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The Revenge of the Past:
Ethnic Nationalism, Soviet Nationalities Policies, and
the Collapse of the USSR

Part I: Introduction

The Nationality Question

The Soviet Union was a multiethnic empire that encompassed nearly 100 ethnic minority groups, each representing a variety of historical and cultural traditions, in addition to national languages.¹ This wide array of ethnic groups included large nations such as the Ukrainians and Kazakhs, as well as smaller groups, including the Chuvash and the Bashkir.² This thesis traces the history of the Soviet government's policies towards these ethnic minorities. These nationalities policies encompassed primarily the promotion of national cultures and languages, in addition to opening greater educational opportunities and administrative positions to ethnic minorities. Furthermore, Soviet nationalities policies attempted to manage the dilemma posed by ethnic nationalism.

The Soviet penchant to vacillate between two policies is the focal point of the present study. Ethnic nationalism in the USSR was at certain points in time tolerated and, for a while, even promoted by the Soviet regime. The Soviets in the late 1920s and early 1930s pursued *korenizatsia*, a policy of encouraging what Yuri Slezkine calls "ethnic particularism."³ In addition to cultivating national cultures and languages under *korenizatsia*, the Soviets demarcated distinct territorial boundaries for each ethnic group.

¹ Jeremy R. Azrael, ed. *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices*, (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978), 250.

² *Ibid.*, 314-315.

³ Yuri Slezkine, "The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 313.

After uniting ethnic minority groups on territorial, cultural and linguistic bases, the Soviet government sought to integrate these minority groups into a cohesive nation, or *Sovetskii narod*. Ethnic minorities came to perceive these attempts at building a cohesive nation as Russification, leading to a cumulative growth of ethnic dissent.

However, this strategy of *korenizatsia*, which allowed considerable cultural, administrative, and at times, economic, autonomy to minority groups ran contrary to the principles of Marxism-Leninism in the eyes of many Soviet leaders. Karl Marx certainly would have disapproved of *korenizatsia*, as he believed that differences between peoples should be disappearing rather than being encouraged. Marx asserted that “national differences and antagonisms between peoples are vanishing gradually from day to day,” and that “the supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster.”⁴ This conflict between Marxist ideology and the pragmatic exigencies faced by the early Soviet regime led to an intense debate within the Communist Party. As a result of this dichotomy, the nationalities policies of the USSR vacillated between *korenizatsia* and a strategy of Russification.

How to cope with the so-called “nationality question” was a constant source of debate throughout the history of the Soviet Union. At certain points in time, such as during the early fledgling years of the USSR, the Soviets were compelled to adopt more lenient nationalities policies towards ethnic minorities for pragmatic reasons. Obviously, the early Bolshevik regime needed to secure as much support from ethnic minorities as possible, which it promoted on the premise of national self-determination and anti-

⁴ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 17.

imperialist propaganda. Thus, promises of cultural and linguistic autonomy were given to ethnic minority groups in return for their submission to Bolshevik rule.

By laying out the various programs and policies that the Soviet government enacted towards the various ethnic minorities of the USSR over the course of the roughly 70 years of its existence as well as their shortcomings and, often, utter failures, the precarious circumstances to which ethnic minorities were exposed can be readily shown. A particularly ubiquitous problem with Soviet nationality policy was in its treatment of ethnic languages in the schools of each respective republic. At certain times, the Soviets allowed schools to instruct students in the ethnic language of the republic, while at other times, native-language schools were compelled to begin instructing almost entirely in Russian.

Along with the inconsistency of Soviet nationalities policies over the years, ethnic minorities were also subjected to intermittent periods of mass deportations and violent suppression at the hands of the Soviet government. Stalin's expulsion campaigns against those feared to be in collaboration with Nazi Germany contributed greatly toward ethnic minorities' distrust of the Great Russians and the collective memory of such instances undermined later attempts to create a *Sovetskii narod*. The subsequent periods of Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and even Gorbachev all saw the Soviet military suppress demonstrations by ethnic minorities in areas of the Baltics, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Under Gorbachev, what had been silent dissent among ethnic minorities became calls for national self-determination. Thus, the failure of Soviet nationalities policies to construct either a multiethnic or a cohesive nation-state ultimately contributed to the collapse of the USSR.

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Defining the Nation

The historian Anthony Smith provides a useful definition of the nation. After noting a distinction between the ‘nation’ and the ‘ethnic community,’ Smith simplifies the term ‘ethnic community’ into the French *ethnie*. Smith then characterizes *ethnie* as “a named human population with myths of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more elements of shared culture, a link with a homeland, and a measure of solidarity, at least among the elites.”⁵ A major distinction between *ethnies* and nations is that *ethnies* are often defined by ancestry myths and historical memories, while nations are typically defined by their historic territory, public cultures, and adherence to common laws. Moreover, nations must possess a homeland, a condition not necessarily true of *ethnies*.⁶

Smith notes a second major factor in the development of national identities, which he calls *invented traditions*. This trend began in the 1870s in Europe and continues to be

⁵ Anthony D. Smith, *The Nation in History: Historiographical Debates about Ethnicity and Nationalism* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2000), 65.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

in effect today. Examples of these kinds of early invented traditions are national sporting contests and festivals. These invented traditions were deliberately created in order to bring about a sense of national consciousness. Smith goes on to write,

They are sociopolitical constructs forged, even fabricated, by cultural engineers who design symbols, mythologies, rituals, and histories specifically to meet modern mass needs. Not only were entirely new symbols, like flags and anthems, created but also ‘historic continuity had to be invented, for example by creating an ancient past beyond effective historical continuity either by semifiction... or by forgery.’ (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) These constructs make up a large part of what we mean by nations and national identities.⁷

This sort of “creation,” or at the very least encouragement, of national consciousness by deliberate efforts can be seen in the Soviet Union with its nationalities policies.

The manner in which the early Bolshevik leaders defined ethnic groups can be distinguished into four major classifications. The first group was made up of *ethnies* considered to be sufficiently developed to establish nation-states. This category included groups such as the Poles and Finns who had experienced long-term periods of sovereignty, as well as groups such as the Georgians, Armenians, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians, all of whom had experienced brief periods of independence. The second group was comprised of groups that the Bolsheviks considered to be wrought under the competing influences of national consciousness and social divisions, and that they were thus not ready to establish nation-states. Specific groups under this category included the Ukrainians, the Belorussians, and the Azerbaijanis. The third group was made up of the *ethnies* of Central Asia who, despite having a sense of ethnic community, had never made the transition to nationhood. Lastly, the fourth group consisted of *ethnies* either too small or too undeveloped to seek national independence or to even possess a separate national existence. This category included the vast majority of small ethnic

⁷ A.D. Smith, 53.

groups located inside the boundaries of the Russian Socialist Federal Soviet Republic, also referred to as the RSFSR [1917-1991]. The distinction between the third and fourth groups would be the basis on which the Bolsheviks designated union and autonomous republics.⁸

Two prominent schools of thought on the origins of nationalism are the primordialists and the instrumentalists. Primordialists tend to focus on the strong emotional attachments that accompany ethno-national revivals while explaining such sentiments as consequences of “the deep-rooted, almost ‘natural’ quality of ethnic belonging.”⁹ Primordial theories of nationalism stress the importance of immediate kinship ties, along with senses of belonging within a particular religious community, speaking a particular language, and following certain social practices.¹⁰ In contrast, instrumentalists characterize ethnic and national identity “not as a primordial constant, but as a social construct.”¹¹ Moreover, instrumentalists see this social construct as a consequence of modernization and as such, believe that ethnic and national identities can be repeatedly created and recreated.¹² Such was the belief of the Soviet regime, which under Stalin attempted to recreate and redefine *ethnie* cultures along socialist lines under *korenizatsia*. His successors endeavored to construct a new, Soviet identity to redefine and replace earlier notions of *ethnie*.

Bollerup and Christenson include the notion of cultural deprivation, or felt colonization, and fear of future cultural deprivation as primordial interests of *ethnies*.

⁸ Ben Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union: A Study in the Rise and Triumph of Nationalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 35-36.

⁹ Søren Rinder Bollerup, and Christian Dons Christensen, *Nationalism in Eastern Europe: Causes and Consequences of the National Revivals and Conflicts in Late Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 36.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 39.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 40.

¹² *Ibid*, 40.

The probability of conflict between *ethnies*, according to the argument, increases where “both groups...have an antagonistic history of interaction, and feel or fear cultural deprivation caused by the opposing nation-group.”¹³ These two primordialist conditions fit the case of the USSR quite nicely, as each were among the primary causes of conflict between the Soviet government and the various *ethnies* living within its borders.

The instrumentalist Soviets alternated between promoting two conceptions of nation-building: between Sovietization, an approach rising out of territorial and citizen’s concepts of nationalism, and *korenizatsia*, which arose from the cultural nationalism notion of *ethnie*. In practice, Sovietization meant Russification, as the Soviets’ attempt at consolidating the nation under a common *Sovetskii narod* took a distinctly Russian tone. This strategy of nation-building encountered resistance from ethnic minorities, who instead sought to achieve political autonomy for their respective *ethnies*. This *ethnie* resistance eventually won out, as Sovietization ultimately failed with the collapse of the USSR.

