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Nationality and Sovietity: Ethnic Policies and Minority Life

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Introduction

The Soviet Union was one of the twentieth century's most ambitious political experiments—a vast, multiethnic superstate that sought not only to revolutionize economics and politics, but to reorganize the intricate tapestry of nationality and ethnic identity inherited from the Russian Empire. From the Red Square of Moscow to the steppes of Central Asia and the forests of the Baltics, the Communist regime imposed sweeping policies to mold its populace into "Soviet citizens," while grappling with—and often aggravating—the diverse loyalties, languages, and historical wounds of its people. The intersection of Soviet ideology with the lived experiences of Ukrainians, Central Asians, Baltics, and Jews provides a profound window into both the possibilities and perils of state-led attempts at cultural transformation.

At the heart of Soviet policy was a deep ambivalence about difference. Early Bolshevik leaders, shaped by Marxist internationalism but pragmatic about the stubborn reality of nationalism, embarked on a policy known as korenizatsiya—an effort to integrate non-Russian populations by promoting local languages, cultures, and leadership. For a moment, Soviet Ukrainians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Estonians, Jews, and a host of other nations experienced what seemed to be a flowering of national life, albeit under the strict supervision of the Communist Party. Yet this experiment in multiethnic harmonization quickly gave way to suspicion, repression, and a march toward Russification, as the regime came to view local identities as threats to its authority.

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The later Stalinist era, defined by centralization and paranoia, witnessed some of the most brutal episodes of ethnic engineering in modern history: mass purges of local elites, forced deportations of millions from their ancestral homes, and efforts to erase or marginalize native languages and customs. Even as the rhetoric of "national equality" was inscribed in the official doctrine, Soviet power created a hierarchy of privilege and marginality, in which the Russian language and culture dominated, and those suspected of "bourgeois nationalism" or insufficient loyalty were targeted for repression.

Yet the story is not only one of oppression. In each region, the subjects of Soviet nationality policy responded in complex and creative ways: some collaborated, others resisted, and many navigated the shifting boundaries of permissible identity. In Ukraine, famine and terror could not fully quash a deeply rooted sense of nationhood. In Central Asia, collectivization and secularization clashed with clan loyalties and Islamic traditions, resulting in hybrid identities that defied Kremlin blueprints. The Baltic peoples endured repression and demographic transformation, yet maintained powerful currents of dissent that would reemerge in the late Soviet period. Soviet Jews experienced both unprecedented opportunities and profound betrayals, shaping a

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unique Soviet-Jewish identity marked by creativity, suspicion, and longing for a distant homeland.

This book takes a comparative approach, tracing the arc of Soviet nationality policy through the close study of these diverse case studies. By doing so, it illuminates both the common patterns of assimilation and resistance across the USSR, and the distinctive trajectories shaped by local historical contexts. The chapters examine not only the high politics of Kremlin decisions, but also the everyday lives of minorities—how policy was translated (or resisted) in classrooms, workplaces, villages, and artistic communities.

Above all, the legacy of Soviet nationality policies remains alive in the successor states of the former USSR. The dilemmas of integration and identity left by the Soviet era continue to shape politics, memory, and social relations from Kyiv to Tashkent, from Riga to Jerusalem. In revisiting these histories, the following chapters seek to provide insight not just into a vanished superpower, but into the enduring challenges of pluralism, autonomy, and belonging in a multiethnic world.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Soviet Nationalities Question: Theory and Ideology

The architects of the Soviet state faced a peculiar dilemma when it came to the diverse array of peoples within their nascent empire. On one hand, Marxist theory, the guiding star of the Bolsheviks, posited that national identity was a construct of bourgeois society, a tool used by the ruling class to divide and conquer the proletariat. True communist revolution, therefore, would ultimately transcend national boundaries, uniting workers of the world in a grand, classless society. This internationalist vision was powerful, a siren call to revolutionaries across the globe who dreamt of a world free from the strife of national chauvinism. Yet, the reality on the ground, especially in the vast and varied territories of the former Russian Empire, was far more complex than theory might suggest.

