

NATIONAL IDENTITY

ANTHONY D. SMITH



PENGUIN BOOKS

PENGUIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England

Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia

Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2

Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182-190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published 1991

5 7 9 10 8 6 4

Copyright © Anthony D. Smith, 1991

AH rights reserved

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives pic

Set in 10/12 pt Monophoto Bembo

Except in the United States of America, this book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser

CHAPTER 2

The Ethnic Basis of National Identity

The origins of what we have termed national identity are as complex as its nature. I am not saying simply that the origins of each nation are in many ways unique and that there is great variation in the starting-points, trajectories, rates and timings of modern nations. The very question 'what are the origins of nations?' needs to be broken down into several further questions, such as: who is the nation? Why and how is the nation? When and where is the nation?

In fact we can conveniently use these questions to seek a general explanation of the origins and development of modern nations in three parts.

1. *Who* is the nation? What are the ethnic bases and models of modern nations? Why did these particular nations emerge?
2. *Why* and *how* does the nation emerge? That is, what are the general causes and mechanisms that set in motion the processes of nation-formation from varying ethnic ties and memories?
3. *When* and *where* did the nation arise? What were the specific ideas, groups and locations that predisposed the formation of individual nations at particular times and places?

Through answers to these questions, albeit of a general and necessarily incomplete nature, we may hope to shed some light on the vexed problem of national origins and development.

ETHNIE AND ETHNO-GENESIS

If myths like that of Oedipus can be seen as widely believed tales told in dramatic form, referring to past events but serving present purposes and/or future goals, then the nation stands at the centre of one of the most popular and ubiquitous myths of modern times: that of nationalism. Central to this myth is the idea that nations exist from time immemorial, and that nationalists must reawaken

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

them from a long slumber to take their place in a world of nations. The hold of the nation lies, as we shall see, partly in the promise of the nationalist salvation drama itself. But this power is often immeasurably increased by the living presence of traditions embodying memories, symbols, myths and values from much earlier epochs in the life of a population, community or area. So it is these pre-modern ethnic identities and traditions that we must first explore.'

The concept of 'ethnicity' has received a good deal of attention in recent years. For some it has a 'primordial' quality. It exists in nature, outside time. It is one of the 'givens' of human existence (this is a view that has received some backing recently from sociobiology, where it is regarded as an extension of processes of genetic selection and inclusive fitness). At the other extreme ethnicity is seen as 'situational'. Belonging to an ethnic group is a matter of attitudes, perceptions and sentiments that are necessarily fleeting and mutable, varying with the particular situation of the subject. As the individual's situation changes, so will the group identification; or at least, the many identities and discourses to which the individual adheres will vary in importance for that individual in successive periods and different situations. This makes it possible for ethnicity to be used 'instrumental' to further individual or collective interests, particularly of competing élites who need to mobilize large followings to support their goals in the struggle for power. In this struggle ethnicity becomes a useful tool.²

Between these two extremes lie those approaches that stress the historical and symbolic—cultural attributes of ethnic identity. This is the perspective adopted here. An ethnic group is a type of cultural collectivity, one that emphasizes the role of myths of descent and historical memories, and that is recognized by one or more cultural differences like religion, customs, language or institutions. Such collectivities are doubly 'historical' in the sense that not only are historical memories essential to their continuance but each such ethnic group is the product of specific historical forces and is therefore subject to historical change and dissolution.

At this point it is useful to distinguish between *ethnic categories* and *ethnic communities*. The former are human populations whom at least some outsiders consider to constitute a separate cultural and

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

historical grouping. But the populations so designated may at the time have little self-awareness, only a dim consciousness that they form a separate collectivity. Thus Turks in Anatolia before 1900 were largely unaware of a separate 'Turkish' identity — separate, that is, from the dominant Ottoman or the overarching Islamic identities - and besides, local identities of kin, village or region were often more important. The same can be said for the Slovak inhabitants of the Carpathian valleys before 1850, despite their common dialects and religion. In both cases a myth of common origins, shared historical memories, a sense of solidarity or an association with a designated homeland were largely absent.³

An ethnic community, on the other hand, can be distinguished by just these attributes, even if they are firmly held and clearly enunciated by only small segments of the designated population and even if some of these attributes are more intense and salient than others at a given period. We may list six main attributes of ethnic community (or *ethnie*, to use the French term):

1. a collective proper name
2. a myth of common ancestry
3. shared historical memories
4. one or more differentiating elements of common culture
5. an association with a specific 'homeland'
6. a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population.⁴

The more a given population possesses or shares these attributes (and the more of these attributes that it possesses or shares), the more closely does it approximate the ideal type of an ethnic community or *ethnie*. Where this syndrome of elements is present we are clearly in the presence of a community of historical culture with a sense of common identity. Such a community must be sharply differentiated from a *race* in the sense of a social group that is held to possess unique hereditary biological traits that allegedly determine the mental attributes of the group.⁵ In practice, *ethnies* are often confused with races, not only in this social sense but even in the physical, anthropological sense of subspecies of *Homo sapiens* such as Mongoloid, Negroid, Australoid, Caucasian and the like. Such a confusion is the product of the widespread influence of racist ideologies and discourses, with their purportedly 'scientific' notions of

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

racial struggle, social organisms and eugenics. In the hundred years from 1850 to 1945 such notions were applied to the purely cultural and historical differences of *ethnies*, both inside Europe and in colonial Africa and Asia, with results that are all too well known.⁶