Part II: Soviet Nationality Policies

Early Soviet Nationality Policies

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, the policy of *korenizatsia* allowed the Soviets to construct what Terry Martin calls an “affirmative action empire” in which the government responded to mounting ethnic nationalism by granting certain privileges to republics dominated by a non-Russian ethno-linguistic group. The Soviet government promoted the national consciousness of each ethnic minority and set up many regional

¹³ Bollerup and Christensen, 184.

and local governmental structures to accommodate desires for greater local autonomy. This model of government has been dubbed ‘ethnofederalism’ in that the Soviet state “recognized and accepted multiethnicity as a guiding principle of social and political life.”¹⁴ The Bolsheviks allowed national minorities to have, in theory, political and cultural autonomy within the USSR under the sole leadership of the Communist Party. The Soviets organized larger ethnic groups such as the Uzbeks and the Ukrainians into union republics, while granting regional autonomy in the form of sub-republic units to smaller groups such as the Chechens and the Ingush.¹⁵

The Soviet government undertook a variety of campaigns in the late 1920s and early 1930s in an effort to promote national consciousnesses among ethnic minorities. Local languages, for instance, became an official governmental language in each ethnic region. However, several ethnic groups’ languages had become so antiquated that they lacked a written form. In these cases, new forms of writing were created as a result of the *korenizatsia* policies. Another key aspect of this process was that the Soviet government sponsored a variety of cultural products in these often newly revived languages such as books, journals, newspapers, and museums.¹⁶ Other examples include ethno-national museums, opera houses, and television stations.¹⁷ The government tolerated all national and ethnic cultures in this manner as long as, according to Stalin, they remained “national

¹⁴ Mark R. Beissinger, *Nationalist Mobilization and the Collapse of the Soviet State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 50-51.

¹⁵ Levon Chorbajian, “The Nationalities Question in the Former Soviet Union: Transcaucasia, the Baltics, and Central Asia,” in Berch Berberoglu, ed., *The National Question: Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Self-Determination in the 20th Century* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 228.

¹⁶ Terry Martin, “An Affirmative Action Empire: The Soviet Union as the Highest Form of Imperialism,” in Ronald Grigor Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 67.

¹⁷ Chorbajian, 229.

in form and socialist in content.”¹⁸ Each technically autonomous republic received symbols of independent states including a national flag, anthem, and parliament for each republic. This was a particularly radical policy given the Soviet Union’s ideological obligation, at least in theory, to promote an egalitarian nation free from divisiveness.¹⁹

Why would the Soviet Union pursue such a radical policy that seems to promote devolution rather than the strict centralization that the USSR strived for? Much of the reasoning behind these policies had to do with Bolshevik rhetoric leading up to and during the Revolution of 1917. The Bolsheviks sought to bring about a sense of ‘class solidarity’ that would replace ethnic interests. Needless to say, this endeavor would require a comprehensive policy geared toward national minorities. The official Communist Party policy was announced during the Second Congress of 1903, which decreed,

equal rights for all citizens, irrespective of sex, religion, race and nationality, as well as the right of the population to receive and education in its own language...the introduction of native language on equal terms with the State language in all local, public and state institutions. Finally, the right of self-determination for all nations comprising the state...²⁰

Several of Vladimir Lenin’s early writings deal with what he calls the “oppressed nations,” or groups who had long suffered at the hands of tsarist imperialism. Imperial nationalities policies overtly promoted Russification, as evidenced by the Minister of Popular Education D. A. Tolstoy, who in 1870 stated that, “the final goal of the education of all the *inorodtsy* [non-Russian peoples]...must be their russification and amalgamation

¹⁸ Robert Weinberg, *Stalin’s Forgotten Zion: Birobidzhan and the Making of a Soviet Jewish Homeland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 15.

¹⁹ Chorbajian, 229.

²⁰ Dina Zisserman-Brodsky, *Constructing Ethnopolitics in the Soviet Union: Samizdat, Deprivation, and the Rise of Ethnic Nationalism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 20.

with the Russian people.”²¹ The imperial regime also created a legal distinction between *inorodtsy* and *prirodnye* [“natural residents,” i.e. Great Russians], rendering ethnic minorities second-class citizens.²² Lenin felt that for the Soviets to ignore their previous rhetoric and to continue to subjugate the newly founded Soviet Union’s various ethnic groups to the same suppression as under the Russian Empire would have made them hypocrites.²³ At the same time, many Bolsheviks, including Lenin, were distrustful of ethnic nationalism to the point that they made certain to organize the republics into non-ethnic geographic units which allowed minorities to claim a republic as their own, yet would allow for an ethnically diverse society to undermine the “false consciousness of nationalism.”²⁴

The Soviets chose to take this path of *korenizatsia* with regards to ethnic minorities out of the simple fear that they would come to see themselves as oppressed under Soviet rule and would thus seek to challenge it. Ethnic minorities had become an important basis of legitimacy for the Bolsheviks in the wake of the Civil War. The anti-Semitism and Great Russian chauvinism of the Whites had driven numerous ethnic minorities into support for the Red Army during the Civil War.²⁵ There was also a pervasive view among the Bolshevik leadership that many of the nations within the Soviet Union were essentially “backward,” both economically and culturally. While *korenizatsia* was meant to address these issues, it seemed to many Bolsheviks to run contrary to the principles of Marxism in that it concentrated on promoting ethno-national

²¹ Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 262.

²² *Ibid*, 170-171.

²³ Slezkine, 313.

²⁴ Chorbajian, 228.

²⁵ Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets: The Russian People and their Revolution, 1917-1921*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 7.

interests rather than the interest of the proletariat. These critics contended that class struggle should be the primary focus in the republics, not cultural policies which seemed to reinforce the ethno-nationalist bourgeoisie. Lenin and Stalin were able to enact their policy by arguing that national movements were a “necessary evil” of sorts that would have to be accepted until ethnic minorities could catch up to the Great Russians economically and culturally.²⁶

The Bolsheviks showed a great deal of concern over the question of ethnic groups, and with good reason. Traditional nationalist rivalries with groups such as the Finns, the Poles and the Ukrainians were revived during the early years of Bolshevik rule, leading Lenin to fear that an uprising by these groups could threaten the newly founded Soviet Union. Bolshevik leaders, including Lenin, felt that ethnic nationalism was dangerous because it could be manipulated by bourgeois leaders to their advantages. This view of nationalism as a masking ideology engendered deep distrust in many Soviet leaders, and explains why Soviet ethnic policies often vacillated. Lenin’s followers considered ethnic national consciousness to be an inevitable stage in human history and that as such, the Soviet government should do its best to try and steer the course of that inevitability. Moreover, Lenin accepted that many ethnic minorities were justified in their distrust of Russians after years of oppression at the hands of the tsarist regimes.²⁷

Lenin expounded on the dilemma posed by the perception of Great Russian chauvinism:

“The Bashkirs do not trust the Great Russians because the Great Russians are more cultured and used to take advantage of their culture to rob the Bashkirs. So in those remote places the name ‘Great Russian’ stands for ‘oppressor’ and

²⁶ Slezkine, 315-317.

²⁷ Ronald Grigor Suny, and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 68-71.

‘cheat.’ We should take this into account. We should fight against this. But it is a long term thing. It cannot be abolished by decree. We should be very careful here. And a nation like the Great Russians should be particularly careful because they have provoked such bitter hatred in all the other nations.”²⁸

Indeed, Russians overwhelmingly staffed most of the local government agencies in the Soviet republics, and Russian laborers dominated skilled occupations in these areas. In the republic of Dagestan in 1929, for instance, only 25.3 percent of employees at the government headquarters were from ethnic groups indigenous to Dagestan.²⁹ Similarly, in the Bashkir Autonomous Republic, only 8.1 percent of the state apparatus’ staff was ethnically Bashkir, while those of Baskir descent only comprised 10.5 percent of laborers in heavy industry.³⁰ In order to combat this perception of Great Russian chauvinism among ethnic minorities, the Soviet regime under Stalin encouraged ethnic minorities to take skilled jobs and government positions under the “affirmative action” policies of *korenizatsia*. The policy also granted considerable cultural, linguistic, and administrative autonomy.

The freedoms granted to ethnic minorities under *korenizatsia* would have clear limits, and would prove temporary. While in many cases the Soviets allowed schools to utilize their regional language as the primary language of instruction, they had no control over the rest of the curriculum. Many of the rights for national minorities which the Bolsheviks often officially endorsed were not enforced by the early Soviet government or were even repressed. While maintaining an official line of the right of secession for national minorities, the Bolsheviks consistently repressed movements led by groups such as the Georgians. Stalin even went so far as to declare, “The so-called independence of

²⁸ Quoted in Slezkine, 316.

²⁹ Zisserman-Brodsky, 22-23.

³⁰ Ibid, 23.

the so-called Georgia, Armenia, Poland, Finland, etc., is only an illusion and conceals the utter dependence of these [weak states] on one group of imperialists or another.”³¹ After 1934, Stalin would vastly scale back many of the privileges granted to ethnic minorities during the early years of Bolshevik rule in what has become known as the “Great Retreat.”

Stalin and the Great Retreat

During the early years of Stalin’s rule, the policy of so called “national liberation” was greatly advanced, allowing him to gain the nickname “father of nations.” In fact, it was under Stalin that the Great Transformation of 1928-1932 saw the height of state financing of ethnic diversity.³² One of the major successes of *korenizatsia* under Stalin was the dramatic increase in the number of ethnic minorities studying at the university level. In Tataria, for instance, the percentage of Tatars attending college increased from 14.6 percent in 1927-1928 to 26.3 percent in the 1934-1935 term.³³ The primary reason for such gains in minority student recruitment was that the Soviet government during this time period allowed many universities in the RSFSR to conduct courses in languages other than Russian.³⁴ Stalin’s early leniency towards ethnic minorities would not last long, however, and by the mid 1930s, his nationalities policies would become ruthless.

The policy of *korenizatsia* was soon replaced by a period of Russification, during which ethnic minorities were forced to abandon their regional customs and utilize the Russian language as their primary means of communication. This period of time during

³¹ Zisserman-Brodsky, 21.

³² Slezkine, 313.

³³ Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to post-Stalinist Society* (Oxford, Westview Press 1991), 56.

