no way of reconciling the three to each other. Instead, the extreme right and extreme left engaged in a civil war with each other (or its nearest equivalent), in the run-up to the Second World War and the adoption of a policy, where might was set to prevail.

Thus, the New Age began with great hopes, but with at least three competing projects for a better future, with a greatly modified territorial map of Europe, the lack of any potentially unifying vision of the future, and a collection of new, and often strife-riven older nations.

But what is a nation? This was the question that Ernest Renan posed, in his lecture of 11 March 1892, at the Sorbonne, in Paris: ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?’ He defined it as ‘a great solidarity constituted by the feeling of sacrifices made and those that one is still disposed to make. It presupposes a past but is reiterated in the present by a tangible fact: consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. A nation’s existence is (please excuse the metaphor) a daily plebiscite, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.8

The First World War, the Balkan Wars and the Russian Revolution not only spelt the end of the great Russian, Austro-Hungarian, German and Ottoman Empires. They also brought in their wake a rift in many European states between common perceptions of a shared past and the present. In the process, any notions of how to continue with a shared existence or of how the future might look, want by the board. If we follow Renan’s line of thought, we will find that the daily plebiscite that should underpin the concept of nationhood was virtually absent from the situation in large parts of Europe after 1914, or 1918, at the latest. The 1920s were marked by competing demands for endorsement, which were decided, in most European states in the 1930s, in favour of various forms of fascism, or nationalist authoritarianism. In the Soviet Union, the Communist Party imposed its own model of the future, after a bloody civil war and the destruction of its political opponents. Yet even the nations which profited from not being affected by the collapse of the great empires were sooner or later drawn into the more general zone of conflict, which grew up between the left and right camps, and their competing claims to a monopoly of the future.

According to Renan, if a nation wishes to be assured of the continuity of a common existence, it needs to justify its existence through reference to a single idea, not only of the future, but of the past. Invented traditions9 tell tales of invented origins in far-distant times, glorious battles and heroic defeats at the hands of the oppressors and external enemies.10 The only problem is that, in 1917/1918, it was scarcely possible to relate to earlier battles and defeats, in connection with the

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vanished kingdoms and empires of old. From a political perspective, it became necessary to construct different versions of the past.

However, that had no chance of succeeding, because it was the very fact of this total break with the old world and construction of something totally new that provided the allure of modernity and the driving force behind revolutions. Modernism wanted to destroy what was old and superannuated, in order to conquer the future. Modernist art gave pictorial form to the unsettling crisis into which the continent, after being subjected to the crazy pace of modernisation, had been propelled. Even before the First World War, art had depicted the discrepancy between the world of experience and the present. The rejection of the past and splintered forms that fragmented space were linked to the end of the great empires, revolution and the emergence of democratic ideals. As a corollary to this, modern artists also discovered a form of visual equivalence for their sense of crisis. It was this that enabled modernism to find the appropriate visual equivalent for the revolution. How did things continue, however, after the ruptures caused by the revolution, when it becomes necessary, not only to evoke the new, but to give it some kind of reality? Form was now once more evoked, to bridge the gap with the past. As far back as in 1915, Heinrich Wölfflin had written, in his Principles of Art History: ‘The time will soon come when the historical record of European architecture will no longer be merely subdivided into Gothic, Renaissance, and so on, but will trace out the national physiognomies which cannot quite be effaced even by imported styles.’

With form, a tradition could be invented and used to suggest a common experience, or expectation. Now that the present had come apart at the seams, form offered the forces of both left and right, to put it together again after their own fashion. Clear, neatly defined, form was instrumentalised in like fashion by both parties in the opposing ideological camps, to convey an image of how they envisaged a future that could equally well be linked to the past. Experiences and expectations appeared to achieve resolution in form. In Germany, the National Socialists drew the logical conclusion from this, by defining modern art as degenerate, whereas in the Soviet Union it was held up to Socialist Realism, considered as an affront to class consciousness and branded as a dangerous aberrance to the left.

