

Nationalism and the Territorial Imperative

Revisiting *The Territorial Imperative: A Personal Inquiry into the Animal Origins of Property and Nations* by Robert Ardrey published 1966

It is worth noting at the start that Robert Ardrey was not a scientist by training, he was a playwright and screenwriter (Oscar-nominated for *Khartoum*) who returned to his early anthropology studies from the 1950s. The *Territorial Imperative* was the second book in his four-part "Nature of Man" series, following *African Genesis* (1961).

Ardrey's core thesis was that territory-holding is a genetically inherited instinct running through the animal kingdom, and humans are no exception. Personal space, property ownership, national borders, and patriotic sentiment are, in his view, cultural elaborations of the same drive that makes a robin defend its garden or a wolf its range.

He rejected the then-dominant "blank slate" assumption in social science: that human behaviour is learned culture all the way down, with no important animal inheritance. Nations, in his account, are the modern institutional expression of an ancient, ineradicable territorial drive; which is why they generate such disproportionate emotional intensity and why disputes over land are so resistant to rational settlement.

A live example to bring the abstract argument into the present is the current war in Ukraine, now in its fifth year since the 2022 full-scale invasion. Russian forces continue making incremental territorial gains in the east, while Ukraine has mounted a sustained deep-strike campaign against Russian oil refining capacity. Repeated rounds of peace talks (Istanbul, Abu Dhabi, Geneva, Florida) through 2025–2026 have failed to produce a final settlement; by the account of both sides, the central sticking point is not security guarantees or governance but **territory itself** — specifically, Russia's demand that Ukraine cede the full extent of the Donbas region, including areas still under Ukrainian control, as a precondition for ending the fighting. Russia's stated justifications combined security claims (NATO expansion) with something closer to Ardrey's territory-identity concept: Putin has repeatedly denied Ukraine's legitimacy as a separate nation, framing Ukrainians and Russians as one people artificially divided — an explicit challenge to Ukraine's right to a bounded, sovereign territory at all. So far there have been an estimated 1.2 million deaths, around half of which are civilians. And the estimated financial cost of the war has surpassed £1 trillion.

In the 1960s Ardrey wrote for a mass audience, and the book was a bestseller that (alongside Konrad Lorenz's *On Aggression* and Desmond Morris's *The Naked Ape*) shaped the era's pop-science conversation about human nature. The book landed in the middle of the "nature vs. nurture" battles of mid-century social science, and the response split sharply along that fault line. Despite, or probably because of, the controversy, the book stayed a bestseller and is

credited with opening paleoanthropology and ethology to a broad readership. The debate itself became a defining episode in the mid-century "human nature" wars.

Philosophers over the centuries have debated whether our bond with territory and the rise of nationalism are natural extensions of human nature or artificial social constructs. Their ideas generally fall into two main categories: firstly, those who see property and borders as a corrupting force, and secondly, those who view them as essential for human flourishing.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously argued in his *Discourse on Inequality* that the moment a man first enclosed a piece of land and said "this is mine" was the true origin of civil society, crime, war, and murders. To Rousseau, territoriality was not a biological instinct, but a harmful social invention that destroyed human freedom.

Karl Marx viewed nationalism and territorial borders as artificial tools created by the ruling class (the bourgeoisie). He argued that national identities were designed to divide the global working class ("the proletariat has no country") and that true human liberation required abolishing private property and national borders.

Conversely, many philosophers argued that owning land and belonging to a distinct cultural group are foundational to human identity, morality, and security.

Thomas Hobbes believed that without clear, state-enforced territorial borders and laws, humanity would exist in a horrific "state of nature" - a war of all against all. For Hobbes, defining and defending territory through a strong sovereign government is the only way to guarantee human survival and security.

Hegel argued that private property and territory are essential for the development of the human ego. He believed that an individual needs to project their will onto an external object (like land) to truly become a conscious person. He viewed the nation-state as the ultimate expression of a people's shared moral spirit (*Geist*).

Ardrey's central thesis is that nationalism is not just a political ideology, but a biological one rooted in our evolutionary past. He suggests that Nationalism transforms land into an "inviolable homeland" because of a deep-seated instinct to guard space as an exclusive possession. He argues that the roots of nationalism are "dug firmly into the social territoriality of almost every species" in our primate family.

A key part of his theory is that a territorial defender gains an "enormous animal energy" when protecting their own land, making seemingly weak nations surprisingly resilient against aggressors (see Ukraine vs Russia). Ardrey utilizes the "amity-enmity complex" (originally proposed by Sir Arthur Keith) to explain how national identity is forged. Amity: In-group Cohesion is the cooperation and morality within a nation empowered by a shared attachment to a territory. Enmity: Out-group Hostility is the cohesion strengthened when the group faces an external threat or "enemy".

Current research largely moves away from Robert Ardrey's terminology of the time, but contemporary evolutionary psychology and neuroscience have found substantial evidence for the underlying mechanisms he described. Modern studies frequently validate the idea that human group identity is "evolutionarily familiar" and deeply rooted in ancestral survival strategies.

Recent research from the London School of Economics suggests that nationalism is an "evolutionarily familiar" trait. This research posits that our ancestors lived in small, kin-based groups where identifying with an "in-group" and defending its territory against "out-groups" was essential for survival. Modern nation-states effectively act as a psychological surrogate for these ancestral tribes, with the brain treating national borders much like ancient territorial boundaries.

Neuroscience: "Neurons to Nations" a 2025 review in ScienceDirect explores the neurocognitive foundations of nationalism. This field suggests that humans have evolved shared neural representations for their nation, which provide a sense of "belonging, meaning, and purpose." Also that emotional processes like pride and fear are used to "scale up" tribal loyalty to the level of modern nation-states through cultural narratives and symbols. Modern evolutionary theory often uses the term "parochial altruism" to describe what Ardrey called the "Amity-Enmity Complex." This theory explains that natural selection likely favoured individuals who were highly altruistic toward their own group but hostile toward outsiders, particularly during times of competition for land and resources.

The Ukraine negotiations example above is close to a natural experiment for Ardrey's thesis: nearly every *other* dimension of the conflict — security guarantees, governance, prisoner exchanges, sanctions — has proven more tractable than the question of who holds which stretch of land. That asymmetry is exactly what the "territorial imperative" as an explanatory concept would predict: **land disputes carry a charge disproportionate to their strategic or economic value**, resistant to the kind of horse-trading that resolves other disputes.

At the same time, the case cuts against a *purely* instinctual reading. Russia's territorial claims are wrapped in an explicit historical-identity narrative (the "one people" argument, denial of a distinct Ukrainian nation) — closer to contemporary psychologists' views that national/territorial claims are constructed and narrated, not simply emitted by instinct. Ukraine's resistance, in turn, is bound up with an assertion of Ukrainian nationhood as real and distinct — a case of national identity being *forged* in resistance to an existential threat, which resonates more with Ardrey's Amity-Enmity argument (nationalism intensifying under external pressure/humiliation).

In summary: is the ferocity of territorial disputes better explained by an Ardrey-style innate territorial drive operating at the level of nations, or by the constructed-identity/humiliation accounts of contemporary psychologists? Or does the case suggest both are operating together: an inherited disposition to treat home ground as non-negotiable, activated and given specific content by historical narrative?

JB Aug 2026