Chapter V

Nation and Empire: Real and Political Unities

THE PROBLEM of the unification of mankind resolves itself into two distinct difficulties. There is the doubt whether the collective egoisms already created in the natural evolution of humanity can at this time be sufficiently modified or abolished and whether even an external unity in some effective form can be securely established. And there is the doubt whether, even if any such external unity can be established, it will not be at the price of crushing both the free life of the individual and the free play of the various collective units already created in which there is a real and active life and substituting a State organisation which will mechanise human existence. Apart from these two uncertainties there is a third doubt whether a really living unity can be achieved by a mere economic, political and administrative unification and whether it ought not to be preceded by at least the strong beginnings of a moral and spiritual oneness. It is the first question that must be taken first in the logical order.

At the present stage of human progress the nation is the living collective unit of humanity. Empires exist, but they are as yet only political and not real units; they have no life from within and owe their continuance to a force imposed on their constituent elements or else to a political convenience felt or acquiesced in by the constituents and favoured by the world outside. Austria was long the standing example of such an empire; it was a political convenience favoured by the world outside, acquiesced in until recently by its constituent elements and maintained by the force of the central Germanic element incarnated in the Hapsburg dynasty, — of late with the active aid of its Magyar partner. If the political convenience of an empire of
this kind ceases, if the constituent elements no longer acquiesce and are drawn more powerfully by a centrifugal force, if at the same time the world outside no longer favours the combination, then force alone remains as the one agent of an artificial unity. There arose indeed a new political convenience which the existence of Austria served even after it suffered from this tendency of dissolution, but that was the convenience of the Germanic idea which made it an inconvenience to the rest of Europe and deprived it of the acquiescence of important constituent elements which were drawn towards other combinations outside the Austrian formula. From that moment the existence of the Austrian Empire was in jeopardy and depended, not on any inner necessity, but first on the power of the Austro-Magyar partnership to crush down the Slav nations within it and, secondly, on the continued power and dominance of Germany and the Germanic idea in Europe, that is to say, on force alone. And although in Austria the weakness of the imperial form of unity was singularly conspicuous and its conditions exaggerated, still those conditions are the same for all empires which are not at the same time national units. It was not so long ago that most political thinkers perceived at least the strong possibility of an automatic dissolution of the British Empire by the self-detachment of the colonies, in spite of the close links of race, language and origin that should have bound them to the mother country. This was because the political convenience of imperial unity, though enjoyed by the colonies, was not sufficiently appreciated by them and, on the other hand, there was no living principle of national oneness. The Australians and Canadians were beginning to regard themselves as new separate nations rather than as limbs of an extended British nationality. Things are now changed in both respects, a wider formula has been discovered, and the British Empire is for the moment proportionately stronger.

Nevertheless, it may be asked, why should this distinction be made of the political and the real unit when name, kind and form are the same? It must be made because it is of the greatest utility to a true and profound political science and involves the most important consequences. When an empire like
Austria, a non-national empire, is broken to pieces, it perishes for good; there is no innate tendency to recover the outward unity, because there is no real inner oneness; there is only a politically manufactured aggregate. On the other hand, a real national unity broken up by circumstances will always preserve a tendency to recover and reassert its oneness. The Greek Empire has gone the way of all empires, but the Greek nation, after many centuries of political non-existence, again possesses its separate body, because it has preserved its separate ego and therefore really existed under the covering rule of the Turk. So has it been with all the races under the Turkish yoke, because that powerful suzerainty, stern as it was in many respects, never attempted to obliterate their national characteristics or substitute an Ottoman nationality. These nations have revived and have reconstituted or are attempting to reconstitute themselves in the measure in which they have preserved their real national sense. The Serbian national idea attempted to recover and has recovered all territory in which the Serb exists or predominates. Greece attempted to reconstitute herself in her mainland, islands and Asiatic colonies, but could not reconstitute the old Greece because many parts had become Bulgarian, Albanian and Turk and no longer Hellenic. Italy became an external unity again after so many centuries because, though no longer a State, she never ceased to be a single people.

