Soviet But Not Russian

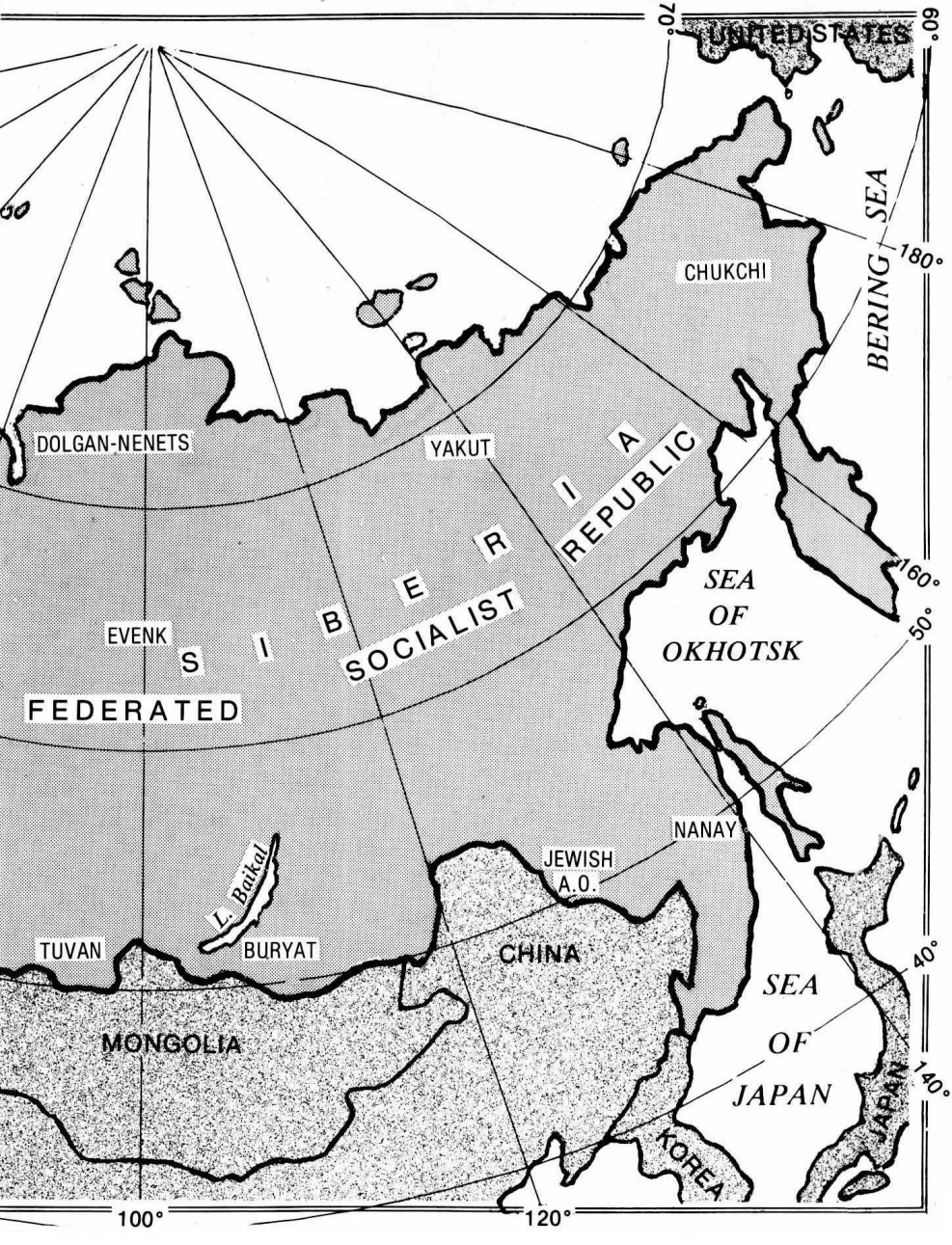
The 'other' peoples of the Soviet Union...

