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# Voices from the Borderlands

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## Introduction

This book begins at the edges. The Soviet Union is often imagined from its imperial center—Moscow’s ministries, party congresses, and marble façades—but the center’s designs were tested, translated, and transformed in the borderlands. From the Baltic forests to the Caucasian highlands and the Central Asian steppe, nationality policies—those state projects that aimed to define, categorize, and cultivate “nations” within a multinational federation—met distinct landscapes, histories, and communities. *Voices from the Borderlands* listens for what happened when those policies collided with local realities, and how deportations, language reforms, and cultural engineering remade both people and places.

The chapters that follow treat deportation not simply as repression, but as a form of statecraft: an attempt to reorder space, loyalty, and memory. Mass removals of Crimean Tatars, Chechens-Ingush, Volga Germans, and other groups were justified in the language of security and modernization, yet they also exposed the paradox of a system that promised national flourishing within a socialist frame while policing identities it had itself helped to codify. By reconstructing the legal scaffolding, bureaucratic routines, and clandestine logistics of population transfers, this book traces how violence and administration intertwined to produce new social geographies.

Language policy is another thread that binds these cases. The shifts from Arabic to Latin to Cyrillic scripts in Central Asia, the regulation of Ukrainian and Russian in schools and media, and the constrained revival of national languages in the Baltics reveal how alphabets and curricula became instruments of power. These were not abstract debates: they determined who could read a textbook, receive a salary, publish a poem, or petition a court. Yet language politics also created openings. Teachers, editors, and folklorists learned to navigate shifting directives, cultivating pockets of cultural autonomy even within tightly drawn ideological lines.

Local agency is central to our narrative. Communities resisted, adapted, bargained, and sometimes collaborated, often in ways that confounded the binaries of domination and defiance. A village might hide a returning deportee while its party committee filed exemplary reports; a filmmaker could embed dissent in ethnographic celebration; a priest or mullah might quietly sustain ritual life under the gaze of the state. Attending to these granular practices reveals not only how policy operated on the ground, but also how ordinary people shaped its outcomes.

Comparative in design, the book moves across four macro-regions—Ukraine, the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—juxtaposing cases to illuminate both common

mechanisms and regional specificities. The aim is not to flatten difference but to place it in conversation: how did collectivization intersect with nation-making in the Kazakh steppe differently than in western Ukraine? Why did script reforms take root in some places and not others? What explains the distinct trajectories of memory politics after 1991, from Baltic lustration to Caucasian debates over rehabilitation and return? By asking such questions across sites, we can see patterns otherwise obscured in single-case studies.

The book's time horizon stretches from revolutionary experimentation and korenizatsiya through Stalinist consolidation, late Soviet recalibrations, and the shocks of Perestroika. But it also looks forward, tracing the afterlives of Soviet nationality engineering in contemporary border regimes, citizenship laws, and language disputes. The legacies of deportation and cultural policy continue to shape elections, education, and diplomacy; they echo in the claims of diasporas, the architecture of memorials, and the vocabularies of protest and propaganda.

Methodologically, the chapters draw on archives, oral histories, cultural production, and the material traces of movement—railway timetables, resettlement maps, school registers, and censored manuscripts. This multi-genre source base allows us to triangulate the official and the intimate, to read bureaucratic forms against family albums and folk songs. The goal is neither to indict nor to exonerate, but to understand how a vast state apparatus sought to govern through nationality, and how people in the borderlands refracted, resisted, or repurposed that governance.

Ultimately, *Voices from the Borderlands* argues that the Soviet periphery was not a passive recipient of central policy but a dynamic arena where identities were made and remade under pressure. The stories gathered here complicate neat narratives of empire and emancipation, showing instead a layered history of engineering and agency, fracture and repair. If the borderlands were laboratories of Soviet policy, they were also workshops of post-Soviet nationhood—places where the meanings of belonging, language, and home are still being contested and reimagined.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Mapping the Soviet Periphery: Concepts and Methods**

The Soviet Union, for all its revolutionary aspirations and centralizing tendencies, was a state profoundly shaped by its peripheries. Far from being mere extensions of Moscow's will, the borderlands—the Baltics, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—were complex zones where imperial legacies, diverse ethnic landscapes, and local political cultures constantly negotiated, adapted, and sometimes resisted the grand designs emanating from the Kremlin. To understand the Soviet experiment with nationality, then, we must begin by mapping this periphery, not just geographically, but conceptually, identifying the analytical tools and perspectives that allow us to hear the “voices from the borderlands.”

One might imagine the Soviet Union as a neatly organized matryoshka doll, with smaller national republics nestled within larger ones, all ultimately contained within the grand Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic. This image, while a convenient visual shorthand, obscures the dynamic and often violent processes by which these administrative boundaries were drawn and redrawn. The very idea of a “Soviet periphery” challenges a simplistic center-periphery model, which often assumes a passive recipient at the edges. Instead, we view the borderlands as active sites of negotiation, where state policies were implemented, interpreted, and often significantly altered by local actors and existing societal structures.

The term “borderlands” itself is loaded, implying a zone that is neither fully inside nor entirely outside. In the Soviet context, these were territories that had, for centuries, been crossroads of empires—Ottoman, Persian, Austro-Hungarian, and, of course, Russian. These historical layers meant that when Soviet power arrived, it encountered not a blank slate, but deeply entrenched social hierarchies, religious practices, linguistic diversity, and distinct understandings of collective identity. The project of building socialism, therefore, was simultaneously a project of integrating these diverse peripheries into a new political and ideological whole, often through aggressive social engineering.

