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THE FUTURE OF "SOVIET" NATIONALITY STUDIES

SUMMARY*

The author proposes a number of corrective strategies to bring nationality studies, especially of the non-Russians, into the main stream of Imperial Russian and Soviet analyses. Among the suggestions are a historicization of the problem; development of new theoretical and conceptual approaches; borrowing from other disciplines, most importantly ethnography and anthropology; clearer definitions and conceptualizations of nationality, nation, and nationalism; inclusion of the Russians in discussions of nationality; and broader treatment of Soviet peoples in the ongoing discussions of imperialism, decolonization, and Orientalism.

*This Summary and the following paper have been substantially shortened by the National Council to omit the author's review of existing "Soviet" nationality studies. A full text is available from the Council on request.
THE FUTURE OF "SOVIET" NATIONALITY STUDIES

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First, the obvious. "Soviet" nationality studies have now come to the center of both professional and public political attention. One might refer to this -- forgive the chauvinism -- as the "post-Karabagh syndrome." The expansion of awareness of non-Russians in the late Soviet period and in the early post-Soviet period has been accompanied by a variety of initiatives from government, universities, foundations, exchange programs, to expand the possibilities for research in the newly-independent republics. One might mention only the formation of the IREX Advisory Group on Central Asia and the Caucasus and IREX's new program supporting individual advanced research opportunities in the Baltics, Georgia, and the Commonwealth of Independent States, the opening of an IREX office in Erevan. The number of graduate studies from what-might-be described as "non-ethnic" backgrounds interested in Central Asia, the Caucasus, Ukraine, etc. has exploded in recent years, and students working on primarily Russian topics have been sensitized to the need to look at multinational and ethnic factors in their work. Ethnicity has joined class and gender as part of the grand triad of references of which historical and social scientific thinking must be aware.

Like so many other fashionable turns in Sovietology, so this recent move toward
the non-Russians has been dictated by policy requirements and the interests of funders.¹ Yet in the post-Cold War environment non-conformist thinking is more easily tolerated, and members of the academy who might have been marginalized or disregarded in the more frigid years of East-West confrontation now find themselves addressing official audiences. Whether ideology is dead or not is less important than that policymakers believe that it is no longer relevant in a period of democratic capitalist triumph. With the Communist menace buried, officialdom is willing to listen to even dissonant voices that help them understand the current power of nationalism, predict the future of the decolonized Soviet bloc, or foresee new dangers from post-nationalist fundamentalisms.

A number of suggestions might be made on the future of work in nationality studies.

1. The insights of particular ethnocentric studies must somehow be married to broader comparative and theoretical perspectives in cultural studies, political science, and sociology.² The evident turn toward history should be encouraged. Many practitioners in Sovietology have already demonstrated how historical case studies can enrich the field. From sociologists like Gregory Massel to political scientists like Zvi Gitelman, Robert C. Tucker, and Stephen F. Cohen, older modeling tumbled before the empirical texturing

¹ The effect of policy requirements should not be understood as universally pernicious. Besides funding much academic research of great quality and value, government has sponsored the activities of investigators, like Paul Goble, formerly of the Department of State, currently with the Carnegie Foundation, or Murray Feshbach, formerly of the Department of Commerce, whose publications provided valuable information to academic researchers. But the agenda of government cannot be supportive of the full range of independent scholarship, which may include work "subversive" to the policies of particular states and critical of dearly-held assumptions of people in power. My point here is that the policy tail has too often wagged the scholarship dog.

² For a passionate appeal for comparative nationality studies, see Alexander J. Motyl, "‘Sovietology in One Country’ or Comparative Nationality Studies?" Slavic Review, XLVIII, 1 (Spring 1989), pp. 83-88.
provided by histories that accented the metamorphoses of the Soviet system. With the recent opening of the Central Party Archive in Moscow and the widening of access to both central state and regional archives, historical research offers fertile ground for generalizations, new conceptualizations, and the development and testing of theory. Comparative studies of nationalities might investigate why some have moved more rapidly than others toward assertion of sovereignty and declaration of independence. The whole problem of formation of nations within the USSR, an essentially historical project, is fundamental to understanding the trajectories, ambitions, self-conceptions of the post-Soviet nations. Everything from borders to literary languages have been historically constructed, rather than naturally determined, and the present moment offers a unique opportunity to find investigators and funding for such explorations.

