



## Nation Building in Germany and Thailand in the 19th and 20th Centuries: A Comparative Essay

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### Abstract

This essay examines nation building in Germany and Thailand in the 19th and 20th centuries from a comparative perspective. The starting point is the observation that both countries undermine central assumptions of classical modernization and colonization theories. Neither Germany nor Thailand were colonized, and in both cases, national order developed primarily from internal state and social dynamics, not as a direct result of liberal-democratic revolutions. The comparison shows that in Germany, the nation initially emerged as a form of cultural self-assertion that preceded the nation-state, but in the 20th century it became highly radicalized along ethnic and racist lines and was ultimately delegitimized. In Thailand, on the other hand, the nation formed in parallel with state centralization as a stable symbolic frame of reference for political order, closely linked to the monarchy and Buddhism. The essay argues that the nation should not be understood as a universal formula for progress or as a means of rule that can be shaped at will, but rather as a historically grown concept of order whose political effectiveness varies depending on the context. It is precisely their shared experience of non-colonization that makes Germany and Thailand an insightful comparative case for alternative paths of modern nation building.

**Keywords:** *Nation Building, Comparative Nationalism Research, Germany, Thailand, Non-Colonization, Modernity*

### 1. Introduction

Hardly any historical phenomenon provokes more political controversy than the modern nation-state, which, since the dawn of modernity around 1800, has triumphed first in Europe and North America, and since the late 19th century, gradually worldwide. For some, it is the root of all evil because it has repeatedly led to armed conflicts, while for others it is the only viable form of state organization because it represents the only order that can adequately guarantee the autonomy, participation, and security of its citizens while remaining grounded in historical traditions.

Nation building is also one of the central, yet theoretically controversial, concepts in modern historiography. For a long time, the nation was understood as a quasi-natural consequence of modernization, industrialization, and political centralization. More recent approaches have fundamentally revised this view, describing nation as a historically contingent, politically produced, and culturally mediated construct (Benedict, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1990; Gellner, 1983). According to this view, nation is less a given identity than an interpretive framework within which political rule is legitimized, social order is stabilized, and collective belonging is generated.

Comparative analyses of nation-building in historical research are often governed by implicit assumptions of normality. National integration is seen as a byproduct of political modernization, democratization, or colonial liberation. Countries that do not follow these developmental paths are either treated as special cases or marginalized in teleological narratives. Germany and Thailand are particularly well-suited to challenging these assumptions. Both countries were never colonized, both developed their national order primarily through internal dynamics, and both, in key aspects, resisted the classic modernization narratives of the 19th and 20th centuries.

At the same time, Germany and Thailand differ fundamentally in their historical contexts. Germany (whatever that may have meant) was politically fragmented until the 19th century, but culturally unified by a strong linguistic and educational tradition. Thailand, on the other hand, possessed a continuous monarchical



order, the territorial and administrative consolidation of which was only accelerated in the wake of external threats. Comparing these two cases allows us to understand nation-building not as a unilinear process, but as a contingent political practice that can be institutionally anchored and symbolically legitimized in very different ways. Both cases thus defy linear modernization narratives.

While in 19th-century Germany the nation initially took shape as a cultural and intellectual project that preceded and normatively challenged the nation-state, in Thailand it emerged parallel to state centralization as a stabilizing frame of reference for political order. These differing constellations of origin profoundly shaped the political effectiveness of national semantics and determined their respective development in the 20th century.

This essay aims to comparatively analyze these different developmental paths. The focus is not on the question of an ideal-typical course of nation-building, but rather on the analysis of the historical conditions under which the nation became effective as a concept of order. The comparison of Germany and Thailand thus allows us to reveal the variability of national interpretive frameworks without perceiving them as arbitrarily malleable or functionally reducible. The goal is not to identify models of success or failure, but to illuminate the different historical conditions, constellations of actors, and symbolic resources from which national orders emerged. Nation-building is understood here as a long-term process spanning the 19th and 20th centuries, undergoing profound transformations in both.

This essay adopts a strictly comparative perspective. It first analyzes the preconditions and dynamics of nation-building in the 19th century before examining the transformations in the 20th century. A theoretical comparison matrix serves as a heuristic tool for systematically identifying similarities and differences.

