



deem to be their rightful place in the world. There are, however, examples of benign nationalist struggles that have not led to violent conflicts or oppression of one population group over another. Here, Icelandic demands for secession from the Danish state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries seem to be a perfect case in point. Although an intense nationalist sentiment generated this contention, it was non-violent almost to the extreme. As a matter of fact, the only casualty that we can in any sense relate to the actions of Icelandic nationalists was the death of an unpopular district governor in northern Iceland from apoplexy in the summer of 1849. A few days before his premature death, a group of about seventy peasants had demonstrated outside the governor's house, asking him to vacate his office at the first opportune moment. Before retreating from the scene, the peasants expressed their nationalist fervour, shouting slogans such as "Long live national liberty! Long live co-operation and unity! Death to oppression!" The shame he suffered from this incident drove the governor to his grave, his friends and relatives contended, although some of his opponents claimed excessive drinking to be a more probable cause for his death.

One might attempt to explain the unusually cordial relations between the periphery and the centre by referring to a pacific Nordic mentality, but the history of the Nordic region hardly supports such a conclusion. For most of the early-modern period, the Danish king and his Swedish counterpart had fought for pre-eminence in Scandinavia, and it was only in the 20th century that it became self evident that the Nordic people did not fight each other in wars. Before 1814, the Nordic region was plagued by the same militarism as any other part of warlike Europe. Rather, one must look at the context of Icelandic nationalism in order to understand its pacific nature; at the same time it has to be seen both as an example of how potent the logic of nationalist discourse has been in European history for the last two centuries, and of how the process of national formation is always shaped by the situation in which it takes place.

## **ICELAND AND THE DANISH MONARCHY**

In the early 1830s, when Icelandic students in Copenhagen formulated the first nationalist demands for their homeland, Iceland had been part of the Danish monarchy for over four centuries. Iceland's status in this complex and heterogeneous state was that of a dependency, which gave it a certain preferential status to the Danish colonies (such as Greenland and the Virgin Islands). Thus, although the Danish king had formally had absolute power in Iceland since the late 17th century, it was only at the end of the 18th that the medieval institution *Alþingi* was finally abolished. This annual assembly had served through the centuries as a high court and a meeting place for the Icelandic élite, but it had gradually lost all significance and few regretted its abolition in 1800.

Until the second quarter of the 19th century, there were few signs of discontent in Iceland with the political and constitutional status of the country in the Danish monarchy. All through the disasters of the Napoleonic wars, Icelanders remained loyal to their king in Copenhagen, in spite of good opportunities of revolting against Danish rule. A long list of possible reasons can be given for this apparent submissiveness in Iceland. To begin with, a distant, relatively poor, and sparsely populated periphery could never play a central role in

the affairs of the state, and for that reason, Iceland enjoyed relative autonomy from the authorities in Copenhagen. Due to its distance from the capital, the government in Copenhagen was never able to formulate or implement a coherent administrative policy for this isolated part of the realm, which in practice meant that its influence on Icelandic affairs was both sporadic and erratic. Moreover, most royal officials in Iceland in the 18th and 19th centuries, except for the governor, were of Icelandic decent, and the language of church and law courts was also Icelandic rather than Danish. Even in cases of administrative regulations that had very detrimental effects on the Icelandic economy, such as the hated monopoly trade of the 17th and 18th centuries, the blame for its adverse consequences was placed on those implementing the policy – that is, the merchants – rather than the one responsible for formulating the policy, that is, the king.

Finally, it was difficult to find the royal government at fault for the grave economic and social problems that plagued Iceland all through the 18th century. The final affliction in this difficult century was the worst eruption in Icelandic history, lasting from the summer of 1783 into the following year. In its wake, over one quarter of the Icelandic population died from hunger and diseases, bringing it down to around 38,000 in 1786. To explain this natural catastrophe, the Lutheran minister of the parish worst hit by the eruption, could only point to God's wrath, brought upon his parishioners for their arrogance, discord, and immoral habits. To others, these times of troubles were the final proof of the fact that the inhospitable natural environment rendered Iceland more or less uninhabitable and, for that reason, the only solution to its predicament was to move the survivors of the famine years to a milder and a more bountiful place. Contemporary observers might disagree on the causes for these natural calamities – divine punishment was but one explanation, an inexplicable curse that had been placed on the nation was another – but no one suggested the king in Copenhagen as a possible culprit in this context.