But a glance at the above list of ethnic attributes reveals not only their largely cultural and historical content, but also (with the exception of number 4) their strongly subjective components. Most important, it is myths of common ancestry, not any fact of ancestry (which is usually difficult to ascertain), that are crucial. It is fictive descent and putative ancestry that matters for the sense of ethnic identification. Indeed, Horowitz has likened ethnic groups to 'super-families' of fictive descent because members view their *ethnie* as composed of interrelated families, forming one huge 'family' linked by mythical ties of filiation and ancestry. Such a linkage between family and nation reappears in nationalist mythologies and testifies to the continuing centrality of this attribute of ethnicity. Without such descent myths it is difficult to see *ethnies* surviving for any length of time. The sense of 'whence we came' is central to the definition of 'who we are'.⁷

What I have termed 'shared historical memories' may also take the form of myth. Indeed, for many pre-modern peoples the line between myth and history was often blurred or even non-existent. Even today that line is not as clear-cut as some would like it to be; the controversy over the historicity of Homer and the Trojan War is a case in point. So are the tales of Stauffacher and the Oath of the Riiitli, and of William Tell and Gessler, which have entered the 'historical consciousness' of every Swiss. It is not only that widely believed dramatic tales of the past serving present or future purposes grow up readily around kernels of well-attested events: in addition, myths of political foundation, liberation, migration and election take some historical event as their starting-point for subsequent interpretation and elaboration. The conversion of Vladimir of Kiev to Christianity (in AD 988) or the founding of Rome (in 753 BC?) may be treated as historical events, but their significance resides in the legends of foundation with which they are associated. It is these associations that confer on them a social purpose as sources of political cohesion.⁸

Similarly, attachments to specific stretches of territory, and to

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

certain places within them, have a mythical and subjective quality. It is the attachments and associations, rather than residence in or possession of the land that matters for ethnic identification. It is where we belong. It is also often a sacred land, the land of our forefathers, our lawgivers, our kings and sages, poets and priests, which makes this our homeland. We belong to it, as much as it belongs to us. Besides, the sacred centres of the homeland draw the members of the *ethnie* to it, or inspire them from afar, even when their exile is prolonged. Hence, an *ethnie* may persist, even when long divorced from its homeland, through an intense nostalgia and spiritual attachment. This is very much the fate of diaspora communities like the Jews and Armenians.⁹

It is only when we come to the varying elements of a common culture that differentiate one population from another that more objective attributes enter the picture. Language, religion, customs and pigmentation are often taken to describe objective 'cultural markers' or differentiae that persist independently of the will of individuals, and even appear to constrain them. Yet it is the significance with which colour or religion is endowed by large numbers of individuals (and organizations) that matters more for ethnic identification even than their durability and independent existence, as the growing political significance of language and colour over the last two or three centuries demonstrates. It is only when such markers are endowed with diacritical significance that these cultural attributes come to be seen as objective, at least as far as ethnic boundaries are concerned.¹⁰

All of this suggests that the *ethnie* is anything but primordial, despite the claims and rhetoric of nationalist ideologies and discourses. As the subjective significance of each of these attributes waxes and wanes for the members of a community, so does the cohesion and self-awareness of that community's membership. As these several attributes come together and become more intense and salient, so does the sense of ethnic identity and, with it, of ethnic community. Conversely, as each of these attributes is attenuated and declines, so does the overall sense of ethnicity, and hence the *ethnie* itself would dissolve or be absorbed."

How does an *ethnie* form? We can give only some very tentative answers. Where such processes are visible in the historical record

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

they suggest certain patterns of ethnic formation. Empirically, these are of two main kinds: coalescence and division. On the one hand, we can trace ethnic formation through the coming together of separate units, and this in turn can be broken down into processes of amalgamation of separate units, such as city-states, and of absorption of one unit by another, as in the assimilation of regions or 'tribes'. On the other hand, *ethnies* may be subdivided through fission, as with sectarian schism, or through what Horowitz calls 'proliferation', when a part of the ethnic community leaves it to form a new group, as in the case of Bangladesh.¹²

The frequency of such processes suggests the shifting nature of ethnic boundaries and the malleability, within certain limits, of their members' cultural identity. It also reveals the 'concentric' nature of ethnic, and more generally collective cultural, affiliations. That is to say, individuals may feel loyalty not only to their families, villages, castes, cities, regions and religious communities, as well as to class and gender identifications; they may also feel allegiances to different ethnic communities at different levels of identification simultaneously. An example of this in the ancient world would be the sentiment of ancient Greeks as members of *a polis*, or the '*sub-ethnie*' (Dorians, Ionians, Aeolians, Boeotians, etc. — really ethnic identities in their own right) and of the Hellenic cultural *ethnie*.¹¹ In the modern world the various clans, languages and ancestral '*sub-ethnies*' of the Malays or Yoruba furnish examples of the concentric circles of ethnic identity and allegiance. Of course, at any one time one or other of these concentric circles of allegiance may be to the fore for political, economic or demographic reasons; but this serves only to reinforce 'instrumentalist' arguments against the primordial nature of ethnic communities and to highlight the importance of boundary changes.^{13*}

At the same time this is the only part of the story. We must not overstate the mutability of ethnic boundaries or the fluidity of their cultural contents. To do so would deprive us of the means of accounting for the recurrence of ethnic ties and communities (let alone their original crystallizations) and their demonstrable durability over and above boundary and cultural changes in particular instances. It would dissolve the possibility of constituting identities that were more than successive fleeting moments in the perceptions,