³⁴ Simon, 56.

the mid to late 1930s was known as the “Great Retreat” in which the scope of the policies favorable to national minorities were vastly scaled back.³⁵ In 1934, for instance, the Sector for National Minorities at the Moscow Regional Soviet and the Commission for Working Among National Minorities, were abolished.³⁶ This pattern was to be repeated among the other major urban areas of the RSFSR as well.³⁷ Much more significantly, between 1937 and 1939, the Soviets dissolved nearly all of the national schools, courts, and village soviets.³⁸ Muslim areas of Central Asia such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan resisted the shift toward Russification for reasons mostly related to religion. During these Russification campaigns, many Islamic customs were repressed by the Soviets, largely due to the atheism of Communist ideology. While many in Central Asia had no way to form any military resistance to the Soviet regime and its policies, they did manage to frustrate the Soviets by “dragging their feet” in implementing reforms.³⁹

Education reform was perhaps the major focus of Stalin’s nationality policies, as Stalin sought to establish Russian as the common language of the Red Army. This educational Russification involved the increasing usage of the Russian language in the schools of several non-Russian speaking republics, along with the gradual phasing out of the languages of ethnic minorities. Stalin’s early educational policies left the Russian language instruction in many republics in a very poor state by the late 1930s. Thus it was decided to make Russian an obligatory subject across the entire Soviet Union, while Stalin bitterly condemned “bourgeois nationalists” in Central Asia and Ukraine, for

³⁵ Slezkine, 313-314.

³⁶ Simon, 61.

³⁷ Ibid, 61-62.

³⁸ Ibid, 61.

³⁹ Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 276.

supposedly sabotaging previous efforts to teach Russian in non-Russian schools.⁴⁰ By 1938, Russian language instruction was obligatory in all schools, and national languages which utilized the Latin or Arabic alphabets had to replace their previous alphabets with Cyrillic.⁴¹

While these policy shifts may have solved many chronic education problems such as low numbers of minority students attending higher education, many republic leaders opposed these new policies as forced Russification tactics.⁴² As a result, many republics implemented the reforms halfheartedly. Stalin remained adamant, however, that the Russian language be properly taught in all of the republics of the Soviet Union so that the Soviet military could depend on troops that could communicate in a common language.⁴³ While Stalin found it was necessary to promote the Russian language as a practical solution to a military problem, his successors found that the same was necessary to create a national Soviet culture, or *Sovetskii narod*.

By the mid to late 1930s, Stalin's nationality policies had become ruthless. This crackdown on ethnic minorities coincided with the rise of Nazi Germany, and was meant to ensure domestic tranquility while being faced by the external threat of fascism. During the years of the *Ezhovshchina*, also known as the Great Purge, hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens were systematically deported and imprisoned, often on trumped up charges of treason. This series of purges that occurred between 1936 and 1937 had a devastating effect on ethnic minorities. In 1936, for instance, over 36,000 Poles and

⁴⁰ Peter Blitstein, "Nationbuilding or Russification?: Obligatory Russian Instruction in the Soviet Non-Russian School, 1938-1953" in Ronald Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 255.

⁴¹ Zisserman-Brodsky, 25.

⁴² Ibid, 256-257.

⁴³ Blitstein, 256.

7,000 Germans were deported to Kazakhstan.⁴⁴ During this time practically the entire population of ethnic Koreans, numbering in excess of 200,000, was deported back to Korea.⁴⁵ In 1937, the Soviets forcefully drove all non-Soviet citizen Chinese back into China.⁴⁶ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn claimed to have been told that anyone in Leningrad with an Estonian surname was deported in 1937, while considerable evidence suggests that thousands of Iranians, Poles, Afghans, Germans, and Bulgarians were deported on ethnic grounds.⁴⁷ Stalin's purges of 1936-1937 indicate a desire to infuse the class struggle with the problem posed by national minorities. Accordingly, much of Stalin's rhetoric on the issue at the time referred to these deported minority groups as 'exploiter classes.'⁴⁸ In reality, the *Ezhovshchina* was a direct response to the threat posed by Nazi Germany.

Stalin's nationality policies targeted Jews in particular. In 1934, the Soviet government established the Jewish Autonomous Region, also known as Birobidzhan, in eastern Russia bordering the Chinese region of Manchuria. This was an attempt to deal with persistent underemployment of Jews in urban areas such as Gomel, where upwards of 70 percent of jobless individuals were of Jewish descent.⁴⁹ Weinberg notes that the widespread unemployment experienced by Jews was, in large part, because many of their pre-Revolutionary professions included lease-holding, commerce, and money-lending, all occupations outlawed under the Soviet government by the early 1930s. Moreover, there was an upsurge in anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union after the Revolution. Thus, the

⁴⁴ Michael Gelb, "Ethnicity During the Ezhovshchina: A Historiography," in John Morison, ed., *Ethnic and National Issues in Russian and East European History: Selected Papers from the Fifth World Congress of Central and East European Studies* (Warsaw: WCCEES, 1995), 203.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 193.

⁴⁶ Ibid, 194.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 197.

⁴⁸ Zisserman-Brodsky, 25.

⁴⁹ Weinberg, 16-17.

issues of unemployment among Jews and mounting anti-Semitism were problems to which the easiest solution seemed to be to encourage Jews to migrate eastward.⁵⁰

Stalin displayed a particular distrust towards ethnic minorities during World War II, largely out of fear of collaboration with the invading Germans. Large numbers of certain ethnic groups suffered deportation to Central Asia and Siberia. These purges picked up where Stalin left off during the *Ezhovshchina*, and in many cases went much further. Over 700,000 Germans were deported from the Soviet Union in 1941 following the Nazi invasion, as well as some 40,000 Lithuanians.⁵¹ In 1944, Soviet authorities deported 194,000 Crimean Tatars due to suspicion of their collaboration.⁵² Stalin's cruel policies toward ethnic minorities during the Second World War created a climate in which many individuals from persecuted ethnic groups would take up arms against their Soviet oppressors. Seizing upon the weakened position of the Soviet government during the Second World War, many ethnic groups sought to disconnect themselves from the USSR. Groups from the Baltic republics, Western Ukraine, and the northern Caucasus region all fought against the Red Army in the form of either guerilla movements or outright allegiance with the Germans.⁵³ The Ukrainian Insurgent Army, which reached a strength of over 50,000 troops in 1945, was one such partisan group.⁵⁴ Sizeable anti-Soviet partisan movements existed in the Baltics as well. Lithuania's partisans totaled upwards of 30,000, with Latvia and Estonia each boasting roughly 15,000 guerillas.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Weinberg, 18.

⁵¹ Ben Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union: A Study in the Rise and Triumph of Nationalism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 71-73.

⁵² *Ibid*, 71.

⁵³ Beissinger, 52.

⁵⁴ Fowkes, 74.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 73.

Ironically, though, the processes of linguistic and ethnic Russification among national minority groups intensified significantly as a result of World War II. Since the war claimed the lives of a disproportionate number of minority males, many female minorities were inclined to marry men from other ethnic groups. Among the national autonomous republics of the USSR in 1959 there were 572 surviving males, aged 20-24 in 1943, to every 1000 females, while there were 605 Great Russian males per 1000 females.⁵⁶ That more minority males perished during the war comes as little surprise, since a greater proportion of ethnic minority males served in the Red Army infantry than did their Great Russian comrades. In a sample of 200 rifle divisions, about 2.8 percent of the troops in July 1943 were Kazakh, while as a whole the Kazakhs only made up about 1.8 percent of the total population of the USSR.⁵⁷ At the same time, about 4.5 percent of the troops were Uzbek, whereas the Uzbeks made up only about 2.8 percent of the total Soviet population.⁵⁸ More remarkably, Ukrainians in July 1944 made up over 33 percent of the 200 divisions, compared to the total Ukrainian population, which only comprised roughly 16 percent of the total population.⁵⁹ Great Russians, in contrast, made up just over 50 percent of the sample divisions, while comprising nearly 60 percent of the Soviet population.⁶⁰ As a result of these demographic changes, there was a sharp increase in linguistic Russification among the ASSR nationalities of the RSFSR after 1943.

Having intensified as a result of World War II, Russification continued into the immediate post-war period. The widespread ethno-national resistance that emerged

⁵⁶ Barbara A. Anderson and Brian D. Silver, "Some factors in the Linguistic and Ethnic Russification of Soviet Nationalities: Is Everyone Becoming Russian?" in Lubomyr Hajda and Mark Beissinger, eds., *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society* (Oxford, Westview Press 1990) 110-111

⁵⁷ Simon, 187.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 187.

during the war did not permeate the postwar period. The Soviet victory and subsequent international prestige attained by the USSR renewed patriotism amongst Russians and non-Russians alike and united the country in ways previously unseen. Nonetheless, isolated patches of ethno-nationalist guerilla resistance remained in the Baltic region as well as Western Ukraine through the late 1950s and early 1960s.⁶¹ By the late 1940s, the Soviets had begun an attack on the cultural privileges granted to ethnic minorities under *korenizatsia*. Stalin told famed Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein in 1947 that, “We must overcome the revival of nationalism we are experiencing with all the peoples.”⁶² During the purge known as the *Zhdanovschina*, the Soviet government waged a war against supposed “bourgeois nationalism” by altering national cultures, histories, and traditions to reflect long-standing friendship with the Great Russians.

In late 1946, for instance, the Ukrainian Central Committee issued six resolutions aimed at eradicating “bourgeois-nationalist deviations” in Ukrainian culture.⁶³ A number of Ukrainian historians were purged, including M. Hrushevskyi, for “bourgeois-nationalist” historiography on trumped up charges such as supposedly denying historically friendly relations between Russia and the Ukraine or rejecting progressive developments originating in Russia in the realms of culture, science, and revolutionary thought.⁶⁴ With its resolution “On the Political Errors and Deficiencies in the Work of the Institute of History at the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSSR,” of August 29, 1947, the Ukrainian Central Committee demanded that other historians criticize the

⁶¹ Beissinger, 52-55.

