Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

Articles

Studia Iuridica Lublinensia vol. 33, 1, 2024
DOI: 10.17951/sil.2024.33.1.29-44

Marta Baranowska
Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Poland
ORCID: 0000-0002-0365-1023
mb1@umk.pl

Nationalism as a Manipulation of Collective Imaginaries (Stereotypes) of One's Own and Strangers in Jan Stanisław Bystroń's "National Megalomania"

Nacjonalizm jako manipulacja zbiorowymi wyobrażeniami (stereotypami) o swoich i obcych w „Megalomanii narodowej" Jana Stanisława Bystronia

ABSTRACT

The research purpose of the article is to analyse Jan Stanisław Bystroń's research on collective imaginaries of one's own people and strangers, on the basis of which he formulated an original perspective on the perception of nationalism. The research question is as follows: What is nationalism in the views of Bystroń? He was one of the first scholars to point out that nationalism boils down to the manipulation of collective imaginaries that are the source of prejudice. His *National Megalomania* (1924) can be considered a forerunner of research on stereotypes. The research purpose of the article is also to point out that his comments on national megalomania preceded the theories on collective narcissism formulated in the 1970s by Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno. They are to this day analysed in scholarly literature, also in the context of research on nationalism. These analyses indicate that the source of narcissism is ressentiment. This concept of Friedrich Nietzsche is also used in theories about nationalism, so it was also included in the analysis of nationalism in this article. Bystroń's research was interdisciplinary in nature, which allowed him to point out a new and, in many points, pioneering perspective on the perception of nationalism. Research on his work also requires an

CORRESPONDENCE ADDRESS: Marta Baranowska, PhD, Dr. Habil., Associate Professor, Faculty of Law and Administration, Department of History of Legal and Political Thought and German Law, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Władysława Bojarskiego 3, 87-100 Toruń, Poland.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

interdisciplinary approach. For this reason, the study uses references to theories from a wide spectrum of social and humanistic research. As a result, it was possible to interpret Bystroń's contribution to the study of nationalisms from a broader perspective.

Keywords: national megalomania; stereotypes; collective narcissism; ressentiment; nationalism; Bystroń

INTRODUCTION

The research subject of the article is to analyse Jan Stanisław Bystroń's[1] studies on one's collective perceptions of one's own people and strangers, which he included in the book *National Megalomania*,[2] as well as the answer to the research question of how he perceived nationalism and its origins. He was one of the first scholars to point out that the source of success of nationalist movements is basing their narrative about society and politics on collective imaginaries (stereotypes) deeply rooted in people's mentality. Particularly important are his comments on national megalomania, which preceded the theories on collective narcissism formulated by Erich Fromm and Theodor W. Adorno. To this day they are being analysed in the scientific literature.[3] However, there is no scholarly research on nationalism that would take into account the achievements of Bystroń. Meanwhile, his considerations constitute worthwhile material that will complement research in the field of the history of political thought, especially the research on nationalism.

In the *National Megalomania*, Bystroń presented the images about his own people and those of strangers that were present in the general public consciousness. He based his research on extremely rich ethnographic material from various historical periods, often not restricted geographically to Poland. Jarosław Chodak pointed out that in his research Bystroń adopted a comparative historical method. He juxtaposed phenomena from different historical periods, not related to each other, in order to capture regularities of the greatest degree of generality.[4] These conclusions concern not only the formation and nature of popular ideas of the past, but also contemporary politics.

---

[1] Jan Stanisław Bystroń (1892–1964) was an ethnologist, ethnographer, sociologist, cultural expert and linguist. He conducted research at the University of Poznan and Jagiellonian University (serving both as head of the Department of Ethnology) and the University of Warsaw (as head of the Department of Sociology). See M. Jurkowski, *Przedmowa*, [in:] J.S. Bystroń, *Megalomania narodowa*, Warszawa 1995, p. 5.

[2] J.S. Bystroń, *op. cit*. *National Megalomania* was first published as an article in "Przegląd Współczesny" in 1924 and later in his book with the same title in 1935.

[3] For example, see A. Cichocka, A. Cislak, *Nationalism as Collective Narcissism*, "Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences" 2020, vol. 34, pp. 69–74.

[4] J. Chodak, *Jan Stanisław Bystroń jako prekursor socjologii historycznej*, "Annales UMCS. Sectio I" 1999, vol. 24, p. 37.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES ON STRANGERS

While analysing the images of strangers from distant and unknown lands, Bystroń pointed out that they were commonly described as freaks, creatures almost contrary to nature. Relationships from distant travels passed from mouth to mouth and transformed into caricatured fantasies. As an example, he quoted, i.a., ethnographic materials collected by the 19th-century researcher Oskar Kolberg, who documented how the landowners living outside Krakow, thus a fairly well-educated social group, perceived the world in the 18th century:

> Outside Poland lie various countries, Hungary, Prussians, Swedes, Luterians and Germans (…). Beyond these countries there are still wild, hot countries turned towards the sunset. Behind the hot countries are the ends of the world: there live wild peoples who are unbelievers, who do not speak, but squeak. (…) These people have huge feet; when it is very hot, they fall to the ground and with their feet, as if they were shovels, they cover their heads from the sun. They have only one eye, but it goes right through their heads. Beyond these countries you can already see the chimneys of hell, looking like dreadful mountains.[5]

Similar stories were also present in literature and were taken up by preachers to show the inferior and shameful lives of others. This is how the ideas of the vast general public about foreign peoples were formed. Attention was paid to physical deformations, defects that make them contemptible, although sometimes they were not visible. Bystroń quoted that the inhabitants of Rwanda claim that the white man wears shoes to hide his donkey hooves, with which he is stigmatized as a creature of an inferior species.