## **ICELANDIC NATIONALISM: ITS ORIGINS AND CHARACTER**

Icelandic nationalism had its ideological roots in the romantic sentiments of the era following the Napoleonic wars in Europe. The ideas of romantic nationalism found a fertile ground in this group, because a strong sense of pride in the Icelandic cultural heritage was prevalent among the Icelandic students even before romanticism became a fashion on the European continent. Comparing the dismal reality of contemporary Icelandic social and cultural life with the glorious period of the sagas in the 10th and 11th centuries, the intellectuals could not avoid pondering the question why their country had declined so spectacularly in the centuries from its first settlement. In the saga period, Icelanders were heroes, equally equipped to fight with the sword and the word, while in the 18th century, according to one pre-romantic commentator, Icelandic society was on the brink of extinction, “terminating in a wretched, sullen, acrimonious, and ever-wicked and infamous lethargy”<sup>1</sup>.

Although the use of medieval history, as a source of pride and encouragement, is a common thread uniting the political ideas of at least some of the 18th-century patriots in Iceland and the romantic nationalists of the 19th, there was a clear shift from the former group to the latter in the political conclusions drawn from this common ground. The 18th-

century advocates of progress had all perceived the Danish king as harbinger of enlightenment in the periphery, or the agent most likely to awaken their countrymen from their apparent slumber. Thus, Eggert Ólafsson, the 18th-century naturalist and poet, who many of the early nationalists looked to as their intellectual progenitor, praised the Danish absolute king in his poetry as a source of peace and justice in Iceland. Icelanders could only blame themselves for their sorry state, he argued, and in order to improve their lot they had to venture upon the road of true enlightenment. For the 19th-century nationalists, however, it was neither adverse nature nor the sloth of the people that had caused Iceland's decline since the late 13th century, but rather the "foreign" governments that had controlled the country since Icelanders lost their independence to Norway in 1262. "National liberty" was the key to economic and social progress, they claimed, because "world history has clearly proved that every nation has prospered the most when it has taken care of its own government", as the emerging nationalist leader Jón Sigurðsson wrote in 1841 in an article calling for a resurrection of the Icelandic parliament<sup>2</sup>. This remarkable shift in the Icelandic political atmosphere had primarily ideological origins, as there was no socio-economic change in Iceland in the first half of the 19th century to warrant this rise in nationalist fervour.

The same idea characterized Icelandic nationalism throughout the struggle for independence from the 1830s into the 20th century; that is, the nationalists shifted the blame for Iceland's economic decline from Icelanders themselves or their natural habitat to a foreign government. This did not necessarily lead to an open criticism of specific policies of the Danish government in Iceland, except, perhaps, its restrictions on free trade with the external world, but rather to a critique of the "unnatural" arrangement where one nation was put under the rule of another. Distinctive culture, the nationalists claimed throughout this period, common history, and a clearly bounded territory made the Icelandic population a separate national community, and for that reason it had the right and duty to resist all integration into a larger national unit.

Icelandic students in Copenhagen around the mid-19th century first developed this ideological outlook, but it is expressed with the greatest clarity in the arguments of the Icelandic delegates in a Danish-Icelandic inter-parliamentary committee formed in 1918. At the end of the First World War, the committee was charged with finding a new framework, acceptable to both partners, for the relationship between the centre and the province. From the beginning, the Icelandic delegates demanded full sovereignty for an Icelandic state, using the Icelandic culture as the main argument for Icelandic sovereignty. Moreover, the Icelandic members of the committee maintained, independence was not only the inherent right of the Icelandic nation, based on its cultural character and history, but also the only route possible toward its maturity and prosperity. Hence, the committee concluded, independence was a necessary prerequisite for the nation to reach its cultural and material objectives and for that reason Icelanders could accept nothing short of full sovereignty [Source].