⁶² Ibid, 204.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 204-205.

works of Hrushevskiy and others to emphasize the leading role of the Great Russians in the “Slavic fight for unity.”⁶⁵ Historian Gerhard Simon argues that the *zhdanovschina*:

“attempted everywhere to fix historical and political consciousness on all-Soviet values, reduce independent cultural and scientific national traditions, fight against Western cultural influences, emphasize the close relations between the individual nations and the Russians since the beginning of time, present Russian culture as the superior, leading world civilization to which all other nations look for a standard.”⁶⁶

The Islamic peoples of the USSR experienced particularly strong effects of the *zhdanovschina*. During the late 1940s, an extensive campaign was launched to denunciate and prohibit centuries-old Islamic literary epics. Although Azerbaijani officials affirmed in 1949 that the Azeri epic *Dede-Korkut* was an “outstanding literary and cultural movement which sings of loyalty, justice, love for the homeland,” two years later Azeri Party chief A. A. Bagirov declared that the epic “contained the poison of nationalism,” and that “Its publication was a gross political mistake committed by the republic Academy of Sciences.”⁶⁷ Most of the republics caved under pressure from Moscow, yet in 1952, the majority in Kirgizia dared to openly resist a Stalinist reinterpretation of the national epic *Manas*, as Kirgiz and Russian newspapers battled back and forth on how the epic should be construed. Moscow eventually won, but that many Kirgiz attempted to defend their cultural privileges afforded to them under previous nationalities policies in the face of terror speaks volumes about the determination of ethnic minority groups to uphold their respective cultures.⁶⁸

Rather than asserting the merits of national cultures, Soviet nationalities policy after 1945 trumpeted everything Russian, from Russian art and literature, to Russian

⁶⁵ Simon, 205.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 205-206.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 206.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 206-207.

science and history. The notion of the Great Russians as the paternalistic majority was revived, with a prominent Soviet literary journal declaring that the peoples of the USSR view “the Russian people as their paragon” and that the peoples of Eastern Europe now “look to the Russian people as their older brother.”⁶⁹ Stalin himself stated at a reception for Red Army officers in May, 1945, “I drink...to the health of the Russian people because it is the most outstanding of all the Soviet Union’s nations...the Soviet Union’s leading power...because it has a clear mind, a firm character, and patience.”⁷⁰ Stalin’s Russification campaign boasted the eminence and the superiority of the Great Russians on the one hand, while Western culture was vehemently denounced on the other. Soviet propaganda focused on the supposedly decadent culture of the West as well as the alleged immorality of capitalism.

Much of the rhetoric was aimed at closing off the USSR during the founding years of the state of Israel. While the USSR initially recognized Israel with benevolence, it quickly distanced itself and began extensive campaigns against “Zionism” and “rootless cosmopolitanism.”⁷¹ This Soviet fear arose from the possibility that the numerous ethnic minority groups of the USSR would come to demand their own “homelands,” similar to that of the Jews in Israel. The Soviets could not, therefore, openly support the founding of the state of Israel. Thus, the *zhdanovschina* from 1949 to 1953 made Jews the most widely persecuted ethnic minority in the USSR, as Jewish newspapers, cultural facilities, schools, radio stations, and theaters were closed down with a much greater effect than on other minority groups.⁷² Many prominent Jewish

⁶⁹ Simon, 207.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid, 208.

⁷² Ibid.

writers and intellectuals were arrested and executed, while others died in prison camps or due to torture. Twenty-five well-known Jewish writers were secretly tried and executed in Moscow in July, 1952, on trumped up charges that they had plotted to establish a Jewish state on the Crimean peninsula.⁷³ Zionist “witch-hunts” ensued in 1952 and into 1953 in universities, factories, and government organs, and newspapers such as *Pravda* carried overtly anti-Semitic propaganda. Verbal abuse towards Jews became common in the streets.⁷⁴ The culmination of this Jewish pogrom was the so called “Doctor’s Plot” of January, 1953, when seven prominent Jewish doctors were charged with murdering a number of Soviet officials as well as plotting a number of other murders.⁷⁵ These actions by the Soviet government signaled what would likely have been a mass deportation of Jews had Stalin not died in 1953.

Soviet Nationalities Policy under Khrushchev

Nikita Khrushchev’s Secret Speech in February of 1956 paved the way for the so-called ‘thaw’ during which many of Stalin’s misdeeds were revealed to a stunned Soviet public. Thereafter, a wide range of Stalinist policies were curbed significantly, including his extreme nationalities policies in place since the mid 1930s. Khrushchev was highly critical of Stalin’s mass deportation of ethnic groups, and many Latvians, Lithuanians, and Estonians were allowed to return to their homelands.

Khrushchev’s *Program* included efforts to increase interaction among the various ethnic groups of the USSR. Increased trade and internal migration between the republics were allowed, and the party apparatus stepped up its Russian language instruction in

⁷³ Simon, 208.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 209.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

schools across the Soviet Union while allowing ethnic minorities to continue the usage of their respective languages.⁷⁶

Up until the end of 1957, Khrushchev's nationality policies seemed to resemble those of the 1920s and *korenizatsia*. Economic and administrative decentralization were the core of Khrushchev's early nationality policies. The linguistic and educational measures of *korenizatsia*, however, would not be as strongly emphasized under Khrushchev as they had been in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

By 1958, Khrushchev's desire to expand the dominance of the Russian language led the Soviet government to scale back any policies which seemed to hearken back to the *korenizatsia* period.⁷⁷ Moreover, by the 1960s, local administrative bodies in the autonomous republics and national republics had to abandon the usage of their native languages in their correspondences and converting them to Russian. This had a widespread impact on the regional academia and legal system.⁷⁸

Khrushchev's revival of Russification stemmed from instances of ethnic tension that had begun to surface in the early years of his rule. Even before Khrushchev's Secret Speech, several Caucasian groups such as the Ingush and the Chechens had seized upon the window of opportunity after Stalin's death and had begun returning to their homelands without the Soviet government's approval. Despite numerous arrests, the Soviet regime could not stop the influx of thousands of Caucasians, and was ultimately forced to relent. As a result, the Chechen-Ingush ASSR was reestablished by 1957, along with numerous other autonomous regions in the Caucasus. Not surprisingly, ethnic tensions arose when many Caucasians returned to find that, in their absence, much of

⁷⁶ Zisserman-Brodsky, 26-27.

⁷⁷ Simon, 245-246.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 251.

their former territory had been taken over by Great Russians. There was one such major incident of ethnic conflict in Grozny, the capital of Chechnya, in which Great Russians rioted after a Russian sailor was beaten to death by an Ingush.⁷⁹ Instances such as this undoubtedly highlight the continued existence of ethnic tension despite governmental attempts to maintain harmony among the various national groups. In response, the Soviets attempted to settle this tension through Russification.

Khrushchev's Russification campaign included educational reforms aimed at advancing the Russian language at the expense of national languages. After 1956, ethnic minorities were allowed greater freedom to study their national languages under the basic "national in form, socialist in content" formula. However, by the time of the 22nd Party Congress in 1962, Khrushchev had come to support the teaching of Russian as a "second native language" among ethnic groups. The various non-Russian languages of the USSR were categorized and those deemed to be "dying" were gradually phased out in regional school networks. Perhaps the most crucial policy shift in terms of language education came in the Education Reform Laws of 1958-1959, which abolished mandatory instruction in national languages and gave non-Russian parents the right to choose the language of instruction for their children. In practice, this new policy greatly lowered the stature of ethnic languages vis-à-vis Russian: languages such as Chuvash and Karelian ceased to be the primary languages in their respective schools.

Many leaders of national republics rejected the laws because they seemed to create a Great Russian double standard: the Education Reform Laws essentially made the study of the Russian language mandatory in national language schools, yet national languages were made optional for Russian language schools. In essence, non-Russian

⁷⁹ Simon, 241-244.

students in both the RSFSR and the republics were expected to study the Russian language, yet Great Russian students living in republics other than the RSFSR were expected only to study in Russian. Georgian official I. V. Abashidze voiced this opinion in December, 1958, declaring, “Knowledge of the local language is a powerful moral factor in creating brotherly unity among people of different nationalities...We think local languages must be required subjects in all curricula in all of the republics’ schools.”⁸⁰ Ukrainian Communist Party Secretary S. V. Chervonenko seconded this opinion, stating, “Many years of experience with national education in the republics show that obligatory Russian classes and the local language classes have proven to be a complete success...Resolving the issue differently seems like a step backwards.”⁸¹ These appeals fell on deaf ears, however, as the Khrushchev regime pushed ahead with its educational reforms.

Those republics who dared to openly resist these Education Reforms, such as Latvia and Azerbaijan, saw their Communist Parties purged in the summer of 1959. Khrushchev’s first victim, Turkmenian Party Chief S. Babaev, was purged a year earlier for complaining that “*korenizatsia* was not progressing fast enough,” since only 18.8 percent of the students at the republic’s six technical universities were of Turkmen descent.⁸² Ethnic minorities also became dissatisfied that the reforms did not address the growing linguistic divide between themselves and Great Russians. Virtually all of the Union Republics continued to offer mandatory instruction in Russian as well as in the respective national languages in most schools despite the official rhetoric. There remained, however, a clear and undeniable double standard which continued to anger

⁸⁰ Simon, 247.

⁸¹ Ibid, 247.