A stranger is not only someone from a faraway unknown country, but also someone from around the corner. Although he is usually similar to others, but, e.g., blackness, which for white people was usually a sign of an inferior species, can be found not only on the skin, but also, e.g., on the palate. Bystroń quoted the example of inhabitants of south-eastern Poland's provinces who described the Ruthenians as black, believing that they have black palates. A game was known there, consisting in establishing the nationality of the dog – you look into the dog's mouth, saying: "Show if you are a Pole or a Ruthenian". If a dog has a black palate is a Ruthenian, and if it has a red, it is a Pole. The strangers were also associated with a bad smell, black magic skills, or the fact that they themselves were devils. For example, in Poland a devil was commonly depicted in a German skimpy garment, which triggered automatic distrust towards this nation. Bystroń also offered many examples of derisive nicknames, which were meant to emphasize physical defects, moral defects, as well as offensive comments on a different kind of clothing, language, and origin. He was not alone in this research and re-

[5] J.S. Bystroń, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

ferred to publications of other researchers, such as the book by Rudolf Kleinpaul.[6] Moreover, Bystroń studied a number of humorous stories about further and nearer neighbours ridiculing their stupidity, ludicrousness, and naivety. He commented on all these images with the following words: "It has been known since biblical times that a man sees a speck in his brother's eye, but does not see the beam in his own eye".[7]

COLLECTIVE IMAGINARIES OF ONE'S OWN AND NATIONAL MEGALOMANIA

Bystroń reiterated that such disparaging of others is a feature of human nature. The perceptions of foreigners serve to make one feel superior because one belongs to a group that is better than others. He pointed out that when an individual or a group exalts itself, it often turns into unhealthy conceit and self-idealisation. In such cases we are dealing with megalomania. The word comes from Greek (*megaleios*, *mania*) and literally means "madness of greatness". Bystroń distinguished personal, but also social megalomania, which historically took the form of tribal, state, and national megalomania. Despite the title of the book, *National Megalomania*, he analysed all these forms. Chodak pointed out that the term "national megalomania" was of a framework character and "was Bystroń's original contribution to the social sciences. However, the term did not receive a wider reception. It was and is associated with the title of the discussed monography".[8] Bystroń analysed the emergence of concepts about the superiority of one's group and its supremacy over others from the earliest, tribal times to the 1930s. These beliefs combine both serious and funny, supernatural, and very down-to-earth things, pathos, and grotesque. Among the basic elements of this notion, he mentioned the claims about originating from the centre of the world, which was particularly important when the world was still thought of as a plain. Later on, various concepts of the centre of the world were present in the Christian circle, but eventually it was considered to be the Holy Land of Jerusalem. For the sake of exaltation, the biblical origin of nations started to be substantiated. For instance, in the 18th and 19th centuries, the English established the Anglo-Israel Identity Society, which provided "evidence" showing that they were descendants of ten lost tribes of Israel.[9] According to Bystroń, this was one of the sources of the emergence of perceptions of their

[6] R. Kleinpaul, *Menschen und Völkernamen: Etymologische Streifzüge auf dem Gebiete der Eigennamen*, Leipzig 1885.

[7] J.S. Bystroń, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

[8] J. Chodak, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

[9] J. Wilson, *British Israelism*, "The Sociological Review" 1968, vol. 16(1), pp. 41–57.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

superiority and legitimate authority over others. Other countries also documented the biblical origin of their nations. In Poland, Wojciech Dębołęcki wrote in 1633 that the dominion of the world by the Kingdom of Poland was established by God in Paradise and the throne of the world was moved from Lebanon to the Polish Crown, and the Polish Scythians are the oldest nation and inherit the power over the world in a straight line. This is the theory of the world empire of Poland, founded on evidenced genealogy. To prove the superiority of their nation, they also pointed to the national language as the first, true tongue created and used by God. For example, Dębołęcki argued that the Slavic language is original and that Greek, Latin and other languages originate from it. Of course, not everyone took Dębołęcki's book seriously, but that way the Polish nobility was able to strengthen their faith in their own superiority, which was established by the Creator Himself. Alternatively, they referred to Roman ancestry, which was to confer the title of political inheritance after the empire. For instance, a tale existed saying that the first ruler of Lithuania was the Roman knight Palemon. The Polish nobility also often saw themselves as Roman descendants and heirs of the grandeur of the Imperium Romanum. In the 19th century, scientific methods changed and emerging nationalist theories could not draw ancestry from Hebrew or Roman origins. Cosmopolitanism began to be systematically pushed out of the common consciousness. Instead, nationalists began to idealize the pagan past. Zorian Dołęga Chodakowski, an ethnographer, was even a fanatic of Slavic paganism. He proved that Poles are the most valuable nation among Slavs. Similar phenomena could be observed in other countries in the 19th century.

