NATIONS & POLITICS *in the* SOVIET SUCCESSOR STATES

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With a foreword by
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Nation and politics in the Soviet successor states

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Foreword

ROBERT CONQUEST

Anyone who has even a moderate knowledge of Soviet nationality problems has long known that a "democratic Soviet Union" would be a contradiction in terms. For it was plain that nationality problems in the USSR had not been solved; that feelings repressed, rather than satisfied, over several generations would re-emerge if and when any civil liberty was restored; and that given freedom to do so citizens of the peripheral nationalities would vote against the system.

It was asserted by Soviet propaganda, and believed by some in the West, that the national problems which had beset the area under previous regimes had been accommodated by a program of autonomy within a greater sphere. This notion has now collapsed. Yet, right up to the end, it was not uncommon to read of members of this or that Western foreign policy establishment regretting the break-up of a unitary centralized Soviet Union.

They have two major plaints. The first is that the greater the number of sovereign states, the more difficult it is for diplomats to operate. The same objection may have been made to the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian and Turkish Empires, to the emergence of scores of African and Asian successor states to Britain and France, and perhaps – earlier – to the disintegration of the Spanish Empire into the many countries of South and Central America. Yes, of course new problems are presented, but coping with such matters is what diplomats and Secretaries of State are for. If they don't like it (an impatient citizen might say), they can retire and retrain as auctioneers or esteem-enhancement counsellors. In any case the breakup of the USSR (and Yugoslavia) would add no more than a score or so to the present large roster of independent states.

But this fairly frivolous objection is linked with a more substantial argument: that the status quo, the unified USSR, was stable, as against the anarchic repercussions of the freed forces of nationalism.

No. The Soviet Union did not provide stability; it froze instability. Its attempts to transcend and transform national feeling are now seen as a total failure; and its claims to have done so as a total fraud.

Nor is a status quo to be desired for its own sake. If you live under a dam with cracks in it you may feel safe, especially if the cracks have been

plastered over. But when they are visible and spreading, and the whole structure is beginning to shake, it would be unwise to rely on the status quo, rather than seek other methods of containing or diverting the force of the waters.

Moreover, it is obviously untrue that the Soviet Union, in the seventy-odd years of its existence, contributed to world stability. On the contrary, it was always a major focus – and for the past forty years *the* major focus – of conscious efforts to destabilize all other states. Even within the past decade it was still instigating and financing a whole cycle of civil wars on foreign soil. And this was precisely because it denied the validity of all other principles, including the national principle, where these presented any sort of obstacle to Marxism-Leninism – that is, to the whole Soviet *raison d'être*.

Of course it is true that emergent nationalism, and not only in the USSR and Yugoslavia, may in some circumstances have highly damaging effects. Negative, destructive forces have emerged and are emerging. But it is a central error and distortion in much of Western argument on the subject to note the extremisms and xenophobias which are sporadically visible, and to write off *all* national feeling on that basis. For there are also positive and prudent phenomena. The elected leaderships not only in, for example, the Ukraine, but in Russia itself, are overwhelmingly against the virulent strains of race-hatred and of police imperialism. There are, in fact, various possible ways in which reasonably equitable relationships, reasonably satisfactory to all parties, might be established among the nations which formed Moscow's empire.

It is in the interests of the whole world that this evolution should be peaceful. But if the West is to help, or even advise, it is essential that our knowledge be as full as possible, and that we see the possibility, let alone the desirability of a restabilization of anything like the old order as a mirage.

Even before the present situation declared itself a number of useful studies of these problems were produced in the West. But with the predicted emergence of the realities of national sentiment, it has become more urgent than ever that a general understanding of the often complex and intractable detail should be given a much higher priority than has so far been the case. The academic and the political and the public mind in the USA, and in the West in general, needs to educate itself quickly if we are to understand, and react intelligently, to the processes now seething away over the huge area of what was the Soviet empire.

The contributions to this collection make a priceless addition to such knowledge and understanding.