⁸² Ibid, 251.

many ethnic minorities in that Great Russians living in areas populated largely by other ethnic groups generally made little effort to learn the national language of that area. According to the 1970 Census, only 3 percent of Great Russians, or 3.8 million individuals, claimed fluency in another Soviet language, with 2.37 million of these claiming fluency in Ukrainian.⁸³ Linguistic Russification can thus be seen as a persistent, tangible threat for ethnic minorities. Moreover, the purges of 1958-1959 sent a clear signal to minority groups that the period of concessions was over.⁸⁴

The official ideological shift in nationalities policy came at the Twenty-Second Party Congress in 1962 as Khrushchev blatantly contradicted many of his statements on nationalities policy in 1957. Khrushchev stated before the Twenty-Second Congress that,

“In the USSR, a new historical community of people of different nationalities and who share common characteristics has arisen - the Soviet People [*Sovetskii narod*]. These nationalities share a common socialist motherland, the USSR; a common economic base, the socialist economy; a common class structure; a common philosophy, Marxism-Leninism; a common goal, the development of communism; and many common spiritual and psychological features.”⁸⁵

Hereafter, the two “dialectic” practices of the “universal development of every nation” and “drawing together of the socialist nations,” were characterized as “interrelated, progressive tendencies.” Previously, Soviet ideology had presumed that the two processes would occur in two distinct yet consecutive periods, while after 1962, these processes were considered simultaneous. This new ideology was “well-suited to legitimize assimilatory policy.”⁸⁶

Jeremy Azrael asserts that the dual processes of drawing nations together while maintaining and developing national identities essentially locked the Soviet leadership

⁸³ Simon, 248.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 251.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 254-255.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 255.

after Stalin into an unyielding contradiction. Azrael asks, “How could [the Soviet leadership] establish a new legitimacy, which was to be based on a consensus developed through the recognition of national aspirations, while simultaneously asserting that the nations of the USSR were moving toward fusion?”⁸⁷ This contradiction was the focal point of much of the dialogue in government circles following the death of Stalin, which had expanded to include many more interest groups, many of which promoted national interests. Furthermore, the Party after Stalin’s death was no longer a “coherent body with a single voice,” but “rather a conglomeration of various interests with conflicting views.”⁸⁸ Under Khrushchev, the Party recruitment apparatus began to seek out cadres more for their technical skills than for their allegiance to ideology. These new technical elites were assigned in particularly high numbers to the national peripheries rather than the central Party organs. In addition, many of these ‘technocrats’ often made decisions based on reality rather than commitment to the Party position. As a result, conflict within the Party arose not only in Moscow, but between Moscow and the national republics as well.⁸⁹

A major element of Khrushchev’s early nationality policy was to entrust greater economic autonomy to the national republics. However, Khrushchev recognized the dangers posed by his earlier policies of economic decentralization, and after 1962 he began to implement recentralization measures. Simon argues that the transfer of economic administration to the republics greatly endangered a “Party dictatorship

⁸⁷ Jeremy R. Azrael, ed., *Soviet Nationality Policies and Practices* (New York, Praeger Publishers 1978), 52.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 52-53.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 53.

conceived to be centralized.”⁹⁰ Likewise, economic decentralization seemed to contribute to growing self confidence among the national republics and bolstered propoganda in favor of national and territorial autonomy. Under the decentralized economic structure, many republics managed to meet and often surpass their quotas for their local supplies, yet frequently fell drastically short of meeting their quotas for delivery to the All-Union fund. For instance, in 1959, the Kazakh SSR met 111 percent of its meat production quota, yet only delivered 28 percent of its quota to the All-Union fund while meeting 95 percent of its local quota.⁹¹ Similarly, the Ukrainian SSR met 95 percent of its meat quota and filled 92 percent of its own local quota, yet only delivered 47 percent of its quota for the All-Union fund.⁹²

In response, Khrushchev in 1963 created a number of economic councils to supervise and coordinate the smaller economic administrative bodies in the republics, as well as the Supreme Economic Council of the USSR which was the “supreme state organ controlling industry and construction.” This strategy allowed Khrushchev to reassert economic control over the republics without stripping them of their recently won competencies. The convoluted economic bureaucracy prompted a large degree of antagonism among the various bodies, providing a convenient context for Brezhnev to later dissolve all of the economic councils created under Khrushchev and assert a more heavily centralized network of economic administration.⁹³ The temporary acquiescence by the Soviet government of a significant degree of economic autonomy to the national republics only to rescind shortly thereafter parallels the vacillation towards cultural

⁹⁰ Simon, 256.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid, 256-257.

policies. Since most republics were able to better meet their domestic needs when given greater economic autonomy, there was a greater tendency to resist economic recentralization among the republics.

In reaction to the growing ethnic dissent arising out of resistance to Russification and economic recentralization, the Soviet regime under Khrushchev brutally repressed all national self determination movements based on ethnic and/or linguistic identities. In 1962, for instance, a group of Ukrainian intellectuals were convicted of high treason for publishing a leaflet calling for Ukrainians to rise up and secede from the USSR. Similarly, many high ranking party officials in republics such as Latvia and Kazakhstan were purged for “showing indulgences toward nationalist sentiments.”⁹⁴ Ronald Suny points out that during the Khrushchev period the USSR “maintained itself through the tolerance of diversity and local national control with the ultimate sanction of the threat or use of armed force.”⁹⁵ The use of the military occurred with the brutal repression of ethno-nationalist rallies in Tbilisi in 1956 and Erevan in 1965.⁹⁶

The Khrushchev period can thus be viewed as a period of ethnic minorities struggling to maintain their preferential position in the early post Stalin years while at the same time being faced with the continuous threat of brutal suppression by the Soviet government.

That said, Zisserman-Brodsky asserts that Khrushchev brought about a sort of “human dimension” to the political culture in the Soviet Union. This, she argues, was central in the ethnic revival in the years following Stalin. It was after Khrushchev that there was a continual public concern over human rights and civil liberties. Thus, the

⁹⁴ Zisserman-Brodsky, 27.

⁹⁵ Suny, 131.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

public environment created under Khrushchev seemed to set forth a precedent under which ethnic minorities had more flexibility and a better case for their nationalist causes. While Soviet nationality policy under Khrushchev was not as favorable toward national republics as in the early Bolshevik period, it was clearly a step towards greater leniency. Zisserman-Brodsky goes so far as to conclude that the “sip of freedom” permitted under Khrushchev after the death of Stalin “proved to be fatal for the Soviet Empire.”⁹⁷ The temporary control given to national elites over economic decision-making, the resurgence of national languages being taught in republic schools, the general sense of a more benevolent government, and most importantly, the ongoing contradictory nationalities policies espoused by the Soviet leadership, all worked to undermine the cohesion of the Soviet republics.

Most of the underground organizations still in existence during the late 1980s first assembled during the “sip of freedom.”⁹⁸ It was at this time that ethnic minorities first “produced outspoken critics of official nationality policies and practices. These critics managed not only to replenish their own ranks in the face of hundreds, if not thousands of arrests, but also to establish dynamic and resilient dissident organizations, ranging from clandestine parties, through editorial boards for the preparation of regular *samizdat*, or underground journals, to networks for the public circulation of programs, petitions, and letters of protest.”⁹⁹ These organizations played a significant role in undermining the Soviet government all the way up to the collapse in 1991.

⁹⁷ Zisserman-Brodsky, 27.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Azrael, 376.

The Brezhnev Period: Another ‘Great Retreat?’

Militant separatist activity waned under the leadership of Leonid Brezhnev, who assumed power after Khrushchev’s fall from grace in the mid 1960s. Formerly operating partisan armies such as the UPA, or Ukrainian Insurgent Army, were silenced during Brezhnev’s rule.¹⁰⁰ Ethno-nationalist dissidence seemed to be at such a low level that Brezhnev announced during a ceremony commemorating the USSR’s fiftieth anniversary in 1972 that, “the national question, as it has come down to us from the past, has been resolved completely, definitely, and irrevocably.”¹⁰¹ While few believed that any sort of ethno-nationalist uprising could succeed during this period due to the enormity of Soviet military strength, a variety of passive ethno-cultural conflicts persisted under Brezhnev. Ongoing disputes over things such as linguistic and cultural expression and religious intolerance continued to unsettle many ethnic minority groups. Moreover, unequal distribution of investment in various autonomous regions and national republics, the right of return for exiled political opponents, and a lack of minority representation in elite posts further revived divisions between the Great Russians and the various ethnic minorities.¹⁰²

Compounding these disputes was yet another period of Russification. One policy pursued under the Brezhnev regime that ultimately spread ethno-nationalist discontent was a continuation of Khrushchev’s campaign to impose on ethnic minorities a homogenous *Sovetskii narod*.¹⁰³ Any type of cultural expression which was thought to espouse ethnic nationalism was bitterly condemned under Brezhnev. The Soviets

¹⁰⁰ Walter A. Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999), 186-187.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 187.

¹⁰² Beissinger, 53-54.

¹⁰³ Zisserman-Brodsky, 28-29.

outlawed traditional Ukrainian dress in the 1970s, as well as customary Belorussian funeral ceremonies known as *dzyady*.¹⁰⁴ The government also eliminated the national Ligo festival of Latvia, during which Latvians traditionally laid flowers at the monument to Liberty, after they proclaimed it a “bourgeois nationalist” festival.¹⁰⁵ Soviet officials even condemned certain types of music as openly nationalist, as was the case with the prohibition of the *dombre*, the national instrument of the Kazakhs.¹⁰⁶ These incidents indicate an abandoning of the earlier cultural autonomy provided under *korenizatsia* together with the attempt to replace national cultures through a Russification campaign.

The 1970 census illustrated several demographic developments that revealed escalating challenges to Soviet attempts to construct a *Sovetskii narod*. In addition to showing the lack of Great Russians claiming fluency in other Soviet languages as well as a decline in the use of Russian by ethnic minorities, the 1970 census revealed that a demographic stagnation of the Great Russians was met with a population explosion in Central Asia and the Caucasus between 1959 and 1970. For instance, among Uzbeks there was a population increase from just over 6 million in 1959 to about 9.2 million in 1970, a 52.8 percent increase.¹⁰⁷ The Kazakhs and Tadzhiks experienced similarly high population growth rates over the same period, with 46.3 percent and 52.9 percent, respectively.¹⁰⁸ The Azeri, Georgians, Armenians, Kirgiz, and Turkmen all showed high growth rates from 1959 to 1970 ranging from 20.2 percent all the way up to 52.2 percent.¹⁰⁹ These high growth rates among the peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia

¹⁰⁴ Anatoly M. Khazanov, *Soviet Nationality Policy during Perestroika* (Falls Church: Delphic Associates 1991), 56.

¹⁰⁵ Khazanov, 56.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Simon, 372.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

contrast sharply with that of the Great Russians over the 1959-1970 period, as the growth rate among Russians totaled 13 percent.¹¹⁰ In the following decade, the situation would not become any more favorable for those hoping for a Russified *Sovetskii narod*. While the growth rates of the peoples of Central Asia and the Caucasus clearly slowed down between 1970 and 1979, ranging from 16.6 percent among Georgians to 35.7 among Tadzhiks, the growth rate of the Great Russians decreased even more dramatically to 6.5 percent over the same period.¹¹¹ This population explosion, met with declining use of the Russian language, must have made the task of creating a *Sovetskii narod* more difficult. Fewer minorities over this period migrated to the RSFSR and intermarriage rates between Great Russians and those of ethnic minority backgrounds were down.