Bystroń emphasized yet another element constituting national megalomania, namely the nationalisation of God, who is always with the nation and supports it in peace, but also in conquests. One goes to war with God on one's lips, and victories become miracles (the so-called the miracle of the Vistula, the miracle of the Marne). National saints are like tribal gods. In Poland, since the time of John Casimir, the Mother of God has been the Queen of the Polish Crown. The conviction of being the chosen nation also is well received, especially among those nations that associate linguistic and historical distinctiveness with religion. The chosen nation is a divine instrument that forces those who are distancing themselves from God to be submissive. When a nation is in danger, the idea of mission appears: it suffers for the salvation of the world. Messianism is one of the theoretical forms of megalomania. It was referred to in the aftermath of the partitions of Poland to mobilize Poles to fight the invaders. Bystroń pointed to the process of gradually blurring the border and replacing the national God with the idea of a divine nation. The nation's deification is nothing more than a shameless worship of itself by a group, which, according to Bystroń, undermines the tradition and values of European civilization. Thus, Bystroń described a phenomenon, previously also described by Émile Durkheim in 1912, that in fact in the form of holiness (deity)

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

a group worships itself.[10] By recognizing the nation as the highest value, nationalism allows the group to worship itself directly and shamelessly.

Collective images have an extra-intellectual character by their very nature. They are shaped by a sense of superiority, often turning into megalomania, which results in mockery, aversion, and even hatred for strangers. The concrete shape of these popular notions is shaped by fears common in a given epoch, and they arise in the atmosphere of "cloudy mysticism of social thinking".[11] Chodak pointed out that Bystroń referred to Lucien Lévy-Bruhl's theory of prelogical thinking to explain the mechanisms of formation of various forms of national megalomania.[12] Lévy-Bruhl in 1922 put forward a thesis that the primal mentality seems infantile, pathological when we look at it through the prism of contemporary perceptions. However, when we place it in the context of the political institutions of the time, the state of knowledge, the social structure, then it may seem quite normal.[13] Therefore, when describing megalomaniac images of one's own people and strangers, Bystroń wrote that when the primitive man thinks in such categories, we should not be surprised, but saddened by the fact that images based on xenophobic primitive thinking are extremely durable and still present in the 20th century. Of course, with the development of knowledge, collective perceptions have changed, in some cases becoming more subtle, but they are still an emanation of the primitive mind. Bystroń seems to want to make the readers aware of the fact that many of them still think in a very similar way by bringing the old, fantasizing collective imaginaries closer. To people in the old days, their ideas also seemed rational and obvious, because they were common. It is only in retrospect that their absurdity can be recognized. The perspective of the place is also important. He wrote: "The juxtaposition of certain ideas that we consider to be a laudable manifestation of national genius in Poland, and that we consider to be a harmful perversion, can be instructive".[14]

NATIONALISM AS A MANIPULATION OF PREJUDICE AND MEGALOMANIAC MOODS

In *National Megalomania* Bystroń not only presented research on collective imaginaries, but also referred to their use in politics. He pointed out that politicians should make sure that their society believes in its own power, because it was helping

[10] É. Durkheim, *Les formes elementaires de la vie religieuse. Le systeme totemique en Australie*, Paris 1968, p. 199.

[11] J.S. Bystroń, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

[12] J. Chodak, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[13] L. Lévy-Bruhl, *La mentalité primitive*, Paris 1960, p. 17.

[14] J.S. Bystroń, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

and still helps in the functioning of great countries. On the other hand, megalomania, i.e. a distorted perception of one's own strength and abilities, inability to make a real assessment of the situation, leads to wrong political decisions and will inevitably end in disaster. Bystroń accused nationalists of inciting unprecedented megalomaniac moods in the nation to gain power through the deepening of divisions and conflicts. Bystroń saw in the 1920s that this inevitably led to imperialism and war. He not only warned against armed conflicts, but also showed that nationalism can destroy Western culture itself. Nationalists began to theoretically capture, justify, and expand megalomaniac notions, and these theories began to undermine science, morality, and religion as the foundation of Western civilization. Bystroń pointed out that they undermine Christian universalism and even take on a blasphemous dimension when a nation is treated like God. According to nationalists, loyalty to a nation is the highest moral duty. He also emphasized that nationalists, referring in their discourse to collective imaginaries, popularize them at the expense of scientific knowledge.

Bystroń was aware that the nationalists' use of collective imaginaries to deepen the division between themselves and strangers has a tactical dimension. Cultivating national megalomania awakens a sense of affiliation to the group, strengthens patriotism, and these feelings are often at the root of acts of heroism or sacrifice. Bystroń believed that although this type of manipulation should be condemned, the fact is that it is an effective tool for exercising power. He pointed out that the Church does likewise by accepting the sometimes primitive ways of sustaining faith among the people. Commenting on this state of affairs, he wrote:

> All the great art of living is about a great sense of measure and tact; it is necessary to consider these popular things, tactically necessary, as a *malum necessarium* and live in compromise with reality, but on the other hand one should never lose sight of the great ideals. Otherwise, we are in danger of either abnegating life or of becoming completely barbaric.[15]

Bystroń stressed that when simple yet effective methods of manipulating people, such as creating antagonism between one's own people and strangers, begin to dominate political discourse, this will lead to the disappearance of the basic religious and ethical concepts on which European culture is based and to the decline of states. It is impossible to build a safe world on the logic of conflict. He warned against the consequences of chauvinistic nationalism.