That research should not be confined to the period after 1917, however, for one of the glaring lacunae in Russian/Soviet studies has been the under-development of prerevolutionary investigations of non-Russians, particularly in a comparative, multiethnic, or empire-wide context. There have been no major studies of imperial nationality policies or of the differentiated effects of imperial state economic policies on non-Russians since the initial probes by Hugh Seton-Watson and a few intrepid monographists a generation ago. The "making of the tsarist empire" is a topic ready for its researchers.

2. The new opportunities for work in the field should encourage the development of approaches to nationality studies that were limited in the past, namely survey research and anthropological field work. One of the most suggestive treatments of a non-Russian people in the 1980s was Caroline Humphrey's work on the Buryats of Siberia, which
underlined the uneven transformative effects of Soviet collectivization and the persistence and adaptation of cultural forms and kinship patterns. Discovering patterns not unlike those uncovered by Tamara Dragadze in her study of a Georgian village, Humphrey showed how

the communal values, inherent in the working of a collective farm, have the effect of supporting parochialism and local ties. On some occasions such as the wedding ritual or the suur-kharbaan games, units of the collective farm even take over the functions of the earlier kin groups. More common, however, is a dual and parallel maintenance of two different kinds of communal group, purely Soviet on the one hand, and ‘Buryat’ (or more correctly Buryat-Soviet) on the other.

From her field work in the Northern Ob River region in Siberia, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer observed how even a very small ethnic group, the Khanty, were able to adapt themselves selectively to the large Russo-Soviet milieu but without complete cultural disintegration. For smaller peoples biculturalism proved to be a viable response to the pressures of the multiethnic, Russian-dominated Soviet environment.

3. Borrowing methodologies from other disciplines or attempting "cross-disciplinary" study seems self-evidently to be a laudable and innocent enough enterprise. This has been one of the major strengths of the "area studies" approach. But in fact the


"historical turn" in anthropology and the "anthropological" or "cultural turn" in history has led to considerable intellectual uncertainty about the approaches of both fields. The post-structuralist and post-modernist innovations have at one and the same time opened up new ways of thinking about identities and categories that appeared fixed and clear and divided the profession between those anxious about relativist and discursive erosion of unexamined fixities and those anxious to undermine old certainties.

In its largely atheoretical treatment of nationality much of Sovietological thought has either accepted uncritically a commonsensical view of nationality as a relatively observable, objective phenomenon based on a community of language, culture, shared myths of origin or kinship, perhaps territory, or not thought about the question. Nationalism was seen as the release of denied desires and authentic, perhaps primordial, aspirations. This "Sleeping Beauty" view of nationality and nationalism has been contrasted with a more historicized view that has gradually gravitated toward a postmodernist understanding of nationality as a constructed category, an "imagined community." This "Bride of Frankenstein" view of nationality and nationalism, which has hegemonized academic writing outside of Sovietology in the last decade, argues that, far from being a natural component of human relations, something like kinship or family, nationality and the nation are created (or invented) in a complex political process in which intellectuals and activists play a formative role. Rather than the nation giving rise to nationalism, it is nationalism that gives rise to the nation. Rather than primordial, the nation is a modern sociopolitical construct.