There is, of course, nothing inherently "non-violent" in this line of reasoning. According to the Icelandic conception of the nation, the national community was a primordial social group, or "embedded in human nature and history", and "objectively identifiable through [its] distinctive way of life", to quote John Hutchinson's definition of primordialist nation-

alism<sup>3</sup>. The Icelandic nation was not “willed by itself”, or formed through “a daily plebiscite”, as French theorists liked to portray their national formation<sup>4</sup>; rather, it was based on “a deep and mysterious impulse, which originates in a rigid natural law, in a basic nature that is common to all”, to quote the words of the Icelandic nationalist historian J.J. Aðils<sup>5</sup>. This innate sentiment forced the nation to claim its birthright, and the “fact” that the Icelandic nation possessed an old, “original” language, further justified the nationalist argument. From this perspective, the nationalist struggle was easily portrayed as an obligation, and in their striving for national liberty the nationalists saw their politics as simply following the laws of nature rather than expressing a political conviction.

There is an unmistakable resonance of German nationalist thought in these assertions. J.G. Fichte had, for example, exalted the German as *der ursprüngliche... Mensch*, or the original person, speaking an uncorrupted, original language, and, therefore, alone capable of loving his or her nation and understanding the “true” national spirit<sup>6</sup>. In 1870, the Prussian historian H. von Treitschke used a similar line of reasoning to justify the annexation of Alsace into the emerging German Reich, formally constituted in Versailles the following year. In his writings, Treitschke vehemently rejected the idea of questioning the Alsacians themselves if they preferred to be German or to remain French citizens, although he did not attempt to hide the fact that the majority of them would probably have chosen France if asked. “The French domination of a German stock is always an unsound condition”, he simply asserted, but “today it is a crime against reason of history, or an oppression of free men by half-educated barbarians.”

Considering the diametrically different social, historical, and political contexts of Icelandic and German nationalist ideals, it is obvious why similar notions of the respective nations produced entirely diverse strategies. Treitschke promoted the interests of a Prussian state, which was growing in strength, seeking hegemony on the European continent: “These provinces [Alsace and Lorraine] are ours by the right of the sword”<sup>7</sup>, he maintained, and the victories of the Prussian army on the battlefields in the fall of 1870 seemed to confirm his opinions. Icelandic nationalists, however, were in no position to brandish the sword in their debates with the Danes. At the end of 1870, or the same that von Treitschke called for the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine, the Icelandic population passed the 70,000 mark for the first time in its recorded demographic history. The great majority of this minuscule nation consisted of poor peasants and their dependents, living on isolated farms scattered around the country. Reykjavík was the only town to speak of in Iceland, and in 1870, this district capital of Iceland was little more than a squalid fishing village of around 2,000 inhabitants. It is, therefore, not surprising that in the 19th century even the leaders of the nationalist movement had serious doubts about the economic viability of an independent Icelandic nation-state.

Regarding its internal politics, there was also limited room or incentive for ethnic aggression in 19th-century Iceland. The Icelandic population has always been unusually homogeneous in cultural terms, speaking a distinct and relatively unified language, and professing more or less the same religious creed. Without any clear cultural markers dividing the population into distinctive, hostile groups, there seemed to be limited ground for ethnic violence in the country. Nationalism invited, however, one obvious possibility for political unrest, and that concerned the relations with the Danish king and his representatives in

Iceland. As mentioned above, until the early 19th century, Icelanders had rarely regarded Danish rule in Iceland as illegitimate or oppressive. The nationalist discourse questioned, however, its legitimacy in a double sense: first, it claimed the subjugation of a “foreign” power to be against “the natural order of things” and in opposition to the “spirit of the age”; second, it portrayed the foreign rule, its lack of interest in Icelandic affairs, and its lack of understanding for the economic and social conditions in Iceland as the real cause for the apparent decline of Icelandic society. The obvious conclusion of this line of argument was not only to question the Danish authority in the abstract sense, but to attack the representatives of that authority in the country itself – and then it did not make much difference if they were of Icelandic or Danish ethnic origins.

