

UDK: 327(4/9)"19"

COBISS: 1.08

## State Failure in the Twentieth Century

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### **Abstract**

The world political map was subject to radical change in the twentieth century. This reflected a marked expansion in the number of states associated with decolonisation and the disintegration of multi-national federations. At the same time a significant number of states failed to survive, notably in Europe and in the first half of the century. Ephemeral states were either incorporated into colonial empires, unified with their neighbours for ideological reasons, merged with a nation-state or lacked the capacity for survival. However, it was a notable feature that the majority of states which failed in one era have been subject to resurrection in another, suggesting a high degree of stability in the state system, and pointing to the improbability of significant future losses to the international community of states.

**Keywords:** states, state formation, colonialism, war, independence

## Introduction

Political geographers directed considerable attention to the creation of states in the twentieth century. The processes of decolonization and national self-determination together with the fragmentation of multinational empires and federations have inevitably focused attention upon the formation of new states (Hamdan 1963; Harris 1993). The fifty-six independent states in existence in the year 1900 had quadrupled to nearly 200 at the end of the century (Christopher 1999). The international system of collective security, created after the Second World War under the oversight of the United Nations, has been remarkably supportive of the status quo for sovereign states, while encouraging decolonization.

However, even in the twentieth century states continued to be removed from the world map and there are potential candidates for removal in the early 21st century. At the same time states which lost their independence were frequently candidates to regain that status, when the factors which led to the loss of sovereignty were eliminated. An examination of ephemeral states may thus assist in suggesting some of the potential changes in the world political system which might take place early in the new millennium. However, as the majority of ephemeral states of the last century have been resurrected, the losses may be balanced by gains.

## Territorial aggrandisement

Territorial aggrandisement has been a feature of the last century as it was of earlier centuries. Major states had the ability to overcome others and incorporate them into their territories. Statements by four significant politicians of the twentieth century provide an insight into the phenomenon. Lord Salisbury, Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler were instrumental in much of the state carnage during the period, in the name of imperialism, social transformation and nationalism. By contrast Prime Minister Lothar de Maiziere actively sought the merger of his state with his more prosperous neighbour.

Lord Salisbury: 'You may roughly divide the nations of the world as the living and the dying... the weak states are becoming weaker and the stronger states are becoming stronger... the living nations will gradually encroach on

the territory of the dying and the seeds and causes of conflict among the civilised nations will speedily appear' (Sharp 1991: 1).

Joseph Stalin: 'For the nations which formerly belonged to old Russia our type of federation may and ought to be considered as leading toward unity. The motives are obvious: either these nations had no independent existence of their own, or they lost it a long time ago; that is why they would be willing to accept without much friction our Soviet type of federation' (Dziewanowski 1977: 82).

Adolf Hitler: 'For a thousand years the provinces of Bohemia and Moravia formed part of the Lebensraum of the German people... Czechoslovakia showed its inherent inability to survive and has therefore now fallen victim to actual dissolution. The German Reich in keeping with the law of self-preservation, is now resolved to intervene decisively to rebuild the foundations of a reasonable order in Central Europe' (Shirer 1964: 548).

Lothar de Maiziere: 'We are one people, we become one state. It is an hour of great joy... It is a farewell without tears' (Keesings 1990: 37761).

These statements referring specifically to the partition of Africa between Great Britain, France and Germany (1898), the Russian invasion of Poland (1920), the German annexation of Bohemia and Moravia (1938), and the reunification of Germany (1990) illustrate both the attitudes of many rulers of powerful states to weak neighbours and the positive approach to national unification. They also reflect the prevailing concepts of their age, ranging from the imperialism of the early twentieth century, through the ideological struggles of communism and fascism to modern liberal nationalism of the post-Cold War era.

