

The continuing relevance of George L. Mosse to the Study of Nationalism

ABSTRACT

This article explores four aspects of George L. Mosse's legacy in the field of nationalism. First, it examines his wrestling with the normative complexities of nationalism, reflected in his horror of integralist nationalism (exemplified in fascism) that was in tension with his sympathy with liberal Zionism. Second, it discusses Mosse's innovative anthropological approach to nationalism as a form of culture that aligns him with the ethno-symbolic school of nationalism, associated with Anthony D. Smith. A third contribution was his pioneering studies of the rituals of war commemoration and their changing forms as central to national legitimation. Finally, Mosse has been recognised by leading feminists as an important early investigator of sexuality as it relates to the construction of repressive national codes of respectability. What links these topics is Mosse's tendency to view nationalism as reinforcing the coercive aspects of modern industrial societies. In none of these areas was Mosse a systematic thinker, but the interdisciplinary character of his work and his concern with fundamental problems of identity continues to inspire research into these issues.

Key words: nationalism; fascism; war commemoration; sexuality; anti-semitism

As a distinguished intellectual and cultural historian of modern Germany and Europe, it is not surprising that George L. Mosse's main contribution to the study of nationalism was in the exploration of its distinctive cultural politics. Any reader of Mosse's publications will be

impressed by his interdisciplinary range, the fertility of his mind, and the intensity of his engagement with fundamental problems. In this article I will not attempt an exegesis of Mosse's many publications and the changes in his approaches over time.¹ Instead, I will reflect on four of his major concerns: first, his ambivalence about the value of belonging to a nation in the modern world because of his awareness of the potential threat it posed to individual autonomy, second, his anthropological approach to nationalism as a form of culture; third, his study of the role of war in the birth of nations and their transformations in the modern period; and finally, his investigations of relationship between nationalism and the construction of sexuality and social deviance.

What links these topics is Mosse's view of nationalism as largely a repressive response to the dislocations of industrial modernity, generating utopian projects that could result in totalitarianism, encouraging a romanticisation of war as an escape from social repression and ennui, and imposing patriarchal, racial and bourgeois norms to control social 'outsiders', including Jews and homosexuals, who threatened an established social order now under challenge.

Mosse was not a systematic thinker on these subjects. In the words of his intellectual biographer, Karel Plessini, he was a 'scout' rather than a 'settler'.² Nonetheless, if some of his key terms lacked clear definition, he was an historian of nuance and considerable originality. As an author, he was driven by normative as well as analytic commitments. These arose out of his identity as a German Jewish homosexual responding to what he viewed as the fragility of

¹ For an excellent short overview of his approach to nationalism, see S. Grosby, 'Cultural History, Nationalism and the Dignity of the Individual: the Work of George L. Mosse', *Nations and Nationalism*, 6, 2 (2000), 275-86

² K. Plessini, *The Perils of Normalcy: George Mosse and the Remaking of Cultural History* (Madison, WI 2014), 16.

European liberalism and western civilization before the attractions of a fascist totalitarianism that threatened the dignity of the individual.

Although George L. Mosse had taken note of nationalism in the 1950s, his major publications on the subject, notably *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975),³ came later in his career. Like many of his generation he was concerned to evaluate as much as to explain the phenomenon. Born into a prominent liberal Jewish family in Berlin that was committed to the defence of the Weimar Republic, his views on nationalism were refracted through his personal witness of the attractions of the fascism that almost destroyed the Jewish people and Western civilization. Nonetheless, as an 'exilic' member of the Jewish diaspora in the USA, he became attracted to the state of Israel after its establishment in 1948 as a national home and refuge for Jews. Shaped by such experiences, his perspectives on nationalism oscillated, always having a strong normative as well as an analytical character.

Fascism, for him, was an extreme form of nationalism (and inconceivable without it). This was apparent in his discussion in *The Crisis of German Ideology* (1964). of the tradition of German *volkisch* and antisemitic ideas that extended from Friedrich Jahn's gymnastic movement to the German youth movement. In the fusion of Aryan mystical ideas with the concept of the Jew as the national anti-type in German popular culture, he identified the seedbed of fascism.⁴

³ G.L. Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements from the Napoleonic Wars Through the Third Reich* (New York, NY 1975).

⁴ G.L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York, NY 1964).

His mature formulation of nationalism is to be found in his 'Mass politics in the Political Liturgy of Nationalism'⁵ (1973) and his *Nationalization of the Masses* (1975). As before, his study was Germany, subject to social stresses as it underwent rapid industrialization and urbanization and lacking a unified state until 1871. Nationalism had its origins in the demythologization of religion during the Enlightenment and in the mass politics arising from new doctrines of popular sovereignty. These first emerged in the French Revolution in which power was legitimised as an exercise of the general will. As Steven Grosby observes, Mosse describes this new kind of democratic politics as one in which political process became a drama with its own structure of myth, symbols and public festivals. Through this the people participated in the worship of themselves as a nation.⁶ During the nineteenth century the masses who were brought into the political sphere were exposed to demagogues and to the search for scapegoats (above all the Jew) for the ills that befell the nation. Fascists effectively built on this after the failures of Italy and Germany in the First World War when they attempted to construct a new political religion.

Mosse's writings reflected a deep suspicion of nationalism. In *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism* (1993) he argued that the belief in a national character enforced a constricting notion of uniformity on the individual. National attributes were defined according to bourgeois middle class norms, but were undercut by a deep insecurity resulting from the dislocations of modernity. This sense of insecurity meant that national identities were built on exclusions, on the differentiation of insiders and outsiders. In German nationalism the Jew became that negative 'other' – the opposite of bourgeois respectability, because of the absorption of Christian symbols into a national iconography and later because of the influence

⁵ G.L Mosse, 'Mass Politics in the Political Liturgy of Nationalism', in E. Kamenka (ed.) *Nationalism: the Nature and Evolution of an Idea* (Canberra 1973).