In *National Megalomania* Bystroń showed nationalism from a new perspective. He did not treat it as an ideology based on a coherent philosophical system, but reduced it to the use and manipulation of collective imaginaries in order to gain political power. In fact, nationalism boils down to stirring up the atavistic reflexes of dividing the world into one's own people and strangers. He also negated that

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 40.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

nationalism is for the good of the nation, because it actually leads to its downfall by undermining its own cultural foundations.

It is worth noting the violent reaction of Polish nationalists to Bystroń's publication. It seems that they were aware that their intentions and methods of action had been exposed. The presentation from the historical perspective of popular ideas on which they built their narrative about the world showed their extra-intellectual dimension and ludicrousness. Immediately after the publication of *National Megalomania* in 1924, members of the National Democracy, such as Bohdan Wasiutyński or Zygmunt Wasilewski, began attacks on Bystroń in an attempt to discredit him.[16] Wasilewski published a review titled *The Spiritual Disarmament of the Nation*, in which he wrote that if Bystroń

> knocked out of [everyone's] head and heart the love that idealizes and enhances reality, there would obviously be no nation. It is fortunate that he will not be able to do so. He will be applauded by a few degenerate Poles and some Jews. (…) In the attempts to disarm Poland whether from military or spiritual defence forces (which are planned to happen simultaneously and on a single command) we must see a criminal attack on Polish civilization.[17]

These arguments are a perfect illustration of the views of Polish nationalists and at the same time confirm Bystroń's observations. Nationalism is based on megalomaniacal notions of one's own nation, which trigger a sense of loyalty and patriotism. Wasilewski even believes that without megalomaniac love there would be no nation. Nationalism is more about manipulating emotions than creating a coherent system of beliefs. The logic of conflict and categorization of the political world into one's own people and strangers/traitors is also visible. Every criticism of the nationalistic point of view was described not as a different point of view, but as a betrayal of the nation and the state.

STEREOTYPES

Bystroń used the term "collective imaginaries", which is the same as the concept of stereotype. *National Megalomania* is considered a forerunner of research on stereotypes. It is worth mentioning that this book was published almost at the same time as the well-known book by Walter Lippmann titled *Public Opinion* published in 1922.[18] In scientific literature, Lippmann is treated "as either the first serious student of stereotyping (or 'father of the concept of stereotypes') or the person who

[16] L. Stomma, *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w.*, Warszawa 1986, pp. 4–5.
[17] Z. Wasilewski, *Rozbrojenie duchowe narodu*, "Przegląd Wszechpolski" 1924, vol. 11.
[18] W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, New York 1965.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

'introduced' the term".[19] He defined "stereotype" as a single-sided, schematic image of a phenomenon, a group, a human being emerging in the mind, and distinguished it from the notion of an ideal, which usually refers to good, true, and beautiful. Stereotypes are cognitive mechanisms that precede the use of reason to minimize the effort of exploring the world. Lippmann pointed out that stereotypes are used not only to create a simplified image of the world in one's head, but also to judge it. Leonard S. Newman pointed out that "stereotypes in the modern sense play only a minor role in *Public Opinion*; (…) Lippmann himself was not actually known for his concern with the unjust perception of and treatment of stigmatized groups of people".[20] *Public Opinion* was not a book devoted to nationalism or to the analysis of the relationship between stereotypes and nationalism. Therefore, the first one to write about nationalism in the context of stereotypes was Bystroń. This does not mean, however, that Lippmann did not formulate any comments that might help people to understand why stereotypes are used in politics, including by nationalists. Stereotypes are a form of social awareness created not from an individual and direct experience, but from social-cultural communication and intergroup contacts. They are therefore an element of tradition, hence they are valued and defended by a given group against those who want to undermine them. "No wonder, then, that any disturbance of the stereotypes seems like an attack upon the foundations of the universe. It is an attack upon the foundations of our universe".[21] Nationalists use this mechanism in building their narratives about the world on stereotypes rooted in social consciousness, often manipulated according to political goals. Therefore, their message finds quite considerable respect, understanding, and defenders. Narratives showing a greater diversity of the world are presented by nationalists as a threat to the tradition and identity of society. They even proclaim that such views inevitably lead to the collapse of the nation and state, to anarchy. Therefore, any person undermining a nationalistic point of view is treated not as a political adversary, but as a traitor. This type of narrative is used to mobilize and integrate supporters in the fight against the outside world and traitors.

Both Bystroń and Lippmann assessed stereotypes negatively. Nowadays in the scientific literature stereotypes are considered to be a basic human cognitive mechanism, which usually remains beyond conscious control. The category of us and strangers describing social reality on the emotional and intellectual level facilitate the ordering of the social world, which is a universal human need.[22] It is a theory of

[19] L.S. Newman, *Was Walter Lippmann Interested in Stereotyping? Public Opinion and Cognitive Social Psychology*, "History of Psychology" 2009, vol. 12(1), p. 9.