Preface

The collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 ended an extraordinarily Orwellian chapter of history in a preposterously Schweikian fashion. To echo the sentiment of virtually every scholar studying the momentous changes taking place within the Soviet bloc between 1985 and 1991, the magnitude and swiftness of the transitions from Communism to post-totalitarianism, and from Soviet to post-Soviet government, were unanticipated and yet somehow inevitable. While a vanguard of scholars – Amalrik, Brzezinski, Conquest – had insisted collapse would come, the scenario of a reform-minded Communist Party General Secretary producing a series of unintended consequences that led inexorably to regime change still seemed implausible in March 1985 when Gorbachev succeeded Chernenko.

Understandably, therefore, at the outset of the six-year Gorbachev era specialists were preoccupied with the agenda of *reform* of the Soviet political and economic system. After all, such large-scale institutional changes as envisioned by Gorbachev were unprecedented in a Communist state. But over time *nationalities* within the USSR came to dominate the agenda of scholars and policy makers alike. Emergent nationalism was widespread, involved much of the public, brought to the fore new leaders, and often produced violent encounters with Soviet security forces. A failed coup in August 1991 briefly rekindled kremlinological-type analysis, but within a month the USSR officially recognized the secession and independence of the three Baltic states, and attention came to be focused on the future of the remaining twelve republics which had declared independence. Soviet federalism as advocated by Gorbachev was stillborn. And while the stability and strength of the Confederation of Independent States remained an open question in 1992, the study of the successor states – and the restless national minorities within them – became more important than ever.

The nationalities "explosion" has led those interested in its study to focus their attention primarily upon its origins. A common belief held by *perestroishchiki* of both East and West was that the crisis resulted almost exclusively from mistakes made in the Soviet past. Political scientist and one-time Gorbachev advisor Fyodor Burlatsky provided an example when he implored observers to "look at the intense national feelings and hatreds

that are erupting around the country. All these problems were created by the authoritarian past.'[1] Similarly, self-proclaimed "half-dissident" Len Karpinsky noted: "we ourselves created this danger by trampeling these republics, disregarding their national interests, culture, and language. Our central authorities planted the roots of the emotional explosion of national sentiment we are now witnessing."[2]

Much of the extensive recent Western literature, if more sophisticated in analysis, none the less shares this underlying assumption. Thus a major study of the nationalities question by Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda concentrated, in the words of the authors, "on the relationship between the Russians and the non-Russians." The central thesis of *Soviet Disunion* was that Russian domination exercised through the Soviet state was responsible for nationalist unrest. Not surprisingly, the purpose of the book was to describe "the way in which an empire masquerading as a new model society crushed resistance, imposed alien values and even an alien language on its subject peoples, and left many of them fearing about their very survival as distinct nations."[3] This "perspective from above" also informed the pioneering work of Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *L'Empire Eclate*, written a decade earlier.[4]

According to this perspective, then, expressions of nationalism have represented little more than outgrowths of anti-communist sentiment, and communist rule was closely linked to Russian domination. Under these circumstances, the corresponding policy response was clear: if the nationalities problem had its origins in Soviet authoritarian rule, then doing away with authoritarianism through perestroika and introducing a new democratic socialism could right the situation.

An analytic approach focusing on Russia is not without its merits. It was the Russian-dominated Soviet state which ultimately bore responsibility for its own domestic instability. Reasons for this range from the inadvertent and belated negative consequences of promoting socio-economic mobility and, correspondingly, of migration, to outright polices of Russification or "sovietization." Yet such analysis ignores the fact that Soviet nationalities were more than merely a product of the Soviet era. This study therefore proceeds from a different set of assumptions. We consider the roots of the nationalities problems to be more complex, transcending the nature of direct Soviet rule. Indeed, as some observers have noted, in certain cases of relations between the nationalities, Soviet authoritarianism may well have provided stability, calming what had otherwise been a violent history. We are aware that, in the long run, to claim that Soviet rule had *any* single effect upon the Soviet nationalities is rife with difficulty, because the nature of nationalities issues in the Soviet Union escapes generalizability. To take a fundamental issue, the sharing of "union republic" status does not imply that the majority groups therein can be analyzed using the same conceptual framework as for national movements.