This was exactly what happened in the early days of the nationalist struggle, especially around the mid-19th century. The protest against the district governor in northern Iceland – the “tyrant-in-chief” as one popular political verse called him – has already been mentioned, and a few months later the lower class parishioners in Reykjavík denounced their pastor for preaching only to the social élite sitting on the front benches of the Reykjavík Cathedral. Innocent as these incidents may seem, they struck fear in the hearts of the government officials in Iceland. To them it seemed as if the “raw masses” shunned all authority and were ready to take the government of the country into their own hands. “The common people hold meetings”, wrote the bishop of Iceland in despair to his superior, the Danish minister of the interior, “and united they are an invincible force. People do not respect their officials at all, and they consider them as their servants, whom they can simply dismiss at will...”<sup>8</sup>.

A revolution against the authorities was, however, not what the leaders of Icelandic nationalism advocated. Thus, while the nationalist leader Sigurðsson urged his countrymen to demonstrate their interest in politics, he chastised them for their tumultuous spirit around the mid-19th century. “Form a national union all over the country”, he wrote in 1850, because

no one has the right to prohibit you from holding meetings and from discussing general issues, but take care to conduct all meetings in an orderly manner... Let no one incite you to dishonour your officials, or to show them improper resistance; remember that officials are assigned to uphold the laws, and the one who shows them disrespect when they act in the name of the laws, disrespects the laws, but with laws the land shall be built up and by lawlessness, destroyed<sup>9</sup>.

Here, Sigurðsson spoke from rather awkward position. As an educated intellectual, residing in Copenhagen, and employed by Danish cultural institutions and scientific societies, he had multiple ties with the Danish authorities in spite of his vocal nationalist opposition to the Danish rule in Iceland. Many government officials in Iceland were former colleagues of his from his student days at the Copenhagen University, and Sigurðsson both understood their situation and had sympathy for their role in Icelandic society. He was also convinced that this troublesome period would pass, expressing his full confidence in the Icelandic popular classes in a letter he wrote to a friend around the middle of the century. It was only if unsavoury leaders confused them, he maintained, or if the government denied them their due rights, that the people would act irrationally. As it turned out, his assess-

ment was entirely correct; no revolutionary leaders emerged in Iceland, and the unrest never developed beyond attacks on a few particular individuals. Under Sigurðsson's leadership, the moderate nationalist discourse was to dominate Icelandic politics, and continued to do so until the early 20th century. Full sovereignty was the sacred goal and main objective of the political striving, but the nation was to attain it through a sober dialogue and with legal means, but not with open confrontation with or a revolt against the Danish authorities.

## DANISH RESPONSE TO ICELANDIC NATIONALISM

Ultimately, Icelandic nationalism was successful, as Iceland gained full independence from Denmark with the foundation of the Icelandic Republic in 1944. In a few successive steps, spread over one century, the Icelandic nationalists edged towards their goal: in the summer of 1845, a democratically elected parliament for Iceland, named *Alþingi* after the medieval assembly, convened for the first time in Reykjavík; in 1874, Iceland received its first constitution, giving *Alþingi* a limited legislative power and authority over the Icelandic budget; in 1904, it was granted Home-Rule, with one minister of Icelandic affairs residing in Reykjavík and responsible to *Alþingi*; in 1918, with the Act of Union, reached through negotiations between Iceland and Denmark, Iceland was declared a sovereign state, sharing only king and diplomatic service with Denmark. In the nationalist version of the collective memory, this was a long-drawn and heroic struggle, where “an old, civilized nation desirous of independence”, fought for its freedom and progress under a “patriotic banner”, to quote one 20th-century Icelandic politician <sup>10</sup>. What the nationalist historiography tends to gloss over, however, is the strange fact that the alleged enemy – that is, the Danish government – dictated to great extent the pace of the gradual transfer of power from Copenhagen to Reykjavík, and it is precisely in the attitudes and policies of the Danish government that we find the crucial key to the peaceful nature of the Icelandic secession. For most of the long-drawn secessionist struggle, the government strategy in Icelandic affairs took the form of an organized retreat, where the royal authorities attempted to come to terms with its impatient Icelandic subjects at every turn. Thus, the Danish government did not fulfil every fancy of the Icelandic nationalists, but was accommodating enough to sustain a firm belief in the bargaining process. To illustrate this point we can take the example of the complex negotiations leading to the introduction of the first written constitution for Iceland in 1874. The most difficult issue at stake was the financial independence of the Icelandic parliament. All parties agreed to the main principle that *Alþingi*, the Icelandic parliament, should be responsible for the Icelandic budget, but it was also obvious to all that Icelanders needed a substantial subsidy from Denmark to run the public finances of the province. Hence, the government formed a committee in 1861, consisting of three Danes and two Icelanders living in Copenhagen, with the objective of determining the actual amount of this financial aid from the state. Eventually the committee split into two main camps; four of the committee members maintained that the Danish state had the parental duty to assist its dependency, although they disagreed on the exact figure of the annual grant. The fifth member, the nationalist leader, Sigurðsson, developed a very different approach to the problem. The question was not how much support Iceland needed, he contended, but to determine the Danish debt to the Icelandic nation for cen-