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

attitudes and sentiments of identifying individuals. Worse, we would be unable to account for any collectivity, any group formation, from the myriad moments of individual sentiment, perception and memory. But the fact remains that, as with other social phenomena of collective identity like class, gender and territory, ethnicity exhibits both constancy and flux side by side, depending on the purposes and distance of the observer from the collective phenomenon in question. The durability of some *ethnies*, despite changes in their demographic composition and some of their cultural distinctiveness and social boundaries, must be set against the more instrumentalist or phenomenological accounts that fail to consider the importance of antecedent cultural affinities that set periodic limits to the redefinitions of ethnic identities.¹⁵

Any realistic account of ethnic identity and ethno-genesis must, therefore, eschew the polar extremes of the primordialist-instrumentalist debate and its concerns with, on the one hand, fixity of cultural patterns in nature and, on the other, 'strategic' manipulability of ethnic sentiments and continuous cultural malleability. Instead we need to reconstitute the notion of collective cultural identity itself in historical, subjective and symbolic terms. Collective cultural identity refers not to a uniformity of elements over generations but to a sense of continuity on the part of successive generations of a given cultural unit of population, to shared memories of earlier events and periods in the history of that unit and to notions entertained by each generation about the collective destiny of that unit and its culture. Changes in cultural identities therefore refer to the degree to which traumatic developments disturb the basic patterning of the cultural elements that make up the sense of continuity, shared memories and notions of collective destiny of given cultural units of population. The question is how far such developments disrupt or alter the fundamental patterns of myth, symbol, memory and value that bind successive generations of members together while demarcating them from 'outsiders' and around which congeal the lines of cultural differentiation that serve as 'cultural markers' of boundary regulation.¹⁶

We may illustrate these points by considering briefly some cases of disruptive culture change that nevertheless renewed, rather than destroyed, the sense of common ethnicity and its identity as we

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

defined it above. Typical events that generate profound changes in the cultural contents of such identity include war and conquest, exile and enslavement, the influx of immigrants and religious conversion. The Persians, at least from the Sassanid period, were subjected to conquest by Arabs, Turks and others, were gradually converted to Islam and experienced more than one influx of immigrants. Yet, despite all the changes of collective cultural identity consequent on these processes, a Persian sense of distinctive ethnic identity persisted, and at times received a new lease of life, notably in the renaissance of the New Persian linguistic and literary revival of the tenth and eleventh centuries.¹⁷ The Armenians too experienced traumatic events that had profound consequences for the cultural contents of their ethnic identity. They were the first constituted kingdom and people to convert to Christianity, were fought over by Sassanids and Byzantines, were defeated, excluded and partly exiled, received considerable influxes of immigrants and were finally subjected to mass deportation and genocide in part of their homeland. Yet, despite changes in location, economic activities, social organization and parts of their culture over the centuries, a sense of common Armenian identity has remained throughout their diaspora, and the forms of their antecedent culture, notably in the sphere of religion and language/script, have ensured a subjective attachment to their cultural identity and separation from their surroundings.¹⁸

These examples suggest the further observation that a combination of often adverse external factors and a rich inner or 'ethno'-history may help to crystallize and perpetuate ethnic identities. If the origins of cultural differentiation itself are lost in the last states of prehistory, we may at least attempt to isolate those recurrent forces that appear to coalesce the sense of ethnic identification and ensure its persistence over long periods.

Of these, state-making, military mobilization and organized religion appear to be crucial. Long ago Weber commented on the importance of political action for ethnic formation and persistence, arguing 'It is primarily the political community, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires the belief in common ethnicity.'¹⁹ It is possible to exaggerate the role of state-making in ethnic crystallization (one thinks of the failure of Burgundy, and the qualified success of Prussia); yet, clearly, the foundation of a unified polity, as

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

in ancient Egypt, Israel, Rome, Sassanid Persia, Japan and China, not to mention France, Spain and England, played a major role in the development of a sense of ethnic community and, ultimately, of cohesive nations.²⁰

Warfare is, if anything, even more important. Not only does 'war make the state (and the state makes war)', as Tilly declared; it fashions ethnic communities not only from the contestants but even from third parties across whose territories such wars are often conducted. The case of ancient Israel is only the most striking, caught as it was between the great powers of the ancient Near East, Assyria and Egypt. Armenians, Swiss, Czechs, Kurds and Sikhs afford other instances of strategically located communities whose sense of common ethnicity, even when it did not originate from these events, was crystallized time and again by the impact of protracted warfare between foreign powers in which they were caught up. As for the contestants themselves, we need note only the frequency with which *ethnies* are antagonistically paired: French and English, Greeks and Persians, Byzantines and Sassanids, Egyptians and Assyrians, Khmers and Vietnamese, Arabs and Israelis . . . While it would be an exaggeration to deduce the sense of common ethnicity from the fear of the 'outsider' and paired antagonisms, there is no denying the central role of warfare, not, as Simmel suggested, as a crucible of ethnic cohesion (war may fracture that cohesion, as it did in the Great War in some European countries) but as a mobilizer of ethnic sentiments and national consciousness, a centralizing force in the life of the community and a provider of myths and memories for future generations. It is perhaps this last function that enters most deeply into the constitution of ethnic identity.²¹

As for organized religion, its role is both spiritual and social. The myth of common ethnic origins is often intertwined with creation myths - such as that of Deucalion and Pyrrha in Hesiod's *Theogony* and that of Noah in the Bible — or at least presupposes them. Very often the heroes of the ethnic community are also those of religious lore and tradition, albeit treated as 'servants of God' rather than ethnic founders or leaders, as was the case with Moses, Zoroaster, Muhammad, St Gregory, St Patrick and many others. The liturgy and rites of the Church or community of the faithful supply the texts, prayers, chants, feasts, ceremonies and customs, sometimes