Numerous scholars have remarked upon the political difficulties which the Soviet nationality conflicts posed for Gorbachev and upon his consequent inability to deal with them. In *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society*, Lubomyr Hajda and Mark Beissinger note "Mikhail Gorbachev originally placed the nationalities issue at the very bottom of his agenda . . . [he] did not even raise the need for a reevaluation in nationalities policy until he was almost two years in office."[5] Generally speaking, Western scholars have operated upon the assumption that there exists one single nationalities "issue," that a nationalities "policy" can be formulated, and that the Soviet nationalities constitute one uniform problem, albeit a critical one, among (and, indeed, linked to) the many faced by the Soviet Union. While this approach may be justified by the fact that Gorbachev himself, especially during his first two years in office, did treat nationalities relations as a unified issue, the underlying assumption is nevertheless incorrect. By 1991, Gorbachev's statements consistently highlighted the differences among the Soviet nationalities, with particular emphasis placed upon the uniqueness of the Baltic situation. It may be argued that Gorbachev made this change due to political expediency, in the hopes of making more difficult the use of the Baltics as a precedent for national movements elsewhere. Beneath the rhetoric, however, many of the relevant Soviet policies enacted – such as economic decentralization, openness, and cultural policies (not to mention, more generally, the numerous drafts of the union treaty) – tended to deal with nationalities precisely in an undifferentiated manner.

Nationalities scholarship can fall into a related trap of assuming that the Soviet "national problem," treated in a way distinct from the approach to nations outside the USSR, existed homogeneously throughout the country. Studies of Transcaucasian nationalism, for example, insofar as they have drawn comparisons with other national movements, often have done so with other nationalities in the USSR, and not with those of neighboring states. The common denominator of shared institutions coupled with some examples of cooperation among unlikely partners (for example, the Baltic mediation attempt in the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict) makes this approach especially attractive. Yet we believe that precisely the opposite approach holds more promise: Soviet nationalities are highly differentiated, and comparisons, to the extent that they may be made at all, are often more appropriate with nations lying *outside* the USSR. We would expect, for example, Turkmen nationalism in Turkmenistan to resemble Turkmen nationalism in Iran or Afghanistan (or, indeed, Iranian or Afghan nationalism) more closely than Latvian nationalism. Up until now, the traditional approach to the study of Soviet nationalities has not been informed by such a rationale.

This book proceeds from the view that while integration into the Soviet Union undoubtedly marked an extraordinary period of political develop-

ment in the course of many national histories, the Soviet period may be perceived as anomalous. Henry Huttenbach, the editor of *Nationalities Papers*, has illustrated this point by making the following observation. Visiting Lithuania in 1988, he witnessed one of the early national front demonstrations during which schoolchildren joined hands and sang first the national anthem and then native folk songs. These folk songs had never been taught to the children in the state schools and had never been heard through the halls of the Komsomol, yet the children were singing them none the less. Huttenbach concludes, "Lithuanian wine was poured into Soviet bottles."[6] The Soviet Union was a political reality for much of the twentieth century, yet it did not put an end to the singing of folk songs, did not destroy national cultures entirely – despite Stalinism – and did not eliminate nationalist sentiment.

It is true, to be sure, that our generation has witnessed the unraveling of the Kremlin-ruled Soviet empire. The historic significance of this development remains unclear. Yet irrespective of the magnitude and the rapidity with which changes have taken place and, indeed, of their desirability, the central question concerns less why the Soviet Union fell apart than how it managed to remain together in the first place. While Victor Zaslavsky's remark that the Soviet Union is effectively "a union of Norway and Pakistan" may at first sound exaggerated, we are sympathetic to the sentiment behind it.[7] For it makes clear that *sovetsky narod* has not, does not, and will not exist. Sovietology as a field of inquiry was therefore well-equipped to study the Soviet nation, which in fact did not exist, and yet ill-equipped to handle the nations of the USSR, which did.