⁶ Grosby, 'Cultural, History, Nationalism', 275.

of racist ideologies.⁷ These ideas had been extensively explored earlier in his *Nationalism and Sexuality* (1985) where he examined antisemitism in relation to other social deviations from the male patriarchal model, including homosexuality. Just as with his perspectives on Fascism, racism was collapsed into nationalism: it was ‘a heightened nationalism’.⁸

In an interview in 1979 he declared all nationalisms bad, yet he also spoke positively of a self-critical patriotism.⁹ Aware of his own emotional identification with Israel, he came to declare that nationalism was a legitimate expression of the desire for community in the modern world.¹⁰ One of his later concerns, stemming from his anxious observation of Israel’s development, was whether nationalism could be tamed. He appeared to approve of a Herderian variety of nationalism. This envisaged that through being rooted in a distinctive community, the individual could combine a realisation of his/her humanity (the concept of *Bildung*) with a cosmopolitan commitment to justice that he saw embodied in early Zionism, whether liberal or socialist.¹¹ *Bildung* he distinguished from the repressive ethos of respectability that created outsiders and led to integralist nationalism of Jacobinsky’s Revisionist Zionism which attempted to establish an exclusive and uniform Jewish state.¹² It was the growing dominance of integralist nationalism, in combination with racist ideas, that had been the forerunner of twentieth century fascism.

Mosse’s originality, however, lay in a second contribution: in his quasi-anthropological exploration of nationalism as a cultural phenomenon. In his initial studies of fascism, his emphasis had been on its ideology in contrast to materialist scholars, who viewed fascism as

⁷ G. L. Mosse, *Confronting the Nation: Jewish and Western Nationalism* (London 1993), 122-3.

⁸ Mosse, *Nationalism and Sexuality*, 133.

⁹ Plessini, *The Perils of Normalcy*, 160-1.

¹⁰ Plessini, *The Perils of Normalcy* 160-1.

¹¹ Mosse, *Confronting the Nation*, chs. 8, 9.

¹² Mosse, *Confronting the Nation*, 172-3.

an irrationalist melange of ideas employed as part of an opportunist drive for power. In contrast, he argued it had to be taken seriously as advocating a revolution of the spirit, a third way between Marxism and liberal bourgeois capitalism, that expressed a longing for wholeness. This led him to understand fascism (and its predecessor nationalism) as not so much a rational ideology like liberalism and Marxism, but as a *Weltanschauung* that appealed to the emotions. Whereas in *The Crisis of German Ideology*, his attention was on *volkisch* intellectuals, in the *Nationalization of the Masses*, he examined nationalism as a type of political religion in the German lands. His achievement was in showing how this was constructed.

As I mentioned, Mosse considered the nation to be a product of the new mass politics emerging with the French Revolution. But the nation was an abstraction that had to be made an objective reality to its members. The core of nationalism lay in the construction of new myths and symbols, idealised social types, of sacred spaces around monuments, and the creation of rituals and public festivals through which a political community formed. This was a neo-Durkheimian interpretation: through regular participation in common rituals devoted to the worship of a deity (the nation), individuals experienced a collective effervescence that bound them to the norms of co-operation on which a stable society could be founded. Nationalism was a surrogate religion, answering to the anomie generated by industrialisation, the loss of religious faith, and the new mass politics inaugurated by the French Revolution. Through its liturgical rites the dislocated masses were formed into a disciplined congregation of the nation. Heavily shaped by romanticism, nationalism represented an aestheticisation of politics.¹³

¹³ Mosse, 'Mass Politics in the Political Liturgy of Nationalism'.

Mosse analysed myths, drawn from the national past, that in a desacralised world provided meaning and were objectified in everyday life through symbols, such as national anthems, flags, and dress.¹⁴ Turning to a wide range of evidence, literary-dramatic, painting and print illustrations, architecture, sculpture, and music, he explored the nationalist deployment of images of the human form and sociality as models of regeneration. Initially drawn from Greek classical antiquity, under the influence of romanticism they increasingly blended with Germanic heroic archetypes.¹⁵ These were exemplified at the individual level in the male bodies of the German gymnastic movement. Great national monuments (for example, the gigantic Hermannsdenkmal 1836-75), described as ‘architectural mountains’ by the designer Wilhelm Kreis, were set in natural surroundings that recalled the ancient Germanic past and expressed through their dimensions the permanence of the nation.¹⁶ The ‘sacred spaces’ surrounding them were the arenas in which nationalists mobilised the people in great public festivals. Such festivals had a quasi-religious character, formed by a symbiosis of Lutheran liturgies and pagan Germanic symbolism (for example, the sacred flame and the oak tree) in which core national groups associated with German resistance to Napoleon (sharpshooters, gymnasts, male choirs) participated. Such rituals functioned to form atomised individuals into disciplined mass collectivities in worship of the nation.¹⁷ The nation became a living reality: by participating in such dramatic performances the people effectively worshipped themselves.¹⁸

As a careful historian, Mosse showed the development of this new politics in Germany was by no means straightforward. The first phase spanned the fall of Napoleon to German unification,

¹⁴ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, ch. 1; on national anthems, see *Confronting the Nation*, ch.1.

¹⁵ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, ch. 2

¹⁶ Mosse, ‘Mass Politics’, 43; *The Nationalization of the Masses*, ch. 3.

¹⁷ Mosse, *The Nationalization of the Masses*, chs 4 and 5.