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

even the scripts, of distinctive ethnic communities, setting them apart from neighbours. And over all this heritage of cultural difference stand the 'guardians of the tradition', the priests, scribes and bards who record, preserve and transmit the fund of ethnic myths, memories, symbols and values encased in sacred traditions commanding the veneration of the populace through temple and church, monastery and school, into every town and village within the realm of the culture—community.²²

State-making, protracted warfare and organized religion, though they figure prominently in the historical record of ethnic crystallization and persistence, may also operate to break up, or cut across, ethnic identifications. This happened when empires like those of Assyria and Achaemenid Persia created the conditions for a sustained intermingling of ethnic categories and communities in an Aramaic-speaking and syncretistic civilization, and when prolonged wars and rivalries put an end to ethnic states and communities like the Carthaginians and Normans (in Normandy). Ethnic identity also developed when religious movements burst across ethnic frontiers and founded great supra-territorial organizations, Buddhist, Catholic or Orthodox, or conversely, through schism, divided the members of ethnic communities such as the Swiss or Irish. Yet, for all these cases, we may find many more that confirm the close links between ethnic crystallization and the antecedent role of states, warfare and organized religion.

ETHNIC CHANGE, DISSOLUTION AND SURVIVAL

The importance of these and other factors can also be seen when we turn to the closely related questions of how *ethnies* change in character, dissolve or survive.

Let me start with ethnic change and with a well-known example, that of the Greeks. Modern Greeks are taught that they are the heirs and descendants not merely of Greek Byzantium, but also of the ancient Greeks and their classical Hellenic civilization. In both cases (and there have in fact been two, rival, myths of descent at work since the early nineteenth century), 'descent' was seen in largely demographic terms; or rather, cultural affinity with Byzantium and ancient Greece (notably Athens) was predicated on demographic

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

continuity. Unfortunately for the classicist Hellenic myth, the demographic evidence is at best tenuous, at worst non-existent. As Jacob Fallmerayer demonstrated long ago, Greek demographic continuity was brutally interrupted in the late sixth to eighth centuries AD by massive influxes of Avar, Slav and, later, Albanian immigrants. The evidence from the period suggests that the immigrants succeeded in occupying most of central Greece and the Péloponnèse (Morea), pushing the original Greek-speaking and Hellenic inhabitants (themselves already intermingled with earlier Macedonian, Roman and other migrants) to the coastal areas and the islands of the Aegean. This shifted the centre of a truly Hellenic civilization to the east, to the Aegean, the Ionian littoral of Asia Minor and to Constantinople. It also meant that modern Greeks could hardly count as being of ancient Greek descent, even if this could never be ruled out.²³

There is a sense in which the preceding discussion is both relevant to a sense of Greek identity, now and earlier, and irrelevant. It is relevant in so far as Greeks, now and earlier, *felt* that their 'Greekness' was a product of their descent from the ancient Greeks (or Byzantine Greeks), and that such filiation made them *feel* themselves to be members of one great 'super-family' of Greeks, shared sentiments of continuity and membership being essential to a lively sense of identity. It is irrelevant in that *ethnies* are constituted, not by lines of physical descent, but by the sense of continuity, shared memory and collective destiny, i.e. by lines of cultural affinity embodied in distinctive myths, memories, symbols and values retained by a given cultural unit of population. In that sense much has been retained, and revived, from the extant heritage of ancient Greece. For, even at the time of Slavic migrations, in Ionia and especially in Constantinople, there was a growing emphasis on the Greek language, on Greek philosophy and literature, and on classical models of thought and scholarship. Such a 'Greek revival' was to surface again in the tenth and fourteenth centuries, as well as subsequently, providing a powerful impetus to the sense of cultural affinity with ancient Greece and its classical heritage.²⁴

This is not to deny for one moment either the enormous cultural changes undergone by the Greeks despite a surviving sense of common ethnicity or the cultural influence of surrounding peoples

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

and civilizations over two thousand years. At the same time in terms of script and language, certain values, a particular environment and its nostalgia, continuous social interactions, and a sense of religious and cultural difference, even exclusion, a sense of Greek identity and common sentiments of ethnicity can be said to have persisted beneath the many social and political changes of the last two thousand years.³⁵

I shall return in a moment to the role of ethnic exclusion in ensuring ethnic persistence. For the present I want to look at the other side of the coin: ethnic dissolution. We say how *ethnies* can be dissolved through fission or proliferation. But in a sense the ethnic community remains in *some* form in such cases — smaller, perhaps, or reduplicated, but none the less still 'in the field'. Can we then speak of ethnic extinction — the disappearance of an *ethnie*, not just in the form it possessed until that point but in any form?