This is not to argue that studies of the Soviet successor states must start from a *tabula rasa*. In many ways, the echoes of Gorbachev's call for *novoe myshlenie* that permeate Western scholarship have created a crisis in post-Sovietological research. However, a complete break from previous models and methodologies, however seductive, would be imprudent. The Soviet historical legacy is of great importance (as, of course, is the Tsarist legacy). The impact of directed migration, of bureaucracy, ideology, and a central economy, as well as of imposed territorial divisions have had significant results across the country. While the lasting effects may be hard to gauge, we should expect some nationalities to have been less profoundly affected than others by the Soviet period. Western "new thinking" must build upon the influence of both the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods to help understand developments in the post-Soviet period. Both earlier periods have affected nationalities issues, and both are therefore central concerns of this book.

This volume deals, then, with what we might call "fraternal illusions": the facade and the reality of national relations in the Soviet Union. For seventy years, these relations were depicted by Soviet ideology as fraternal – there supposedly existed constitutional equality of republican nationali-

ties and the protection of the rights of minority groups. Yet, for a long time, it has been apparent that the claim to national harmony was in fact illusory. With the countenancing of Gorbachev of criticism of the dominant political discourse, the fictional nature of this fraternity was revealed. *Nations and Politics in the Soviet Successor States* serves to demystify the multinational Soviet state.

Each chapter in this book treats a separate Soviet nationality and then focuses on the dynamic of its political mobilization. To this end, two questions have been posed by the authors: To what extent has nationalism played a role in mobilizing peoples of the USSR toward political action? And what have been the fundamental cleavages dividing Soviet society, and what role has nationalism played in creating them? Western scholars have recognized the pervasiveness of the nationality dimension. Paul Goble, for example, contends that "[n]ationality affects virtually everything in the Soviet system; it is not, as is sometimes thought, confined to issues such as language and culture. . . . But, while it affects everything, it determines relatively little, allowing both the authorities and the nationalities room to maneuver in achieving their goals."[8] And while Hajda and Beissinger also assert that "[t]here is a nationalities component to every facet of Soviet politics," this is certainly not true of *nationalism.*[9] The answers to the two questions posed above invariably differ greatly across the Soviet Union, and it is from this difference that the chapters diverge. From this perspective, other questions, such as the role of a diaspora, the increasingly explosive issue of refugees, the importance of religious differences, and regional economic relationships are considered. Questions touching upon more recent history, such as the role of anti-communism, are also addressed. None of these questions can be answered definitively without first having examined the specific features of a given region.

In order to describe the processes of political mobilization, we focus upon the distinctiveness of various national agendas. Much as Gorbachev's calls for a new Soviet federation based upon a new set of integrative principles failed to deal with the distinctiveness of Soviet nationalities, *any* abstract prioritizing of the conflictual issues dividing nationalities, or between nation and state, would be misguided. Only a systematic consideration of individual nations may yield such an agenda. Different relationships weigh more heavily in different regions; different cleavages have varying effects upon political mobilization. Each chapter highlights such variations.

Now that we have described the framework behind the individual chapters, let us present a brief description of the structure of the volume as a whole. The introductory chapter proceeds from an analysis of traditional Western approaches towards the nationality question in the USSR and then offers a framework for a theoretical treatment of nationalism, understood in terms of the variegated relationships between center, titular

nationality, and non-titular nationality in the Soviet Union. The way in which nationalism emerges when a nation must maintain a relationship with a larger state is different from the results of its dealing with minority groups under its own jurisdiction. Particular attention is therefore paid to the theoretical aspects of nationalism; *applications* of nationalities theory are left to the other chapters.

The traditional "view from above" approach is presented in chapter 2, and it serves as a brief transition to the "perspective from below" taken in the remainder of the volume.[10] Such a macro-approach is valuable in reassessing the national myths which were propagated by the Soviet center and circulated throughout the country until the time of Gorbachev. That such spurious ideas still have some currency is remarkable. As late as 1989, a respected long-standing critic of the Soviet system, Roy Medvedev, appeared none the less, like Gorbachev himself, to show incomprehension and even insensitivity to the nationalities issue: "I do not agree with those who say there is no 'brotherhood of peoples' in the USSR. There was and there is cooperation among nations. There is a new historical and social community: the 'Soviet people.' All this is not a 'myth.'" Medvedev's only qualification about the harmony existing within the *sovetsky narod* was limited to invoking the complex cultural mosaic of the USSR: "The friendship among populations," he observed, "does not exclude the rise of disputes when more than a hundred different nations, each with its own traditions, live side by side."[11] In his contribution, Victor Zaslavsky describes how this short-sighted Kremlin perspective contributed to the system's inability to respond to nationalities issues.

