

# What Is a Nation?

## ***1882 lecture provides eloquent answer***

by Ernest Renan

*“Qu’est-ce-que c’est qu’une Nation?” – “What is a Nation?” – Ernest Renan’s may well be the best-known essay addressing this difficult question. Below is the author’s summation of a lengthy lecture he delivered in March 1882 at the Sorbonne. It is translated by guest editor Gerda Bikales. Renan (1823-1892) was, by the time he gave this lecture, an acclaimed Orientalist, a free-thinking theologian, and a professor at the prestigious College de France. Modern readers may be taken aback by the essay’s style, which mixes warmhearted eloquence about the ideals of nationhood with overly general rhetoric not expected in academic discourse today.*

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. These two things which, in reality are just one, make up this soul, or spiritual principle. One exists in the past, the other in the present. One is the shared possession of a rich heritage of memories; the other is present-day consent, wanting to live together, the will to continue to cherish the entire inheritance one has received. Gentlemen, Man does not improvise. The nation, like the individual, is the culmination of a past full of efforts, sacrifices, and devotion, going back a long way. The cult of our forefathers is the most legitimate of all, for they have made us what we are. A heroic past, great men, true glory, that is the social capital upon which we base the idea of nation. To have shared glories in the past, and have a common will in the present; to have performed great deeds together, and want to do still more, those are the conditions essential for being a people. We love in proportion to the sacrifices to which we have consented, and in proportion to the afflictions we have suffered. We love the house we have built and handed down. The Spartan song: “we are what you were; we shall be what you are,” is, in its simplicity, the shortened hymn of every fatherland.

More valuable than common custom houses and strategic borders, is a past full of shared glories and

regrets, and a future full of common goals to be achieved. To have suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together – this is what we can understand, despite differences in race or language. I said a moment ago “to have suffered together” – yes, common suffering unites more than joy. When it comes to national memories, mourning is of more value than triumphs, for it imposes duties and mandates a common effort.

A nation is thus a large-scale fellowship, created by the sense of sacrifices made and those one is inclined to make in the future. The nation presupposes a past, yet it is summarized in the present by a tangible fact: consent – the clearly expressed desire to continue life in common. Pardon the metaphor, but the existence of a nation is a daily plebiscite, just as the existence of the individual is a perpetual affirmation of life. I know very well that this is less metaphysical than divine law, less brutal than the so-called laws of history. Following the order of the ideas that I am presenting to you, a nation no more than a king has the right to say to a province: “You belong to me, I am taking you.” For us, the province is its people. If anyone has a right to be consulted in this matter, it is the inhabitants. A nation never has a real interest in annexing or keeping a country against its will. The wish of nations is definitely the only legitimate criterion, the one we must always come back to.

We have rid politics from metaphysical and theological abstractions. What remains, after that? Man remains, with his desires, his needs. You’ll tell me that secession, and in the long run, the crumbling of nations result from a system that places these old organisms at the mercy of ignorant will. It is clear that in such matters no principle must be pushed to the extreme. Truths of this order are applicable only in their totality and in a very general way. Human wishes change; but what doesn’t change on earth? Nations are not something eternal. They started up, and they will end. They will probably be replaced by a European confederation. But such is not the law of the century in which we live. At this time, the existence of nations is

desirable, even necessary. Their existence is the guarantor of liberty, which would be lost if the world had just one law and one master.

Through their differing and often contrary capacities, nations labor in the common work of civilization; each one contributes a note to this great concert of humanity, which, after all, is the highest real ideal that we can reach. Alone, each has its weaknesses. I often tell myself that an individual who would have the faults that nations consider virtues, who feeds on boastfulness, who would be as jealous, as selfish and quarrelsome, who could not tolerate anything without taking offense, such a person would be the most insufferable of beings. But all these discordant details disappear in the general state of affairs. Poor humanity, how you have suffered. How many trials still await you. May wisdom guide you to keep you from the countless dangers thrown in your path!

I recapitulate, gentlemen. Man is neither a slave of his race, nor of his language, nor his religion, nor of the course of rivers, nor of the direction of mountain chains. A large assembly of men, healthy of mind and warm of heart, creates a moral conscience, which we call a nation. As long as this moral conscience gives proof of its power by sacrifices that demand the effacement of the individual in the service to the community, it is legitimate, it has the right to exist. If doubts arise along the borders, consult the populations in the disputed areas. They are surely entitled to have an opinion on the issue. This will bring a smile to the lips of political transcendents, those know-it-all persons who spend their lives deceiving themselves and from the heights of their superior principles, they pity our earthly troubles. "Consult the populations? What naiveté! There go those sick French ideas claiming to replace diplomacy and war with childishly simple means." – Let us wait, gentlemen; let the reign of the transcendents pass; learn to bear the disdain of the powerful. Perhaps, after much fruitless fumbling, people will come back to our modest empirical solutions. The way to be right in the future is to be resigned, at certain times, to being unfashionable. ■