The Russian Empire, a "prison of nations" in Lenin's memorable phrase, was a sprawling mosaic of some 120 distinct ethnic groups, each with its own language, customs, and often, grievances against the Tsarist regime. These national aspirations, far from being mere bourgeois distractions, had fueled many of the revolutionary movements that ultimately brought down the Romanov dynasty. To ignore them, or simply wish them away, would have been politically naive and strategically disastrous for the Bolsheviks, who, despite their internationalist rhetoric, were acutely aware of the need to consolidate power within these diverse territories. This, then, was the "nationalities question"—a thorny theoretical and practical challenge that would shape Soviet policy for decades to come, constantly forcing the regime to reconcile its grand ideological pronouncements with the stubborn persistence of national identity.

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Vladimir Lenin, a shrewd pragmatist in addition to being a fervent ideologue, understood that dismissing national identity outright would alienate vast swathes of the population whose support was crucial for the survival of the new Soviet state. Instead, he proposed a nuanced approach, often summarized by the slogan "national in form, socialist in content." This meant that while national cultures, languages, and even certain administrative structures could be preserved and even fostered, their ultimate purpose was to serve the larger goal of building socialism. National distinctiveness was to be a vehicle, not an impediment, to the internationalist revolution. This ideological tightrope walk was a hallmark of early Soviet nationality policy, a constant balancing act between concession and control.

Lenin's theoretical framework also emphasized the right of nations to self-determination, a principle he championed even before the 1917 revolution. This was a direct rebuke to Tsarist imperial policies, which had often suppressed non-Russian

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languages and cultures in favor of Russification. The promise of self-determination, even if largely symbolic in practice, was a powerful tool for winning over national minorities, particularly those who had suffered under Russian domination. It offered a vision of a future where their cultural distinctiveness would be respected, and their voices heard, a stark contrast to the heavy hand of imperial rule. This rhetorical commitment to national rights, enshrined in early Soviet constitutions, provided a legal and ideological basis for the later establishment of national republics and autonomous regions.

However, the "right to self-determination" was not without its caveats, particularly when it came to the actual exercise of that right. For the Bolsheviks, self-determination was legitimate only if it led to the triumph of socialism. If a national movement threatened the integrity of the Soviet state or aligned itself with "bourgeois" or "counter-revolutionary" forces, then the "right" quickly evaporated. This inherent tension between proclaimed national rights and the overarching demands of the socialist revolution would be a recurring theme, often leading to brutal crackdowns on perceived nationalist deviations. The ideological purity of the internationalist cause always trumped the claims of individual nations if the two came into conflict.

Joseph Stalin, who would later become the ultimate arbiter of Soviet nationality policy, also contributed significantly to the theoretical discourse in his early career as People's Commissar for Nationalities Affairs. His 1913 essay, "Marxism and the National Question," became a foundational text for Soviet ethnic policy. In it, he defined a nation as "a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture." This definition, while seemingly academic, had profound practical implications, as it provided the criteria by which the Soviet state would identify and categorize its numerous nationalities, often drawing new borders and creating new administrative units where none had existed before.

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Stalin’s early work, though often overshadowed by his later tyrannical actions, reflected the broader Bolshevik effort to grapple with the national question in a structured, "scientific" manner. His emphasis on objective criteria for nationhood provided a framework for what would later become the system of "national delimitation," particularly in Central Asia, where existing identities were often fluid and localized rather than conforming to neat national categories. This attempt to rationalize and categorize nationalities, while appearing to acknowledge their existence, also laid the groundwork for state control and manipulation of these identities.

The theoretical debates surrounding the national question were not merely abstract intellectual exercises; they had direct and often dramatic consequences for the lives of millions. The shifting interpretations of "national in form, socialist in content," the ambiguous scope of "self-determination," and the criteria for defining a "nation" all

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translated into concrete policies that shaped everything from language instruction in schools to the administrative boundaries of republics. These ideological blueprints, however flawed or contradictory, served as the justification for a wide range of state interventions into the cultural and social fabric of minority communities, sometimes benign, sometimes devastating.

For example, the initial emphasis on developing national cultures and languages during the korenizatsiya period was a direct outgrowth of Lenin's early principles. The belief that socialism could only be built by integrating non-Russian populations through their native languages and cultural forms led to a flowering of national institutions, publishing, and education. This was not a purely altruistic gesture; it was a calculated strategy to win over populations who might otherwise view the Soviet regime as simply a continuation of Russian imperialism. The ideological rationale, therefore, provided a powerful impetus for policies that, for a time, genuinely fostered national cultural development.