Based on this foundation, the theoretical premises of the comparison are first developed before the developments of nation-building in the 19th and 20th centuries in both countries are systematically compared. The aim is not to present success stories or narratives of failure, but rather to reconstruct nation as a historically variable organizing principle.

## 2. Theoretical Comparison Matrix

The comparison of nation-building in Germany and Thailand is based on four analytical dimensions: (1) the social actors involved in nation-building, (2) the relationship between nation and state, (3) symbolic resources of national legitimacy, and (4) the handling of social and cultural difference.

First, the groups involved in nation-building differ considerably. In Germany, where there was no state frame of reference, nation was initially a cultural project of intellectuals, poets, and historians, which was only later instrumentalized by the state. In Thailand, on the other hand, nation-building originated with the state from the outset, particularly with the monarchy and the central bureaucracy. This difference points to different forms of political legitimacy: cultural self-affirmation versus administrative integration.

Second, the relationship between nation and state varied. In Germany, nation existed long before the nation-state and became its subsequent source of legitimacy. In Thailand, however, nation emerged parallel to state centralization and remained permanently tied to state institutions. Here, nation was less an aspiration than a system of order.

Third, both countries drew on different symbolic resources. The German concept of nationhood was rooted in language, history, and culture, while the Thai nation was defined by monarchy, Buddhism, and loyalty to the state. These differences explain the distinct emotional and political charge of national discourses.

Fourth, the approach to difference diverged. Germany tended toward exclusive definitions of national belonging, which became radicalized in the 20th century. Thailand hierarchically integrated ethnic and regional diversity without completely homogenizing it. Difference was not negated but administratively contained.

This expanded comparative matrix forms the analytical framework for the following historical sections. Methodologically, the text employs an asymmetrical comparison. Germany serves as an example of a socially and ideologically charged nation-building project, while Thailand exemplifies a nation-building model primarily constructed through state and symbolic means. This very asymmetry allows us to delineate



the limitations of Eurocentric theories of nationhood and to understand nation-building as a globally variable process.

### **I. Nation Building in 19th-Century Germany**

In 19th-century Germany, nationhood initially developed as a cultural construct. Faced with political fragmentation, the idea of a German nation served as a projection screen for unity, despite lacking institutional reality. Language, literature, and historiography played a central role in the construction of national identity. The nation appeared as a pre-political community whose legitimacy was derived from culture and history (Benedict, 1983).

In the early 19th century, Germany did not exist as a state, but rather as a cultural space of interpretation within a complex entity, the “German Confederation.” Language, literature, philosophy, and historiography generated the concept of a German nation long before it was politically realized. This “cultural nation” was a reaction to the political fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire and to the experience of Napoleonic foreign rule (Koselleck, 1989).

This cultural idea of nationhood was closely linked to the educated middle class. Universities, literary circles, and historical societies functioned as central sites for national self-understanding. The nation was articulated here not as a political program, but as a form of cultural self-affirmation. It was precisely this depoliticization that gave the idea of nation its appeal, as it symbolically overlaid social and political conflicts and was understood as a model for state formation.

In Germany, Romanticism in particular contributed to the emotionalization of the concept of nation. The nation was understood not as a contractual community, but as an organically grown unity. This understanding of nation was deliberately apolitical, yet highly normative: the nation was considered a moral and cultural order that stood above existing states. This very fact created a lasting tension between the national idea and political reality.

In the course of the Napoleonic Wars, this cultural nation underwent a politicization. The dual experience of external foreign rule and internal modernization gave the idea of nation an enormously mobilizing function. At the same time, nationalism remained ambivalent: it was directed in an exclusionary manner against actual or imagined external threats and dominance, while internally it fulfilled a socially inclusive, even liberal, function. In the first half of the 19th century, nation functioned both as a formula for exclusion and marginalization and as an integrative project of emancipation.