[20] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

[21] W. Lippmann, *op. cit.*, subchapter 7.1.

[22] It is worth mentioning the research of Jacques-Philippe Leyens and his colleagues, who opened a new chapter in contemporary group relationship psychology by presenting an alternative concept,

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

the essential understanding of social categories, which means that man has a strong tendency to attribute an inalienable and unchangeable essence to individual social entities. It is assumed that members of each group have the same characteristics. It is characteristic that strangers are perceived as less human and even diabolic.[23]

COLLECTIVE NARCISSISM

The division into us and strangers is not necessarily antagonistic. Often the attitude towards a different group is much more complex, changeable, and ambivalent. For nationalists, however, antagonistic stereotypes, taking on megalomaniacal dimensions, are more effective in controlling human emotions. Bystroń pointed out that individual megalomania is treated as a disease, often ridiculed, while tribal, state, and national megalomania are widely accepted. Thus, he distinguished between two types of megalomania. They have the same nature, are a symptom of illness, and differ in terms of social acceptance.

Modern scientific literature indicates that megalomania accompanies narcissistic personality disorder. People with a narcissistic personality are convinced of their uniqueness and have a pathologically exaggerated desire to be admired by others. Moreover, arrogance and haughtiness towards others are observed in such people.

> Havelock Ellis, in his 1898 paper on auto-eroticism, first gave psychological significance to the term "narcissism". Sigmund Freud's major contribution, *On Narcissism* (1914), was devoted exclusively to development and pathology. (…) Another early and significant formulation from a psychoanalytic perspective was furnished by Wilhelm Reich in *Charakteranalyse* (1933).[24]

Furthermore, the scientific literature also contains concepts that the behaviour of narcissistic individuals can spread onto entire societies that then become narcissistic.[25] The self-esteem of a narcissistic individual is sometimes elevated by

explaining the processes of stereotyping. See J.-P. Leyens et al., *Emotional Prejudice, Essentialism and Nationalism*, "European Journal of Social Psychology" 2003, vol. 33(6), pp. 703–717.

[23] See N. Haslam, P. Bain, L. Douge, M. Lee, B. Bastian, *More Human Than You: Attributing Humanness to Self and Others*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 2005, vol. 89(6), pp. 937–950; A. Citlak, *Psychologiczne i językowe uprzedmiotowienie obcych (stereotypizacja i dehumanizacja wrogów)*, "Studia nad Autorytaryzmem i Totalitaryzmem" 2018, vol. 40(4), pp. 7–30.

[24] D.K. Reynolds, *Narcissistic Personality*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. R.J. Corsini, vol. 2, New York 1994, p. 449. W. Reich (*Massenpsychologie des Faschismus. Zur Sexualökonomie der politischen Reaktion und zur proletarischen Sexualpolitik*, Kopenhagen–Prag–Zürich 1933) wrote not only about narcissistic individuals but also about the narcissism of the masses. He considered the identification with the leader and the cult of the leader as the psychological basis of Nazism, which was to be an expression of the narcissism of the masses.

[25] See J. Crocker, R. Luhtanen, *Collective Self-Esteem and Ingroup Bias*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1990, vol. 58(1), pp. 60–67.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

the fact that the group he belongs to is better than others. "As much as people can demand special recognition and privilege for themselves (as individual narcissists do), they can claim the same for the groups they belong to (as collective narcissists do)".[26] Thus, the individual begins to treat the group as exceptional and deserving of special treatment.[27]

The very concept of collective narcissism appeared in the scientific literature in the 1970s. This phenomenon was described by Erich Fromm, who, like Bystroń, pointed out that while individual narcissism is usually negatively perceived by the environment, collective narcissism is seen as a celebration of a common identity.[28] The behaviour of such a group is similar to that of narcissistic individuals, i.e. it is characterized by hostility, exaggerated reactions to criticism. Empathy is judged as weakness and naivety. The main driving force behind the narcissistic individual and the group is the need for control and power. All but their own group are perceived as inferior, lesser, and therefore can be destroyed and subjugated without guilt.[29] In the 1970s also another scholar Theodor W. Adorno wrote about collective narcissism. He pointed out that social criticism of personal narcissism causes narcissistic individuals

> are condemned to collective narcissism. As a compensation, collective narcissism then restores to them as individuals some of the self-esteem the same collective strips from them and that they hope to fully recover through their delusive identification with it. More than any other pathological prejudice, the belief in the nation is opinion as dire fate: the hypostasis of the group to which one just happens to belong, the place where one just happens to be, into an absolute good and superiority.[30]

Adorno stressed that this very process of transferring individual narcissism onto national narcissism "gives nationalism its pernicious power".[31] Moreover, he drew attention to the emerging ideological distinction between "healthy national sentiment" and "pathological nationalism". Meanwhile, in his opinion, "the dynamic that leads from the supposedly healthy national sentiment into its overvalued excess is unstoppable, because its untruth is rooted in the person's act of identifying himself with the irrational nexus of nature and society in which he by chance finds

---

[26] A. Golec de Zavala, K. Dyduch-Hazar, D. Lantos, *Collective Narcissism: Political Consequences of Investing Self-Worth in the Ingroup's Image*, "Advances in Political Psychology" 2019, vol. 40(S1), p. 38.