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The emphasis in Soviet studies on a priori nations that have reawakened in the Gorbachev era to put forth their long-repressed demands has had the regrettable effect of suppressing study of the formative influence of the seventy-year long Soviet period. Seldom adequately evaluated, except negatively, by most Western writers and by the nationalists now in power in many of the non-Russian republics, the Soviet period was in fact the incubator of new nations that were formed in part as a result of contradictory Soviet policies (e.g., korenizatsiia followed by Stalinist Russification) and in spite of them. Unfortunately, at the very moment when opportunities for most interesting research are opening up, when the possibility of working more closely with colleagues in the post-Soviet world has become a reality, the triumph of anti-Communist nationalism has also meant the victory of a certain reading of history and the potential exclusion of other readings. New political requirements at the moment of establishing ethnic claims to territory and statehood may foreclose conceptualizations that threaten the essentialist understanding of the antiquity and solidity of nations.

Examples of the kind of thinking of which scholars should be most suspicious are particularly prevalent in the media. For example, Serge Schmemann of the New York Times recently repeated the usual take on the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict in an article entitled "In the Caucasus, Ancient Blood Feuds Threaten to Engulf 2 New Republics," when he referred to "images of unavenged deaths and ancient hatreds, of tribal passions that 70 years of enforced Communist harmony failed to quell."

...Artsakh, [Khachatur B. Simonyan] declares, using the ancient Armenian name for Nagorno-Karabakh, is indisputably Armenian and nonnegotiable. "Do you know when the first Turk set foot on Karabagh?" he thundered with disdain. "Only in 1752! How can they claim that these are their lands?"

That he should consider 240 years so negligible begins to explain
why a mere 70 years of Soviet peace failed to still ancient passions...

To Nagorno-Karabakh belongs the distinction of being the first tribal conflict to break through the enforced Soviet peace. That was four years and more than 2,000 casualties ago.7

Rather than an "ancient tribal" conflict, the war in Karabagh can be read as a multilayered struggle over territory and national identity that has as much to do with cultural and social constructions of what makes up Armenia and Azerbaijan in the twentieth century as it does with older narratives, with who Armenians and Azerbaijanis conceive themselves to be after seventy years of Soviet statemaking, and how each people defines the "other" that it is ready to annihilate. Though there have been numerous conflicts between Armenians and Azerbaijanis in this region, they were not the same conflict with the same causes, and Armenians and Azerbaijanis had long periods of coexistence and collaboration as well. Few historians would excuse Serge Schmemann if he attributed the first and second world wars, fought within twenty years of one another and by the same adversaries, to the same causes or to ancient tribal antagonisms that could be read back into primordial Gallic or Gothic origins.

Scholars of Russia, the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet area would benefit enormously from the insights of those critics of intellectual traditions that have separated Russia and "the East" from the "more advanced" or progressive or civilized West. Russia and the Eastern Bloc, not to mention the non-Russian areas of Transcaucasia and Central Asia, have been the victim of an Orientalist disdain for a backward society and state formation that maliciously deviated from the normal, natural path of world

civilization. As Edward Said has pointed out, thinking about the non-West is really a way of understanding and conceiving the "West." In such a perspective the non-Western other, be it Russia or the Middle East, is seen as inferior, alien, and is intellectually and perceptually, if not politically, dominated. The evident acceptance of such an idea of deviation from civilization and historically-constructed inferiority by post-Soviet intellectuals has created a community of consensus between American conservatives and Russian "democrats," but the confidence with which difference between the Communist experience and civilization is declared only masks profound epistemological difficulties and unexamined political assumptions. East has not only connotated weakness and inferiority, but mystery and danger. At this moment the Green Menace has replaced the Red Menace, and fundamentalist Islam occupies the space left by Marxism-Leninism. Though the threat from Russia appears to have dissipated, should there be a change in government or a restored military, all the cultural apparatus is in place to restore old fears and suspicions.