turies of economic exploitation. The reason why Icelanders had become a burden on the Danish state was simply the mismanagement of the country's finances and the detrimental trade system that was forced upon them with violence. By taxing the Icelandic nation, he argued, through this "most severe trade-yoke for two and a half centuries... wasting its finest occupations, and suffocating all progress and prosperity", the Danish authorities had reduced the Icelandic nation to economic dependence. To support his case, he wrote a long historical survey, mapping out Danish mismanagement of Icelandic economic affairs from the 16th to the mid-19th centuries. His conclusion was that the Danish government was in an exorbitant debt to the Icelandic nation, and therefore it had the obligation to pay back a huge sum into the Icelandic budget every year for a long time to come as restitution for past injuries <sup>11</sup>.

The Danish government rejected Sigurðsson's claims out of hand, as could be expected, because it is not a common practice of dependent countries to sue their former rulers for mistreatment. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the system of monopoly trade was a common practice in "most of the civilized world", the government argued, and it had abolished the system when it realized how harmful it was to the Icelandic economy. The Danish authorities acknowledged, however, that they had to repay Icelanders for public land that had been auctioned off in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Sigurðsson's intransigent position in the negotiations with the Danish government delayed a solution for a number of years as he convinced the Icelandic parliamentary majority not to give up any of their ultimate demands. At the same time as he refused to budge, Sigurðsson admitted, however, in letters to his friends, that one reason for his obstinacy in this affair was his conviction that Iceland was still too poor and underdeveloped to become financially independent. Therefore, he wanted to delay its divorce from Denmark for a while, or at least until it could stand on its own feet.

In 1871, after three unsuccessful attempts to negotiate with the Icelandic parliament on the issue, the government gave up and forced a solution upon its unyielding subjects. In this settlement, the Danish authorities offered their dependency a considerable financial assistance – part of it was a temporary aid decreasing gradually until it ceased entirely after three decades, and another part was defined as a permanent contribution to the Icelandic budget as restitution for the sale of public land. The Icelandic nationalists rejected this arrangement with indignation, on the grounds that it had not been passed in the Icelandic parliament and therefore it violated the Icelandic national right to self-determination. In practice, however, the Icelandic parliament accepted what it got, interpreting the annual aid it received from Denmark until 1918 as a partial compensation for past injuries rather than charity given by a benevolent master.

Without ever discussing the basic rules of the game, the Danish authorities and the Icelandic nationalists seem to have been in a total agreement about how to conduct their contest. Neither side wanted violent confrontations, because conflicts of that nature would have jeopardized the interests of both factions of the debate. Therefore, the intellectual leaders of the Icelandic nationalist movement never advocated a millenarian transformation of Icelandic society. They came from the class that had always manned the Danish administrative system in Iceland, and they certainly expected to remain in that position when Iceland would receive a more independent status in the future. The other main polit-



ically active group in Iceland, the peasant-farmers, were obsessed with what they perceived as declining social order in the country and, in spite of their resentment to growing centralization in Iceland, they did not question the role of the state as the only institution capable of maintaining peace and order in Icelandic society.