[27] At the same time, there are research studies that show that this is not absolute rule. See *ibidem*, pp. 38, 61–62.

[28] E. Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, London 1973.

[29] T. Olchanowski, J. Sieradzan, *Wprowadzenie do problematyki narcyzmu: od klasycznych koncepcji narcyzmu do narcyzmu kultury zachodniej*, [in:] *Narcyzm. Jednostka – społeczeństwo – kultura*, ed. J. Sieradzan, Białystok 2011, p. 25.

[30] T.W. Adorno, *Opinion Delusion Society*, "Yale Journal of Criticism" 1977, vol. 10(2), p. 239.

[31] *Ibidem*, p. 238.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

himself".[32] Narcissism is therefore the basis of identification with the nation, which is considered to be better than others, hence there is a tendency for these feelings to turn into xenophobic nationalism.

In my opinion, it is important to point out another element, namely the source of narcissism and megalomania. One of the definitions is as follows:

> Collective narcissism is a belief that one's own group (the ingroup) is exceptional and entitled to privileged treatment but it is not sufficiently recognized by others. Thus, central to collective narcissism is resentment that the ingroup's exceptionality is not sufficiently externally appreciated.[33]

The authors point to ressentiment as a source of narcissism. When characterizing collective narcissism, Fromm wrote: "Group narcissism (…) is extremely important as an element giving satisfaction to the members of the group and particularly to those who have few other reasons to feel proud and worthwhile".[34] Narcissism is therefore a compensation for the feeling of underestimation and weakness associated with the impossibility of changing this state of affairs.

The ressentiment itself has been broadly described by Friedrich Nietzsche, who pointed out that it lies at the very foundation of Christian civilization, since it treats weakness as a virtue by reversing the values.[35] Consequently, a man sinks even more deeply into weakness as he ceases to strive to increase his power, considering it worthless. Nietzsche wrote: "The revolt of the slaves in morals begins in the very principle of resentment becoming creative and giving birth to values – a resentment experienced by creatures who, deprived as they are of the proper outlet of action, are forced to find their compensation in an imaginary revenge".[36] Ressentiment is a phenomenon in which, out of a sense of weakness and underestimation, one hates those who have inferiority complexes and despises those who are considered inferior. Nietzsche criticised nationalism because he thought that assessing a man through the prism of nationality devalued him. Those who judge and segregate people using the nationality criterion apparently do not see anything valuable in themselves, since they squeeze everything they are into such a narrow mould.[37]

It is precisely this aspect that I wanted to stress: that narcissism, which comes from ressentiment, has a destructive effect both on individuals and on the group. The research shows that, paradoxically, people who narcissistically identify themselves

---

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 239.

[33] A. Golec de Zavala, K. Dyduch-Hazar, D. Lantos, *op. cit*., p. 37.

[34] E. Fromm, *op. cit.*, p. 275.

[35] See M. Baranowska, *Jednostka, państwo i prawo w filozofii Fryderyka Nietzschego. Mała vs wielka polityka*, Toruń 2009, pp. 67–103; eadem, *Nadczłowiek, czyli negacja religijności*, "Studia Iuridica Toruniensia" 2014, vol. 14, pp. 13–33.

[36] F. Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, New York 1921, p. 17.

[37] M. Baranowska, *On Being a German, according to Friedrich Nietzsche*, "Przegląd Zachodni" 2017, vol. 73(2), pp. 52–53.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

with their own group manifest exploitation tendencies towards it. Agnieszka Cichocka and Agnieszka Cislak pointed out: "However, most recent findings suggest that collective narcissism might also ultimately harm the in-group. (…) this concern for the image of the group does not necessarily translate into in-group loyalty or a concern for the well-being of in-group members".[38] Political philosophers also stress the destructive dimension of narcissism. This phenomenon is excellently illustrated by Slavoj Žižek, who stressed that man in the postmodern consumerist civilization is a "pathological narcissus".[39] The view that narcissism is a syndrome of our times is also shared by other researchers.[40] While analysing the emotions that underlie social life, Žižek pointed out that egoism and altruism are most often mentioned as opposites. Meanwhile, a well-functioning community can be built on both of these elements, and perhaps that is why political thought has referred to both individualism and community. In his opinion, the real opposite of egotism and altruism is ressentiment.[41] He referred to the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who distinguished *amour-de-soi*, a concern for one's self-preservation and well-being, which is not the opposite of the care of the common good, and *amour-propre*, a malign concern to stand above other people, delighting in their despite is a different thing. This kind of love is not about the common good, but about destroying a barrier preventing it from being achieved. *Amour* loses its original nature, ceases to be identified with personal good, but with the misfortune of others.[42] This is also the way to understand the ressentiment that makes me ready to act against my own interests. To illustrate this phenomenon, Žižek quoted an anecdote about a Slovenian peasant. A good witch offered him that either he would get one cow and his neighbour two, or both would lose the same number of cows. The peasant immediately chose the second option. In the dark version, the witch says: I'll give you whatever you want, but I warn you, your neighbour will get twice as much. The peasant answers: Take out one of my eyes![43]

The reference to ressentiment as a source of narcissism makes it possible to understand its destructive character and to take it into account in the deliberations on nationalisms. Nationalists compound collective narcissism, referred to as megalomania by Bystroń, in order to evoke certain emotions and actions in society, which they then exploit for their political purposes, mainly to fight strangers,

[38] A. Cichocka, A. Cislak, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

[39] S. Žižek, *"Pathological Narcissus" as Socially Mandatory Form of Subjectivity*, [in:] *Manifesta 3: Borderline Syndrome: Energies of Defence*, Ljubljana 2000, pp. 234–255.