The Revolution of 1848/49 brought internal tensions into sharp focus. While liberal forces linked nationhood with constitution, popular sovereignty, and fundamental rights, seeking to create a nation-state, this political realization failed to materialize. Simultaneously, the states—especially Prussia—began to embrace the national idea as an instrument of rule and power, in contrast to the Habsburg Empire, a multi-ethnic realm that, due to its internal diversity, could not become a “nation-state”. The failure of the revolution then led to a long-term shift: nationhood was increasingly conceived from the perspective of the state, rather than society (Hans-Ulrich, 1995).

The founding of the German Empire in 1871 reinforced this development by definitively linking nationhood to military success and state power. The Franco-Prussian War functioned not only as a foreign policy event but also as a pivotal event in the formation of national identity. War became the midwife of the German nation-state, in which cultural self-interpretation and political order became intertwined. The nation increasingly appeared as a community of shared destiny, whose existence was proven in conflict (Hobsbawm, 1990).

This militarization of national semantics had long-term effects. Schools, conscription, and the administration contributed to anchoring national loyalty not only emotionally but also institutionally. At the same time, the political participation of broader segments of the population remained limited. The nation integrated culturally without opening up democratically. This very constellation led to national expectations not being fulfilled within the political system but instead becoming ideologically intensified, so that nationalism transformed into a conservative, reactionary, and increasingly racist phenomenon (Hans-Ulrich, 1995). In the late 19th century, the nation was systematically institutionalized. Schools, the military, and the administration, along with historical myths—such as the idea of the Reich or the figure of Bismarck—



consolidated national meanings. The nation became a lived experience, yet it was not openly negotiable in politics. It had become a political battle cry.

This very combination of emotional charge and political limitation proved to be ambivalent. The nation stabilized the state, but at the same time created expectations that could not be fulfilled institutionally.

## II. Nation Building in the 19th Century: Thailand (Siam)

In Thailand, nation building in the 19th century took place under fundamentally different conditions. The Kingdom of Siam was never colonized, but was subject to massive pressure from European powers. Here, nation building primarily served to secure state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Reforms under King Chulalongkorn from the mid-19th century onward aimed at administrative centralization, legal unification, and symbolic modernization (Winichakul, 1994). Winichakul (1994) has shown that the concept of a homogeneous national space only emerged in the course of colonial border demarcations. Nation was thus not a cultural starting point, but a result of geopolitical reorganization (“geobody”).

The formation of national order therefore took place not only administratively, but also spatially and symbolically. As German-language overviews also emphasize, modern Thailand was only conceptualized as a coherent political space in the late 19th century. Previously, flexible border zones and personal power relations existed, which were replaced by colonial cartography and diplomatic demarcations (Stevens, 2025). Nationhood thus formed as a territorial abstraction, not as a historically developed self-description of the population.

Central to this process was the transformation of a pre-modern mandala empire into a territorially defined state. Nationhood did not arise from societal mobilization, but from state rationalization. Cartography, administration, and education played a crucial role in the establishment of national order. Nationhood was an instrument of government, not an expression of social movement and popular self-determination. Monarchy and Buddhism functioned as central symbolic resources. The king appeared (and appears) as the guarantor of national unity, while Buddhism established moral order. This connection lent nationhood a sacred dimension that naturalized political loyalty. Nationhood legitimized reforms without demanding democratic participation.

Nationhood, the absence of colonial rule made it possible to shape national identity as a narrative of continuity. Nation was not presented as a revolutionary break, but rather as a careful adaptation. This strategy proved extraordinarily successful, as it combined modernization with cultural stability.

In the late 19th century, Siam began to develop national symbols—flag, anthem, historical narratives. Unlike in Europe, however, nationhood remained an elite project. Buddhism functioned as a cultural glue without becoming politicized. Nationhood stabilized the state without mobilizing social conflict. Wasana Wongsurawat emphasizes that in Siam, nationhood served less to integrate than to order. It served to establish hierarchies and discipline, not to create equality (Wongsurawat, 2019).

In Thailand, the consolidation of national order in the 19th century was less conflict-ridden but equally profound. The reforms under Chulalongkorn combined administrative modernization with a deliberate staging of state continuity. Buddhism functioned as the cultural infrastructure of this national order. He structured loyalty without being politically mobilizing and made it possible to present the nation as a moral and cosmological order (Reynolds, 2006).