¹⁸ Mosse, ‘Mass Politics’, 46.

the second period the Second Reich, and the third mass politics of the Weimar Republic.¹⁹ The first mass national (as opposed to local) festival, which evoked the ancient German *Thing* (or tribal gathering), took place around a ruined hill-top castle in Hambach in May 1832, but it was not until the twentieth century that a standardised national liturgy formed. The revolutions of 1848 had favoured liberal-revolutionary rather than national themes, and the celebration of the centenary of the birth of the national hero, Schiller, in 1859 was local. After unification the official military-dominated festivals (such as *Sedanfest* of 1871) stifled popular participation in favour of social deference and conservative Protestant values.²⁰ Although choral societies, sharpshooters and gymnasts had now developed national organisations, they were increasingly bourgeois and the festivals' liturgical functions were undercut by beer and entertainment. Against this, a nationalism from below crystallised by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in the form of Wagner's Bayreuth Theatre propagating a return to a pagan mythos, of German youth organisations, and of a worker's movement that, though socialist, marched under nationalist banners and symbols.²¹ Nationalism increasingly took a mass form in the lead-up to the First World War and in the Weimar period. This was the soil on which Nazism flourished in the aftermath of defeat and economic crisis.

Mosse's third major contribution - the importance of mass death and military sacrifice in the sacralisation and desacralisation of nationalism - derived logically from this understanding of nationalism as a political religion. Drawn to this topic in the late 1970s by Phillippe Ariès's scholarship on changing European attitudes to death,²² by Paul Fussell's study of the Great War as a destructive caesura in Western modernity,²³ and by Marc Ferro's discussion of the

¹⁹ Mosse, *Nationalization of the Masses*, 17-19.

²⁰ Mosse, *Nationalization*, 83-90.

²¹ *Ibid.*, chps 5,6 and 7.

²² P. Ariès, *Western Attitudes to Death: From the Middle Ages to the Present* (Baltimore 1974).

²³ P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford 1975).

male camaraderie of the trenches,²⁴ he explored the cult of the fallen soldier as a central legitimising ritual of the modern nation in a series of pathbreaking articles, including in this journal.²⁵ These culminated in his classic study, *Fallen Soldiers*.²⁶

In his eyes, war became romanticized as a sacred vocation as a response to the dislocations and constraints of modernity. This cult arose out of the secularisation of religion and the need to give meaning to large-scale death on the battlefield. The key event was the French Revolution which, in linking citizenship to patriotic military service and in summoning the entire nation to battle, transformed the status of soldier: no longer mercenary or debased peasant but proud citizen. Those who died in battle were now commemorated as martyrs, who voluntarily sacrificed their lives for the nation, and were celebrated in statuary using Christian iconography as models of emulation.²⁷ The European-wide resistance to the invading French armies led to the widespread diffusion of the cult.

Mosse claims that after the return of the *ancien regime* in 1815, ideals of patriotic sacrifice resonated among rebellious male middle class youth, particularly in the German lands. Influenced by romanticism and bored by the restrictions of bourgeois society, they looked upon war as an adventure and source of authenticity. During the nineteenth century, an iconography was elaborated in which Christian and national images were fused, and a set of rituals developed, employing flags, anthems, classical representations, monuments, and separate military cemeteries, set within a natural landscape. These ‘gardens’ where heroes ‘slept’ ready

²⁴ M. Ferro, *The Great War 1914-18* (London 1969).

²⁵ G.L. Mosse, 'National Cemeteries and National Revival: the Cult of the Fallen Soldiers in Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History* 14, 1 (1979), 1-20; 'Two World Wars and the Myth of the War Experience', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 21, 4 (1986), 491-513.

²⁶ G.L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers* (Oxford 1990).

²⁷ *Ibid.*, ch.1.

to awaken when the nation called became places of pilgrimage, conveying an escapist yearning for a pre-industrial harmony.²⁸

This cult came to a peak with the outbreak of war in 1914, which initially inspired mass volunteering. However, the cumulative effects of two World Wars were to reverse the positive relationship between war and national cohesion. The First World War was a mass technological phenomenon of conscription armies, dominated by static defence lines, anonymous and alienating except for the camaraderie of the trenches, and it resulted in death on an unprecedented scale.²⁹ It destroyed the romantic myth of the individual volunteer, and it produced a democratisation of men and officers. This was reflected in heroic representations of the common soldier in the military cemeteries and the cenotaphs to the Unknown Soldier. Soldiers themselves created a 'myth of the war experience' as a device that both distanced themselves from the realities of war and legitimised the war. This myth combined ideas of war as a test of manliness, as inspiring the camaraderie of the trenches and as a cult of sacrifice.³⁰ It was represented through heroic images of male youth.

Whereas in the victor countries the new myth was compatible with a mood of disillusioned pacifism among ex-soldiers, Mosse argued in Germany the defeat generated a sense of humiliation and betrayal directed against civilian society and Jews. This, together with the brutalising ethos of mass killing and sense of nostalgia amongst ex-servicemen for the *gemeinschaft* of a militarised male brotherhood, provided inspiration and legitimacy for Nazi para-militarism in the Weimar period.³¹

²⁸ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, ch. 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁰ Mosse, 'Two World Wars', 492.

³¹ Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, ch. 8.

The Second World War, as a war of movement, generated no equivalent myth among frontline soldiers. It rather completed the destruction of the romantic ideal, by blurring the vital distinction between fighters and civilians, notably through the aerial devastation of cities and the Holocaust. The introduction of (nuclear) armaments at the end of the war indicated that future wars might entail the annihilation of nations.³²

Mosse argued that the visibility of religious genres of remembrance after the Second World War demonstrated the weakening hold of the national cult. After 1945, in Britain and Germany there was also a trend away from the public sacralization of the dead in monument-building focused on the national collectivity and a preference for the utilitarian provision of recreational facilities that served the individual needs of the people.³³ He wrote of the changed function of national symbols after the Second World War: their purpose now was not to rouse men to sacrifice, but instead to calm their fear of death and project a healthy world. War was no longer glorified as part of national self-representation, but masked through keeping it at a distance from individual lives.³⁴

Finally, Mosse's explanation of nationalism as a response to the upheavals of industrial modernity made him a pioneer in studying the relationship between nationalism, the body and sexuality. Here, he argued that nationalism, like fascism, advanced repressive ideas of social respectability derived from the bourgeois family.³⁵ Again the terrain was mainly Germany where social and political change particularly in the rapidly expanding cities created an incessant insecurity and fears of physical as well as moral degeneration. Nationalists along with religious revivalists and later racial ideologues sought to restore order by controlling

³² Ibid., 201, 223–4.