[40] See C. Lash, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York 1991; P. Sloterdijk, *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main 1983.

[41] S. Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, New York 2008, p. 90.

[42] J.-J. Rousseau, *The Collected Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 1: *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, Hanover 1990, p. 63.

[43] S. Žižek, *Violence…*, p. 92, 108.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

whether from other countries or from the political opposition. In this narrative, the opposition is a traitor to the nation, as Bystroń was presented by members of the National Democracy. Usually, nationalists are not only concerned with their own good, their exaltation over others, but their desire to harm strangers. Not only things are to be good for us, but strangers are to suffer, be humiliated, excluded. As Adorno pointed out, narcissism lies at the root of every kind of nationalism and national sentiment, and therefore they have a tendency to turn into aggressive, chauvinistic nationalism. Bystroń did not refer to the notion of ressentiment and did not explain why megalomaniac images of his community are formed in the social consciousness, but he clearly indicated that the nationalist policy based on strengthening megalomania will have negative consequences for the nation.

CONCLUSIONS

Bystroń's *National Megalomania* was pioneering in many ways. Comments on national megalomania outstripped the theories about collective narcissism, which are now also used in the scientific literature to explain phenomena of social and political life, including nationalism.[44] Such theories and analyses indicate that the source of megalomania and narcissism stems from ressentiment. In my opinion, this concept of Nietzsche is also a key category for understanding the phenomenon of nationalism and should therefore be included in research on nationalism. Bystroń was able to see the links between cultural and social phenomena, which are often overlooked by scholars describing the world from the perspective of a single specialization. In *National Megalomania* he presented research combining ethnographic, sociological and linguistic points of view. At the same time, from the perspective of this research he referred to contemporary politics and the growing nationalist movement. This provided an original and bold answer to the question of what nationalism is. He pointed out that the nationalist narrative about the world is based on the manipulation of primitive stereotypes, prejudice and the liberation of a sense of superiority and megalomania. Bystroń's aim was to expose the nature of nationalism and to make readers aware of the fact that politics based on this madness of greatness will inevitably lead to the decline of Western culture. Despite the changing world, its publication from almost 100 years ago is still valid, because the

[44] "The need to understand the dynamics and social consequences of collective narcissism has been recently highlighted by the implication of collective narcissism in the growing popularity of populist (e.g. support for Donald Trump), isolationist (e.g. support for Brexit in the United Kingdom, the rise to power of Euro-sceptic parties in Poland and Hungary), and neo-fascist political movements (e.g. support for the ONR, the National Radical Camp, in Poland)" (A. Golec de Zavala, K. Dyduch-Hazar, D. Lantos, *op. cit*., p. 38).

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

multiculturalism of the modern world is not a temporary discomfort or temporary problem, but something that will probably continue to grow and strengthen. Bystroń showed that understanding the phenomena of social and political life requires an interdisciplinary approach from researchers. Therefore, contemporary research on nationalism should combine experiences and theories developed in various branches of science, such as history of political thought, philosophy, sociology, psychology, social psychology or cultural studies.

REFERENCES

Adorno T.W., *Opinion Delusion Society*, "Yale Journal of Criticism" 1977, vol. 10(2), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/yale.1997.0013**.

Baranowska M., *Jednostka, państwo i prawo w filozofii Fryderyka Nietzschego. Mała vs wielka polityka*, Toruń 2009.

Baranowska M., *Nadczłowiek, czyli negacja religijności*, "Studia Iuridica Toruniensia" 2014, vol. 14, **DOI: https://doi.org/10.12775/SIT.2014.001**.

Baranowska M., *On Being a German, according to Friedrich Nietzsche*, "Przegląd Zachodni" 2017, vol. 73(2).

Bystroń J.S., *Megalomania narodowa*, Warszawa 1995.

Chodak J., *Jan Stanisław Bystroń jako prekursor socjologii historycznej*, "Annales UMCS. Sectio I" 1999, vol. 24.

Cichocka A., Cislak A., *Nationalism as Collective Narcissism*, "Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences" 2020, vol. 34, **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2019.12.013**.

Citlak A., *Psychologiczne i językowe uprzedmiotowienie obcych (stereotypizacja i dehumanizacja wrogów)*, "Studia nad Autorytaryzmem i Totalitaryzmem" 2018, vol. 40(4), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.19195/2300-7249.40.4.1**.

Crocker J., Luhtanen R., *Collective Self-Esteem and Ingroup Bias*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 1990, vol. 58(1), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.58.1.60**.

Durkheim É., *Les formes elementaires de la vie religieuse. Le systeme totemique en Australie*, Paris 1968.

