

## **The Role of the Individual & the State**

One way of examining international relations is through the role of unique individuals. As E. H. Carr argued in *What is History?*, the study of the idiographic (i.e. individuals) is just as valid and necessary as the study of broad trends and patterns in human societies if we are to gain a fuller understanding of history. Exactly the same argument applies to the study of international relations.

For example, how could one adequately explain the emergence of French hegemony in 17th-century Europe without taking into account the clever statecraft of Cardinal de Richelieu (1585–1642) who became Chief Minister to Louis XIII of France? Richelieu's masterstroke was to align France with the Protestant powers in the Thirty Years War, thus greatly enhancing French power at the expense of France's major rival, Spain. How could one explain the breakdown of the 18th-century balance of power in Europe without reference to the career of Napoleon Bonaparte, who for a limited period succeeded in dominating a large part of Europe? And how can one understand the way in which Napoleon's bid for domination was defeated and how a new balance of power was created at the Congress of Vienna without examining the role of British statesman, Viscount Castlereagh, who, as British Foreign Secretary (1812–22) led the Grand Alliance against Napoleon and, with Prince Klemens von Metternich the Austrian Foreign Minister and Chancellor, created the new Concert of Powers which succeeded in maintaining a general peace in Europe for over half a century? And what chance would the student of international politics in Europe have of understanding the developments which ultimately undermined the European balance of power in the 19th century without a proper consideration of the policies of Prince Otto von Bismarck, Prime Minister of Prussia (1862–90),

who masterminded the defeat of France and Austria and brought about the unification of Germany?

Nor is the key role of individual statesmen and leaders restricted to the autocracies and traditional monarchies of the pre-democratic era. It is hard to underestimate the contribution of Georges 'Tiger' Clemenceau, Premier of France 1917–20, to Allied victory in the First World War and to the shaping of the Treaty of Versailles. Similarly, it would be impossible to explain the determined and ultimately successful British struggle to defeat Hitler without taking into account the key role of Winston Churchill as wartime Prime Minister. How very different things would have been if Neville Chamberlain had somehow survived in office or if the premiership had fallen into the hands of a politician who still clung to the policy of appeasement towards Germany.

It is easy to find examples of dictators in recent history who had a colossal impact on the shape of international relations: Adolf Hitler, Joseph Stalin, and Mao Tse-Tung are obvious examples. And in attempting to explain the ending of the cold war and the implosion of the Soviet Union, it would be absurd to overlook the major role of Mikhail Gorbachev, General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party 1988–91. Gorbachev's personal commitment to developing communism with a human face and ending the confrontation with the West were of seminal importance. His political reforms ended the Communist Party's monopoly of power and paved the way for a break-up of the Soviet Union.

Last but not least we should not neglect the huge importance of the common man, particularly important in times of major crises and war. The sacrifices of millions of individuals made possible our enjoyment of freedom in the democracies of today. It was that wisest of all liberal political philosophers,

John Stuart Mill, who observed: 'The worth of a state, in the long run is the worth of the individuals composing it'.

It is again all too easy to overlook the importance of the character and qualities of a state's citizens when attempting to assess the state's power and influence. The dramatist Jean Giraudoux, in his play *Tiger at the Gates* about the war between the Greeks and the Trojans, makes Ulysses muse aloud about the strength of nations:

A nation doesn't put itself at odds with its destiny by its crimes, but by its faults. Its army may be strong, its treasury well filled, its poets at the height of inspiration. But one day, why no one knows, because of some simple event ... the nation is suddenly lost.

Total disappearance of a nation-state would indeed be a rare event in today's world. Indeed the durability of the state as the fundamental unit of the international system is one of the basic realities for any student of international relations. Nevertheless there are international relations scholars who argue that the state is becoming obsolete because even reasonably well-resourced states are unable to deal with the serious challenges posed by transnational phenomena such as climate change, major natural disaster, international organized crime, pandemics such as AIDS, and so on, and because greater regional economic integration and major reform of the UN may now be, according to their view, more promising as a framework for assisting very weak states.

As we have observed there is a huge variety of states. Many are so weak that they can best be viewed as quasi or failing states. Some are extremely unpleasant and dangerous not only to their citizens but to the wider international community. Despite this there is no sign of citizens wishing to abandon their state structures in favour of some integrated system of global or even regional governance. The recent rejection of the EU's draft Constitution by the voters in key member states suggests that even in the EU, a region of the world with long experience of substantial economic integration, there is no appetite for joining a superstate. Let us be realistic. The modern state is not seen as obsolescent by its citizens. With all its imperfections and problems the state seems to be here to stay.

The CSS Point