William M. Mandel

SOVIET BUT NOT RUSSIAN

UNION OF SOVIET

Homelands of some of the many peoples of the Soviet Union are indicated. Since peoples of any Soviet nationality are free to live anywhere in the USSR, and the Soviets are very mobile,



SOCIALIST REPUBLICS

large numbers of every nationality live and work far from their traditional homelands.

Also by William Mandel:

The Soviet Far East and Central Asia

Soviet Source Materials on USSR Relations with East Asia, 1945-50 (documents)

A Guide to the Soviet Union

Russia Re-Examined: The Land, the People and How They Live

Soviet Women

Soviet Marxism and Social Science

To my father, Max, born in 1894, who first took me to the Soviet Union, and who at 90 continues to challenge and stimulate my thinking.

SOVIET BUT NOT RUSSIAN

The 'Other' Peoples of the Soviet Union

William M. Mandel

The University of Alberta Press
and
Ramparts Press
Palo Alto, California 94303

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Mandel, William M.
Soviet but not Russian.

Includes bibliographies and index.
1. Ethnology--Soviet Union. 2. Soviet Union--Ethnic relations. I. Title.
DK33.M26 1985 305.8'00947 84-42759
ISBN 0-87867-095-5
ISBN 0-87867-096-3 (pbk.)

Published by
The University of Alberta Press,
141 Athabasca Hall, Edmonton, Canada T6G 2E8
and
Ramparts Press, Palo Alto, California 94303

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 84-42795
ISBN 0-87867-095-5
ISBN 0-87867-096-3 (paperback)

Printed in the United States of America

CONTENTS

MAPS

UNION (Full Ethnic) REPUBLICS

Armenia S.S.R.	3,119,000
Azerbaijan S.S.R.	6,202,000
Belorussian S.S.R.	9,675,000
Estonian S.S.R.	1,485,000
Georgian S.S.R.	5,071,000
Kazakh S.S.R.	15,053,000
Kirgiz S.S.R.	3,653,000
Latvian S.S.R.	2,539,000
Lithuanian S.S.R.	3,445,000
Moldavian S.S.R.	3,995,000
Russian S.F.S.R.	139,165,000
Tajik S.S.R.	4,007,000
Turkmen S.S.R.	2,897,000
Ukrainian S.S.R.	50,135,000
Uzbek S.S.R.	16,158,000

The nation for which each Soviet Socialist Republic is named is a majority within its borders except for the Kazakhs and Kirgiz, who are less than half the populaltion in their native territories.

AUTONOMOUS REPUBLICS

Abkhaz A.S.S.R. (Georgia)	509,000
Adzhar (Ajar) A.S.S.R. (Georgia)	362,000
Bashkir A.S.S.R. (Russia)	3,865,000
Buryat A.S.S.R. (Russia)	929,000
Chechen-Ingush A.S.S.R. (Russia)	1,170,000
Chuvash A.S.S.R. (Russia)	1,311,000
Daghestan A.S.S.R. (Russia)	1,672,000
Kabardin-Balkar A.S.S.R. (Russia)	688,000
Kalmyk A.S.S.R. (Russia)	301,000
Karakalpak A.S.S.R. (Uzbek)	957,000
Karelian A.S.S.R. (Russia)	746,000
Komi A.S.S.R. (Russia)	1,147,000
Mari A.S.S.R. (Russia)	711,000
Mordovian A.S.S.R. (Russia)	984,000
Nakhichevan A.S.S.R. (Azerbaijan)	247,000
North Ossetian A.S.S.R. (Russia)	601,000
Tatar A.S.S.R. (Russia)	3,453,000
Tuva A.S.S.R. (Russia)	269,000
Udmurt A.S.S.R. (Russia)	1,516,000
Yakut A.S.S.R. (Russia)	883,000

Many of these peoples are minorities in their own native territories, but the top Party and government posts are reserved for them.

PREFACE

With one exception, the "other" peoples described are not minorities in the American sense. They are majorities or in two cases pluralities in the territories in which they developed over the centuries. That explains the name of the country: Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Soviet Union for short. It does not include the neighboring Communist-governed countries such as Poland.