The Danish state played a pivotal role in this respect. Thus, from a “post-nationalist” perspective, the Danish authorities’ attitudes towards the Icelandic nationalist movement appear to have been both enlightened and generous. Most states fight vigorously against any micro-nationalist aspirations that may threaten their integrity. The Danish government never attempted, however, to suppress the Icelandic nationalist movement. This is even more surprising when we consider the weak position of the disgruntled group – in fact, many of the most vocal leaders of the Icelandic nationalist movement, including Sigurðsson, were either directly employed by the Danish state or financially dependent upon grants from Danish state institutions.

There are, in my opinion, two main explanations for the benign reactions to Icelandic nationalism on the part of the Danish state. First, many Danish dignitaries subscribed to the same myths as the Icelandic nationalists. To them, the Icelandic language and literature formed an important source for the formation of the various Nordic identities, including the Danish national sentiment. Here we can take the Danish Lutheran clergyman Grundtvig as an example, but he was a crucial figure in the articulation of Danish national identity during the early 19th century. Following Great Britain’s defeat of Denmark in the Napoleonic wars, and the loss of Norway to Sweden in 1814, Grundtvig translated Icelandic medieval literature to modern Danish in his search for the original Nordic or Danish mind, for the true essence of “Danishness”. Similar attitudes towards Icelandic medieval culture were very common in Copenhagen in the first decades of the 19th century, as a number of Icelandic students and intellectuals earned their living in these years by editing and copying old Icelandic manuscripts that were published by learned societies in Copenhagen. This was, of course, an integral part of widespread aspirations in the Germanic world to seek for alternative sources for European civilization, rejecting the prevailing view that the western ideals and systems of thought had their sole origins in Greece and Rome of the classical period.

We can even discern a similar respect for Icelandic nationalist symbols in the policies of the Danish state and in the actions of its highest officials in Iceland. Thus, a royal resolution of 1840 called for the resurrection of the medieval *Alþingi* in its old meeting place at Þingvellir – the “parliamentary plains” – stipulating that it should adhere “as far as possible to the same rules as this older assembly”<sup>12</sup>. In the same period, the Danish governors of Iceland were obliged not only to understand the language of their subjects, but also actually to speak it in their dealings with Icelanders and on official occasions. Unlike most European administrators in similar positions, the Danish governors did not treat the idiom of the periphery with contempt, and rather than suppressing it, they promoted the use of the Icelandic language at the time as it was becoming a symbol for Icelandic separatism and national identity.

Second, integrating a poor and distant province into the emerging Danish nation-state, against the will of its inhabitants, was hardly worth the effort. Integration, be it violent or non-violent, is a costly affair, and given the state of the Icelandic economy in the late 19th

century, there was little hope that such investment would ever return any profit to the Danish state. Moreover, two wars over Schleswig-Holstein, and the loss of the two duchies to Prussia and Austria in 1864, convinced a growing number of Danish politicians that the Danish nation-state should be just that, comprising only people willing to identify themselves as Danes, and as members of the Danish nation. Thus, at the end of the First World War when the opportunity arose to reclaim the Danish-speaking part of Schleswig, the Danish government was far more interested in reuniting these lost Danish tracts with Denmark than retaining its dependency in the North Atlantic. To demonstrate its faithful adherence to the “national principle”, the Danish government opened a new round of negotiations with the Icelandic parliament on Iceland’s status in the state. As quoted above, the Icelandic representatives in the inter-parliamentary committee formed on this occasion demanded a full sovereignty for the former dependency, based on the argument that this was the natural right of the Icelandic national community. True to their expressed beliefs in Woodrow Wilson’s 14 points, the Danish negotiators agreed to the demands of their Icelandic colleagues, fulfilling at last the dream that had united the Icelandic nationalists since the mid-nineteenth century.