## Ephemeral states

In the course of the twentieth century some 28 independent states were removed from the world political map (Table 1). Others (including Luxembourg and Poland) were suppressed in the course of the two world wars, only to be resurrected at the conclusion. I propose only to discuss those states which gained some measure of international recognition during the periods of general peace and which may be regarded therefore as part of the accepted international community for long periods. Some governments failed to gain this vital element of diplomatic recognition, even from their sponsors, although they retained their independence of other governments for long periods of time.

**Table 1. Ephemeral states of the twentieth century**

STATE	DATE OF DEMISE	DATE OF INDEPENDENCE	YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE	DATE OF RESURRECTION
Orange Free State	1902	1854	48	-
Transvaal	1902	1881	31	-
Korea	1905	1895	10	1945
Congo	1908	1884	24	1960
Morocco	1912	*	*	1956
Montenegro	1918	1878	40	-
Armenia	1922	1918	4	1991
Azerbaijan	1922	1918	4	1991
Georgia	1922	1918	4	1991
Ukraine	1922	1918	4	1991
Hejaz	1925	1916	9	-
Newfoundland	1934	1931	3	-
Ethiopia	1935	*	*	1941
Austria	1938	*	*	1945
Czechoslovakia	1939	1918	21	1945
Albania	1939	1913	26	1943
Estonia	1940	1918	22	1991
Latvia	1940	1918	22	1991
Lithuania	1940	1917	23	1991
Tanna Tuva	1944	1921	23	-
Slovakia	1945	1939	6	1993
Manchuria	1945	1932	13	-
Palestine	1950	1948	2	-
Somaliland	1960	1960	0	-
Zanzibar	1964	1963	1	-
Vietnam (South)	1975	1954	21	-
Germany (East)	1990	1949	41	-
Yemen (South)	1990	1967	23	-

\* *several centuries of independence*

Tibet, for example, appeared on the map of the world for 38 years between 1912 and 1951, yet failed to secure international recognition of its separate self-declared statehood, even from its sponsor, Great Britain.

A few general comments are required to set the issue in spatial and temporal perspective. On a continental scale, some thirteen of the ephemeral states were situated in Europe, compared with seven each in Africa and Asia

and only one in the Americas. These figures lend credence to Mark Mazower's (1998) condemnation of Europe as the 'dark continent' of the twentieth century.

This verdict is reinforced when it is remembered that six of the extra-European state failures resulted from annexation by European countries.

On a temporal scale eleven states lost their independence in the first quarter of the twentieth century, a further eleven in the second quarter and only six in the second half of the century. The two world wars and their immediate aftermaths were particularly dangerous times for the survival of weak states. In contrast, the late twentieth century was the most secure, once the system of collective security was in place, as demonstrated by the international response to the Iraqi attempt to incorporate Kuwait in 1990. Only three ephemeral states possessed a continuous independent state history extending back more than 50 years at the time of their demise. Indeed over a third (10) lost their independence within ten years of gaining statehood and a further third (10) within 25 years of gaining independence. A measure of international security appears to be gained by the length of time a state can maintain its sovereignty. A more detailed examination of the ephemeral states of the twentieth century may offer some indicators as to the circumstances and preconditions leading to failure. Loss of independence may be linked to four broad themes : colonial expansion, ideological liberation, national reunification and lack of independent capacity. The listing is not mutually exclusive as demise was often the result of more than one factor, or at a time when several unfavourable circumstances coincided.

## Colonial expansion

The expansion of the colonial empires in Africa and Asia continued well into the twentieth century and national aggrandizement in Europe continued until the Second World war. Thus the Orange Free State and South African Republic (Transvaal) were conquered by Great Britain in 1900-1902. There followed the Belgian annexation of the Congo Free State in 1908, the Franco-Spanish partition of Morocco in 1912 and, the Italian conquest of Ethiopia in 1935. In Asia, Korea was 'protected' by Japan in 1905 and annexed five years later.