The volume then proceeds to treat each of the republics separately. While certain nationalist movements have implicitly contained irredentist claims, few have expressed the desire for reunification of lands in existence in pre-Soviet times.[12] Breaking with an approach which would, for example, lump Central Asia into a single homogeneous analytical unit, our study disaggregates it. This approach provides greater explanatory power for understanding the complexities inherent in the Central Asian region. Much the same would apply to the Baltics and to the new Eastern Europe which, while at times sharing the same history, have distinct cultures and languages. In the case of Ukraine, even history differs and the incorporation of the western and eastern parts into different states before 1939 provides a focus of analysis. In the Caucasus, the differences are especially stark, with religion often being perceived as a decisive factor. The significance of each national group, of course, differs widely on several axes, including: historical role, population, natural resources, levels of economic development, and degree of national self-consciousness. The treatment of each national group in individual chapters should not in any way serve to blur these distinctions; on the contrary, we feel that only such a division does them justice.

A separate section of the book is devoted to what were the Soviet non-union republics – now the "nations without states." While an exhaustive examination of these entities would require another study, we have attempted to cover enough ground in this volume to draw conclusions about their national development. For this reason, we have opted in favor of a regional approach instead of individual case studies, with chapters devoted to the Middle Volga, North Caucasus, and Siberia – the areas with the highest concentration of nations enjoying limited autonomy.

A further clarification about this section, given its relative unorthodoxy, seems warranted. The territorial breakdown of the Soviet Union into fifteen union republics (and, upon its collapse, fifteen successor states), coupled with the lack of attention afforded to national groups not so represented, has led to their neglect in nationality discourse. None the less, as national groups they share many qualities. Their recent assertions of sovereignty have only heightened this similarity. This has led to the peculiar emergence of nations within nations, the phenomenon of "*matrioshka* nationalism." Those who supported Soviet federation might wish, for example, to apply this concept to Russia itself.

In contrast to this disaggregated framework for the study of Soviet nationalities, the concluding chapter adopts a cross-national comparative perspective. While seeking to identify the commonly-held patterns of nationalist assertion posited in the introductory chapter – thus enabling a better understanding of nationalism as a phenomenon – this final chapter also employs the findings of the empirical chapters to establish various irregularities among national movements. One methodology used to examine these trends is the qualitative comparative case-study approach.

The scholars contributing to this volume are regional specialists, each of them having worked extensively in their particular areas. They come from a variety of disciplines: political science, history, sociology, geography, and anthropology. Such diversity is welcome, given the wide scope of the topic being analyzed. It is the hope of the editors that this diversity will assist in the creation of a guidemap to the intricately woven national movements in the former Soviet Union. We hope that our readers, like ourselves, will come away from this volume with a knowledge of the diversity of the Soviet nationalities – impressed with how difficult they have been to maintain, however loosely, under a single roof, but also sensitive to how they will continue to function now that the roof has been blown off.

In this spirit, the toponymic approach informing the book is use of the most recent, national appelations for countries and places. Soviet-period toponyms are retained to designate a historical context.

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Stanford University
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Notes

1 Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina vanden Heuvel, eds., *Voices of Glasnost* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989), p. 195.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 303.
3 Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion* (New York: Free Press, 1990), pp. xii–xiii.
4 Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *Decline of an Empire* (New York: Newsweek Books, 1979).
5 Mark Beissinger and Lubomyr Hajda, "Nationalism and Reform", in Hajda and Beissinger, eds., *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1990), p. 306.
6 Henry Huttenbach, "Nationalism in the Baltics," presented at the Annual Meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies. Washington DC, October 18, 1990.