I think we can if we hold to the historical, cultural and symbolic criteria of ethnic identity I have been employing. There are two main kinds of ethnic extinction in the full sense: genocide and ethnocide, which is sometimes - at times misleadingly — called 'cultural genocide'. In one sense genocide is a rare and probably modern phenomenon. It includes those cases where we know that mass death of a cultural group was premeditated and the basis of that targeting was exclusively the existence and membership of that cultural group. Nazi policies towards the Jews and a part of the Gypsies were of this kind; so perhaps were European actions towards the Tasmanian Aborigines, and the Turkish actions in Turkish Armenia.²⁶ Other policies and actions were genocidal in their consequences rather than their intentions; such ethnic destruction occurred when the American Whites encountered the American Indians, and when the Spanish conquistadors encountered the Aztec and other Indian populations of Mexico (though here disease played a larger part). In these cases ethnic extinction was not deliberately aimed at, yet no attempt was made to mitigate those policies whose side-effect was genocidal. These genocidal actions need to be distinguished again from large-scale massacres like those by the Mongols in the thirteenth century or in modern times by the Soviets and Nazis of selected populations (for example, the Katyn massacre or the reprisals of Lidice and Oradour), which are designed to break a

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

spirit of resistance by terrifying the civilian population or rendering it leaderless.²⁷

The interesting point about genocide and genocidal actions, at least in modern times, is how rarely they achieve their stated goals or unintended consequences. They rarely extinguish *ethnies* or ethnic categories. In fact they may do the opposite, reviving ethnic cohesion and consciousness, or helping to crystallize it, as they did with the Aborigines' movement or Romany Gypsy nationalism. Perhaps there are deep-rooted facets of modernity that both encourage and preclude successful genocide (where success is measured by total extinction), and this may have much to do with the conditions and diffusion of nationalism. It may have been easier to destroy an *ethnie* in pre-modern times. At any rate, when at last the Romans decided to destroy Carthage once and for all they erased the city and massacred three quarters of its population, selling off the rest into slavery. Though vestiges of Punic culture persisted till the time of St Augustine, the Carthaginians as a western Phoenician *ethnie* and ethnic state were extinguished.²⁸

The same fate awaited several peoples of the ancient world, including the Hittites, Philistines, Phoenicians (of Lebanon) and Elamites. In each case loss of political power and independence presaged ethnic extinction, but usually through cultural absorption and ethnic intermingling. These are cases of ethnocide rather than genocide, despite the drama of the political events that precipitated them. When he destroyed Susa and eliminated the Elamite state from politics in 636 BC Asshur-bani-pal, king of Assyria, did not set about exterminating every Elamite (the Assyrians in fact usually deported the élites of the peoples they conquered). Yet so massive was the act of destruction that Elam never recovered, new peoples settled within its borders, and, though its language persisted into the Achaemenid Persian period, no Elamite community or state re-emerged to sustain the myths, memories, values and symbols of Elamite religion and culture.²⁹

The fate of Assyria itself was even more swift and dramatic. Nineveh fell in 612 BC to a combined onslaught of Cyaxares' Medes and Nabopolassar's Babylonians, and her last prince, Asshur-uballit, was defeated at Harran three years later. Thereafter, we hear little of 'Assyria'. Its gods were received by Cyrus back into the pantheon at

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Babylon, but there is no further mention of state or people, and when Xenophon's army marched through the province of Assyria he found all her cities in ruins with the exception of Erbil. Was this a case of genocidal actions or even genocide?³⁰

It is unlikely. The goal of Assyria's enemies was destruction of her hated rule. That meant destroying her major cities so that there was no chance of a revival of her political fortunes. True, Nabopolassar talked about 'turning the hostile land into heaps and ruins', but this did not mean exterminating every Assyrian, even if this had been feasible. Perhaps the Assyrian élites were evicted; but, in any case, in terms of religion and culture they were less and less differentiated from the Babylonian civilization they sought to emulate. Besides, the latter days of the vast Assyrian empire witnessed severe social divisions both in the army and the countryside, and considerable ethnic intermingling in the empire's heartlands, and use of an Aramaic lingua franca for commercial and administrative purposes following a large influx of Arameans. Hence the ethnic distinctiveness of the Assyrians was severely compromised well before the downfall of the empire, and cultural syncretism and ethnic intermingling helped to ensure the attenuation and absorption of the Assyrian ethnic community and its culture by the surrounding peoples and cultures.³¹

As with the Phoenicians, Elamites and others, the relatively swift disappearance of an Assyrian culture and community must be seen as an example of ethnocide. In the ancient world at least, destruction of a community's or state's gods and temples was seen as the means of destroying the community itself; that seems to have been the aim of the Persians when they destroyed the Babylonian temples in 482 BC, and perhaps of the Romans when they destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70.¹² The aim in all such cases was the eradication of the group's culture, rather than the group itself, and it differs in its intended effects from the much slower, unplanned processes of cultural absorption which have undermined many small ethnic categories and communities.

History is replete with instances of unintended cultural absorption and ethnic dissolution. Engels, surveying the ethnic map of Europe in 1859, referred to these dying ethnic cultures and communities as so many 'ethnographic monuments', which he hoped would soon

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

disappear to make way for the large capitalist nation-state. He has, in fact, been largely disappointed. At the same time the diminution of many former *ethnies*, and the attenuation of their sentiments, as in the cases of the Occitanic, Sorbs, Wends and many others, demonstrates these widespread processes of gradual absorption through incorporation and fragmentation.

But, equally, they suggest the other side of the coin - the durability of ethnic ties, the longevity of their cultures and the persistence of collective identities and even communities over several centuries. If ethnic boundaries and cultural contents undergo periodic change, how shall we account for ethnic survival potential, sometimes across millennia?

Again, it is useful to consider a well-known example. Jews trace their ancestry to Abraham, their liberation to the Exodus, their founding charter to Mount Sinai, and their golden age to (variously) the Davidic and Solomonic kingdom or the era of the sages in the late Second Temple period and after. These are all myths in the sense outlined above, and they retain their religious potency today. But their potency is not only religious. They remain, even for secular Jews, charters of their ethnic identity. Here, too, as with the Greeks and Armenians, the Irish and Ethiopians, there is a *felt* filiation, as well as a cultural affinity, with a remote past in which a community was formed, a community that despite all the changes it has undergone, is still in some sense recognized as the 'same' community. To what is this sense of continuity, of shared memory and of collective destiny owed?