These factors all but negated Khrushchev's claim that the nations were fusing together and at the same time weakened any justification for a central integrating role for the Great Russian nation and language.¹¹² "At the same time," writes Azrael, "[these factors] demonstrated the fact that nationhood was autonomous of socioeconomic changes and that the future evolution of the USSR did not imply the future fusion of nations."¹¹³ Despite attempts by Khrushchev to assert more centralized control through the promotion of a "Soviet people," a more decentralized sense of nationhood appears to have arisen during the 1960s and early 1970s.

In response to the results of the 1970 census, the Soviet regime during the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s revamped its efforts to broaden its Russian language instruction among non-Russians. Brezhnev inherited this proposed solution from his

¹¹⁰ Simon, 372.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Azrael, 54.

¹¹³ Ibid, 54-55.

predecessor, “[a]s Khrushchev’s attempt to breathe Marxism-Leninism back to life obviously petered out, and the demographic balance began to shift against the Great Russians, the Russian language was thrust more and more into the role of chief instrument of socialization and integration.”¹¹⁴ As time passed, the goal of consolidating the Soviet people under the Russian language became of increasing importance to Brezhnev, as his education policies demonstrate.

Brezhnev’s education policies aimed at expanding the role of the Russian language throughout the USSR, further revitalizing an atmosphere of Russification. The double standard established under Khrushchev continued under Brezhnev: Russians had their own schools regardless of which republic they resided in, whereas ethnic minorities residing in the RSFSR had no choice but to attend Russian-language schools. Minority groups were thus “doomed to acculturation and de-ethnization.”¹¹⁵ Even more insulting to ethnic minority groups was praising the Great Russians in official Soviet rhetoric during the Brezhnev period. The Soviets promoted Russian as the language of the October Revolution and of Lenin, in addition to proclaiming it as the language of the Communist future and “the powerful means for spiritual integration.”¹¹⁶ Moreover, the Soviet official line maintained that non-Russians had a “craving” for the Russian language and that it was an “objective, historical factor,” that the Russian nation had “gained the love and respect of all of the toilers.”¹¹⁷ A certain degree of Great Russian arrogance in the official Party line unquestionably existed, giving credence to the perceived threat of renewed Russification among ethnic minorities.

¹¹⁴ Isabelle Kriendler, “Soviet Language Planning since 1953,” in Kirkwood, Michael, ed., *Language Planning in the Soviet Union* (London, Macmillan Press 1989), 52.

¹¹⁵ Khazanov, 47.

¹¹⁶ Kriendler, 53.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

Brezhnev's language policy translated into a further reduction of the number of schools instructing in languages other than Russian. This process was implemented across the entire USSR, but those within the RSFSR were most heavily affected. In the early 60s under Khrushchev, there were 47 languages used as the means of instruction other than Russian. By 1982, that number had fallen to 16.¹¹⁸ Even in the few non-Russian language schools, native language instruction was used only in the lowest grades, and the time dedicated Russian language study overall in the late 1970s comprised about 14 to 17 percent of the average school day.¹¹⁹ Whereas Khrushchev's regime had been tolerant of those republics that did not fully conform to the Party's policies on education, Brezhnev forced all republics to comply. Estonia and Lithuania finally relenting in 1980 and 1981, respectively, to introduce Russian language study in first grade classes.¹²⁰

Dissatisfaction grew among many ethnic minorities over the Russification of their national political elites during the Brezhnev period. One dissident Moldovan author, Chingiz Aitmatov, criticized officials who he felt to be "a special type of demagogue...who almost made his prestigious profession extolling the Russian language and depreciating his own in appropriate and inappropriate situations."¹²¹ One Bashkir worker lamented, "our leadership and deputies of the Bashkir ASSR cringed and groveled before chauvinism, most of all worrying about their own privileged positions; for them it was disgraceful to give a speech even once on television or radio in the Bashkir language."¹²² A disgruntled Tatar complained, "Many leaders to this day never

¹¹⁸ Kriendler, 54.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Ibid, 54.

¹²¹ Khazanov, 59.

¹²² Ibid.

give speeches in their native languages; some of them don't even speak it."¹²³ These concerns seemed to be ignored, however, as Soviet language policy under Brezhnev unmistakably favored the Russian language. Regional leaders were expected to follow suit and promote the Russian language as well.

In addition to addressing Khrushchev's supposed failures in promoting the Russian language, Brezhnev also sought to tackle what the Soviet leadership perceived to be unsatisfactory migration rates. Brezhnev hoped to increase the number of Great Russians residing in the republics in order to facilitate his Russification campaign among ethnic minority groups. In its rhetoric, the Soviet government had always maintained that the migration of peoples of different ethnic backgrounds within the Soviet Union was a positive mechanism for the "internationalization" of the Soviet peoples. In reality, this internal migration was a practical political tool for the Soviet regime to create loyal groups in the republics to make Russification easier while at the same time strengthening control in the periphery. The upshot of internal migration meant that by the late 1980s, only Armenia maintained ethnic homogeneity with 90% of the population being Armenian. In Kazakhstan and Kirgizia, the respective indigenous ethnic groups no longer constituted a majority, and the same held true for 13 of the 20 autonomous republics of the USSR.¹²⁴ The non-Estonian population of Estonia tripled between 1959 and 1988.¹²⁵ It comes as no wonder, then, that these ethnic groups came to feel threatened by the rapid, ongoing influx of Great Russians into the republics.

The Brezhnev government institutionalized cultural Russification in the mid-1970s. With its policy known as *etnokulturovedenia*, the Soviet government hoped to

¹²³ Khazanov, 59.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 44-45.

¹²⁵ Ibid, 46.

overcome so-called “national barriers” by passing specific elements of Russian culture on to ethnic groups. Russian teachers were to “immerse students in the Russian spiritual world and promote ‘a gradual merging and ultimately also integration within the framework of a common socialist culture.’”¹²⁶ Under *etnokulturovedenia* Soviet researchers studied cultural differences among the various nationalities, such as different takes on family values and national symbolism, and made proposals on how to fill in cultural voids and modify views that they more closely resembled those of Great Russians.¹²⁷ Cultural Russification added to the dissent among the republics, along with mounting numbers of ethnic Russians migrating into the republics and increased linguistic Russification.

Ethnic tensions boiled over in 1970 in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, over a soccer match between a team from Moscow and a local Uzbek one. Three days of demonstrations ensued, with students marching and chanting “Russians go home!” and “Uzbekistan is for the Uzbeks!”¹²⁸ There was a surprising degree of sympathy for the protesters exhibited by the Uzbek police, according to eyewitness accounts.¹²⁹ While traveling throughout the Soviet republics during the mid- 1970s, one Soviet historian frequently heard among non-Russian intelligentsia members the slogan, “If by the 21st century we will be forced to forget our native language and convert to Russian, our children and grandchildren will with even greater reason write anti-Russian slogans in Russian.”¹³⁰ In Georgia, the people staged mass demonstrations against linguistic Russification in 1978, with

¹²⁶ Kreindler, 55.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Khazanov, 53.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid, 44.

protesters chanting, “Give us back our language!”¹³¹ These protests led to the preservation of a provision in the Georgian constitution that defended the status of the Georgian language in the republic’s schools. Similar protests against linguistic Russification took place in the Baltic republics during the late 1970s, although with less success.¹³² While ethno-nationalist discontent was by and large silenced during the early Brezhnev period, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, dissent in the republics was becoming evident once again.

Soviet leaders in the Brezhnev period vastly overestimated their successes in terms of building a cohesive, multiethnic nation-state. While ethno-nationalist dissent was less evident under Brezhnev than under any other period of Soviet history, ethnic minorities nonetheless continued to resist Russification tactics. With respect to Central Asia, historian Walter Kemp points out that Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders were rather naïve in supposing that hundreds of years of “brilliant Irano-Turkic-Islamic culture” could be replaced with a hollow Soviet culture in a mere seventy years.¹³³

Reform, Nationalism, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union

Yuri Andropov, an aging Politburo veteran, came to power following the death of Brezhnev in 1982 determined to solve the problems of mismanagement and lack of productivity in the Soviet republics. Andropov attributed these problems to regional leaders. He believed that a number of these leaders were attempting to subvert Soviet policies of which they did not approve. Andropov accused other republic leaders of trying to procure more central government funds for their respective republics by corrupt

¹³¹ Khazanov, 54.

¹³² Kreindler, 56.