In the USSR, the Russians are one-half the population. The others are native to languages other than Russian. One-quarter of the entire population does not even claim to know Russian well, their census tells us. These are chiefly among peoples whose languages do not belong to the same family as Russian.

People of any nationality may and do live all over the country. When outside their ancestral territories, they do form minorities in our sense. The Russians themselves are minorities, sometimes large, sometimes very small (as in Armenia), outside the Russian Republic of the USSR.

This book provides separate chapters on the major and some smaller but particularly distinctive geographic nations of the Soviet Union. Other chapters treat related nations grouped to make it possible to relate to them from an American frame of reference. Because of the large Jewish population in the United States, there is a very substantial chapter on the Soviet Jews, although they are less than one percent of the people of the USSR. Not being a majority or plurality anywhere in that country, they are a true minority. There are many other true minorities—Germans, who outnumber the Jews; Poles, outnumbered by the Jews—but public interest in them does not justify separate treatment in a book

designed to be read, hopefully studied, but not meant to be an encyclopedia on this subject.

My writing is grounded upon 10 visits to the USSR, beginning with a year of residence, 1931-32. I was United Press (UPI) Expert on Russia during World War II, have been a Hoover Institution Fellow at Stanford University, and have taught at U.C. Berkeley, San Francisco and San Jose State universities, and Golden Gate University Law School. My view of what North Americans want to know about the USSR is based largely on the questions put to me by listeners to my radio program on that country, now in its 27th year, students' queries in class, and readers' letters prompted by my earlier books about that country.

My travels, taking me to all 15 ethnic republics, most of them more than once, have included such means as a rented Soviet car in which I taped hitch-hikers of all ages.

When words have the exact flavor of the manner of a living human being, it is hard to disbelieve them even if they are contrary to everything one's education and the media have conditioned one to believe is true. But the moment they show signs of processing by an intermediary, one's prejudices take over and one can relax into the comforting thought that the intermediary is selling a bill of goods, even though he has simply cut and re-arranged for logical sequence and third-person English. Joyce and Faulkner discovered that a long time ago in the field of imaginative writing. The success of Studs Terkel's documentary books is that they present their tape transcripts as they were spoken.

As a consequence, I will make much use of that style. Today that is recognized as sound anthropology.[1] I first started using tape recorders in the Soviet Union in 1966, and have done so on six visits. Some people there are mike-shy, exactly as here. Some will object to being taped but will then say, off mike, essentially the same things others are willing to say into it. Less educated individuals are often, not always, less articulate, which is why I have fewer workers and farmers to quote, relatively. But my intellectuals and professionals are almost always people born at the bottom of the social heap, who moved up thanks to affirmative action or simply the abolition of discrimination.

Although I had both students and travelers very much in mind in the writing, this book does not follow the normal rules for academic texts and certainly not for tourist guides. While a reader's ethnic background may cause him to be most interested in some particular chapter, the book is written to be read through.

My space allocation per country is not in proportion to population, but to Western interest arising out of ethnic backgrounds, and to the richness of my own eyewitness observations or those of highly qualified and vivid authors who knew the situation before my time. I have had colorful contact with writers in the Soviet East, South, and West, but social attitudes proved to be much the same, so to reproduce what was said in each case would be boring. The most gripping material about the life of the peasantry in the early Soviet years is from Belorussia. It applies equally to the Ukraine and Russia proper, except for nuances that are purely technical to anyone who is not a specialist on one of those nationalities. The differences among the Soviet countries will appear readily enough. The life of a nomad was obviously not that of a farming peasant. A people that lived in dispersion all over the world, like the Armenians, views matters differently than one very few of whose members have ever emigrated. Peoples with long histories of organized government differ in psychology from those whose first geographic ethnic administrations arose only as a result of Soviet policy.