The simple answer, that peoples survive in some form because they are rooted in their homelands and enjoy a large measure of independent statehood, will clearly not do in the Jewish case. The Jews have been exiled from both for nearly two thousand years. Not that either is unimportant to the Jewish sense of identity; but both figure more as symbol than as living memory. Certainly this is true of statehood, the Hasmonean being the last truly independent Jewish state — unless we include the kingdom of the Khazars. The land of Israel was at times more than a symbol of messianic restoration; groups of Jews made their way there from time to time and founded synagogues. Yet here too the yearning for Zion was often more spiritual than actual, a vision of perfection in a restored land and city.³³

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Another common view, which this time is directed specifically to diaspora peoples, is that their survival depends on their ability to find a distinct economic niche in host societies, usually as middlemen or artisans, between military and agrarian elites and the peasant masses. That Jews, Greeks and Armenians, like Lebanese and Chinese traders, found such niches in medieval European and early modern societies is not in question and neither is the role of such occupational niches in reinforcing residential patterns and cultural segregation where these already exist. What is at issue is the method by which the category 'occupational niche' is separated from the nexus of conditions that make up typical diasporas and assigned a prior casual weight in ensuring ethnic survival and status. Rather, as Armstrong has argued, archetypal diasporas that stem from religious and cultural differences must be seen as a totality of interrelated aspects and dimensions in which occupational segregation and middleman status serves to reinforce and articulate, but not necessarily to ensure, ethnic difference and survival. Certainly, in Moorish Spain Jews held every kind of occupational position, but their ethnic survival was bound up with more fundamental religious and cultural distinctions from their neighbours.³⁴

A more basic consideration stems from the earlier emphasis on organized religion. In the case of diaspora communities, as of sects-turned-*ethnies* like the Druse, Samaritans, Maronites and Sikhs, religious rituals, liturgy and hierarchies have played a powerful conserving role, ensuring a high degree of formal continuity between generations and from community to community. Add to this the separating power of sacred languages and scripts, texts and calendars, and the apparent mystery of millennial diaspora survival appears soluble.

But there are difficulties here, too. For one thing this says nothing about the shape, size or location of the surviving community. The Samaritans, for example, were till quite recently heading for ethnic extinction, because after centuries of decimation endogamy could no longer replenish their numbers. In the case of the Beta Israel (or Falasha) of northern Ethiopia the attrition of their numbers in war, and the isolation of their craftsman community, might have spelt absorption had it not been for a wider Jewish ethnic self-renewal and the rise of Zionism and the state of Israel.³⁵

This thesis also says nothing about the vitality of the community.

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

Religion may become petrified and antiquarian, as did the Assyrian state religion; in that case, as we saw, it contributed nothing to the chances of ethnic survival. The same inner decay can be found in later Roman religion, as in the Pharaonic religion of Ptolemaic Egypt. In neither case could we hang an argument for ethnic survival, let alone ethnic vitality, on any movement within the traditional religion.³⁶

Religion, then, may preserve a sense of common ethnicity as if in a chrysalis, at least for a period, as was the case with Greek Orthodoxy for the self-governing Greek Orthodox *millet* under Ottoman rule. But unless new movements and currents stir the spirit within the religious framework, its very conservatism may deaden the *ethnie* or it may become a shell for an attenuated identity.³⁷ Clearly, organized religion by itself is not enough. What then are the characteristic mechanisms of ethnic self-renewal? I would single out four such mechanisms:

1. *Religious reform* Having accepted the importance of organized religion for ethnic survival potential, we need to consider the role of movements of religious reform in stimulating ethnic self-renewal. In the case of the Jews there are a number of instances. These range from the Prophetic and Deuteronomic movements in eighth-century and seventh-century BC Judah to Ezra's reforms in the mid-fifth century BC, the rise of Pharisaism and Mishnaic rabbinism in the second century AD, right up to the Chassidic and neo-Orthodox movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In each case religious reform was intertwined with ethnic self-renewal; the community's mode of renewal was religiously inspired.³⁸

Conversely, failure of religious reform or petrified conservatism may turn the modes of ethnic self-renewal elsewhere. This occurred among the Greeks at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Greek Orthodox hierarchy in Constantinople became increasingly remote from middle-class and popular aspirations, including those of the lower clergy who supplied the revolt in the Morea with some of its leaders. Here Greek aspirations found increasingly secular ideological discourses for their goals.³⁹

2. *Cultural borrowing* In the wider field of culture ethnic survival finds sustenance not from isolation but from selective borrowing

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

and controlled culture contact. Here again we can find an example from Jewish history. The stimulus of Hellenistic culture, from the time of Alexander on, provoked a lively encounter between Greek and Jewish thought that, though it had fierce political repercussions, strengthened through enrichment the whole field of Jewish culture and identity.⁴⁰ There are many other examples of the ways in which external cultural stimuli and contacts have renewed the sense of ethnic identity through selective cultural appropriation; nineteenth-century Japan, Russia and Egypt afford well-known cases.

