

The Europe of Multinational Empires (Nineteenth-Early Twentieth Century)

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ABSTRACT

While the constitution of nation-states was a key feature of nineteenth-century Europe, a number of multinational empires endured until the aftermath of the First World War, including some of the continent's greatest powers: the Russian Empire, the Habsburg Empire, the Ottoman Empire, and the German Empire. This national pluralism was not managed in the same way in all places, and depended on the numerical, economic, and cultural importance of the nationalities in question. Similarly, the policy of central authorities with respect to them varied from one state to another and one from monarch to another, ranging between liberalism and heightened repression. The century was punctuated by armed revolts by national groups against imperial authority, which in the Ottoman Empire chiefly led to independence (Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria), whereas the uprisings of the Poles of Russia were brutally suppressed. Of these four empires only the Soviet Union, the empire of the tsars, remained a multinational entity after the Great War.



Map of minorities in Austria-Hungary on the eve of the First World War, by Georges Brun.. Source : "The Causes of the First World War," special report produced by Georges Brun, Canopé Académie de Strasbourg (2015), available online : crdp-strasbourg.fr



Ethnic composition of Austria-Hungary on the eve of the First World War. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)



Ethnic groups of the Ottoman Empire and the Balkan peninsula in 1911, by William R. Shepherd, The Historical Atlas, New York, 1911. Source : [Wikimedia Commons](#)

The spread and triumph of the national idea was a key feature of the nineteenth century, although this should not overshadow another major reality, namely that nation-states did not at all cover the entire map of Europe, which included a number of multinational empires, among them the greatest powers of the continent. There were four of these political entities that brought together a number of nationalities within their borders. For the Russian, Habsburg, and Ottoman Empires, this point is not under debate; the German Empire, with its Polish and Danish subjects—as well as those from Alsace-Lorraine from 1871 onward—can be added to this group.

Diverse Realities

These empires all faced the same question of how to manage this national and confessional pluralism. Yet the similarities end there, as they had to contend with different situations. In the German Empire, “minorities” represented no more than 10% of the population, and therefore could not challenge the fundamentally German nature of the Hohenzollern empire. In the Romanov empire, the proportion of Russians was not nearly as overwhelming and was actually diminishing, but they did account for over 50% of the tsar’s subjects. The Austrian Empire had a different configuration, as Germans were the largest group, but represented barely one-fifth of the population, although their political, economic, and cultural influence was greatly superior. After the loss of its

Italian possession in 1859 and 1866, their share rose to one-quarter. Taken together, Slavic nationalities had a higher total, a fact that was cited by supporters of German unity under the auspices of Prussia to deny Austria the status of a German power. The situation partly changed with the dual monarchy between Austria and Hungary, which was established by the Compromise of 1867: on the Austrian side, the proportion of Germans rose to over a third, but without ending the Slavic majority; in Hungary, the Magyars had a relative majority that they continued to consolidate until 1914. The Ottoman Empire in Europe presented a different scenario. It included only a few pockets of Turkish or simply Muslim populations, as in Bosnia-Herzegovina: a few islands amid a sea of essentially Orthodox Christians.

Contrasting Policies toward Nationalities

The policy of central authorities toward their nationalities varied from one state to another, and sometimes within the same state. The case of the Poles, divided since the late eighteenth century between three sovereignties, is an example. At the end of the Napoleonic period, Alexander I initially introduced a liberal regime in Russian Poland, which lasted only a few years. In 1820 it gave way to increasingly severe repression, which was heightened after the failed uprisings of 1831 and 1863. Saint Petersburg ultimately pursued a policy of Russification, which ended by pitting the Polish population against Russia. In Prussian Poland, the Poles of Posen, Silesia, and West Prussia were targeted for *Kulturkampf*, the struggle led by Chancellor Bismarck in the 1870s against the Catholic Church and party. This battle was one of the facets of the anti-Polish policy led by Berlin through a program of colonization and Germanization. Vienna's policy toward Galicia was different. While Austria began with a heavy yoke, like other power-sharing entities it changed course during the 1860s. Significant measures were established to the advantage of Poles, while Polish became the internal language of administration in Galicia, and the universities of Krakow and Lemberg were Polonized. As a result of these overtures, the Polish elite of Galicia became a pillar of the Austrian governmental and parliamentary system until 1914. Vienna generally pursued a liberal policy toward nationalities after the Constitution of 1867, which established their rights. This liberalism contrasted with the harsh treatment reserved by Budapest for the kingdom's other national groups in view of Magyarizing them, an undertaking that led to the steady decrease of their influence.

Ottoman authorities tried to respond to pressure from nationalities with efforts at conciliation. Launched in 1839 by a charter establishing equality among all of the empire's subjects, the Tanzimat reforms culminated in 1876 in the proclamation of a constitution, followed by the election of a parliament. This attempt to overcome national and religious divisions through reforms and modernization inspired by the West ended in failure, and possibly contributed to weakening the empire. Constantinople reverted to a policy of repression toward the Christian populations of its Balkan possessions, one that it had never truly abandoned.

These tensions led throughout the century to armed revolts against imperial authorities on the part of nationalities seeking autonomy or independence. The Ottoman Empire had to face a series of insurrections in Europe: the Serbs were the first to revolt in 1811, followed by the Greeks in the 1820s, the Slavs of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1875, and the Bulgarians in 1876. These movements all had the same outcome—independence. While the Greeks won their independence in 1829, the process took longer and proceeded in stages for the Serbia and Romania (1878) and Bulgaria (1908). In the end, Ottoman possessions in Europe simply melted away. Russia had to face insurrections in its Polish sector in 1831 and 1863, which were brutally suppressed, and provided Saint Petersburg with arguments for tightening its grip. In the Habsburg Empire, in the wake of the Revolution of 1848, Hungary waged a war against Austria to gain its independence. Vienna prevailed, but only with armed support from Russia. The repression was brutal, although the Compromise of 1867 established a new era in relations between Austria and Hungary, based on a great deal of autonomy for the latter and a dual monarchy.

Nationalities, International Considerations and the Crisis of Empires

The question of nationalities became intertwined with the game of international relations on a number of occasions. The Greek rebels would never have defeated the Ottoman Empire, even in its decline, without military support from a number of European powers (England, France, and Russia). Napoleon III sought—in vain of course—to take advantage of the Polish Insurrection of 1863 to advance a major plan for the territorial recomposition of Europe. The annexation of Alsace-Lorraine by the German Reich in 1871 was at the heart of the dispute opposing it with France until 1914, with its return even becoming a French war aim.

Finally, powers interfered in Balkan affairs both directly and behind the scenes. Russia intervened militarily in the European provinces of the Ottoman Empire during the crisis that began in 1875 (Herzegovina, Bosnia, Montenegro), and in March 1878 imposed particularly harsh conditions on the Sublime Porte in the Treaty of San Stefano. Opposition from London and Vienna led to the Congress of Berlin (June-July 1878), which alleviated its clauses. With Russian support, the Balkan League (Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece) declared war on Turkey, with the goal of driving it out of Europe and dividing Macedonia among themselves.

Austria-Hungary did not take part in the Balkan Wars, but saw the enlargement of Serbia as a threat, hence its reaction to the assassination of Crown Prince Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, which sparked the First World War. It had in effect signed its own death warrant. The Ottoman Empire did not survive the war either, while the German Reich lost most of its national minorities at Versailles. However, the Soviet Union, successor to the empire of the tsars, remained a multinational ensemble, albeit shorn of its Baltic and Polish populations.

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