¹³³ Kemp, 188.

means. While Andropov was unable to create a comprehensive plan to address these problems before his death, he did make an important contribution to the Soviet regime's position on the nationalities question. Andropov once declared,

The successes in resolving the nationalities question certainly do not mean that all of the problems engendered by the very fact of life and work of numerous nations and nationalities in the framework of a single nation-state have disappeared. This is hardly possible as long as nations exist, as long as there are national distinctions. And they will exist for a long time, much longer than class distinctions.¹³⁴

Andropov thus admitted that there would be ethno-nationalist discontent as long as the Soviet Union allowed for the expression of nationalist identities, and he was the first Soviet official to state that nations and national distinctions had an identity entirely separate from class.¹³⁵ There would be no such watershed with regard to Soviet nationality policy during the reign of Andropov's successor, Konstantin Chernenko. Chernenko did not consider the nationality problem to be of the utmost urgency, and as such, left nationality policies on the periphery of his political programs.¹³⁶

Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev came to power in 1985 with a spirit of enthusiasm and reform. The overarching terms used by Gorbachev to describe his reforms were *perestroika* (restructuring) and *glasnost'* (openness). Gorbachev found himself facing overwhelming obstacles very early on in his leadership in spite of the apparent need for reform in the Soviet Union. This need for reform arose out of the domestic and international challenges faced by the USSR. Abroad, the Soviets were struggling with a costly war in Afghanistan which alienated the USSR from the international community. At home, the Soviet Union found itself facing economic stagnation as well as a crisis of

¹³⁴ Kemp, 191.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Zisserman-Brodsky, 31.

leadership that resulted from the deaths of Brezhnev, Andropov and Chernenko in rapid succession. Moreover, Gorbachev had to build a political base of support for his reform policies with the greatest opposition to his doing so coming from “the party and state bureaucracies in the national republics.”¹³⁷ He took up Andropov’s position on corruption, and carried on the fight against noncompliance with Party policy among regional leaders. Gorbachev also sought to break down the networks of patronage and nepotism that reinforced their positions.¹³⁸

Though Gorbachev correctly recognized then necessity of reform, implementing them proved difficult, particularly in the republics. In order to implement his reforms, Gorbachev sought to install regional leaders in line with his platform. Several top leaders from ethnic minority backgrounds in several national republics were replaced by Gorbachev allies of Great Russian descent. These moves were met with ethno-nationalist protests, as ethnic minorities sought to defend the privileges first granted to them under *korenizatsia* and continued under Khrushchev and Brezhnev. In December 1986, in Kazakhstan, for instance, demonstrations ensued after the long time Communist Party chief Dinmukhammed Kunaev was replaced by the Russian Gennady Kolbin.¹³⁹

Gorbachev’s *perestroika* and *glasnost*’ campaigns after 1985 created opportunities for national self-determination groups. While the repressive nature of the Soviet regime prior to Gorbachev’s reforms undoubtedly allowed for the suppression of any articulation of national demands or interests, the system’s ability to silence critics was effectively curtailed under *perestroika*. The abolition of the *nomenklatura*, the system that gave Communist Party officials the sole right to appoint leaders to key

¹³⁷ Suny, 127.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 191-193.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 128.

economic, social and military positions, undercut the Communist Party. The Communist Party lost much of its *raison d'être* in the eyes of party members and non-members alike without the function of delegating jobs and positions. The deterioration of the Communist Party provided an opening for alternative political groups, including those in favor of ethno-national sovereignty.¹⁴⁰

The implementation of *glasnost*' also weakened the Soviet government's control over critics and proponents of national self-determination movements. Although central control over the supposed 'freedom of speech' afforded to Soviet citizens under *glasnost*' was intended to keep radical discontent under control, critics were still able to voice their opinions. Such open dissidence further undermined the Communist Party's already waning legitimacy.¹⁴¹ The ability to criticize and speak out under Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*' provided ethnic minorities with an opening to voice their long-quieted discontent. Suny argues that Gorbachev appears to have believed in the fictional unity of a *Sovetskii narod*, a notion introduced under Khrushchev.¹⁴² Therefore, the argument goes, he did little to respond to the demands of the separatist ethnic minority factions. Moreover, Gorbachev's perpetual refusal to return to the violently repressive measures of his predecessors removed the element of fear from many ethno-nationalist groups seeking sovereignty. Thus, the Gorbachev era provided a window of opportunity for ethno-nationalist independence movements to develop.

One area in which criticism became widespread was in the longstanding Russian language policy in education. In particular, many of the national language protests of the 1980s pushed for the abolition of the "free choice" provisions of the 1958-1959

¹⁴⁰ Bollerup and Christensen, 55-56.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, 57.

¹⁴² Suny, 139.

Education Reform Laws.¹⁴³ Resistance to the resumption and expansion of obligatory Russian language curriculum laid the groundwork for the ethno-nationalist calls for cultural revival during the *glasnost*' period.¹⁴⁴ Many of the ethno-nationalist leaders, including Levon Ter Petrosyan of Armenia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia of Georgia, and Ivan Drach of Ukraine, pushed for national sovereignty during the breakup of 1991 and were heavily influenced by the repressive era of Russification that marked the late 1960s to the early 1980s.¹⁴⁵ One ethno-nationalist dissident, Belorussian Mikhail Kukobaka, traces his revolutionary roots to this linguistic repression of the late 1960s as he writes,

I sighted an inscription on a turnpike. Twenty-five years ago it was written in Byelorussian with the Russian translation below. Now the Byelorussian phrase has disappeared. To my surprise, this offended me. Suddenly, I realized that I am a Byelorussian. From time immemorial my forefathers have lived here, and this land consists of the remains of countless generations of my kinsmen. I, their descendent, have an undeniable right not only to this land but also to my native language, the right to be Byelorussian.¹⁴⁶

According to Soviet philosopher Grigorii Pomerants, "Nationality, the only officially recognized distinction between Soviet citizens, has become a leading principle of political organization...Nationalities have turned into political parties."¹⁴⁷

Indeed, ethno-nationalist separatist movements appeared in full force by early 1990. In March of that year, for instance, Lithuania's legislature had declared independence, while numerous so-called "salvation committees" sprang up across the Baltics.¹⁴⁸ In Ukraine, a number of independent political parties were established in

¹⁴³ Kreindler, 48-50.

¹⁴⁴ Beissinger, 55.

¹⁴⁵ Suny, 131.

¹⁴⁶ Zisserman-Brodsky, 91-92.

¹⁴⁷ Victor Zaslavsky, "The Evolution of Separatism in Soviet Society under Gorbachev," in Gail Lapidus and Victor Zaslavsky, eds. *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 72.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 74-75.

1990, distancing Kiev from Moscow. Among these were the Liberal-Democratic Party, the Democratic Party of Ukraine, and the Popular Movement for Reconstruction.¹⁴⁹

Dina Zisserman-Brodsky uses the term *relative deprivation* to define the primary motivating causes for the ethno-nationalist separatist movements that helped bring about the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991. Relative deprivation can be characterized as either egoistic or fraternal, with the former encompassing personal discontent arising when an individual compares his or her own situation to that of outside individuals, and the latter dealing with social discontent resulting when an individual compares the situation of his or her group as a whole to that of an outside group.¹⁵⁰ The primary categories of relative deprivation explored by Zisserman-Brodsky are political deprivation, status deprivation and patterns of ethnic domination, as well as forms of economic, environmental, territorial, religious, cultural and linguistic deprivation.

Political deprivation came first and foremost from frustration with the fictitious notion of "national sovereignty" which the Soviet leadership trumpeted. Many ethnic groups claimed to no avail a right to secession that Lenin and other early Bolsheviks supported. Moreover, areas forcibly incorporated into the USSR such as Georgia and the Baltics considered themselves "under occupation" according to various underground dissident publications known as *samizdat*.¹⁵¹ Another form of relative deprivation noted by these *samizdat* was that of ethnic domination at the hands of the Great Russians, a complaint that focused on the influx of Russians into areas populated by ethnic minorities and preferential treatment towards Russians in terms of delegating positions of power.

¹⁴⁹ Miron Rezun, ed. *Nationalism and the Breakup of an Empire: Russia and its periphery*, (London: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 60.

¹⁵⁰ Zisserman-Brodsky, 69.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 73-75.

For instance, one *samizdat* from Latvia laments that “all leading positions – all party, state and economic department head positions – were given to Russian newcomers.”¹⁵²

Some *samizdat* authors alleged economic deprivation at the hands of the Russians. M. Sahaidak criticized the Soviet economic policy as “predatory” while alleging that although Ukraine in the mid 1970s contributed to 23 percent of the USSR’s exports, it received only fewer than 15 percent of its imports.¹⁵³ These types of grievances are supported by evidence showing that by the 1980s, every republic in the USSR experienced a trade deficit with the RSFSR except Armenia.¹⁵⁴ In terms of government spending, the 1988 Soviet budget for social needs totaled 1308 rubles per capita in Estonia, but only 212 rubles per capita in Tataria.¹⁵⁵ There were similar protests to what was believed to be environmental deprivation, as two *samizdat* authors in Georgia and Azerbaijan claimed that Russians sought to exhaust oil supplies first in regions dominated by Turkic peoples. Even more protests arose from individuals in Armenia who sought to remove environmentally harmful nuclear and chemical facilities, staffed largely by Russians, from their territory.¹⁵⁶

With regards to religious deprivation, Georgian dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia cited Moscow’s repressive control over the Georgian Orthodox Church as one of his movement’s primary grievances, while strong resistance was felt to the repression of the Catholic Church in Lithuania.¹⁵⁷ The Soviets also dissolved independent churches in Ukraine, as noted in M. Sahadiak’s 1974 *samizdat* titled “Ethnocide of the Ukrainians in

¹⁵² Zisserman-Brodsky, 78.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 87.

¹⁵⁴ Khazanov, 7.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵⁶ Zisserman-Brodsky, 89.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 100-101.

the USSR.” Sahadiak considered the liquidation of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church and of the West Ukrainian Uniate Church in the 1930s and 1940s to be part of “Moscow’s struggle against the Ukrainian Church.”¹⁵⁸ Other *samizdat* lamented the contradiction between oppression of so called national religions, and the promotion of the dominant group’s religion. In Azerbaijan, for instance, the dominant Azerbaijani authorities forbade the opening of a Georgian Orthodox Church while allowing the free practice of Islam.¹⁵⁹ In terms of territorial deprivation, a 1966 *samizdat* by S. Karavansky listed a number of “deliberate mistakes” in drawing boundary lines. One such instance involved areas of the Smolensk and Briansk *oblasts* populated mostly by Byelorussians being allocated to the RSFSR.¹⁶⁰ In another example, the Ulyanovsk and Orenburg *oblasts* populated mostly by Tatars were not made part of the Tatar Autonomous Republic, but were instead assigned to the RSFSR. One anonymously published *samizdat* titled *Petition to Brezhnev* by several Georgians living in areas of Azerbaijan argued that those lands had been illegally annexed to the Azerbaijan SSR despite the fact that “this was Georgian land” and that “Georgians constituted the majority of the population.”¹⁶¹ Cultural and linguistic deprivation can be readily seen in the Russification campaigns in non-Russian classrooms.