3. *Popular participation* Socially, too, we can discern modes of ethnic self-renewal in the movements of social strata and classes. Of these, the most relevant are popular movements for greater participation in the cultural or political hierarchy. The great socio-religious popular movement of the Mazdakites in fifth-century Sassanid Persia renewed the severely damaged fabric of Sassanid Persian and Zoroastrian community at the same time as it undermined the foundations of the Sassanid state. This in turn provoked a repressive, but also ethnically regenerative, movement under Chosroes I in the sixth century, which included the codification of the basis of the *Book of Kings*, a return to Iranian mythology and ritual, and a national revival in literature, protocol, learning and the arts.⁴¹ The popular movements in Judaism, from the Mosaic era to the Chassidim just mentioned, also served to renew a demotic *ethnie* through enthusiastic popular participation and missionary zeal. The same is true of various popular movements in Islam, including its foundation and the movements of Sunni or Shi'ite purification and messianism to this day, such as Wahhabism, Mahdism and the Shi'ite revolution in Iran.⁴²

4. *Myths of ethnic election* In many ways myths of ethnic chosenness go to the heart of the modes of ethnic self-renewal and hence survival. What we notice, first of all, is that *ethnies* that, for all their ethnocentrism towards others, lacked such myths (or failed to instil them in the general population) tended to be absorbed by other communities after losing their independence. This may of course be an argument from silence. Generally speaking, it is *ethnies* with religious myths of ethnic election that possess the specialist classes whose position and outlook are so heavily bound up with the success and influence of election myths — and it is they who are often our

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

only literary witnesses. Nevertheless, when we consider the fate of many *ethnies* that possessed such classes but boasted no such myth of ethnic election (as opposed to royal election), then, as the cases of Assyria, Phoenicia and the Philistines reveal, it is clear that their chances of ethnic survival were considerably diminished.

This, of course, merely puts the onus of explanation back on to the conditions which foster and sustain myths of ethnic election. Yet such a method short-circuits the process of ethnic survival through exclusive election. For what the myth of election promises is a conditional salvation. This is vital for grasping its role in survival potential. Its *locus classicus* is found in the book of Exodus: 'Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then shall ye be a peculiar treasure unto me from all the peoples; for all the earth is mine; and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.'⁴³ To see oneself as potentially 'an holy nation' is to link chosenness indissolubly with collective sanctification. Salvation is accessible only through redemption, which in turn requires a return to former ways and beliefs, which are the means of sanctification. Hence the recurrent note of 'return' in many ethno-religious traditions that inspire movements of both religious reform and cultural restoration. Given the ineluctable subjectivity of ethnic identification, this moral summons to re-sanctify the potential elect provides a powerful mechanism for ethnic self-renewal and hence long-term survival. This is certainly one key to the problem of Jewish survival in the face of adversity, but we can also trace its revitalizing effects among other peoples - Amharic Ethiopians, Armenians, Greeks converted to Orthodoxy, Orthodox Russians, Druse, Sikhs, as well as various European *ethnies* like the Poles, Germans, French, English, Castilians, Irish, Scots and Welsh, to name a few. So widespread a phenomenon clearly bears more thorough-going investigation.⁴⁴

'ETHNIC CORES' AND THE FORMATION OF NATIONS

Religious reform, cultural borrowing, popular participation and myths of ethnic election: these are some of the mechanisms that, along with location, autonomy, polyglot and trading skills and organized religion, help to ensure the survival of certain ethnic

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

communities across the centuries despite many changes in their social composition and cultural contents. These cases again bring us up sharply against the central paradox of ethnicity: the coexistence of flux and durability, of an ever-changing individual and cultural expression within distinct social and cultural parameters. The latter take the form of a heritage and traditions received from one generation to another, but in slightly or considerably changed form, which set limits to the community's outlook and cultural contents. A certain tradition of images, cults, customs, rites and artefacts, as well as certain events, heroes, landscapes and values, come to form a distinctive repository of ethnic culture, to be drawn upon selectively by successive generations of the community.

How do such traditions influence subsequent generations? In pre-modern communities it is the priests, scribes and bards, often organized into guilds and castes, who recount, re-enact and codify traditions. Often as the only literate strata, and being necessary for intercession with divine forces, priests, scribes and bards achieve considerable influence and prestige in many communities. Organized in their brotherhoods and temples and churches, they form a network of socialization in the major towns and much of the surrounding countryside - depending upon their degree of organization and mental monopoly in the community's territory. Indeed, in many ancient and medieval empires priesthoods and their temple and scribal infrastructure formed indispensable partners in government and/or rival centres of power to the Court and bureaucracy, especially in ancient Egypt and Sassanid Persia.⁴⁵

Even in diaspora communities we find the priests, rabbis and doctors of law, organized along more or less centralized lines, forming an encompassing network of tribunals and counsel, and endowing far-flung enclaves with religious, legal and cultural unity in the face of an often hostile environment. Especially among Jews and Armenians, as Armstrong has demonstrated, this highly evolved network of religious officials and institutions was able to ensure the subjective unity and survival of the community and its historical and religious traditions.⁴⁶

It is through such unifying and embracing mechanisms that what we may term 'ethnic cores' are gradually built up. These are fairly cohesive and self-consciously distinctive *ethnies* which form the

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

kernel and basis of states and kingdoms such as the barbarian *regna* of the early medieval era. Among the kingdoms of the Franks, Lombards, Saxons, Scots and Visigoths the sense of a community of customs and common descent played a vital role, despite the fact that many of their inhabitants did not belong to the dominant ethnic community. Nevertheless, in popular perception, such *regna* were seen as increasingly communal and possessed of a unifying cultural basis.⁴⁷ By the later medieval period these subjectively unified communities of culture formed the core around which large and powerful states erected their administrative, judicial, fiscal and military apparatus, and proceeded to annex adjacent territories and their culturally different populations. Under Edward I, for example, the English (Anglo-Norman) state expanded into Wales, destroying the Welsh kingdoms and bringing most Welshmen into the realm as a peripheral cultural community under the domination of the English state. Something similar happened in France under Louis VIII to the *pays d'oc*, notably the County of Toulouse, at the time of the Albigensian Crusade.⁴⁸