This truth of a real unity is so strong that even nations which never in the past realised an outward unification, to which Fate and circumstance and their own selves have been adverse, nations which have been full of centrifugal forces and easily overpowered by foreign intrusions, have yet always developed a centripetal force as well and arrived inevitably at organised oneness. Ancient Greece clung to her separatist tendencies, her self-sufficient city or regional states, her little mutually repellant autonomies; but the centripetal force was always there manifested in leagues, associations of States, suzerainties like the Spartan and Athenian. It realised itself in the end, first, imperfectly and temporarily by the Macedonian overrule, then, by a strange enough development, through the evolution of the
Eastern Roman world into a Greek and Byzantine Empire, and it has again revived in modern Greece. And we have seen in our own day Germany, constantly disunited since ancient times, develop at last to portentous issues its innate sense of oneness formidable embodied in the Empire of the Hohenzollerns and persistent after its fall in a federal Republic. Nor would it at all be surprising to those who study the working of forces and not merely the trend of outward circumstances, if one yet far-off result of the war were to be the fusion of the one Germanic element still left outside, the Austro-German, into the Germanic whole, although possibly in some other embodiment than Prussian hegemony or Hohenzollern Empire.\(^1\) In both these historic instances, as in so many others, the unification of Saxon England, mediaeval France, the formation of the United States of America, it was a real unity, a psychologically distinct unit which tended at first ignorantly by the subconscious necessity of its being and afterwards with a sudden or gradual awakening to the sense of political oneness, towards an inevitable external unification. It is a distinct group-soul which is driven by inward necessity and uses outward circumstances to constitute for itself an organised body.

But the most striking example in history is the evolution of India. Nowhere else have the centrifugal forces been so strong, numerous, complex, obstinate. The mere time taken by the evolution has been prodigious; the disastrous vicissitudes through which it has had to work itself out have been appalling. And yet through it all the inevitable tendency has worked constantly, pertinaciously, with the dull, obscure, indomitable, relentless obstinacy of Nature when she is opposed in her instinctive purposes by man, and finally, after a struggle enduring through millennia, has triumphed. And, as usually happens when she is thus opposed by her own mental and human material, it is the most adverse circumstances that the subconscious worker has

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\(^1\) This possibility realised itself for a time, but by means and under circumstances which made the revival of Austrian national sentiment and a separate national existence inevitable.
turned into her most successful instruments. The beginnings of the centripetal tendency in India go back to the earliest times of which we have record and are typified in the ideal of the Samrat or Chakravarti Raja and the military and political use of the Aswamedha and Rajasuya sacrifices. The two great national epics might almost have been written to illustrate this theme; for the one recounts the establishment of a unifying *dharmarāja* or imperial reign of justice, the other starts with an idealised description of such a rule pictured as once existing in the ancient and sacred past of the country. The political history of India is the story of a succession of empires, indigenous and foreign, each of them destroyed by centrifugal forces, but each bringing the centripetal tendency nearer to its triumphant emergence. And it is a significant circumstance that the more foreign the rule, the greater has been its force for the unification of the subject people. This is always a sure sign that the essential nation-unit is already there and that there is an indissoluble national vitality necessitating the inevitable emergence of the organised nation. In this instance, we see that the conversion of the psychological unity on which nationhood is based into the external organised unity by which it is perfectly realised, has taken a period of more than two thousand years and is not yet complete.² And yet, since the essentiality of the thing was there, not even the most formidable difficulties and delays, not even the most persistent incapacity for union in the people, not even the most disintegrating shocks from outside have prevailed against the obstinate subconscious necessity. And this is only the extreme illustration of a general law.

