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Neo-Nationalism and How States Use History

How can Western states counter the rise of 'neo-nationalism' in places such as India, China and Japan? John Hemmings believes they should encourage historical debate and introspection, primarily by referring to their own complex histories.

By John Hemmings for ISN

Across the globe, ethnic nationalism is becoming a powerful political force – from resurgent [Hindu](#) and Chinese nationalism, to the rise of anti-immigration political parties in the West. Even leaders such as [Shinzo Abe](#) and [Recep Erdogan](#) are getting in on the act, trying to recast history for their own purposes. Although Samuel Huntington's 1996 book "The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order" got many things wrong, it was correct in anticipating a shift in global patterns of political identification in the wake of the Cold War. For instance, Huntington accurately pointed out that as societies gradually ceased to identify with that era's binary logic, they would fall back on older political motivations, aligning themselves around religion and culture. Nevertheless, Huntington's proposition that global dynamics would take on a 'civilizational' hue has failed to materialize. Instead, it is state-based forms of ethnic nationalism that appear to be on the rise. Western states can respond to this development by using examples from their own historical experience – such as Atlantic slavery, imperialism and the Holocaust – to encourage debate and introspection about the teaching of national history in rising powers.

Nationalism and history

In recent years, nationalist tropes that were common before the two World Wars have resurfaced and now seem to be fueling many states, as they attempt to take their place in a post-Imperial, post-Cold War, and, some would even argue, post-Western, global order. Such is the similarity with the period in question that the comparison itself is becoming a recognizable trope. In [remarks](#) to a journalist at Davos, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe compared the current competition between Japan and China to that between the UK and Germany a century before. Renowned Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan has made a similar [comparison](#) between the US and China, with the US playing the role of Imperial Britain, jealously guarding its privileges, and China as the newly-risen power, intent on taking its rightful 'place in the sun.' India also seems to be under the spell of nationalism linked to a sense of growing power. However, not everyone is using nationalist narratives for the same ends: in Japan and Russia, these narratives are being used to reinvigorate flagging national purpose. In India, they are a hubristic reaction to rapid economic growth, a way of recasting India's role in the modern world.

Not only are these narratives dangerous, they are at the forefront of tensions and territorial disputes

involving major powers. In its attempt to justify Russia's annexation of Crimea, for example, the Kremlin argued that the region had historically been a part of Russia. Another narrative used to confound Western media was the suggestion that the move was merely a reaction to a decade of NATO expansion at Russia's expense. This [explanation](#) – a throwback to 19th century power politics – neatly bypassed the fact that it was the expansion of the EU – a less hostile-sounding adversary – that had actually precipitated the crisis. Another historical narrative that is at the forefront of great power tensions is that of China's [historically-freighted](#) claims to the South China Sea – a resource-rich and hugely strategic waterway that is vital to the region's major trading nations. China's claims that the contested territory – within the so-called '9-dashed line' – have a historical basis are difficult to substantiate given that many of the islets and rocks are uninhabitable. This use of history to justify territorial claims often contradicts a state's espoused principles. Argentina's [claims](#) to the Falkland Islands are a case in point, given that democratic Buenos Aires seems to value imperial Spanish claims and its own attempts at colonization over the right of islanders to self-determination.

The Internet and the classroom

Oddly, the spread of nationalist narratives has not just been confined to newly rising (state) capitalist powers like China and India. Technology is also playing a role. Many observers predicted that the Internet would ultimately weaken the nation-state, replacing it instead with a flat global community of like-minded consumers. While global pop culture has developed into a sort of common language involving cat memes, YouTube videos, and scandalous tweets, it has not weakened nationalistic communities or the states they represent. Instead, as Norwegian social anthropologist T.H. Eriksen has [shown](#), nationalism has thrived in cyberspace and allowed many communities to socialize more fervently and more narrowly. Indeed, such has been the welcoming effect of the Internet that even imagined states like [Kurdistan](#) and [Tamil](#) Sri Lanka have burgeoning online communities.

Neo-nationalism, however, is hardly dependent on the web. It has also developed in the classroom as Marc Ferro, Margaret MacMillan, and others have pointed out. In the wake of the Cold War, long-forgotten narratives of injustice or glory have been dug up and fashioned anew. Often, changes in classroom curricula have been state-led. In China, this was the case in the [Education Reforms](#) of the 1990s, which sought to replace the ideological legitimacy of the Communist Party with a nationalist agenda, explaining that only the CPC had protected and strengthened China from outside powers such as the US and Japan. This same process has been taking place in Putin's Russia, where it seems the words of Russia's first Head of Secret Policy, Count Benckendorff, still rule: "Russia's past is admirable, its present is more than magnificent, and...its future – it is beyond anything the boldest mind can imagine." The 2009 announcement by then-President Dmitry Medvedev of a [commission](#) based on "analyzing and suppressing all attempts to falsify history to the detriment of Russian interests" and the 2006 state-sponsored text book "A Modern History of Russia: 1945-2006" reveal exactly how strongly those words resonate today. Even liberal democracies like [Japan and South Korea](#) are not immune from state interference in the classroom, with the Abe administration and the National Institute for Korean History promoting 'correct' interpretations of national history.

Much of this would seem to come down to the political exploitation of human nature. As individuals – whether members of a tribe or a nation-state – we tend to remember the crimes of others, while forgetting or downplaying our own. We find it hard to accept that our group is the villain of a historical study. Many nations have engaged in wars with their neighbors; some to dominate them, some to avoid being dominated. As norms about empire and war have changed, it is far easier to remember the efforts of our ancestors to resist domination than to impose it. Chinese nationalists, for instance, speak fluently of the '100 Years of Humiliation' while ignoring countless Chinese invasions and occupations of Korea and Vietnam. Japanese nationalists speak of American 'war crimes,' such as the nuclear bombings and the Tokyo Trials, while dismissing Japanese 'war crimes' in China. Turkish

nationalists criticize the excesses of Western imperialism in the same breath as they [extol](#) the virtues, benevolence, and orderliness of the Ottoman Empire. Russian nationalists warn of NATO expansionism without reflecting on the fact that they belong to the largest territorial state in the world – much of which was conquered by empire and force.

But what can the liberal democratic world do to combat the teaching of narratives such as these? Perhaps the best policy response in the West to the rise of neo-nationalism is to act as a mirror for rising powers by continuing to encourage debate and national introspection about the past. In approaching Turkish historians about the Armenian Genocide, for instance, one might point to the examples of how the US has dealt with slavery, the UK with imperialism, and Germany with the Holocaust. Of course, Western liberal democracies do not teach history perfectly. Few British schools teach the devastating Indian famine of 1877 and few American ones teach American colonialism in the Philippines. French and Spanish textbooks still refer to their empires in a favorable light. Nevertheless, Western countries can encourage a healthy aversion to using law to proscribe what can be taught in history classrooms. After all, the teaching of nationalist narratives ultimately affects regional neighbors and other states. It has far-reaching international significance.

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