

# Off The cuff

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## NATIONALISM



**IN 1960**, aged 15, I attended the funeral of Harry Pollitt, the leader of the Communist Party of Great Britain. It was fascinating to see the delegations from all over the world – Bulgarians bearing vast bombastic funeral wreaths, whilst the Chinese delegation in identical brown suits each carried a delicate bunch of flowers tied with long flowing ribbons. The most moving part of the ceremony was when Paul Robeson, the American athlete, actor, and bass-baritone, sang *England Arise, The Long, Long, Night is Over*. This was broadcast to the crowd overflowing the crematorium chapel.

England, arise! The long long night is over,  
 Faint in the east behold the dawn appear;  
 Out of your evil dream of toil and sorrow  
 Arise, O England, for the day is here.  
 From your fields and hills  
 Hark! the answer swells:  
 Arise, O England, for the day is here.

Long, long have been the anguish and the labour,  
 Dark, dark the clouds of unbelief unrolled,  
 Dreadful the night when no man trusted neighbour,  
 Shameful the nightmare-greed of gain and gold;  
 Yet from fields and hills  
 Hark! the song now swells:  
 Arise, O England, for the day is here.

“For the day is here”. It’s a song about a mystical past and a dreamed future. Redolent with love of the country. Its tone is different from *Rule Britannia* stuff, more akin to the sentiment of *Jerusalem*, though without William Blake’s sensuous passion.

England is a very old nation composed of many different elements. It has, at different times, been Welsh, Saxon, Norwegian, Danish, Norman, and Dutch, like a rock group, which over the years has lost all its original members, yet somehow manages to remain the same. The continuity of England is an illusion, one composed by chroniclers, churchman, courtiers, monarchs, and historians. It’s a mystical notion, constantly made and remade as the territory and its people undergo tectonic rumbles: linguistic, ethnic, economic, political, and racial – shifting from one period to another.

What is distinctive about England is that it arose as a more or less coherent political and social entity long before the rise of European nationalism in the nineteenth century. This means that apart from our ferocious and bloody struggles with the Welsh, and Scots, on our island, it is often difficult for us to comprehend foreign nationalism, which appear artificial or simply trumped up. Our nationalism is so obviously ‘authentic’ that even its extension in the eighteenth century to *Britain*, and what many Irish people have called the *Butchers’ Apron* (the *Union Jack*), has somehow benefitted by the vaunted courage of Queen Boadicea, Alfred the Great, the sterling efforts of King Athelstan, Oliver Cromwell, and of course, Winston Churchill. It’s our island story.

The truth is, however, that England is as put-together as Israel, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan. Territories,

composed and constructed without regard to the existing racial and religious divisions, boundaries cut roughshod through peoples and communities to create new nations. Even ancient countries, like Egypt has frontiers that ebb and flow along the Nile and back and forth across the deserts and mountains of Sinai, where Moses is said to have wandered with the Israelites.

Eastern Europe offers us a dramatic picture, a small compact Lithuania that once stretched from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Poland moving in and out of existence, unsure of where its boundaries are. A class of Polish-speaking aristocratic landowners, extending across vast tracks of Ukraine, battenning on a peasantry using a different language, grandees who after 1914 were bitterly attacked by nationalists that murdered tens of thousands of Poles and even greater numbers of Jews, in order to establish the ethnic purity of Ukraine, against the 'mongrelising' Hapsburgs, and most particularly, the Polish nationalists led by Józef Pilsudski who was always unclear where Poland began and ended.

Into this mix came the Bolsheviks; Vladimir Lenin insisted on paper that Ukraine should become independent while his Red Army, made sure that it remained firmly under the control of the Commissars in Moscow.

So, Ukraine has a modern history in which the neighbouring powers have done all they can to deny the legitimacy of its existence – Hapsburg Austria, Hohenzollern Germany, Romanov Russia, Soviet Russia, and the Polish Republic. All of them at one time or another had a piece of the pie, however indigestible it proved to be. So, it was unsurprising, given the terror famines and brutality of Stalin's rule in the 1930s that large numbers of Ukrainians initially welcomed the Nazi's with flowers and cheers when they entered the country in June 1941. Traditionally, they were no strangers to pogroms and murdering Jews. The rural population, led by their priests, were largely in favour of ethnic massacres carried out by all

and sundry. The peasants thought that the soldiers of the Wehrmacht and the einsatzgruppen would rid them of the Jews, and the Bolsheviks. They even thought that Hitler would allow them to have a Ukrainian state and a Ukrainian government.