Colonialism was not confined to Africa and Asia. In Europe Germany occupied the western provinces of Czechoslovakia in 1939, proclaiming them the 'Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia'. Although historical precedents were cited, the incorporation of an alien nation could be justified on no other

grounds than national aggrandizement and controlling an inferior people as expressed in terms of the protectorate proclamation, quoted earlier. Albania suffered a similar fate. The second world war brought the era of expansive imperialism to a close.

## **Ideological liberation**

Ideological concepts of national liberation have frequently been used to subvert independent governments. Occasionally such subversion has been used to incorporate one state into another, as a means of securing the new political dispensation. The most frequent use of this tactic was made by the Soviet government in fostering Scientific Socialism, although the Saudi conquest of much of the Arabian peninsula might also be regarded as ideological.

The twentieth century has witnessed the use and abuse of the term 'democracy' in a variety of ways. With it has gone the idea of 'liberation' in order to achieve democracy. Such slogans were widely adopted by Soviet administrations, first to establish and then expand the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union), although in essence the policy bore close resemblance to colonial expansion (Swietochowski 1995). Thus the majority of the various national state governments which emerged from the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 were systematically overthrown by Soviet insurrections as undeserving of separate existence, as suggested by Joseph Stalin. The governments of the national states of the Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, which had achieved international recognition during and immediately after the First World War, were overthrown by Soviet forces in the course of the ensuing civil war. Nominal independence was maintained at first, although the states were linked by military alliances and ideological bonds, which did not preclude significant measures designed to foster national development. Finally the states were joined to Russia through a unification agreement devised by the centralised Communist Party in 1922 to create the Soviet Union as a means of building socialism (Pipes 1964).

In 1940, the three Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia were incorporated into the Soviet Union in the name of ideological liberation. Their independence had been recognised in 1920 as a political necessity in order to preserve the Soviet regime in its Russian heartland, at the same time as Finland and Poland had been recognised. Only the latter two countries were permitted to escape permanently from Stalin's definition of 'old Russia'. In the Baltic states, allegedly popular demands by the three national parliaments

after carefully controlled single-candidate elections were cited as the reason for the demise of the independent states.

In 1944 Tanna Tuva, which had experienced no previous period of Russian rule, was incorporated into the Soviet Union as a means of eliminating political opposition in the country and forestalling a possible Chinese claim to re-establish control at the end of the Second World War. The Tuvan government recognised that 'the Soviet State .. has attained the flowering of the material and spiritual strength of large and small peoples in a unified socialist family' and stated that 'to live and work in this family is the solemn desire of the whole Tuvan people' (Rupen 1971: 146).

In Arabia the Kingdom of Hejaz was conquered by the Sultanate of Nejd in 1925 and the Hashemite dynasty was overthrown. Ostensibly, this campaign was undertaken to enforce the stricter Wahhabi Islamic religious regime on the spiritual center of Islam and to safeguard the security and integrity of annual pilgrimage (Kostiner 1993). It was only in 1932 that Hejaz and Nejd were united to form the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a means of preventing secessionism and attaching Hejaz more securely to the Saudi state.

## National unification

Nationalism linked to a sense of shared identity has been one of the most powerful political forces of the twentieth century (Smith 1991). The concept of the nation and the idea of national unification in spatial terms have been used by many politicians to incorporate neighbouring states deemed to house an unredeemed portion of the nation. National unification in the twentieth century has been of two basic forms. The first involved the gathering together of states speaking a common language or sharing a common culture. The second represented the reunification of nations which had been partitioned on ideological grounds, upon the elimination of the ideological differences.

The first state to succumb to the doctrine of national unification in the twentieth century was Montenegro. After a long and successful struggle for independence, the *raison d'être* for two Serb inhabited states was questionable when the common enemy had been defeated. The collapse of the national army during the First World War undermined the prestige of the aged Montenegrin king. Thus at the end of the war in 1918 King Nicholas was deposed and the state merged with the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) under King Peter of Serbia.