## CONCLUSIONS

On December 1, 1918, the Act of Union between Denmark and Iceland came formally into effect. The celebrations in Reykjavík were solemn and subdued, and it was as if the inhabitants of the Icelandic capital did not fully comprehend the significance of the occasion. This was though a fitting conclusion to the Icelandic nationalist struggle, because it had always been restrained, in spite of the intense sentiments that motivated it. It is tempting to interpret the Icelandic case as redemption for ethnic nationalism in general, or as a blueprint for non-violent ethnic striving. This would, however, overstate the case. Icelandic nationalism had the same propensity for violence as any other ethnic nationalism, because its ultimate goal was not negotiable and its inflated rhetoric on the character of the Icelandic nation invited a sense of racial superiority. It was, therefore, not because of its nature that Icelandic nationalism never erupted in violence or racist aggression, but rather because of very peculiar circumstances. First, the geographic isolation of the country and the extraordinary homogeneity of its population have always limited the possibilities of competition between ethnic groups in Iceland. It was only when Icelanders began to extend their economic boundaries on the sea that they came into conflict over their territorial borders. Second, Icelandic nationalism never countered any violent opposition to its demands for national sovereignty – on the contrary, the great respect Danish authorities had for Icelandic cultural traditions gave certain credibility to Icelandic claims for nationhood. Although some proponents of Icelandic nationalism regretted the slow pace of the Danish retreat, their frustration never prompted them to exit from the process of dialogue with their opponent. Finally, the Icelandic secession exemplified new trends in inter-Nordic relations in the 19th century and beyond. As the two Scandinavian monarchies gave up their dreams of gaining hegemonic status in the Baltic region, they gradually adapted their legitimacy to principles of nationalism. Thus, the Norwegian secession from the union with Sweden in 1905 also happened through peaceful means, and the same can be said of the referendum redefining the Danish-German borders in the aftermath of the First World War.

In the Icelandic experience, nationalist secession was, therefore, a fairly painless process. The heroes of the contest were middle-class intellectuals, few of whom had to make any serious personal sacrifices for their cause. They were strategists and polemicists, but only fighters in a metaphorical sense. This has led Icelanders to generalize from their experience and to treat all secessionist and nationalist struggles as an unproblematic fight for natural rights – hence the pride that the Icelandic government has taken in being among the first government to officially recognize some of the new national states of Eastern Europe. Recent events in Europe have cast some doubt on the rationality of this policy, because brutal conflicts between various ethnic groups in some of these new states seem to confirm the violent nature of nationalism. But nationalism has always been a complex and imprecise political creed; while some of its fundamental logic is universal, its manifestations take on very different forms around the world. Therefore, it is difficult to devise a general theory that covers all national formation, which is, perhaps, the most important lesson we can draw from the case of the Icelandic secession.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Ólafsson E., *Nockrar Hugleidingar, frammsettar í ljóðum sem nefnast Bwnadar-baalkur*, Hrappsey 1783, pp. 4-6 and 17-18.
- <sup>2</sup> Sigurðsson J., *Um Alþing á Íslandi, Ný félagsrit*, vol. 1, 1841, p. 90.
- <sup>3</sup> Hutchinson J., *Modern Nationalism*, London 1994, p. 3.
- <sup>4</sup> Lavis E., *Histoire de France contemporaine depuis la Révolution jusqu'à la paix de 1919*, vol. 9, Paris, 1922, p. 511 and Renan E., *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? Conférence faite en Sorbonne, le 11 mars 1882*, in Psichari H. (ed.), *Œuvres complètes de Ernest Renan*, vol. 1, Paris 1947, p. 904.
- <sup>5</sup> Aðils J.J., *Dagrenning*, Reykjavík 1910, p. 10.
- <sup>6</sup> Fichte J.G., *Reden an die deutsche Nation*, in: *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's sämtliche Werke*, vol. 7, Berlin 1846 (1808), pp. 320-327, 377-378 and *passim*.
- <sup>7</sup> von Treitschke H., *Was fordern wir von Frankreich?*, in: *Zehn Jahre deutscher Kämpfe, 1865–1874. Schriften zur Tagespolitik*, Berlin 1874, pp. 289-291.
- <sup>8</sup> The letter, written on March 5, 1850, is printed in Kristjánsson A., *Kringum Þjóðfundinn 1851, Andvari*, vol. 83, 1958, pp. 77-80.
- <sup>9</sup> Sigurðsson J., *Til Íslendinga, Ný félagsrit*, vol. 10, 1850, pp. 159-160.
- <sup>10</sup> Gíslason G.Þ., *The Problem of being an Icelander, Past, Present and Future*, transl. P. Kidson Karlsson, Reykjavík 1973, p. 89.
- <sup>11</sup> Sigurðsson J., *Um fjárhagsmálið, Ný félagsrit*, vol. 22, 1862, pp. 22-99.
- <sup>12</sup> *Lovsamling for Island*, vol. 11, Copenhagen 1863, pp. 614-628.