In the Soviet Union, Socialist Realism was now held up as the approved form, with the approved content. Artists pointed heroic scenes from the recent revolutionary past, in a historicising style, as a way of creating a new foundational myth. At the same time, they were expected to foreshadow the future reality and embody it in pictorial terms. Art was thus enabled to take the kind of effortless leap into the future that proved impossible to achieve in everyday life. The happy masses of ‘new’, ‘healthy’, ‘pure’ people wave to us out of the pictures. They acclaim their Leader, who joins them in celebrating invented traditions and has promised them an orderly existence, at some time in the future.

Pictures which were accepted for the exhibitions at the Haus der Deutschen Kunst. likewise, showed idylls from the past as projections into the future. Beautiful landscapes, happy families and proud people were placed on show, as were images of buildings from different centuries. Both ideologies showed how something like a retrospective view of an unsullied world could be transposed into the

future. The form in which the pictures were painted was once more based on a central perspective, as in the paintings of the Renaissance. The viewer could easily recognise the form and the structure; the themes belonged to a dream world, which helped the viewer to combat the inadequacies of the present in the interests of a happy future, and thereby to endure further suffering and sacrifice.

These forms and this content may be found, not only in painting, but in all kinds of films, photographs, postage stamps, newspapers, and other mass media.

The general move back to form could not fail to have an effect on modern art, as well. This may have been because modernism was itself in thrall to a diffuse longing for a recognisable world and perhaps, even, an unsullied one. Yet modern art remained tied to democratic political movements, which did not persecute it, but allowed it its own place in art exhibitions and magazines, such as Deutsches Bauen. The democratic movements stayed true to modernism, within limits. However, they did not go along with the demand for a break with the old world, and basically remained faithful to the narrative of the past that had held sway, up until 1914. The history of these democratic movements did not form part of the modernists’ strategies of legitimation. Their existing versions of designs for a better future, which had only taken shape after a long gestation and series of compromises, looked bloodless and unconvincing in a period of turmoil, when only deeds seemed capable of forging a new world. This may have been one of the reasons why the democratic parties in almost all countries in Europe lost their majorities in the course of the 1930s.

The Second World War began on 1 September 1939, when the German Wehrmacht marched into Poland. This marked the beginning of the attempt, not only to expunge the humiliation of Versailles – i.e. achieve a revision of the borders that had been imposed on the old German Reich by the Treaty of Versailles – but to lay the foundations of a new Third Reich, that would last for a Thousand Years. Somewhat later, on 17 September 1939, the Soviet Union fell on the Poles from the East. Six years later, and only after a devastating war had been fought, did it become possible to exorcise the whole panoply of right-wing nationalist concerns. Europe was completely restructured and found stability in a Cold War and new projections into both the past and the future. The new narratives of the post-war period have already been expounded in the exhibition, ‘Myths of Nations. Arena of Memories’. 12

Yet there is no such thing as the ‘End of History’13! The crises, wars and revolutions of the new millennium once more prompted the question of whether the loss of a common past and future must always, and inevitably, lead to a battle over the past and the future. Does this battle inevitably split communities and lead to terrorist ideologies?

Questions to the authors, in relation to the individual European nations, or countries:

- How did perceptions about the past and the future change between 1914 and 1918?
- What visions of the past and the future did representations of the right, left and liberal democratic camps construct, in the period after 1918?
- How, after the beginning of the Second World War, did not only Germany and the Soviet Union, seek to legitimise war and the occupation of other countries?

Various constructs of the past and future can be read into the art posters, films and postage stamps of the time, as well as other items, such as toys and utilitarian objects, schoolbooks and magazines. Presumably, we shall find that the mortal foe is depicted on election posters, for instance, and postage stamps will be found to have been used as a vehicle for celebrating the achievements of the past. Toys may be found to champion patriotic sentiments and films utopian projects, just as pictures may present a pure, unsullied world, or even horror scenes, as a means of inducing terror.

Working alongside the individual authors, we intend to request the loan of up to 30 objects from each country. A variable proportion of these will be shown in the exhibition at each venue.