Other states were to follow. One of the most complex cases was Austria in 1938. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in November 1918 resulted in an identity crisis in the rump German-speaking state as the various nationalities of the former Empire proclaimed their independence. In the immediate aftermath of defeat, the Republic of German-Austria was established, but the projected incorporation into Germany was prohibited under the Versailles peace settlement in 1919. The fostering of a distinctive separate Austrian national identity was difficult and contested throughout the inter-war period. After the installation of the National Socialist government in Berlin in 1933, the legitimacy of the Austrian state was systematically undermined, ultimately leading to invasion and a stage-managed referendum on unity (Wagner and Tomkowitz 1971).

China presents a particularly distinctive approach to national unification. The disintegration of China following the revolution which overthrew the monarchy in 1911-1912 was viewed by all Chinese factions as temporary. Thus Manchuria, which gained limited international recognition, was reincorporated into China upon the defeat of its protecting power, Japan in 1945.

The decolonization of Asia and Africa in the two decades after the Second World War was expected to lead to the reunification of peoples divided by colonial boundaries. This did not happen on any significant scale (Young 1991). The most substantial adjustment took place in the Horn of Africa. The Republic of Somaliland (ex-British), formally passed an act of unification with the Somalia Republic (ex-Italian) in order to create a single Somali national state in 1960 (Prunier 1994). In 1964 the Arab sultanate of Zanzibar was overthrown and the African revolutionary government sought union with neighbouring Tanganyika to form Tanzania (Clayton 1981).

The last group of national unifications were the result of the Cold War and its aftermath. Reunification where nation-states had been partitioned on ideological grounds has been significant, particularly in the last quarter of the century (Corson and Minghi 1994; Waterman 1996). The re-unification of Vietnam, Germany and Yemen were all achieved when the ideological division between the two power blocks of the Cold War was eliminated and governments of similar ideologies were in power in the two sections of the country. Vietnam was reunited following the communist victory in the South, Yemen following personnel changes in the South and Germany following change in the East. In each case the reasons for the continuation of two separate states were considered to be outweighed by considerations of a common nationhood.

## Lack of independent capacity

In a restricted number of cases demise was due to the government's lack of capacity to maintain the state's separate independent status. In view of the presence of politically stable and viable ministates in the world political system, this issue requires a significant measure of qualification (Duursma 1996). Furthermore, the presence of a large body of 'quasi-states' which lack the basic internal and external structures to maintain their status, yet were sustained by the guarantee of the international community, makes this a difficult category to define (Jackson 1990). However, certain states did prove incapable of maintaining their separate existence as leaders sought the protection of larger neighbours in the interests of their own preservation. Two states, Newfoundland and Palestine may be placed in this category.

Newfoundland gained the right to independence under the Statute of Westminster in 1931. However, with the onset of the Great Depression and the decline in the price of the island's staple exports, servicing the public debt became impossible (McIntyre 1977). As a result the island surrendered its newly gained status to Great Britain, which took over the administration and the debt.

Possibly the most highly contested case of state failure in the twentieth century was Palestine. The partition of the former mandated territory between Israel and Palestine resulted in conflict and the intervention of neighbouring states. The authorities in the Transjordanian occupied sector (the West Bank) declared King Abdullah of Transjordan to be 'King of all Palestine' in 1948 (Smith 1984: 90). The Palestinian state, however, lacked basic infrastructure and was controlled by pro-Transjordanian factions, which were threatened by popular discontent. In 1950 Transjordan and Palestine were united to form the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, thus securing the monarchy's hold over the West Bank.

## Precipitating failure

State failure was usually brought about by specific political actions, leading to diplomatic crises and so forcing the leaders of the threatened states to consider their options, or lack of options. It is a truism that governments are essentially conservative, and few rulers willingly vote their countries out of existence. Thus it has usually been the use of force or the threat of the use of

force that has precipitated the actual actions leading to the death of the state. It was Adolph Hitler's statement 'my patience is now at an end' with its implied threat of imminent and overwhelming military action if his demands were not met, which precipitated the demise of Czechoslovakia, as it had been in the earlier surrender of Austria (Bullock 1962: 463). In these cases outlined the international community did not intervene. Indeed diplomatic moves by the incorporating power secured the acquiescence of countries with a vested interest in the move. This did not preclude the adoption of unilateral invasion, which was unopposed by the international community, but generally the actual use of armed force was not needed to secure incorporation (Kirby 1994). Indeed, only five of the 28 states enumerated above succumbed directly to military force, rather than negotiating their own demise.