³³ Ibid., ch.10.

³⁴ Mosse, *Confronting the Nation*, 26.

³⁵ Mosse, 'Introduction', in Id. *Nationalism and Sexuality*.

sexuality, creating idealised and differentiated patriarchal male and female stereotypes as well as images of deviant ‘others’. The ‘others’ were above all, the rootless Jew, the homosexual, communists and prostitutes, all associated with the diseases and degeneracies of the modern metropolis. The Nazis sought to eliminate these threats to the bourgeois order.

In what respects have Mosse’s writings had an impact on the scholarship of these four aspects of nationalism? His analysis of nationalism’s relationship to fascism is full of tensions. His discussion of individual cases was nuanced and displayed an awareness of the many variants of nationalism. In seeking to differentiate a good patriotism, which advanced a universalist idea of human development of the individual, from an aggressive and integralist nationalism, from which fascism, in his opinion, derived, Mosse was following a well-trodden path. In the 1940s Hans Kohn (also a liberal Zionist) had distinguished ‘Western’ political from ‘Eastern’ cultural varieties, the former disposed to an enlightened liberal individualism, the latter to a reactionary organic-collectivism that fled modernity into the era of ancient myths.³⁶ This was later reformulated by scholars as the civic-ethnic distinction.³⁷ This distinction has been regularly critiqued by scholars (especially when presented as a dichotomy) who argue that all nationalisms are both civic and ethnic to varying degrees.³⁸ In his discussion of the Israeli case, Mosse displayed an awareness of this, and he offered a more subtle account than Kohn for shifts across the nationalist spectrum.

³⁶ H. Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism* (New York, NY 1946), 329-41.

³⁷ R. Brubaker, “‘Civic’ and ‘Ethnic’ Nationalism”, in R. Brubaker, *Ethnicity without Groups* (Cambridge, MA 2004) 132–46.

³⁸ O. Zimmer, ‘Boundary Mechanisms and Symbolic Resources: Towards a Process-Oriented Approach to National Identity’, *Nations and Nationalism*, 9, 2 (2003), 173–93.

Whereas Kohn had related different tendencies to factors such as the prior existence of a state and the presence or absence of a strong middle class, Mosse in his discussion of Israel focused more on geo-politics and reasons of state. The threat to the liberal ideals of the diasporic Zionist founders came from establishing a Jewish state in an already settled territory which led to repeated wars with the surrounding Arab populations. This, to his distress, had resulted in a shift to an integralist Zionist nationalism preoccupied with borders, territorial conquest, and exclusion that threatened his hopes for a federation or confederation of Israeli and Palestinian peoples.³⁹

Mosse follows Kohn in understanding Fascism as a form of extreme or ‘ultra’ nationalism. Most historians agree, but his assimilation of nationalism to fascism and indeed to racism is highly problematic because of his failure to offer a clear definition of nationalism. Characterising it as a ‘mood’, ‘a means of self-identification and belonging’ or a ‘new style of politics’, is to render it so elastic as to fit almost any political phenomenon.⁴⁰ Anthony Smith has defined nationalism ‘an ideological movement for the attainment and maintenance of autonomy, unity, and identity on behalf of a population deemed by some of its members to constitute an actual or potential “nation”’.⁴¹ There is a further need to define nation as a named community, resting on conceptions of common descent, regulative customary practices, the possession of a homeland, and a distinctive culture, that claims or aspires to be self-governing. Clearly the racial nationalisms of the late nineteenth century share many assumptions with Nazism (though not with Italian Fascism) and nationalist themes were intrinsic to fascism. But it is open to question whether fascism, with its extreme cult of the leader, its cult of violence as intrinsic to the human being, its claim to a totalitarian vision of the world, its corporate

³⁹ Plessini, *The Perils of Normalcy*, 154-6.

⁴⁰ For these quotations, see Plessini, *The Perils of Normalcy*, 142-3.

⁴¹ A.D. Smith, *Nationalism* (Cambridge 2000), 1.

ideology and drive for imperial conquest is not a separate ideology with its roots in Social Darwinism. Hitler's final orders (the Nero decree) for the destruction of Germany on the grounds that it had forfeited through defeat its right to exist suggest that he viewed the German nation in instrumental terms.

What then of Mosse's second contribution – his quasi-anthropological understanding of nationalism as a form of 'political religion'? There is a similar issue with Mosse's use of this term, which he occasionally alternates with 'civic religion'. It is not always clear to what 'political' referred – the people, the state or a messianic leader. Nor does Mosse define 'religion' in relation to nationalism.⁴² Mosse speaks at times of theology and liturgy, though these are different, and not necessarily interconnected. Nationalism lacks a fully articulated political theology as such. Although culturally rich, it is politically thin as an idea-system, as Michael Freeden states, requiring an alliance with other ideologies (for example, liberalism or socialism) to define how the state should be organised, in, for example, defining the balance between liberty and equality and in prescribing the distribution of resources.⁴³ Unlike many religions, its liturgies are not fixed but vary according to time and place.