The reform policies of the late 19th century were not solely aimed at administrative efficiency but possessed a pronounced symbolic dimension. Recent research has highlighted that Siam deliberately adapted European forms of state representation without fully adopting their political foundations. In particular, the conscious adaptation of European symbolic forms and the introduction of courtly rituals—orders, uniforms, and ceremonies—served less to social equality than to enhance the international visibility of state modernity. As Manalapanacharoen (2017) has shown, nation emerged here as performative modernity: visible, disciplined, and hierarchical.

Interim conclusion: While nation in 19th-century Germany arose as a linguistic and cultural construct, in Thailand it functioned as an instrument of state control. Both cases show that nation-building is not necessarily linked to political participation and social equality.



### III. Nation Building in the 20th Century: Germany

In the 20th century, the internal tensions of German nation-building became openly apparent. In Germany, the early overlap of cultural nation-building ideals and state power politics persisted. The Weimar Republic, as an improvised state after the lost First World War, faced the paradoxical task of establishing a democratic nation whose symbolic foundations remained authoritarian and exclusive. Nation was highly emotionally charged, yet politically deeply contested. This very discrepancy contributed to the increasing radicalization of national rhetoric in the 1920s, which turned against the republican system itself (Peukert, 1987).

The lack of congruence between national symbolism and republican practice contributed to political destabilization. Nation remained normatively charged, while state institutions were perceived as weak. This discrepancy facilitated the radicalization of nationalist discourses. National Socialism took up this radicalization and elevated it to a new level. The nation was no longer defined as a historical and cultural community, but as a racially and ethnically defined unity of destiny. The complete identification of state and people led to a totalization of the political order, in which deviation was no longer seen as opposition, but as an existential threat. Nation-building here transformed into nation-annihilation, into systematic exclusion, violence, and extermination—both internally and externally. This extreme case makes it clear that the nation is not an inherently integrative project, but can become highly destructive when it escapes institutional constraints (Fulbrook, 1999).

In National Socialism, the nation was biologized, totalized, and morally absolutized. The equation of people, race, and the Führer state transformed national belonging into an instrument of brutal, systematic violence. The nation lost all integrative function and became the core of legitimacy for state terror.

After 1945, a fundamental delegitimization of nationalist semantics took place. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the nation was deliberately depoliticized and replaced by constitutional patriotism, federalism, and Western integration. The nation remained present as a cultural frame of reference but lost its mobilizing power. In divided Germany, competing national narratives existed, framing political loyalty differently.

In the Federal Republic, the nation was institutionally limited and normatively de-emotionalized. Federalism, constitutionalism, and European integration relativized national sovereignty.

In the GDR, however, nation remained politically instrumentalized, but was ideologically reshaped by socialism. In both German states, nation lost its integrative power. It remained present, but no longer formed the political center. This deliberate limitation of national semantics represents a direct reaction to National Socialism and the catastrophes of the 20th century.

Only after 1990 did nation cautiously return to public discourse in Germany, but now in a highly standardized form. Democratic constitution, historical responsibility, and European integration limited national self-assertion. Nation became reflexive, not emphatic.

Interim conclusion: In the 20th century, the German case demonstrates a political radicalization of the nation that culminated in self-destruction, followed by a deliberate semantic defusing. Nation remained present, but lost its central role in establishing order—a stark contrast to the Thai model of controlled national continuity.

### IV. Nation Building in the 20th Century: Thailand

Nation-building in 20th-century Thailand is characterized by a remarkable blend of political rupture and structural continuity. While the 1932 revolution formally marked the transition from absolute to constitutional monarchy, the monarchy—like the military—remained a central principle of national order. Nation was not reinvented, but rather reframed.

Thailand did not experience a rupture comparable to that of Germany. Its non-colonization allowed for institutional and state continuity without, however, initiating a fundamental democratization of the national order. The 1932 revolution altered institutional structures in Thailand, but not the symbolic grammar of national belonging. Nation remained apolitical, monarchy sacralized, and political conflicts were externalized (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014).