Conversely, the later turn towards Russification and the suppression of national elites also found its roots in the same ideological framework, albeit interpreted through a more rigid and suspicious lens. As the Soviet state consolidated its power, national distinctiveness increasingly came to be seen as a potential breeding ground for "bourgeois nationalism," a threat to the monolithic unity of the socialist project. The "internationalist" ideal, once a banner for liberation, could easily be twisted into a justification for suppressing any form of national expression that deviated from the party line. This ideological flexibility allowed the regime to justify wildly different and often contradictory policies over time, always claiming adherence to the true spirit of Marxism-Leninism.

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The concept of a unified "Soviet people" also emerged from this ideological crucible, becoming increasingly prominent as the decades progressed. While initially acknowledging and even promoting national diversity, the long-term goal was always the creation of a new, supra-national identity. This "Soviet man" or "Soviet woman" would transcend narrow national loyalties, embracing a shared socialist consciousness. This was not simply about cultural assimilation; it was an attempt to forge a new political and social identity that would bind together the disparate peoples of the USSR under the banner of communism. The promotion of Russian as the lingua franca and the emphasis on a common Soviet historical narrative were all part of this ambitious project of identity formation.

The theoretical underpinnings of Soviet nationality policy, therefore, were a complex blend of internationalist ideals, pragmatic political considerations, and a persistent desire for control. From Lenin’s nuanced approach to Stalin’s more rigid definitions, the ideological debates shaped the very structure of the Soviet multinational state. These debates were not confined to the ivory towers of academia; they seeped into every aspect of Soviet life, determining who belonged, who was suspect, and what

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forms of national expression were permissible. The grand theories of the national question, constantly reinterpreted and re-applied, became the intellectual scaffolding for a system that would alternately celebrate and suppress the diverse peoples within its borders.

The "nationalities question" was thus not a static problem with a single, unchanging solution in the eyes of the Soviet leadership. Instead, it was a dynamic challenge, constantly evolving with the political climate and the changing priorities of the Communist Party. The initial revolutionary zeal for empowering oppressed nationalities gradually gave way to a more cautious, and eventually, repressive approach as the state sought to solidify its power and eliminate perceived threats to its unity. This evolution from a relatively accommodating stance to one of outright suppression was a direct reflection of the ideological shifts within the Party itself, moving from the more open-ended interpretations of Lenin to the rigid totalitarianism of Stalin.

Moreover, the Soviet approach differed significantly from traditional imperial models. While empires typically sought to assimilate conquered peoples into the dominant culture, often through force, the early Soviet project initially aimed for something more complex: a form of controlled national development within a larger socialist framework. This distinction, though often blurred in practice, was ideologically crucial. It allowed the Bolsheviks to present themselves as liberators of oppressed nations, in contrast to the Tsarist "prison of nations," even as they exerted firm control over the parameters of national expression. The theoretical framework, therefore, served as a propaganda tool as much as a genuine guide for policy.

The very creation of national republics and autonomous regions, seemingly a concession to national self-determination, was also a strategic move to manage and control ethnic diversity. By creating distinct administrative units based on nationality, the Soviet state could both acknowledge national identity and simultaneously delineate its boundaries. This provided a convenient mechanism for categorizing populations, for implementing specific policies for specific groups, and for keeping a watchful eye on potential separatist tendencies. The theoretical commitment to national-territorial autonomy, therefore, had a very practical, centralizing application in the Soviet system.

In essence, the Soviet nationalities question was a grand ideological experiment, an attempt to reconcile the universalist claims of communism with the persistent reality of national identity. The theories and debates that emerged from this challenge provided the intellectual justification for a range of policies, from cultural flourishing to brutal repression. The legacy of these theoretical constructs, and their practical implementation, would continue to shape the lives of Ukrainians, Central Asians, Baltics, and Jews, and indeed, all the peoples of the Soviet Union, for generations to come, long after the original ideologues had passed from the scene. The stage was set for a complex drama, where lofty ideals would often collide with harsh realities, and

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where the everyday lives of ordinary people would be profoundly altered by the ever-shifting currents of Soviet nationality policy.

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