In this as in all my writings, I am deeply indebted to my wife, Tanya, for research, criticism, and first editing. She too knows Russian and has been virtually all over the Soviet Union, repeatedly. The most detailed criticisms by others are those of Laura X (as she is publicly known), my son David, Drs. Shura and Sidney Saul, and Dr. Stephen Dunn. Particular thanks are due to Jon "Paka" Meachum, who made meticulous comments under the difficult circumstances of a prisoner sharing a cell in a state penitentiary. My colleague at radio station KPFA, Michael Butler, and Prof. Lynn Turgeon, also read an early version of the entire manuscript, and offered comments. An American anthropology graduate of Moscow University, Paula Garb, my daughter Phyllis, and my friends George David, Daisy Goodman, Louis Laub, and Sol Zeltzer, read and offered opinions, some at great length, on individual chapters. All those listed will have to forgive me where I did not accept sound advice for reasons of space, time, or feeling that I had simply done all that I had the energy to do. All are free to offer criticism of the finished product, in print if they desire.

NOTE

1. William Mandel among others, "Comment on Ivan Polunin, 'Visual and Sound Recording Apparatus in Ethnographic Fieldwork'," *Current Anthropology*, XI, No. 1 (1970), pp. 18-21.

1

Overview

"How will I recognize you?" I asked Dr. Lily Golden-Hanga over the phone. We were arranging to meet in the lobby of my Moscow hotel.

A peal of contralto laughter accompanied her answer, in English with a heavy Russian accent. "I'm big and black and fat!"

She turned out to be regal in bearing, large, and most definitely black.* A historian, whose doctoral studies focused on the history of African music, she is now a researcher at the Africa Institute of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. She was writing a paper on Black nationalism worldwide when we met. Since then she has assisted an isolated village of a Soviet sub-Arctic ethnic minority to get the community center promised them but delayed by bureaucratic neglect.

Her name is not Russian, obviously. The Golden is from her father, who in 1931 organized a group of sixteen Black families—the men were all graduates of Tuskegee Institute in Alabama—to move to the Soviet Union and teach modern farming to, in her words, the "people of color" in Uzbekistan near Iran, in the Asian part of the country. That is where she was born and grew up. "Some Uzbeks are much blacker than I am." Her own daughter, a Moscow University graduate, is half African.

Actually, there are very few persons of African descent in the

*"Contrary to popular belief, the Soviets are not a 'white' monolith."[1]

Union of Soviet Socialist Republics—old Russia didn't need to import slaves, since the landowning nobility kept their own fellow-Russians in a very slavery-like condition called serfdom. However, over 30,000,000 people (nearly an eighth) don't look "white," but more like Mexicans of Indian heritage or like Orientals or a mixture of both. One such is Tolomush Okeev, Kirgiz film director born in a Soviet village on the Chinese frontier. The story of his assistant, a Kirgiz woman, contains elements of the Soviet "minorities" story in almost classical form. ("Minorities" is placed in quotes, as the Kirgiz are a plurality and, with related Asian people, a majority in the Kirgiz Republic.)

"My name is Rakhia. I was born in the family of the very first to be a Communist."—the word is used in the USSR only to describe actual members of the party. "My father was 19 when they gave him his membership card in 1927."

Like most Kirgiz, her parents were nomadic peasants, but "In 1925, they joined a collective farm. My father was the chairman of the farm, then head of the county committee of the Communist Party. Now he's retired, with a personal pension." That is a high honor, something like the result of a private bill in the U.S. Congress.

"I too am one of the 'children of wartime.' I was born in 1942. I saw my father very infrequently because he was always away at work, but my mother was always there by my side. Among us Kirgiz, all children are treasured dearly by their parents, whether there is one in the family or 15.

"And so that's how I grew up, held very dear, the only daughter in the family, and mama always said, 'Be whatever you want, but the most important thing is to respect people. If a person comes into your house, do not ask him questions. Give him water, give him bread. Then ask him, Have you come a long way? From where? If he's from far away, give him your last horse'."

Immediately after graduation from high school, she went to work at the film studio, and later graduated from the USSR Institute of Cinematography in Moscow. "So that's been my work. I'm very happy in it. My husband, Arshan, assists me a great deal. Sometimes I'm away filming for three months at a stretch. We have two little boys, and he takes care of them. In my work, there are times when one works day and night, paying no attention to time. So I'm fortunate that he gives me support, and understands me.