The Constitutional Revolution of 1932 represented less a democratic breakthrough than an elite revolution. Bureaucrats and the military assumed state power, while national symbolism was systematically modernized. Nation now appeared as a fusion of state, people, and modern sovereignty, yet remained organized top-down (Baker & Phongpaichit, 2014).

Even after the end of the absolute monarchy, nation remained closely tied to symbolic forms of rule. While the constitutional order altered the institutional architecture, it did not change the central role of monarchical representation. Studies of Thailand's political culture show that nation became increasingly depoliticized and ritualized in the 20th century. Democratic processes existed, but did not become the primary source of national legitimacy (Ebsen et al., 2018). Nation continued to function as a suprapolitical concept of order that did not resolve political conflicts but rather masked them.

The period under Field Marshal Plaek Phibunsongkhram in the late 1930s and 1940s was particularly formative. Phibun pursued an explicitly nationalist project that combined cultural homogenization, linguistic standardization, and symbolic modernization. The renaming of Siam to Thailand, state-mandated behavioral norms, and the emphasis on ethnic Thai identity aimed at creating a modern national body (Winichakul 1994). At the same time, this project remained selective. Ethnic minorities, particularly in the north and south, were not integrated but rather hierarchically categorized. Nationhood meant conditional belonging. This form of administrative inclusion without political equality clearly distinguishes the Thai case from European nationalisms.

After World War II, nation-building was increasingly reoriented within the context of the Cold War. Thailand positioned itself as an anti-communist frontline state, with nationhood becoming an ideological category of defense. Monarchy, the military, and Buddhism formed an ideological triad that defined national unity against internal and external enemies (Reynolds, 2006).

During this period, the monarchy experienced a symbolic renaissance. King Bhumibol Adulyadej functioned as a figure of moral integration, while political power effectively remained with the military. Nationhood became emotionally charged but simultaneously politically emptied. Loyalty replaced participation.

Since the 1970s, tensions within this model have become openly apparent. Student movements, rural protests, and regional inequalities challenged the state-controlled national narrative. Nevertheless, the national symbolic system proved remarkably resilient. Even periods of democratic opening relied on existing national semantics rather than fundamentally transforming them.

The stability of the Thai model rested, not least, on a lasting elite consensus between the monarchy, the military, and economic actors. In Thailand, nation remained primarily an instrument of state stabilization. While military interventions and authoritarian phases interrupted democratic developments, they did not fundamentally challenge the national order. The monarchy continued to function as a supra-political point of reference, symbolically embodying nation and defusing political conflicts. Nation was ubiquitous but rarely subject to open negotiation.

Wasana Wongsurawat has shown that national order in 20th-century Thailand was intricately intertwined with capitalist networks. Nation served as a framework for legitimizing economic inequality without making it politically visible (Wongsurawat 2019: 41–67). Wongsurawat argues that since the late 19th century, the history of Thailand (Siam/Thailand) has been inextricably intertwined with the triadic relationship between the Crown (monarchical elite), Chinese-origin capitalists, and the respective dominant world powers. This alliance was crucial not only economically, but also politically and culturally for the establishment and stabilization of the modern Thai state. Wongsurawat identifies three historical phases in the development of the Thai nation-state:

- 1) The first phase was the period of modernization and the formation of a royalist nation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. King Chulalongkorn (Rama V, 1868–1910) initiated a comprehensive project to centralize governmental power—both in his own person as monarch and in the central government. This approach is similar to the policies of the Japanese emperor during the concurrent Meiji period. His successor, King Vajiravudh (Rama VI, 1910–1925), developed a nationalist narrative that equated the nation with the monarch. He thus created an alternative form of nation-state in which sovereignty emanated from the person of the monarch, rather than being defined—as in most other cases—by the boundaries of a national territory. This



particular form was necessary because the legal concept of “extraterritoriality” (i.e., the exception to territorial sovereignty) was still in effect. According to Wongsurawat, this made it impossible to establish Siam as a territorial nation-state during that period.

2) The so-called revolutionary phase of the 1930s: In 1932, the Siamese Revolution ended the absolute monarchy and replaced it with a constitutional system. However, the territorial nation-state was not realized until the constitutional government completely abolished extraterritoriality in 1938. To mark this profound change, the nation-state’s name was changed from Siam to Thailand the following year: For Wasana, this was not merely a name change, but a fundamental transformation of the nation’s very form.