4. In much of the past writing on Soviet nationalities non-Russian communities have been treated as homogeneous, relatively coherent groups facing the Russian other. Predictions by the 1970s included the notion that homo islamicus would stand against homo sovieticus. But just as the Soviet Islamic world proved to be far from homogeneous, so many of the republics found themselves divided internally, and on closer focus even within ethnicities divisions along class, gender, generational, and regional lines can be observed. The vertical integration of the nation, which had been proposed by nationalists as the more authentic social alliance in opposition to horizontal class solidarities, has often proven to be quite fragile. The clearest case is Georgia,
where interethnic struggle evolved into intraethnic civil war, but also in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Lithuania, Ukraine, and the Central Asian republics deep political cleavages have emerged now that the Russian imperial enemy has been displaced. Among the most serious cleavages have been those between old political classes, often made up of former Communists remade as nationalists, and rival elites; between cosmopolitan intellectuals and more popular nationalist forces; between more intensely nationalist regional elements and more assimilationist or accommodationist groups; and between religious fundamentalists and secular modernizers. Strange and seemingly unpredictable alliances between ethnic and social groups have been formed in the new context of states dominated by a formerly repressed nationality. Russian and non-Russian minorities (e.g., Poles and Russians in Lithuania) in multinational fronts now confront nationalities seeking to become hegemonic in their ”homeland.”

5. Clearer definitions and distinctions must be made in our thinking about nationality and nationalism. A common vocabulary may be an impossibility, but some collaboration and agreement in the use of common terms would enhance further discussion. Here again comparative studies are most important. And the field of post-Soviet studies must be linked with the broader field of ethnic studies. The relative neglect or complete omission of the work of Fredrik Barth, Donald Horowitz, Harold Isaacs, Anthony D. Smith, and other theorists of ethnic identity and conflict is glaring in Soviet nationality studies. The problem we are studying is no longer confined to a

demonstration of the weaknesses and failings of Soviet-style regimes in the area of nationality policy but rather the consequences of empire, the difficult post-colonial transition from authoritarianism to democracy, from an imposed hegemonic culture to the construction of national cultures.

6. For all its orientation on policymaking and the Russian center, Soviet studies in the past managed largely to avoid discussion of Russians as a nationality and Russian nationalism as a cultural and political expression of underdeveloped nationhood. Exceptions to the rule, like Frederick Barghorn, John Dunlop, Roman Szporluk, and Alexander Yanov only made more apparent the silence both of scholarship and of the Russians themselves. Like the largest non-Russian nationality, the Ukrainians, the Russians are in the throes of an intense national formation, in which neither the boundaries of the nation nor the degree of inclusion and exclusion of populations has yet been determined. Here the processes of constructing identities, affiliations, and loyalties, of projecting images of enemies, of formulating "national interests" are underway with no certain end in sight. A period of political competition among rival definitions of the nation lies ahead as the Russian republic -- not unlike the other republics -- struggles with a more exclusively ethnic (russkaia) notion of nationhood and a more inclusive (rossiiskaia) idea of citizenship.

The variety of Russian nationalisms -- ranging from Russophilic nostalgia for a
lost past to authoritarian and neo-fascist movements -- and the phenomenon of Russian
national statebuilding in the post-Gorbachev period have heightened the need for
distinctions between various kinds of nationalisms. Certainly an imperialist nationalism
of a Zhirinovskii must be distinguished from the self-deterministic nationalisms of Rukh
or the Pan-Armenian National Movement. 10 If the various functions of nationalism --
as mobilizer of disparate strata and diverse regions around the "nation", defender of
ethnic privileges and advantages, or claimant to recognition of existence, legitimacy, and
security -- are uncritically homogenized, analysis of the variety of nationalist movements
is rendered impossible.

7. While nationalists might gloat that the idea of sovetskij narod, that "meta-ethnic
entity" projected as the Soviet future by Communist theorists and ethnographers, has died
an ignominious death, one of the consequences of empire has been the ethnically-mixed
population that resulted from intermarriage and migration within the USSR. The
65,000,000 former Soviet citizens who live outside their nominal "homelands"
(25,000,000 of whom are ethnically Russian); partners in or children of ethnically-mixed
marriages; the so-called russkoiazychnye; and millions who still identify with a country
that no longer exists all defy easy categorization into ethnic nationality. Even in many
of the non-Russian peoples a deep imprint of "sovietism" (sovkovost'), of habits and

10. The importance of these distinctions was impressed on me in conversation with Lowell Barrington.
expectations, values and ways of thinking, is not quickly erased. This extra-ethnic formation had a reality of its own, which needs to be studied, if only because supraethnic "nationalities," like the American or Swiss, present vital alternatives to the more ethnically determined nationalities.