"I regret only that my children did not see how my parents

lived, how they were never lazy, and never begrudged anything to anybody. Somebody wanted tea, they always found time for that. They were accustomed to working all the time. I grew up that way; I don't know how to sit around not doing anything. I would like our children's generation to grow up with a love for work. That is our happiness."

At least one film on which she has worked is shown on the art and college circuit in the United States—*The Ferocious One*, sometimes titled *Wolf Kokerek*, a moving story of human relations.

Most people don't become anthropologists or movie directors. Nor does everyone have understanding parents who are eager for change. For that very reason the values that seem to have reached the younger generation in the most remote places are particularly impressive. In a park in Dushanbe, capital of Soviet Tajikistan, near the Afghan border, I talked with a young man of 23 who was born not very far away in one of the most desolate and isolated pieces of the Soviet Union, in mountainous country where a peak rises to 25,000 feet. He is a Tajik, some of whom are the dark brown color of most of the peoples of India. There are twice as many Tajiks in Afghanistan as in the USSR.[2]

In the 1960s, he had said to his father: "I'm going to school. I want to be a real person when I grow up, and not a slave in your hands." My father said: 'What do you mean, you don't want to be here and be in my hands? I want it.' But I said to him: 'Now we have Soviet laws. I want to be a person. I love my whole people, no matter what nationality. There's more. I want to be an educated person, and not a worker on a collective farm or a state farm.' Well, he cursed me and I ran away from home again. I graduated from high school. I went to a trade school. I studied there for a year and became an electrician." There could be no thought of not finding work, as guaranteed full employment is built into the system. This one fact has done more to reduce ethnic prejudice than all other measures combined. No one need protect his job by convincing himself that he has more right to it than someone of different appearance or language or religion or gender.

Soviet Turkmenia is the southernmost Soviet republic. On a collective farm there, only 25 miles north of Iran, there is a gallery of paintings commissioned by the farmers to record their lives, past and present. My guide explained that the people on the farm had started at the level of Iran today.

"You see, this one has experienced every hardship, and those

people's child is dying, and yet they have to pack up and leave the area," because the landlord wanted them no longer. "Over there you see a peasant: he ploughed the land himself, sowed it himself, threshed it himself, and what's left for him? The ruling khan took his share, the mullah [clergyman] took his, others took theirs, and he's left with a few sacks. That's his share. But *this* painting is already the period of collectivization, farming getting on its feet. The next one is simply a horse-racing scene, something very popular among Turkmen."

A second large room is lined with portraits. The subjects here do not look defeated, ragged, hungry. An elderly local farmer explained, "These are the people who founded our collective farm, that solid core. This man is one of our brigade leaders—he still is." Waving his arm at the whole gallery and beyond to the farm outside, he went on: "They made all this, starting in 1943. I started working on this farm in 1943. I ploughed a lot of land side by side with them, with horses, with camels.*

"They all worked out in the fields. I worked with them every day. That one over there was an active worker, our first brigade leader. He died only three years ago, still young."

That portrait was distinctly larger than the others, a special distinction because, "He was the first to use water from the Kara-Kum Canal." That canal is the only one on earth with dimensions comparable to California's Central Valley Project: for 250 miles, it is wide and deep enough to be used for barge transportation through the desert it irrigates. But because its trace chemicals are different from those of well water, the pioneer in using it for cotton could have been taking a big risk.

One portrait is of a woman. The farmer explained, "When our collective farm was established, she was our first village mayor. She died not long ago. These paintings were done by very prominent artists," he said, pointing to one by Izzat Klychev, a Turkmenian, and "People's Painter of the USSR, an artist very well known throughout the entire Soviet Union." It depicted a local wedding "in accordance with our customs."

So a country where painting was forbidden by religion (Turkmenia is Islamic by heritage) now has painters of USSR-wide prominence, and people whose fathers were medieval sharecroppers not only enjoy art but encourage it financially. When we left the village, after dark, it was obvious that there was electricity in every

*His point was that today it's all with tractors.