Our approach centers on what we call “nationality policies”—a broad umbrella term encompassing the myriad ways the Soviet state attempted to define, categorize, and manage the diverse ethnic and linguistic groups within its borders. Unlike Western notions of a singular national identity, the Soviet system officially recognized and even cultivated multiple nationalities, each with its own designated territory, language, and cultural institutions, at least in theory. This seemingly progressive approach, however, was inextricably linked to the state's desire for control and its unwavering

commitment to a universal socialist future. The tension between promoting national cultures and subsuming them within a broader Soviet identity forms a core paradox of this book.

To dissect these policies, we employ a multi-scalar analysis. This means looking at the grand pronouncements from Moscow—the decrees on language, the plans for collectivization, the justifications for deportation—but also examining how these policies were enacted, interpreted, and experienced at the republic, regional, and even village levels. A directive from the Politburo might seem unambiguous on paper, but its implementation in a remote Central Asian aul or a Ukrainian collective farm could take on entirely different forms, influenced by local cadres, the resistance of the population, and unforeseen circumstances.

Another key concept is “cultural engineering.” This refers to the deliberate and systematic attempts by the Soviet state to reshape the cultural landscape of its diverse populations. This was not merely about propaganda; it involved concrete interventions in education, language, media, religion, and the arts. From the adoption of new alphabets in Central Asia to the promotion of specific literary genres in Ukraine, the state sought to create a “Soviet man” and a “Soviet woman” whose national identity was harmonized with their socialist consciousness. This top-down approach, however, often collided with existing cultural practices, leading to hybrid forms of expression and often, subtle acts of subversion.

Deportations, a central theme of this book, are understood not simply as acts of repression, but as a distinct form of “statecraft.” These were not random acts of violence, but meticulously planned and executed operations aimed at achieving specific political, economic, or demographic goals. The legal frameworks, logistical challenges, and the subsequent efforts to erase the memory of these events reveal a chillingly rational bureaucratic machinery at work. By treating deportations as statecraft, we can analyze the justifications offered by the state, the methods employed, and the long-term consequences for both the deported populations and the territories they left behind.

The “politics of memory” is another crucial lens through which we examine the Soviet periphery. How were historical narratives constructed and imposed by the state? How did local communities remember and transmit their own histories, often in defiance of official versions? And how did these contested memories resurface and shape political identities after the collapse of the Soviet Union? The silence surrounding deportations, the rewriting of history textbooks, and the creation of new national holidays all speak to the profound struggle over who controls the past, and thus, the present and future.

Methodologically, this book triangulates across several types of sources to reconstruct a nuanced picture. Archival documents, unearthed from former Soviet state and party archives, provide the official narrative and the bureaucratic details of policy

formulation and implementation. These include directives, reports, minutes of meetings, and internal correspondence. These documents often reveal the inner workings of the state apparatus, the debates among officials, and the sometimes-stark discrepancies between stated goals and actual outcomes.

However, official documents rarely capture the full human experience. To access the “voices from the borderlands,” we rely heavily on oral histories. These personal testimonies, collected from survivors of deportations, witnesses to cultural campaigns, and those who navigated the intricacies of daily life under Soviet rule, offer an invaluable counterpoint to the official record. Oral histories bring to life the emotional impact of policies, the strategies of survival, and the persistent efforts to maintain cultural identity in the face of state pressure. They illuminate the small acts of resistance, adaptation, and resilience that often go unrecorded in official histories.

Cultural production—literature, film, music, and art—also serves as a rich source of information. While subject to censorship and ideological control, artists and intellectuals in the Soviet periphery often found subtle ways to express national sentiment, critique official policies, and preserve cultural heritage. Analyzing these forms of expression allows us to understand how national identities were articulated and transmitted, sometimes clandestinely, within the constraints of the Soviet system. A folk song, a painting, or a poem could carry layers of meaning understood by a local audience, even if it passed muster with censors.

Finally, we examine the material traces of these policies: resettlement maps, railway timetables detailing population movements, school registers reflecting language shifts, and censored manuscripts revealing the state’s anxieties. These tangible artifacts provide concrete evidence of the state’s interventions and the ways in which daily life was restructured. A border post, a memorial, or the ruins of a deported village all speak to the enduring impact of Soviet nationality policies on the physical and human landscape.

By combining these diverse methodological approaches, we aim to move beyond a simplistic narrative of victimhood or triumph. Instead, we seek to present a complex and multi-layered account of how the Soviet state attempted to manage its diverse populations, and how those populations, in turn, shaped the very nature of Soviet power. The “Soviet periphery” was not just a geographical location; it was a contested space of identity formation, political struggle, and cultural resilience.

This book is also inherently comparative. By juxtaposing cases from Ukraine, the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, we aim to identify common patterns in Soviet nationality policies while also highlighting regional specificities. For instance, the experience of collectivization in the fertile lands of Ukraine differed significantly from its implementation among nomadic pastoralists in Kazakhstan. Similarly, the annexation of the Baltic States in 1940 introduced a distinct set of challenges and

policies compared to the integration of the Caucasian republics, which had been part of the Russian Empire for a longer period.

These comparisons allow us to ask critical questions: What factors determined the severity of deportations in different regions? How did pre-Soviet imperial legacies influence the implementation of Soviet language policies? What explains the varying degrees of cultural resistance and adaptation across these diverse borderlands? By placing these experiences in conversation, we can move beyond isolated case studies and develop a more comprehensive understanding of the Soviet project of nation-building.

Ultimately, "Mapping the Soviet Periphery" is about more than just locating places on a map. It's about understanding the conceptual terrain upon which Soviet nationality policies were conceived, implemented, and ultimately, challenged. It's about recognizing the agency of those living at the edges of a vast empire, whose voices, though often suppressed, continued to resonate and shape the course of history. The chapters that follow will delve into the specific contours of these policies and their human impact, revealing a history far richer and more complex than any single narrative could encompass.

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