Locating such ethnic cores tells us a good deal about the subsequent shape and character of nations - if (and when) such nations emerge. It helps us to answer in large part the question: *who* is the nation? and to some extent: *where* is the nation? That is to say, a state's ethnic core often shapes the character and boundaries of the nation; for it is very often on the basis of such a core that states coalesce to form nations. Though most latter-day nations are, in fact, polyethnic, or rather most nation-states are polyethnic, many have been formed in the first place around a dominant *ethnie*, which annexed or attracted other *ethnies* or ethnic fragments into the state to which it gave a name and a cultural charter. For, since *ethnies* are by definition associated with a given territory, not infrequently a chosen people with a particular sacred land, the presumed boundaries of the nation are largely determined by the myths and memories of the dominant *ethnie*, which include the foundation charter, the myth of the golden age and the associated territorial claims, or ethnic title-deeds. Hence the many conflicts, even today, for sundered parts of the ethnic homeland, — in Armenia, in Kosovo, in Israel and Palestine, in the Ogaden, and elsewhere.

Both the close relationship and the differences between the

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

concepts of *ethnie* and nation and their historical referents may also be seen by recalling our definition of the nation. A nation, it was argued, is *a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members*. By definition the nation is a community of common myths and memories, as is an *ethnie*. It is also a territorial community. But whereas in the case of *ethnies* the link with a territory may be only historical and symbolic, in the case of the nation it is physical and actual: nations possess territories. In other words nations always require ethnic 'elements'. These may, of course, be reworked; they often are. But nations are inconceivable without some common myths and memories of a territorial home.

This suggests a certain circularity in the argument that nations are formed on the basis of ethnic cores. There is, indeed, considerable historical and conceptual overlap between *ethnies* and nations. Nevertheless, we are dealing with different concepts and historical formations. Ethnic communities do not have several of the attributes of the nation. They need not be resident in 'their' territorial homeland. Their culture may not be public or common to all the members. They need not, and often do not, exhibit a common division of labour or economic unity. Nor need they have common legal codes with common rights and duties for all. As we shall see, these attributes of nations are products of particular social and historical conditions working upon antecedent ethnic cores and ethnic minorities.

On the other side of the picture we should note the possibility of forming nations without immediate antecedent *ethnie*. In several states nations are being formed through an attempt to coalesce the cultures of successive waves of (mainly European) immigrants — in America, Argentina and Australia. In other cases states were formed out of the provinces of empires which had imposed a common language and religion, notably in Latin America. Here, too, creole élites began a process of nation-formation in the absence of a distinctive *ethnie*. In fact, as nation-formation proceeded it was found necessary to fashion a distinctively Mexican, Chilean, Bolivian, etc. culture, and to emphasize the specific characteristics - in terms of separate symbols, values, memories, etc. — of each would-be nation/⁹

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

The dilemma is even sharper in sub-Saharan Africa, whose states were created, if not deliberately across *ethnies*, at least with little reference to them. Here the colonial states had to foster a purely territorial patriotism, a sense of political loyalty to the newly created states and their embryonic political communities. In the independent states born of these territorial communities several *ethnies*, ethnic fragments and ethnic categories were drawn together by political regulation and social boundaries that had come to include previously unrelated groups in the post-colonial political system, and had brought them, even against their will, into a new struggle for scarce resources and political power. In these circumstances the ruling élites, who may often have been recruited from a dominant *ethnie* or coalition of ethnic groupings, were tempted to fashion a new political mythology and symbolic order not only to legitimate their often authoritarian regimes, but also to head off threats of endemic ethnic conflict and even movements of secession. In these cases the state is utilized to fashion the 'civil religion' whose myths, memories, symbols and the like will provide the functional equivalent of a missing or defective dominant *ethnie*. So the project of nation-formation in sub-Saharan Africa suggests the creation of the components of a new ethnic identity and consciousness that will subsume, by drawing together, some of the loyalties and cultures of the existing *ethnies*. At least that has been the national 'project' of many African and Asian élites.⁵⁰

This means that the relationship of modern nations to any ethnic core is problematic and uncertain. Why then should we seek the origins of the nation in pre-modern ethnic ties when not every modern nation can point back to an ethnic base? There are, I think, three reasons why we should do so.

The first is that, historically, the first nations were, as we shall see, formed on the basis of pre-modern ethnic cores; and, being powerful and culturally influential, they provided models for subsequent cases of the formation of nations in many parts of the globe.

The second reason is that the ethnic model of the nation became increasingly popular and widespread not only for the foregoing reason, but also because it sat so easily on the pre-modern 'demotic' kind of community that had survived into the modern era in so many parts of the world. In other words the ethnic model was sociologically fertile.

THE ETHNIC BASIS OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

And third, even where a nation-to-be could boast no ethnic antecedents of importance and where any ethnic ties were shadowy or fabricated, the need to forge out of whatever cultural components were available a coherent mythology and symbolism of a community of history and culture became everywhere paramount as a condition of national survival and unity. Without some ethnic lineage the nation-to-be could fall apart. These three factors in the formation of nations provide the point of departure for our analysis in the next two chapters.