The conditions leading to the free acceptance of the loss of state identity are more difficult to assess. Thus Hitler's successful incorporation of Austria was facilitated by a general lack of faith in the future of a separate Austrian state following the fall of the Habsburg dynasty, even among opponents of the National Socialist Party. The promotion of national unification, through a common linguistic identity undermined the concept of a need for a separate Austrian government. The same ideological loss of a distinctive socialist identity was recognised as cause of the demise of the German Democratic Republic in 1990.

In other cases incorporation was effected through the promotion of the idea that backward and inefficient governments should make way for modern, progressive and more efficient governments, which were capable of effecting good governance and economic and social development. The last Emperor of Korea's plaintive resignation of his office to the Emperor of Japan, stating that it was necessary for him to 'entrust Our Great Task to abler hands than Ours' is a case in point (Kim and Kim 1967: 215). The concluding communique that President Emile Hacha of Czechoslovakia had 'confidently placed the fate of the Czech people in the hands of the Fuhrer' is another (Bullock 1962: 485). These arguments were after all the basic rationale of colonialism.

## **Resurrection**

Just over half the states (15) which suffered destruction in the twentieth century were resurrected at a later stage. This suggests that the factors leading to demise can be reversed. The most obvious example is the undoing

of colonial annexations. Six of the eight states annexed as colonies or 'protectorates' were revived as independent states. Those annexed in the 1930s, together with Korea, regained their independence as a result of the defeat of the axis powers in the Second World War. The remaining two did so during the decolonisation of Africa. The two which did not regain their independence (Orange Free State and Transvaal) were incorporated into the Union of South Africa in 1910, a move not subsequently disputed by their then exclusively White electorates.

Seven of the nine states annexed on nominally ideological grounds were revived. These were the full member Soviet Socialist Republics of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which regained sovereign status upon the Union's dissolution in 1991. The two states which did not regain independence were Tanna Tuva, which as a lower level Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, was not given the option in 1991, and Hejaz, which remains a part of the Saudi dominions.

Only two of the nine states which disappeared as a result of national unification have been revived, although two more attempted to do so. Austria regained its independence in 1945 as part of the allied process of dismantling of the German National Socialist state. The other resurrection was Slovakia, which was suppressed in 1945, but regained independence in 1993 as the federal state of Czechoslovakia disintegrated once more. National integration has gone furthest in China, where ethnic Manchus constitute only a small minority of the population of the area of the former Manchuria. Elsewhere, national unification revolves around the elimination of differing levels of economic and political development bequeathed by the former separate governments rather than overcoming ethnic differences.

Neither of those characterised as losing their independence as result of a lack of capacity have as yet regained independence. Newfoundland joined the Canadian Confederation in 1949 with and its budget subsidised by the federal government. This situation of financial dependency has tended to preclude separatist action. However, Palestine appears to be on the verge of regaining statehood, as a result of reestablishing a degree of political capacity and most significantly a measure of international support.

Some of the ephemeral states, which have not regained independence, continue to exist as sub-state political units where periodic references are made to the revival of their previous status. Thus Montenegro, Tanna Tuva, Zanzibar, Palestine and Newfoundland enjoy varying measures of selfgovernment. Since 1992 the authorities in Somaliland operate a selfproclaimed

independent, if unrecognised, state. In contrast even the names 'Manchuria' and 'Transvaal' have been eliminated from the administrative maps of China and South Africa respectively as part of programmes to erase their historical heritages.