Mosse seems to have considered nationalism as a secularisation of Judeo-Christianity, and particularly notes the indebtedness of German romantic nationalism to the 'inward' Pietist faith. But this leaves the hold of nationalism in countries where Hinduism, Islam or Buddhism were dominant something of a mystery. 'Political religion' also masks the great variety of attitudes of nationalists to the great religions. Whereas republican nationalists in France sought

⁴² For a discussion of some of these issues, see S. Grosby, 'Nationality and Religion', *Nations and Nationalism* 24, 2 (2018), 258-70.

⁴³ M. Freeden, 'Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology', *Political Studies*, 46, 4 (1998), 748-65.

unsuccessfully to replace Catholicism and its culture, provoking a cultural war, most nationalists reject such an ambition, often establishing the dominant religion as the official practice of the state. Only in very rare cases were nationalists able to supplant dominant religions, and usually not for long.

George L. Mosse's major studies on nationalism preceded or accompanied the burst of theoretical studies of the subject in the 1980s and 1990s, most of which sought to explain nationalism by reference to modernisation. His approach differed from most of these scholars in significant respects. Ernest Gellner put a much more positive gloss on the relationship. While considering the symbolic dimensions of nationalism as epiphenomenal, he regarded the nationalism as functional for the rise of industrialism and of a plural world order.⁴⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, like Mosse, viewed nationalism as one of a range of invented traditions of an industrialising society⁴⁵, which, although at first liberal-civic, became irrationalist taking ethnic-linguistic forms. However, his was an instrumentalist interpretation of nationalism as a device of competing elites to secure power. Mosse was closer to and was a direct influence on the ethno-symbolic school of nationalism, pioneered by Anthony Smith.

While acknowledging the importance of political and economic modernisation Smith argued that the symbolic world of culture was 'as much part of social reality as material and organizational factors'.⁴⁶ Like Mosse, Smith interpreted the rise of nationalism as a response to the crisis of meaning arising from the impact of secularisation (mediated by the modernising state) on traditional religions which took the form of a 'rediscovery' of historical models to

⁴⁴ E. Gellner, *Thought and Change* (London 1964); E. Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, (Oxford 1983).

⁴⁵ E. J. Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe 1870-1914', in E. J. Hobsbawm and T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge 1983); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nation and Nationalism Since 1780* (3rd edn, Cambridge 1992).

⁴⁶ A.D. Smith, *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism* (London 2009), 1-2, 24-5.

guide the present. Likewise, Smith initially focused on the role of intellectuals responding to this crisis to explain how a given nationalism developed, but came to consider that the emotional appeal of nationalism rested on its ability to renovate older ethnic myths, symbols, memories and culture.⁴⁷ In *Chosen Peoples* he referred to Mosse's examination of collective rituals as part of a study that maintained that nationalists's abilities to appropriate Judeo-Christian symbols, rituals and liturgies enhanced the endurance of nations. Smith, however, was always careful to recognise the persisting power of religion in many countries.⁴⁸ Like Mosse, he highlighted the role of the arts in transforming the abstraction of the nation into a highly individualised territorial and cultural community. Painters enabled their countrymen to *visualise*, while composers inspired them to *feel* the national homeland, its heroic history and the distinctive the culture and customs of the people.⁴⁹ In contrast to Hobsbawm, Smith argued for an interactive relationship between elites and broader social strata. Like Mosse, he was suspicious of top-down instrumentalist explanations that failed to explain why nationalist ideas resonated.

Smith, however, offered a more positive reading of nationalism. Mosse tended to speak of nationalism in terms of romantic escapism, and of its mythologies as masking realities. In contrast, Smith regarded nationalism as supporting a plural vision of humanity and historical myths as providing a sense of collective pride through which communities could find their own paths to progress. Smith also recognised that nationalists were concerned generally not only with culture but with the advancement of their life chances through political struggle. It is only possible to apply Mosse's analysis of German nationalism to nationalism-in-general with great caution. Although nineteenth century German nationalism had a strong cultural focus, this is

⁴⁷ A.D. Smith, *The Ethnic Origins of Nationalism* (Oxford 1986).

⁴⁸ A.D. Smith, *Chosen Peoples: Sacred Sources of National Identity* (Oxford 2003).

⁴⁹ A.D. Smith, *The Nation Made Real: Art and National Identity in Western Europe, 1600-1850* (Oxford 2013); M. Riley and A.D. Smith, *Nation and Classical Music: From Handel to Copland* (New York 2016).

explicable by the political fragmentation of Germans until 1871 and the sense of national inauthenticity of the Second Reich after unification, because of the exclusion of many Germans from the state. Even so, Mosse's analysis of nationalism is highly selective: the main vehicles of German national politics the Centre Party, the National Liberals and the Social Democrats are absent, and politics seems to be analysed only in terms of its expressive functions as a form of theatre. Mosse also appears to be interested in nationalist political concerns only as precursors of the totalitarian visions and activities of Nazism. What is notable in *The Nationalization of the Masses* is Mosse's constant referencing forward in his analysis of the nineteenth century festivals to the Nazi period. Although admitting the importance of contingent factors such as the Depression and the threat of Bolshevism in the triumph of Nazism, his discussion seemed primarily concerned with building a continuity between German nationalism and Nazism.

A second criticism arises from doubts about the solidarity-forming power of political rituals in modern societies. Jeffrey Alexander has argued Durkheim's arguments might apply to small tribal groups in which all the population participates. Nations, however, are large-scale, anonymous, imagined, and complex societies, where the majority, unable to join directly in public rituals, at best engage second-hand as spectators through the mass media or passively as in a theatre. In effect, only a minority experienced the effervescence and binding power of ritual practice.⁵⁰ In reply, Mosse could argue that his discussion of the nationalisation process goes well beyond a discussion of symbolic rituals, in exploring how through multiple media (visual, literary, musical and theatrical), there occurred a wide dissemination of myths, symbols and stereotypes that shaped a broader popular consciousness. Even so, Mosse's own

⁵⁰ J. C. Alexander, 'Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy', in J.C. Alexander, B. Giesen, and J.L. Mast (eds.), *Social Performance: Symbolic Action, Cultural Pragmatics and Ritual* (Cambridge 2006), 29–90..

analysis reveals that only a small minority of the German population were involved in the national festivals even during the mass rallies of the Nazi period.