3) The third phase began in 1945 with the overthrow of the revolutionary government following World War II, which ended with the defeat of Japan—the country with which Thailand had entered into a formal alliance in 1942. Royalists subsequently returned to the forefront of Thai politics. The first post-war prime minister was the leader and founder of the Free Thai movement. During the Cold War, the United States supported the post-war Thai government to restore the monarch to an increasingly influential political position—as a bulwark against communism. The nation was subsequently reshaped once again—this time into a royalist, territorial nation, in which the monarch’s person was to symbolically encompass every square inch of the national territory, so that the sovereignty emanating from him would extend throughout the entire country to its geographical borders. Rama IX undertook these journeys across the country annually.

Two competing yet complementary explanatory models are currently available for Thai nation-building: Tongchai Winichakul’s thesis of the “geo-body” since the end of the 19th century and Wasana Wongsurawat’s thesis of the royalist character that emerged after the revolutionary period and World War II. These findings are also taken up in German-language research, which describes the nation less as a community of identity than as a form of rule. Nation offered meaning without promising equality. This is precisely where Thai nationalism differs fundamentally from its German counterpart, which in the 20th century promised equality and produced violence where it was not achievable.

Interim conclusion: In the 20th century, nation-building in Thailand stabilized state order without creating an inclusive political nation. The nation functioned less as a medium of collective self-determination than as an instrument of hierarchical integration and ideological stabilization.

## 5. Conclusion

A comparative look at Germany and Thailand shows that nation-building neither follows a uniform path of modernization nor is necessarily tied to democratization or colonial liberation. The shared experience of not being colonized makes both cases particularly insightful for comparison. It allows us to analyze nation-building not as a reaction to external foreign rule, but as an internal project of order that possesses a high degree of flexibility and appeal.

In 19th-century Germany, nation-building initially developed as a cultural and intellectual form of self-affirmation that preceded the state and ultimately challenged it normatively and institutionally. In Thailand, on the other hand, nation-building emerged parallel to state centralization as an instrument of administrative integration and symbolic stabilization. While nation-building in Germany represented a utopian projection screen for collective self-determination, in Thailand it primarily functioned as a means of securing power and consolidating territory.

These structural differences significantly shaped developments in the 20th century. In Germany, the racially charged nature of national semantics led to a glorification of the nation, which reached its most destructive culmination in National Socialism. The deliberate softening of national concepts that began after 1945 points to the profound delegitimization of the nation as a political principle of order. The nation remained present but lost its central integrative function in favor of constitutional and supranational ties.

In Thailand, by contrast, the close connection between nation, monarchy, and state proved remarkably stable. Despite political upheavals, military regimes, and limited democratization, the nation remained a comparatively constant, hierarchical system of order. National affiliation was less politically negotiated than symbolically administered. Loyalty replaced participation, and continuity replaced rupture. The comparison makes it clear that nationhood cannot be understood as a universal formula for progress, nor as an arbitrarily malleable instrument of domination. Rather, it appears as a historically developed concept of order whose



interpretive content, scope, and political effectiveness vary in specific contexts. Germany and Thailand thus represent two different, yet coherent, paths of national self-description, the stability or fragility of which only becomes apparent over the long course of history.

This very finding makes the comparison fruitful. It shows that nation-building does not necessarily go hand in hand with democratization, participation, or social integration. A nation can stabilize without emancipating and mobilize without integrating. In this respect, Germany and Thailand mark two opposing poles of a common problem: the creation of political order in modernity. They exemplify two different modes of national order: the risky politicization of the nation on the one hand, and its controlled symbolization on the other.

This brings the essay's argumentative arc to a close. Nation-building appears neither as a universal model of progress nor as a mere product of colonial experience. It is a historically variable, power-bound project whose concrete form depends on specific constellations of actors, symbolic resources, and international frameworks. The comparison between Germany and Thailand reveals that deviations from supposed normal paths of nation-building are particularly insightful. Nation is not an answer, but a question—constantly posed, constantly answered anew.

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