Fromm E., *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, London 1973.

Golec de Zavala A., Dyduch-Hazar K., Lantos D., *Collective Narcissism: Political Consequences of Investing Self-Worth in the Ingroup's Image*, "Advances in Political Psychology" 2019, vol. 40(S1), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12569**.

Haslam N., Bain P., Douge L., Lee M., Bastian B., *More Human Than You: Attributing Humanness to Self and Others*, "Journal of Personality and Social Psychology" 2005, vol. 89(6), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.89.6.937**.

Jurkowski M., *Przedmowa*, [in:] J.S. Bystroń, *Megalomania narodowa*, Warszawa 1995.

Kleinpaul R., *Menschen und Völkernamen: Etymologische Streifzüge auf dem Gebiete der Eigennamen*, Leipzig 1885.

Lash C., *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in Age of Diminishing Expectations*, New York 1991.

Leyens J.-P., Cortes B., Demoulin S., Dovidio J.F., Fiske S.T., Gaunt R., Paladino M.-P., Rodriguez-Perez A., Rodriguez-Torres R., Vaes J., *Emotional Prejudice, Essentialism and Nationalism*, "European Journal of Social Psychology" 2003, vol. 33(6), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.170**.

Lévy-Bruhl L., *La mentalité primitive*, Paris 1960.

Pobrane z czasopisma Studia Iuridica Lublinensia **http://studiaiuridica.umcs.pl**
Data: 19/11/2026 04:35:13

Lippmann W., *Public Opinion*, New York 1965.
Newman L.S., *Was Walter Lippmann Interested in Stereotyping? Public Opinion and Cognitive Social Psychology*, "History of Psychology" 2009, vol. 12(1), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1037/a0015230**.
Nietzsche F., *The Genealogy of Morals*, New York 1921.
Olchanowski T., Sieradzan J., *Wprowadzenie do problematyki narcyzmu: od klasycznych koncepcji narcyzmu do narcyzmu kultury zachodniej*, [in:] *Narcyzm. Jednostka – społeczeństwo – kultura*, ed. J. Sieradzan, Białystok 2011.
Reich W., *Massenpsychologie des Faschismus. Zur Sexualökonomie der politischen Reaktion und zur proletarischen Sexualpolitik*, Kopenhagen–Prag–Zürich 1933.
Reynolds D.K., *Narcissistic Personality*, [in:] *Encyclopedia of Psychology*, ed. R.J. Corsini, vol. 2, New York 1994.
Rousseau J.-J., *The Collected Writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 1: *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques: Dialogues*, Hanover 1990.
Sloterdijk P., *Kritik der zynischen Vernunft*, Frankfurt am Main 1983.
Stomma L., *Antropologia kultury wsi polskiej XIX w.*, Warszawa 1986.
Wasilewski Z., *Rozbrojenie duchowe narodu*, "Przegląd Wszechpolski" 1924, vol. 11.
Wilson J., *British Israelism*, "The Sociological Review" 1968, vol. 16(1), **DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.1968.tb01291.x**.
Žižek S., *"Pathological Narcissus" as Socially Mandatory Form of Subjectivity*, [in:] *Manifesta 3: Borderline Syndrome: Energies of Defence*, Ljubljana 2000.
Žižek S., *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections*, New York 2008.

ABSTRAKT

Celem badawczym artykułu jest analiza badań Jana Stanisława Bystronia nad zbiorowymi wyobrażeniami o swoich i obcych, na podstawie których sformułował oryginalną perspektywę postrzegania nacjonalizmu. Pytanie badawcze jest następujące: Czym jest nacjonalizm w poglądach Bystronia? Jako jeden z pierwszych naukowców zwrócił on uwagę na to, że nacjonalizm sprowadza się do manipulacji zbiorowymi wyobrażeniami. *Megalomanię narodową* (1924) jego autorstwa można uznać za prekursorską pracę w badaniach nad stereotypami. Ponadto celem badawczym jest wskazanie, że uwagi Bystronia na temat megalomanii narodowej wyprzedziły teorie o kolektywnym narcyzmie sformułowane w latach 70. XX w. przez Ericha Fromma i Theodora W. Adorno. Są one do dziś analizowane w literaturze naukowej, także w kontekście badań nad nacjonalizmami. W analizach tych wskazuje się, że źródłem narcyzmu jest resentyment. Ta koncepcja Friedricha Nietzschego jest wykorzystywana również w teoriach dotyczących nacjonalizmów, dlatego została włączona do analizy nacjonalizmu w niniejszym artykule. Badania Bystronia miały charakter interdyscyplinarny, dzięki czemu wskazał nową i w wielu punktach prekursorką perspektywę postrzegania nacjonalizmu. Badania nad jego twórczością też wymagają interdyscyplinarnego podejścia. Z tego względu w opracowaniu wykorzystano efekty badań naukowych z szerokiego spektrum nauk społecznych i humanistycznych. Dzięki temu udało się z szerszej perspektywy zinterpretować wkład Bystronia w badania nad nacjonalizmem.

Słowa kluczowe: megalomania narodowa; stereotypy; kolektywny narcyzm; resentyment; nacjonalizm; Bystroń