This raises doubts about Mosse's pathological explanation of nationalism as utopian ideology forming individuals dislocated from traditional attachments by modernity into politicised masses. The concept of the masses, derived from Gustave Le Bon's and José Ortega y Gasset's theories about the irrationality of urban 'crowds', is problematic. Modern societies are highly socially differentiated, and Mosse's own nuanced discussion reveals that German national organisations and festivals were frequently undercut by class and religious tensions and often failed to evoke mass enthusiasm.

Indeed, except at times of existential crises an active (as opposed to a banal) nationalism is always a minority activity, whose core adherents tend to be educated professionals. This means we need more refined theories that include interests as well as values to explain why nationalism attracts specific groups, and how nationalists are able to build multi-class coalitions to obtain political power. As Mosse would have been well aware, nationalism cannot be understood only in relationship to modernisation because it emerged also in relatively underdeveloped countries (such as Greece and Ireland) and varied widely in its social constituencies, as well as in the forms it took, liberal, socialist, conservative and populist.

What Mosse does explain, with great imagination and power, is how cultural nationalist movements are able to socialise groups who feel alienated from dominant political structures into an oppositional culture that at times of crisis of the state can act as platform for collective political action. His discussion of festivals and political rituals influenced studies of late nineteenth century Irish cultural nationalism as a countercultural phenomenon, that sought to

create a new historicist *Weltanschauung* integrating all aspects of Irish society.⁵¹ This movement had striking parallels with German nationalist movements, in seeking inspiration in ancient Gaelic culture and mythic heroes as a source of national regeneration. The national revival was led by a young intelligentsia frustrated at their perceived double exclusion from power, first by the British state that denied Ireland Home Rule, and second by the established Irish Catholic political elite. They constituted only a minority even of their generation, but were formed into a self-consciously ‘missionary’ community, by active participation in Irish language and literary activities, sporting bodies, and pilgrimages to national sites that separated them from a ‘profane’ anglicised society. A section of this radicalised group staged the Easter Rebellion against the British state in 1916 and eventually assumed power.

Mosse understood his third focus, on the study of war, as part and parcel of his thesis about the linkage between nationalism and modernity. As a political religion, nationalism resonated in a period of large-scale death and sacrifice. Citizenship had raised the status of the soldier to become the symbol of the national body politic, who in dying as martyr attested to a faith in the immortality promised by the nation. He portrayed the attractions of nationalist war on the part of young middle-class males as a romantic escape from the stresses of rapid industrial change and the strictures of normality, and he cited the euphoria following the outbreak of war in 1914 as a form of release from the bourgeois life. This was war as festival.

However, a focus on war undercuts an explanation of nationalism (or fascism) as tied to general developmental processes. War is a contingent and therefore unpredictable phenomenon, whose origins are linked more to elite decisions and patterns of geo-political rivalry rather than

⁵¹ J. Hutchinson, *The Dynamics of Cultural Nationalism: The Gaelic Revival and the Creation of the Irish Nation-State* (London 1987).

industrialisation. Moreover, the fortunes of war, of victory or defeat, create turning points or ‘critical junctures’ that can radically change the historical track lines of populations. Without the defeat of the Second Reich it is doubtful if the Nazi revolution would have occurred. Although industrial mechanisation underpins both World Wars, Mosse observed the very different character of the First and Second World Wars and their significance for national identities, the former static but reinforcing a division between home and military fronts, the latter one of movement that also obliterated this division.

In spite of such criticisms, Mosse’s work remains seminal in three respects. He identified the importance of commemorative rituals and mythologies and their relation to mass death; the role of military conflict in cementing male solidarities that have long term social and political significance; and the relationship between the changing character of war and the legitimisation of the nation state. In what follows, I offer a (rather arbitrary) snap-shot of the vast literature on the changing memorialisation of war.

Mosse was innovative (along with Reinhardt Koselleck)⁵² in deploying the use of visual, monumental and literary evidence in depicting the development of the war memorials and of the cult of the national dead. He can be criticised for his stress on romanticism and industrialisation in the origins of this cult. Ernst Kantorowicz documented (as Mosse himself noted) that an idea of a patriotic martyrdom emerged in Europe as early as the period of the Crusades⁵³, and other historians have found premodern precursors to the cult of martial manliness and patriotic sacrifice, for example, in Sweden’s wars against Denmark in the

⁵² R. Koselleck, ‘War Memorials: Identity Formations of the Survivors’, in R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History: Timing, History, Spacing Concepts*, (Stanford, CA 2002), 285–326.

⁵³ E. H. Kantorowicz, ‘Pro Patria Mori in Medieval Political Thought’, *American Historical Review*, 56, 3 (1951), 472–92.

seventeenth century.⁵⁴ This problematises a characterisation of nationalism as modern and as an escape from bourgeois restrictions, though undoubtedly romanticism gave this cult new meaning and intensity. How far the cult of fallen soldiers is dependent on a symbiosis with Christian iconography is also questionable as martial martyrdom appears in Islamic and Buddhist societies. But in fairness to Mosse, he saw his work as exploratory and offering signposts to further research.