### **Terminally ill states?**

It may be asked whether there are recognisable symptoms, which may predict the possible death of a state. As only five states have died in the last 50 years, it is unlikely that many will suffer the same fate in the immediate future. Furthermore, the revival of over half those states which died in the last century confirms the resilience of the state once created. The prospects for further losses in the new millennium are extremely limited.

National unification and a lack of capacity appear to be the sole factors still operative in the world in the last 50 years to induce such a result, with the end of colonialism and the major ideological conflicts of the century. Few nations are still divided into separate internationally recognised states. Korea remains the prime case, although speculation on the possibilities and prospects for unification is inconclusive (Eberstadt 1997). The future of Bosnia-Herzegovina, caught in the struggle for Serb and Croat unification, remains uncertain, although international guarantees appear to offer security for its survival. The same may be said of the guarantees offered to Kuwait.

The disintegration of the Soviet Union resulted in the emergence of several states which had little history of national cohesion. Particularly significant in this respect are Belarus and Moldova (Dawisha and Parrott 1997). The government of Belarus has conducted unsuccessful negotiations to rejoin Russia. The linguistic and cultural distinctions between the two nations are slight, but the economic situation of Belarus has led to a Russian rejection of the merger. The Romanian-speaking population of Moldova similarly may find the building of a separate Moldovan nation problematical.

The fate of other states is irreparably linked to a ruling dynasty. Thus the stability and continuity of the dynasty may be essential for the survival of the state (Joffe 1994). Oil rich states, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Brunei, may only sustain separate statehood through adherence to the concept of a just Moslem monarchy. Similarly the political survival of the principality of Monaco depends upon the continuation of the Grimaldi dynasty (Duursma 1996). In these cases a republican revolution or

the extinction of the dynasty could therefore destroy the state. An argument has been advanced for the demise of Lesotho, now that apartheid has been ended in South Africa (Lemon 1996). However, predicting such events is essentially looking into a crystal ball.

## Conclusion

Against the general trend of international events, states did fail in the twentieth century, although remarkably few did so in the second half of the century, once the impetus offered by instability surrounding the two world wars was over. Furthermore, over half of those states which did fail were subsequently resurrected. The particular circumstances attending their demise have demonstrated a number of significant processes in the development of the state system. The preservation of sovereign statehood is regarded as the first duty of a government, yet some states fail for basic reasons. The balance between preservation and extinction is sometimes delicate and states which were apparently secure in one era become insecure in another. The nature of the external threats confronting them and the strength of their accepted internal political leadership shift with time. Potential state death, as well as rebirth, requires a greater understanding of the process in order to anticipate the potential for disruption caused by both. However, it must be emphasised that the map of the world, as ever, is liable to significant change, in spite of the innate conservatism of the international community. Against this must be placed the observation that within the confines of the present international dispensation, the permanent suppression of an independent state has been remarkably difficult to achieve.

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## Moč in nemoč držav v 20. stoletju

### Povzetek

Podoba političnega zemljevida sveta se je drastično spremenila v dvajsetem stoletju. Predvsem je opaziti izrazito povečanje število držav različnih velikosti, kar gre pripisati v glavnem dekolonizacijskem in dezintegracijskim procesom večnacionalnih držav oziroma federacij. V istem obdobju nekaterim državam, predvsem v Evropi, ni uspelo preživeti. Države so se vključevale v kolonialne imperije, se združevale z sosedami iz ideoloških razlogov ali se pridružile sosednji nacionalni državi, saj niso imele več moči za obstoj. Zabeležiti pa velja, da je obdobju nemoči države oziroma slabljenju ideje nacionalne države ponavadi sledilo obdobje oživljanja. Med drugim nas to navaja na misel, da sta sistem in ideja nacionalne države zdrava in živa, obenem pa ta ugotovitev ne govori v prid razlišljanjem, ki prihodnost vidijo in povezujejo le z mednarodnimi združbami oziroma omrežjem držav.