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## SOURCE

In July 1918, a committee of four members selected by the Icelandic parliament, Alþingi, and four members appointed by the Danish king, met in Reykjavík to discuss the future relations between the two countries. The Icelandic representatives began the negotiations with the following declaration:

**Islenska þjóðin hefur ein allra germanskra þjóða varðveitt sína fornu tungu, er um öll Norðurland gætt fyrir 900-1000 árum, svo líka hreytist, að hvar Íslendingur meður skilur enn í dag og gætur hagnýtt sér til háttar bókmennskjárskjóðs hinvar fornu mæningar vorrar og annars Norðurlandspjóða. Með langum hefur sérstakt þjóðerni, sérstakt siðir og sérstök menning varðveitt. Og með langum hefur alinn orðvitarinn um sérstöðu landins gegnverri frændþjóðum vorum óvillt líka með þjóðerni. Þessi óvill, sérstök tunga og sérstök menning, teljum vér stópa öse sögulegan og eðlilegan rétt til fullkoma sjálfstæðis. Framfarir þær, íslenska þjóðin hefur tekið á sérkomu ástogum lands í varðlegum og andlegum efnum, hafa stórum aukit sjálfstæðisþær hættar og þá jafnframt eðlilega sé sjálfstæðisþær hættar, og hún er sannlegrt um það, að Álfvottit sjálfstæði er nauðsynlegt skilyrði til þess, að hún sé með því almærkt í varðlegum og andlegum efnum, ann hún kappi að.**

**Þar sem vér verðum að tjá fullvitað, að íslenska þjóðin hefi sig sína bæði lagalegan og stjórnsýslagan rétt til þess að njóta Álfvottis jafnréttis við öðru þjóðum í sambandinu milli Íslands og Danmerkur, þá séðum vér, að ólíklegi sé að gæta samninga um réttarástand landsins á öðrum grundvelli en sínu lagalegi og stjórnsýslagi rétti, er vér höfum rétt að, bendir til að vorri stöðu, og sjálfstæðisþær þjóðarþær krefji. Sambandsáttvöringur á öðrum grundvelli myndu sig fullkomna íslenska þjóðinni, verða þóðum eðlilegum sambandsins óráðgjafur og líka fyrir sér síðar til sambandsins.**

**Samtveitt því, er vér nú höfum sagt, virðist óse, að samningar um sambandi Íslands og Danmerkur verði á þessum grundvelli gerðir, að Ísland verði víðurkennt fullvitað rétt**

The Icelandic nation is the only Germanic nation to preserve the ancient language, which was used in all the Nordic countries 900-1000 years ago, with so small changes that all Icelanders

still understand and can use perfectly the literary treasures of both our own ancient culture and the one of the other Nordic countries. With the language, people have preserved a distinctive nationality, distinctive customs, and distinctive culture. And, with the language, the consciousness of the country's special status in relation with our kindred nations has always lived with the nation. We deem that these circumstances, a particular language and distinctive culture, give us a historical and natural right to total independence. The progress, which the Icelandic nation has made in the last decades, both in economic and cultural matters, has dramatically increased its needs for independence and also, naturally, strengthened its desire for freedom, and the nation is totally convinced that full independence is a necessary prerequisite for it to successfully reach the goals it strives for, both in economic and cultural affairs.

As we are totally convinced that the Icelandic nation considers that it has both legal and moral right to enjoy total equality with the Danish nation in the relations between Iceland and Denmark, we assume that it is impossible to make a contract on the legal relations between the two countries on any other basis than the one indicated by the legal and moral right mentioned above, and the needs of the nation for independence. An act of union on any other premises would not satisfy the needs of the Icelandic nation, would cause dissatisfaction among both partners of the contract and lead, in the end, to a separation of the two countries.

According to what we have said, it is clear that a contract regulating the relations between Iceland and Denmark has to *recognize the sovereignty of the Icelandic state...*



**SEE PLATES 3-4**