His work on commemorations and its forms has inspired a huge literature stretching from Jay Winter's seminal analysis of the memorialisation of the First World (and his subsequent studies of its visual, sculptural and literary representations) to Ken Inglis's studies of the significance of the Anzac memorial for Australian national identity⁵⁵. Mosse's concepts of fallen soldiers and of myth of the war experience continue to resonate, framing an important recent study of the politics of contemporary war commemoration and nationalism in Britain and Russia.⁵⁶

His innovative study of the myths of war and coping strategies, as arising out of the experience of soldiers themselves, remains an important counter to top-down elitists interpretations. Moreover, his discussion of how individuals distanced themselves from horror by 'war trivialisation' in the form of jokes, post cards, toy soldiers, and the tourism of battle sites broke new ground by showing how war 'memory' became embedded at the level of popular culture. This anticipated in certain respects the recent field of 'everyday nationalism'.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ A. Marklund, 'The Manly Sacrifice: Martial Manliness and Patriotic Martyrdom in Nordic Propaganda during the Great Northern War', *Gender and History*, 25, 1 (2003), 150–69..

⁵⁵ J.M. Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge 1995); *War Beyond Words* (Cambridge 2017); K. Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape* (Melbourne 1998).

⁵⁶ N. Danilova, *The Politics of War Commemoration in the UK and Russia*, (London 2015).

⁵⁷ See E. Zerubavel, *Time Maps* (Chicago 2003), ch. 2.

A second significant insight lay in the connections between war and small-group male solidarities, and how such solidarities of the trenches paved the way for understanding the formation of para-military formations of radical nationalism in the interwar period. Michael Mann in his study of Fascists has explored this linkage.⁵⁸ Anthony King, citing Mosse, has argued that there was an intimate association between masculinity, comradeship, nationalism and political motivation in citizen armies.⁵⁹ This has been taken up by many feminist scholars. One important study has even proposed that regular wars and subsequent commemorations of young male military sacrifice, centred on the flag, have been an essential source of nation state cohesion.⁶⁰ Others have explored how the institution of universal male conscription in countries such as Turkey has created networks for career advancement that contributed to the exclusion of women.⁶¹

Finally, Mosse broke ground in analysing of how the changing character of war has transformed conceptions of the nation, both positive and negative. He argued the enormity of loss from the total wars of the twentieth century may have destroyed heroic nationalist mythologies, observing that a celebration of martial sacrifice as embodied in great monuments has been replaced by concern for victims, both civilian and military. The mythic images now serve to distance national populations from the fear of death in the nuclear age.⁶² Several scholars have taken this further in their discussion of the replacement of heroic by traumatic remembrance, in arguing that monuments now do not mask but rather portray victimhood.

⁵⁸ M. Mann, *Fascists*, (Cambridge 2002), chs. 1 and 2.

⁵⁹ A. King, *The Combat Soldier: Infantry Tactics and Cohesion in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, (Oxford 2013), ch. 4.

⁶⁰ C. Marvin and D. W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge 1999).

⁶¹ A.G. Altinay, *The Myth of the Military Nation* (New York 2004), ch. 3.

⁶² Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 223-5.

Chris Coker has suggested that Western societies have lost faith in the civic patriotism able to invest death on the battle field with meaning. The tombs to the Unknown Soldier and Edward Lutyens's abstract Cenotaph to the dead indicated that with the triumph of industrial technology war had become agentless. Soldiers are no longer warriors given individuality and meaning by a shared national telos but have become anonymous victims.⁶³

In similar fashion, Jenny Edkins examined Lutyens's Cenotaph and the Vietnam Wall, as emblems of a long-term shift away from heroic towards traumatic remembrance. She argues that the Vietnam Wall, in lacking a didactic national symbolism, encouraged an individualistic and constructivist stance to the past that undermines the idea of an objectified moral collective.⁶⁴ This followed Mosse's perception that, since 1945, there has been a trend away from the public sacralization of the dead in monument-building focused on the national collectivity, towards the utilitarian provision of recreational facilities that served the individual needs of the people. This reaction against official heroic narratives and monumentalism has deepened in the contemporary period, according to Anthony King, who documents the increasing communal and demotic forms of contemporary national commemoration. The focus is increasingly on individual mortality and loss.⁶⁵

John Gillis extended Mosse's concerns about the representation of outsiders in his studies of contemporary commemoration as a political process, contested by nondominant groups (class, gender, and ethnic) against their exclusion from official narratives of war, public spaces, memorials, and history textbooks. From this perspective, national pasts are compromised because they mask the state violence towards minorities inherent in the establishment of

⁶³ C. Coker, *The Future of War* (Oxford 2004), 14.

⁶⁴ J. Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge 2003), ch. 3.

⁶⁵ A. King, 'The Afghan War and Postmodern Memory: Commemoration and the Dead of Helmand', *British Journal of Sociology*, 61, 1 (2013), 1–25.

homogenized societies and they justify patterns of exclusion and injustice that lie behind many of the world's conflicts.⁶⁶ However, such interpretations have to be qualified by the continued popularity of canonical commemorative rituals of the two world wars.⁶⁷

Mosse's fourth major concern with respect to nationalism: its association with bourgeois respectability and the repression of social and sexual 'outsiders' has provoked praise and controversy.⁶⁸ One might ask how representative his analysis is since his discussions are centered on Germany, with some references to France, Italy and Britain (all industrialising countries with a large middle class), given that nationalism has become a global phenomenon that takes root in many different socio-economic terrains. Mosse seems to underplay the diversity of nationalisms, some of which adopted counter cultural norms at least in their social movement phase. The Irish Gaelic League in the early twentieth century became a means for the involvement of young educated feminists in public life, who would normally be excluded by traditional Catholic patriarchal norms.⁶⁹ This more liberal phase was overturned after independence when there was a reassertion of patriarchal Catholic values. Perhaps, one need to distinguish between the nationalism of opposition movements from that of state- and nation-building phase, but in the latter case one might wonder if nationalism is being captured by the dominant value system rather than the reverse. Certainly, his equation of nationalism with sexual repression does not apply to a number of contemporary movements. Some contemporary right-wing populist movements (for example in the Netherlands) have gay leaders: in this case an affirmation of the LGBT+ norms is used to exclude allegedly homophobic Muslims from membership of the Dutch nation state.

