

'Round Table in memory of John Alexander Armstrong'?

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This issue provides a critical appreciation of John Armstrong's contribution to nationalism following his death on 23 February 2010. Born in the oldest city in the United States, St. Augustine, Florida, to Irish and Hispanic Catholic parents, Armstrong also served in the US army in Belgium during World War II. His dissertation on Ukrainian nationalism during the war, published in 1955 as *Ukrainian Nationalism*, was sparked by his war service, and drew upon interviews with Ukrainian participants and Germans he conducted in 1949 as well as German documents. Taras Kuzio, in this volume, remarks that this was an absolutely seminal work on Ukrainian nationalism. Armstrong joined the Political Science department of the University of Wisconsin in 1954, and, despite the behaviouralist revolution in American political science, remained anchored to a comparative political history approach. In addition to his landmark *Nations Before Nationalism* (1982), Armstrong was a leading Sovietologist whose work - beginning with *The Soviet Bureaucratic Elite. A Case Study of the Ukrainian Apparatus* (1959) - was one of the few to draw attention to the internal workings of minority nationalism in the USSR.

In this issue, several prominent scholars of nationalism – Anthony Smith, Pal Kolsto, Steven Grosby and Taras Kuzio – reflect on the contribution made by the late John Armstrong to the study of nations and nationalism. All agree Armstrong made a lasting impact on the field. For Smith, Kolsto and Grosby, Armstrong's insights offered a distinct perspective on the origins of nations at a time when the functionalist and structuralist interpretations of Deutsch, and later Hobsbawm and Gellner, took centre stage. The latter emphasised material developments to the exclusion of symbolic factors. Kolsto and Kuzio also draw our attention to Armstrong's considerable East European and Soviet oeuvre, which many who are only acquainted with his magnum opus, *Nations Before Nationalism* (1982), neglect.

Anthony Smith, the founding father of ethnosymbolist theory, acknowledges his debt to Armstrong. Kolsto likewise concurs that Smith was influenced by his insights. *Nations Before Nationalism* was Armstrong's crowning achievement, his principal contribution to nationalism theory. Yet Armstrong was no theorist: he did not, as Kolsto astutely observes, advance a model to grapple with those offered up by the likes of Deutsch or Gellner. Instead he penned an evidence-based, inductive, historical sociology and political history which built middle-range observations from the ground up - based on wide reading in European and Middle Eastern history. Covering an immense historical and geographic canvas, Armstrong did not, as Smith and Kolsto note, precisely define ethnic group and nation. Nor did he tackle the 'when is the nation?' question in a systematic way. From Iran to Spain, northern Europe to the Sahara, the ancient world to the early modern era, Armstrong instead led us on an expedition to explore the political subjectivity of the premodern Old World. This book should, writes Kolsto, have been dubbed, 'Identity Making' before nationalism.

Smith points to a number of key concepts first elucidated and woven together by Armstrong: the mythomoteur, symbolic border guards, the golden age, the role of capital cities. In an interesting

aside, Kolsto informs us the term 'mythomoteur' is drawn from an obscure French academic who yoked together French terms meaning 'myth' and 'engine.' Smith suggests mythomoteurs are critical because they bind people's affection to a polity even in the absence of state compulsion or material benefits. This explains why political memories can survive the dissolution of a state to live another day. Grosby, like Smith, credits Armstrong with seeing beyond the material and political exigencies of today to the *longue duree* and the longstanding connections between the dead and the living which are reproduced, often by religious institutions, over generations. Grosby underscores how important religion is, how it often borrows from and shades into nationalism, and how Armstrong was correct to stress its significance in the premodern world. Here religion was not simply a universalist outlook, as Gellner or Giddens would have it, or an otherworldly creed, but an institutional structure, worldview and idiom which provided the chrysalis for political identity. In short, though Armstrong didn't specify this, his work implies that once humans and their religious elites began to keep records, this opened the door to 'national' consciousness. The neolithic rather than modern era thus inaugurates the age of nations.

Taras Kuzio, like Kolsto, foregrounds Armstrong's East European work, reminding us that few scholars in the United States paid much attention to Ukrainian nationalism and fewer still were able to glimpse the second-class position of 'younger brothers' such as the Ukrainians, who consequently always felt a distance from ethnic Russians. Hence Armstrong's observation that it was highly unlikely that a Ukrainian could ascend to Soviet leadership and his relevance for the re-emergence of Ukrainian nationalism in both 1989 and 2013-14.

For Smith, Armstrong's *meisterwork* never really resolved the tension between the ahistorical nature of its boundary approach to identity construction derived from Barth, and its historicist aspects - myths and symbols reproduced in sacred centres. Were premodern 'nations' formed organically along linguistic and religious boundary lines, or was there an element of deliberate political construction of such boundaries, as a Barthian might insist? In terms of the 'cultural stuff' that Barth derided, but which sounds awfully like a myth-symbol complex, how much was this focused on boundaries, and how much on myths of shared ancestry and attachment to homeland, core aspects of the definition of ethnicity?

Kolsto adds that Armstrong at once rejected the primordialist label in favour of modernism while contesting the claim that nations are epiphenomenal by citing their ability to answer to the deeply-cherished human need for meaning and continuity. Whether one views this ambiguity as a strength or weakness, few will quibble with Armstrong's legacy as a titanic figure in nationalism studies. His work is a first port of call for those seeking to understand the ethnosymbolist critique of modernist and constructionist theory. For this we owe him our scholarly gratitude.