It will be useful to dwell a little upon this aid lent by foreign rule to the process of nation-making and see how it works. History abounds with illustrations. But in some cases the phenomenon of foreign domination is momentary and imperfect, in others long-enduring and complete, in others often repeated in various forms. In some instances the foreign element is rejected,
its use once over, in others it is absorbed, in others accepted with more or less assimilation for a longer or briefer period as a ruling caste. The principle is the same, but it is worked variously by Nature according to the needs of the particular case. There is none of the modern nations in Europe which has not had to pass through a phase more or less prolonged, more or less complete, of foreign domination in order to realise its nationality. In Russia and England it was the domination of a foreign conquering race which rapidly became a ruling caste and was in the end assimilated and absorbed, in Spain the succession of the Roman, Goth and Moor, in Italy the overlordship of the Austrian, in the Balkans the long suzerainty of the Turk, in Germany the transient yoke of Napoleon. But in all cases the essential has been a shock or a pressure which would either waken a loose psychological unity to the necessity of organising itself from within or would crush out, dispirit or deprive of power, vitality and reality the more obstinate factors of disunion. In some cases even an entire change of name, culture and civilisation has been necessary, as well as a more or less profound modification of the race. Notably has this happened in the formation of French nationality. The ancient Gallic people, in spite of or perhaps because of its Druidic civilisation and early greatness, was more incapable of organising a firm political unity than even the ancient Greeks or the old Indian kingdoms and republics. It needed the Roman rule and Latin culture, the superimposition of a Teutonic ruling caste and finally the shock of the temporary and partial English conquest to found the unequalled unity of modern France. Yet though name, civilisation and all else seem to have changed, the French nation of today is still and has always remained the old Gallic nation with its Basque, Gaelic, Armorican and other ancient elements modified by the Frank and Latin admixture.

Thus the nation is a persistent psychological unit which

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3 Here there was no single people to be united but many separate peoples which had each to recover their separate independence or, in some cases, a coalition of kindred peoples.
Nature has been busy developing throughout the world in the most various forms and educating into physical and political unity. Political unity is not the essential factor; it may not yet be realised and yet the nation persists and moves inevitably towards its realisation; it may be destroyed and yet the nation persists and travails and suffers but refuses to be annihilated. In former times the nation was not always a real and vital unit; the tribe, the clan, the commune, the regional people were the living groups. Those unities which in the attempt at national evolution destroyed these older living groups without arriving at a vital nationhood disappeared once the artificial or political unit was broken. But now the nation stands as the one living group-unit of humanity into which all others must merge or to which they must become subservient. Even old persistent race unities and cultural unities are powerless against it. The Catalan in Spain, the Breton and Provençal and Alsatian in France, the Welsh in England may cherish the signs of their separate existence; but the attraction of the greater living unity of the Spanish, the French, the British nation has been too powerful to be injured by these persistences. The nation in modern times is practically indestructible, unless it dies from within. Poland, torn asunder and crushed under the heel of three powerful empires, ceased to exist; the Polish nation survived and is once more reconstituted. Alsace after forty years of the German yoke remained faithful to her French nationhood in spite of her affinities of race and language with the conqueror. All modern attempts to destroy by force or break up a nation are foolish and futile, because they ignore this law of the natural evolution. Empires are still perishable political units; the nation is immortal. And so it will remain until a greater living unit can be found into which the nation idea can merge in obedience to a superior attraction.

And then the question arises whether the empire is not precisely that destined unit in course of evolution. The mere fact that at present not the empire, but the nation is the vital unity can be no bar to a future reversal of the relations. Obviously, in order that they may be reversed the empire must cease to be a mere political and become rather a psychological entity.
But there have been instances in the evolution of the nation in which the political unity preceded and became a basis for the psychological as in the union of Scotch, English and Welsh to form the British nation. There is no insurmountable reason why a similar evolution should not take place on a larger scale and an imperial unity be substituted for a national unity. Nature has long been in travail of the imperial grouping, long casting about to give it a greater force of permanence, and the emergence of the conscious imperial ideal all over the earth and its attempts, though still crude, violent and blundering, to substitute itself for the national, may not irrationally be taken as the precursory sign of one of those rapid leaps and transitions by which she so often accomplishes what she has long been gradually and tentatively preparing. This then is the possibility we have next to consider before we examine the established phenomenon of nationhood in relation to the ideal of human unity. Two different ideals and therefore two different possibilities were precipitated much nearer to realisation by the European conflict, — a federation of free nations and, on the other hand, the distribution of the earth into a few great empires or imperial hegemonies. A practical combination of the two ideas became the most tangible possibility of the not distant future. It is necessary to pause and consider whether, one element of this possible combination being already a living unit, the other also could not under certain circumstances be converted into a living unit and the combination, if realised, made the foundation of an enduring new order of things. Otherwise it could be no more than a transient device without any possibility of a stable permanence.