Inventing national identity, by Anne-Marie Thiess, June 1999

…Nations are much younger than their official histories would have us believe. No nation in the modern, that is political, sense of the word existed before the ideological revolution that began in the 18th century and conferred political power on “the people”. From that time on, the nation was conceived as a broad community united by a link different in nature both from allegiance to the same monarch and from membership of the same religion or social estate. The nation no longer derived from the ruler. It was henceforth independent of the contingencies of dynastic or military history. This powerfully subversive concept opened the way for entry into the age of democracy; but if it was to succeed, the future had to be justified in terms of loyalty to the past.

In order to move from a Europe of kings to a Europe of nations, disparate population groups had to be convinced that despite their obvious differences they shared an identity that was the basis for a collective interest. This was no easy matter. In 1800 the common identity of a Prussian landowner and a Bavarian craftsman, a Magyar nobleman and a peasant on his estates, or a burgher of Florence and a Calabrian shepherd, was far from self-evident. It was, in any case, far less certain than identities based on social status, religion or attachment to a fairly restricted local area. To produce Germans, Hungarians or Italians, it was necessary to postulate a community of birth and continuity of filiation through the ages……

Codification of the national languages that were gradually introduced in place of a mosaic of dialects was also part of a joint undertaking. The procedures involved extended as far as providing assistance in the development of national identity to nations that suffered from an initial deficit of native intellectuals as a result of their political situation. German, French, English and Russian scholars helped to establish national identities in Balkan countries emerging from Ottoman rule. The constitution of a cultural heritage of the Southern Slavs and the development of Serbo-Croat began with support from Austrian and German scholars, including the distinguished philologist, Jacob Grimm…..

…The first world war gave birth to the League of Nations, the second to the United Nations Organisation. In each case the word “nations” was used, not “states”. For in the 20th century the nation is considered throughout the world as the only legitimate basis for the state. The struggles against European colonial powers were conducted by national liberation movements, and any claim to secede from an existing state necessarily involves proclamation of the existence of a specific, oppressed nation.

Nevertheless, the formation of nation-states raises a major problem: how can state and nation be made to coincide? The “nationality principle”, regularly invoked since the 19th century to justify the political division of a geographical area on a democratic basis, is an attractive universal moral principle that disguises the economic and military power relations at work in the formation of states. And even if the principle were to be fully respected, the problem would not disappear: the area within the boundaries of any state is intrinsically heterogeneous and contains populations that can claim to belong to various nationalities.

There are, however, other ways of making states nationally homogeneous. The most violent method is to expel the “national minorities”….. In democratic states a less brutal approach is generally preferred. The method is to inculcate a feeling of national unity by the use of mass propaganda over a long period. School is of course the main instrument, but the effort extends to all areas of daily life, from ordinary individual pursuits and leisure activities (particularly sport) to public holidays, which have increased considerably in the course of the 20th century and provide a setting for the celebration of collective identity. In this system, unification does not involve the denial of diversity. Rather, a hierarchy of values is established in which everything on the territory of the state derives from the nation, and local particularisms have meaning and legitimacy only within that framework.