⁶⁶ J. Gillis, 'Introduction', in J. Gillis (ed.), *Commemorations* (Princeton, NJ 1994): 3–26

⁶⁷ See Hutchinson, *Nationalism and War*, ch 4.

⁶⁸ Plessini, *The Perils of Normalcy*, 17, 116–7.

⁶⁹ Hutchinson, *The Dynamics*, ch.8.

In Mosse's works much emphasis is placed on the role of 'othering' in the constitution of national character. In *Nationalism and Sexuality*, he maintains this derives from the social and psychological insecurities of the industrialisation process that requires the re-assertion of bourgeois norms and controls. Here the 'outsiders' are inside the society (the Jew, the prostitute, the homosexual).⁷⁰ Other scholars have argued, however, for the primacy of external 'othering' in the crystallisation or reinforcement of national stereotypes. Charles Tilly thus writes of the consequent circumscription of populations within the nation state through geopolitical rivalry and war,⁷¹ Anthony Smith has explored the crystallisation of national identities through the development of 'we-they' stereotypes in interstate propaganda.⁷² How external and internal 'othering' connect would be a subject of interesting investigation.

Whatever criticisms one might have, no one can doubt the importance of Mosse's achievement. The leading feminist scholar, Nira Yuval-Davis, praised Mosse as a pioneer in relating nationalism to changing gender roles and sexuality.⁷³ The publication of his *Nationalism and Sexuality*, once again richly informed with reference to visual images and literary texts, accompanied an explosion in feminist scholarship exploring the gendered character of nationalism. This analysed the sexual demarcation of the public sphere and private sphere, educational segregation, and the role of war in creating men as subjects and women as objects of the nation.⁷⁴ It is, therefore, hard to identify the specific impact of Mosse. Where he

⁷⁰ How far there is an intrinsic connection between outsider status and sexuality is moot. In Joanna Michlic major study of Polish nationalism, the Jews appear as the threatening other as representatives of disease, usury and ritual murder rather than of deviant sexuality. J. B. Michlic, *Poland's Threatening Other* (Lincoln 2006).

⁷¹ C. Tilly, 'States and Nationalism in Europe 1492-1992', *Theory and Society*, 23, 1 (1994), 131-146.

⁷² A.D. Smith, 'War and ethnicity: the role of warfare in the formation, self-images, and cohesion of ethnic communities', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 4, 4 (1981), 375-97.

⁷³ N. Yuval-Davis, *Gender and Nation* (London 1997), 3,13.

⁷⁴ For example, F. Anthias, and N. Yuval-Davis (eds.), *Woman-Nation-State* (London 1989); G. Sluga, 'Identity, Gender, and the History of European Nations and Nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 4, 1 (1998), 87-111; W. Bracewell, 'Rape in Kosovo: Masculinity and Serbian Nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 6, 4 (2000), 563-90.

undoubtedly stands apart is in his early analysis of nationalism as it related to homosexuality and lesbianism. LGBT+ studies in this field has emerged only recently.

To conclude, I have argued that George L. Mosse understood nationalism as a form of new symbolic politics that addressed the anomie generated by industrialisation, the loss of religious faith, and the mass politics inaugurated by the French Revolution. Central to nationalism, Mosse thought, was a utopian vision that sought to unify the social world and that had the potential to produce totalitarian solutions in the name of the popular will. One outlet for the search for transcendence and *gemeinschaft* was the romanticisation of war and sacrifice with all its dire consequences. The idealized images of authenticity, produced by nationalists, also reinforced the norms of a bourgeois order under social threat that stigmatized racial, religious and sexual minorities. As a man devoted to individual liberty, he offered a largely negative judgement on nationalism, though he recognized in his own life experience the yearning for roots that it sought to address. He hoped against hope it was possible to achieve a humanistic patriotism, detached from the excesses of a xenophobic integralism.

I have identified some problems in his analysis: a lack of clear definitions of some key concepts, particularly 'nationalism' which render some of his conclusions debatable. In his comparative scholarship Mosse showed his awareness of the varieties of nationalism and his rich discussion of individual cases was always nuanced. He was concerned to break new ground in the understanding of fundamentally important problems and saw his writings as setting agenda for others to follow. However, his interpretation of nationalism as a bourgeois response to the dislocations of modernity is too narrow and throws doubt on some of its claims about the repressive codes of respectability. It is also difficult not to conclude that his focus on

Germany and Italy, the two cases of 'successful' fascisms, skews some of his general claims about nationalism particularly in relation to fascism and lead to an overestimation of its expressive character.

Such criticisms should not obscure his achievements and continuing relevance. Mosse was a pioneer in recognising the importance of the emotions in explaining the capacity of nationalism, rather than liberal or socialist ideologies, to be the main legitimiser of political communities. Although he may have exaggerated the theatrical dimension of nationalism in accounting for its popular attraction, his discussion of myth, liturgy and ritual in the form of national festivals offered an original and plausible model of the socialisation of nationalist elites. Anthony D Smith has acknowledged Mosse's influence in inspiring his influential ethno-symbolic framework in the field of nationalism, which, in foregrounding the symbolic world, counterbalances previous approaches that privileged more 'objective' political and economic processes.

Mosse's later explorations of the constitutive and changing character of war and military institutions in the formation and erosion of national identities have also had a profound impact, particularly in the study of war commemoration in its different forms, on which there is now a huge literature. His discussion of the role of subaltern actors (soldiers) rather than elites in myth creation (the myth of the war experience) and the socio-psychological mechanisms for overcoming trauma continue to inspire new lines of research. His examination of the gendered character of war making and myth construction has been taken up by generations of feminist scholars who have exposed how masculinist ideologies have become dominant in the modern period, in spite of egalitarian ideologies, shaping access to political power and prestige.