They were to be rapidly disabused as the Nazi's who viewed Ukrainians as Untermensch, unworthy of culture, respect, or nationality. Their rude awakening was so rapid that by August – a matter of weeks after the German invasion, Stepan Bandera, the Ukrainian fascist leader, was packed off to Berlin and subsequently to Sachsenhausen concentration camp. Matters didn't end there. Bandera's supporters took over the Ukrainian Insurgent Army in 1943. A year later the Nazis released Bandera and returned him back to Ukraine where he waged a war of attrition against both the Third Reich, and the forces of the Soviet Union which did not end until the early 1950s.

It is this tangle of Ukrainian nationalism with massacres of Poles, and Jews, with fascism, and their very brief alliance with Nazi Germany, that to this day informs Vladimir Putin's lies and paranoia. As he shells modern Ukraine to rubble, he is destined to discover exactly how radically out of touch he is. The Kyiv government, with its Jewish president, its parliament armed to the teeth, supported by a Ukrainian and Russian-speaking public, looking West, prepared to fight to the death for independence and democracy, is revealing Vladimir Putin to be a man trapped by outmoded histories.

Some people on the left, enjoy insinuating that Ukrainian nationalism is right-wing, dark, and reactionary. There is a tendency for these people to share Vladimir Putin's florid imaginings. Informed, by the world of eighty years ago, they want to think of Ukraine as a country fixed in the past, rather than the dynamic product of the last seventy years, and most particularly of the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, marked by the Maidan Revolution of 2013-2014, free general elections, free speech, and

the ongoing war with Russia; the first phase of which started with the annexation of Crimea in 2014.

What is clear from all this is that nations and nationalities are artifacts of given political developments and social movements. Regardless of how they may deck themselves out in seemingly eternal truths, floral headdresses, accompanied by 'ancient' folk dances, and ethnic and cultural verities, they are the creations, for good or ill, of discernible social forces that constantly create and invent 'traditions' and remake nations.

Socialists and the left in general have historically always had an uneasy relationship with nationalism, preferring instead to argue for a class-based *internationalism* in which the division of society by classes takes precedence over ethnic, linguistic, religious, and national identities and divisions. Yet this *internationalism* has always been fraught, intersected by national commitments that, in practice, it has always been impossible to ignore or avoid.

For example, in September 1939 Harry Pollitt the leader of Britain's communists had to resign all his posts in the Communist Party because he supported the war effort of Britain against the Third Reich. Officially the Party continued to support Stalin's alliance with Hitler established by the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Consequently, the Communist Party of Great Britain refused to support the war effort, denouncing it as a 'bosses slaughter' – an imperialist war – being fought in defence of the British Empire. Suddenly, on June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1941, twenty-two months after the German-Soviet partition of Poland, Hitler's forces invaded Russia. In a blinding flash, the Party performed a *Volte-face*, deeming the armed struggle to be "a war that workers must fight". Harry Pollitt was restored to the leadership of the Party as the conflict was no longer a 'bosses war'. Now it was an anti-fascist crusade in defence of Soviet Russia, Peace, and Democracy, rather than an 'imperialist war'. Britain's communists became prominent cheerleaders for Winston Churchill.

So, nationalism and internationalism collide and interpenetrate one another. As I noted earlier Lenin both recognised the impendence of Ukraine and waged war against it in 1918 because the nationalist forces were supported by landowners and merchants “against the interests of the workers and peasants”.

However, Polish workers, and Ukrainian peasants supported Polish and Ukrainian nationalists and fought tooth and nail against the fake ‘internationalism’ of Lenin, and the Bolshevik commissars. It wasn’t clean or clearly defined either, as the armies of the Ukrainian nationalists, Makhno (the anarchist leader), the Greens (peasant social democrats), and the Germans, fought it out with the Bolsheviks, the Polish Republic, and each other.

Although much is made in left-wing circles of internationalism and the need to promote class unity across national boundaries it has never worked out quite like that. The identification of working people with the countries in which they live have generally come to the fore, disappointing socialist internationalists, as working-class people have rallied to the flag and the defence of the nation.

This is exactly what is happening in Ukraine today. Despite deep-seated corruption, and a host of other problems, great masses of ordinary Ukrainians are fighting for their nation, bosses and workers – the poor and well-to-do together – because they want to be completely independent of Russia, and they want freedom of speech and free elections in order to control their own government.

So, this is not the time for old slogans about “the enemy being at home”, and class solidarity opposed to the national interest. The battle is being waged at the level of the nation – we must recognise that, and support Volodymyr Zelenskyy’s Ukraine against Vladimir Putin’s Russia by all the means at the disposal of our own movements, and of our own bourgeois governments.