Of all of the Soviet regions, the Baltic republics and the Caucasus displayed the greatest nationalist discontent in the years leading up to the collapse of 1991. In 1978, mass demonstrations succeeded in blocking a proposed constitutional amendment which would have designated Russian as an official language of Georgia. Ten years later, in

¹⁵⁸ Zisserman-Brodsky, 100-101.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 101.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 90.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

November 1988, mass protests and student-led hunger strikes again broke out in Georgia in opposition to yet another constitutional amendment which the protesters felt compromised the national sovereignty of the Georgian Republic.¹⁶² By April 1989, demonstrators in Georgia had grown bold enough to stage a pro-independence rally. It was met with a military barrage that resulted in the deaths of nineteen protesters as well as the wounding of hundreds more. The attempt to suppress the nationalist protests backfired, as many moderate Georgians became more sympathetic to ethno-nationalist leaders such as Merab Kostava and their causes.¹⁶³ The Georgian case provides a perfect example of Soviet ethnic minorities struggling to defend privileges granted under *korenizatsia*. The proposed amendments threatened the longstanding right to have the Georgian language as the sole official state language. This right came under fire by the new amendment, leading to mass demonstrations. The frustration that accompanied such struggles, often along with instances of brutal repression, precipitated the evolution of ethno-nationalism into demands for independence.

The Karabagh Conflict of February 1988, which arose over a disputed enclave within Azerbaijan overwhelmingly populated by Armenians, proved to be even more significant in undermining the Soviet regime's attempts to stamp out ethno-nationalist movements. This conflict exemplifies the failure of the Soviet government's nationality policies to bring about national unity and amity between the Azerbaijanis and the Armenians. The source of this conflict is an example for Zisserman-Brodsky's 'territorial deprivation,': the Soviet partition of Karabagh left neither Armenians nor Azerbaijanis satisfied. Moreover,

¹⁶² Chorbajian, 238-239.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 240.

“[i]nternal boundaries of the USSR were drawn with an eye to political considerations, so that some territories that would have been assigned to particular republics on the basis of historical claims or population majorities were assigned elsewhere. This policy set the stage for prolonged territorial conflicts within and between a number of republics.”¹⁶⁴

This problem became evident in other areas of the Caucasus, as well, including the dispute between the Georgians and the Abkhazians.¹⁶⁵

Armenians within Karabagh felt as though Azerbaijan was intentionally impeding the enclave’s economic development, and that Armenians were being encouraged to emigrate so that the territory could be populated by more Azerbaijanis. In an unprecedented move, the Karabagh soviet council voted 110 to 17 to proclaim the transfer of authority over Karabagh to Armenia.¹⁶⁶ In response, Azerbaijanis took to the streets in protest, proclaiming that Karabagh was a historical part of their homeland. Before long, the conflict led to violence, as armed mobs from each side sought to exact their frustrations on members of the opposing ethnic group. Hundreds of thousands of refugees on both sides fled their homes as a result of the mounting violence.¹⁶⁷ The Soviet government soon realized that it was confronted with a mass political movement outside of Communist Party control.

Gorbachev reacted by attempting to imprison several members of the Armenian-led Karabagh Committee as well as some nationalist Azerbaijani leaders. He also tried to prevent the population from political participation, unsuccessfully. Once the imprisoned leaders were released, Armenians promptly set about “dismantling communism and

¹⁶⁴ Chorbajian, 240.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 238-239.

¹⁶⁶ Suny, 133-134.

¹⁶⁷ Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 72

creating an Armenian democracy.”¹⁶⁸ Once it became clear that his earlier measures had not been effective, Gorbachev saw no choice but to send in the military to disband the growing nationalist movement in Azerbaijan. He did so reluctantly in January 1990. Stephen Kotkin argues, however, that Gorbachev’s commitment to “humane socialism” and his refusal to suppress decisively ethno-nationalist elements in Azerbaijan did much more harm to the Soviet regime than good. Not only did Gorbachev not use the military “swiftly and massively,” he also invited several nationalist leaders to join the new regional government apparatuses, further undermining the Soviet efforts to bring peace in the Caucasus.¹⁶⁹

Because of the Karabagh incident, Armenian leaders decided to declare independence in 1990 following earlier declarations of independence by Lithuania, the Russian Republic, Ukraine, Belorussia, and Moldova.¹⁷⁰ The Karabagh incident shows the extent to which national self-awareness persisted into the 1980s despite decades of effort by the Soviet government to bring about a sense of unity under the concept of a *Sovetskii narod*. The conflict highlighted the problem of territorial deprivation and exposed the inability of the Soviet regime to maintain order in the republics.

Kotkin argues that one of the primary ways in which nationalism influenced the collapse of the USSR was that it provided a context for regional leaders to seize power for themselves. For instance, while Ukrainian parliamentary leader Leonid Kravchuk at first strongly opposed devolution in the USSR, but then responded rather quickly to the various student protests that rocked Kiev in 1990 supporting Ukrainian sovereignty.

When the second draft of the Union Treaty of 1991 came before Kravchuk, he rejected it

¹⁶⁸ Suny, 136.

¹⁶⁹ Kotkin, 84.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid, 90.

and thereby positioned himself as the leading presidential candidate for an independent Ukraine. Similarly, the chairman of the Kazakhstan Supreme Soviet Nursultan Nazarbaev rejected the post of Vice President of the USSR and instead rallied national support which he hoped would translate into a successful presidential run in post-Soviet Kazakhstan.¹⁷¹ Nazarbaev had stressed for quite some time the need for greater economic autonomy from the Soviet Union, as Kazakhstan, along with Kirgizia, depended most heavily on the central treasury. Nazarbaev hoped to lead a series of economic reforms in Kazakhstan following the South Korean model of development, but such reforms would be impossible under the framework of the USSR.¹⁷² Nazarbaev therefore had an obvious personal interest in Kazakh independence from the Soviet Union.

Separatists such as Kravchuk and Nazarbaev were provided ammunition for their nationalist causes by Gorbachev. The Soviet premier never clearly stated what would happen in the event of a breakaway by one of the Soviet republics, and after Soviet troops opened fire in Georgia in 1989, and again in Lithuania in 1991, many moderates in those republics joined the nationalist separatist movements.¹⁷³ A rising tide in ethno-nationalist sentiment caused by the Soviet government's intermittent use of violence on led regional elites to jump on the separatist bandwagons. Since leaders such as Kravchuk supported independence movements only after immense public pressure, the ethnic nationalism expressed during the late 1980s and early 1990s could not have been created by the regional elite in any sort of "power grab." Rather, these movements resulted from

¹⁷¹ Kotkin, 104-107.

¹⁷² Lapidus and Zaslavsky, 8.

¹⁷³ Kotkin, 107.

long-held collective discontent among ethnic minority groups due to the various forms of relative deprivation at the hands of the Great Russians.

Kravchuk and Nazerbaev may indeed have been instrumentalists, in the sense that they believed the ethnic identities of their respective republics could be shaped to meet their political goals. There is, however, a multitude of earlier *samizdat* publications and first-hand accounts that testify to long-standing primordial nationalism in the republics. There is also a lack of evidence to suggest that these leaders actively promoted a previously unseen identity in the months leading up to the collapse of the USSR. Thus, these regional elite must have simply ridden the resurging wave of primordial nationalism in the late 1980s and early 1990s and channeled it to suit their political ends.

Part III: Conclusion

From *Korenizatsia* to Collapse

Brezhnev once stated that Soviet culture was “socialist in content, diverse in its national forms and internationalist in its spirit.” In reality, according to Walter Kemp, its culture was “Soviet in form but meaningless in content, and that by being all things to all people, it meant very little to almost anybody.”¹⁷⁴ The Soviet leadership pursued a paradoxical approach to dealing with ethnic minorities. On the one hand, it carried out Russification campaigns in language and culture policy along with reserving many top military and administrative positions for individuals of Great Russian descent. On the other hand, it implemented policies such as *korenizatsia* that allowed marginalized ethnic minority groups to preserve, and in many cases develop their national identities, in

¹⁷⁴ Kemp, 188.

addition to obtaining administrative positions through affirmative action programs.¹⁷⁵ The Soviet nationalities policies, paradoxical as they were, failed to construct either a multiethnic or cohesive nation-state. The cumulative disillusionment with these vacillating policies engendered dissent among ethnic minorities, culminating in the national self-determination movements of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Much of the force behind the ethno-nationalist movements that helped bring down the Soviet Union in 1991 can be traced to the economic shortcomings of Gorbachev's reforms as well as continuing economic deprivation in that certain republics received greater funding than did others.¹⁷⁶ Other major factors contributing to the collapse were an escalating push for democracy, and to some degree, opportunism on the behalves of regional elites. In addition to these factors, the various Soviet nationalities policies, beginning with *korenizatsia*, also played an important role in the collapse of the USSR.

Chorbajian asserts that the process of fostering national identities began at its most basic level in that "the organization of internal Soviet borders on a national basis provided the territorial and institutional basis for the development and strengthening of national consciousness."¹⁷⁷ In addition to creating a territorial boundary for each individual *ethnie* in the forms of national and autonomous republics, the Soviet government also promoted a form of national consciousness among each individual ethnic group. This was carried out by promoting both ethnic cultures and national languages. However, after uniting each respective ethnic group on cultural, linguistic, and territorial grounds under *korenizatsia*, the instrumentalist Soviet government at

¹⁷⁵ Kemp, 188-190.

¹⁷⁶ Khazanov, 9.

¹⁷⁷ Chorbajian, 238.

various points sought to integrate these *ethnies* into a greater *Sovetskii narod*. Such attempts were perceived among the *ethnies* as renewals of Russification, a clear source for a primordialist sense of cultural deprivation. As a result, silent dissent accumulated in many republics throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Once this dissidence was no longer silenced under Gorbachev, ethno-nationalist dissent exploded to such an extent that a crisis ensued in which the Soviet government could not maintain control. Thus, one of the seeds for the collapse of the USSR was planted very early on: all the way back to the 1920s and the policy of *korenizatsia*.

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