8. Finally, the future of nationality, nationalism, and nationhood needs to be considered in all its multidimensionality and contradictions. The twentieth century appears to have been a century when nationality, far from melting away in the pot of capitalist or socialist modernization, emerged as a potent form of social cohesion, consciousness, and allegiance. Given the legitimacy of the contemporary discourse of national self-determination, both in its Wilsonian and Leninist variants, the drive of nationalism in this century toward recognition of nations as states has an unquestioned authenticity and authority. But both on the road to sovereignty and after achieving it, ethnic nations have also tended to attempt full empowerment of the dominant ethnic group in any politically-defined territory and move toward the ethnic homogenization of the nation-state. Multinational states appear to be unstable or potential threats to the full realization of nationalist programs, and democracy, defined as both majority rule and legal protection of minorities, has often been the victim of nationalist movements in power.

Yet other great secular trends of the twentieth century -- the transnational nature of modern capitalist economies, the internationalization of the division of labor, and the

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11. The popular term *sovok* (literally, dustpan) is used to refer to the Soviet Union, the Soviet way of life, or a Soviet person.
consequent compromise of state sovereignty -- have challenged the viability of homogeneous ethnic states. As Eric J. Hobsbawm observed,

‘The nation’ today is visibly in the process of losing an important part of its old functions, namely that of constituting a territorially bounded ‘national economy’ which formed a building block in the larger ‘world economy’, at least in the developed regions of the globe. Since World War II, but especially since the 1960s, the role of ‘national economies’ has been undermined or even brought into question by the major transformations in the international division of labour, whose basic units are transnational or multinational enterprises of all sizes, and by the corresponding development of international centres and networks of economic transactions which are, for practical purposes, outside the control of state governments.\(^\text{12}\)

Lest this sound like one more variant of economic determinism and another "Marxist" failure to appreciate the independent variables of demography, politics, and culture, one might also note the current migration of peoples from south to north, east to west, so threatening to relatively homogeneous nations, like those in northern Europe; the flow, not only of commodities, but of money, American culture, information and technology; the creation of a global culture, an international legal system, and extranational media networks -- all of which compromise the agendas of single ethnicity states.\(^\text{13}\)

Just as an integration of "Russian" studies and the study of non-Russian peoples seemed about to break through, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Soviet Bloc into constituent national states threatens, not only to reinforce the division of ethnic Russian from non-Russian studies, but to explode the whole concept of "Russian (Soviet) and East


\(^{13}\) See, for example, Mike Featherstone (ed.), *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity* (London: Sage, 1990).
European" area studies. As parts of the former USSR gravitate in one direction toward Scandinavia, in another toward central Europe, and in a third toward the Middle East, scholars are increasingly doubtful about the conceptual unity or intellectual justification for an area studies approach. Admittedly more tantalizing for political science and sociologists studying contemporary developments, the attraction to disciplines and away from area studies presents both advantages and disadvantages. Area studies was never a discipline with its own field theory, but always an interdisciplinary arena in which investigators from a variety of disciplines could work more deeply with combined knowledge of language, culture, history, economics, as well as politics and sociology. Because the "Soviet" region retains its historical heritage of half a millennium of imperial connection, for historians area studies needs little justification. Given the fatality of the need for knowledge of the relevant languages and the legacy of Russian and Soviet hegemony, historians will continue to be concerned with more than a single ethnicity. No history of Georgia or Tajikistan is possible without a larger focus. But neither, it can certainly be argued, can any meaningful contemporary study hope to understand present and future trends without knowledge of that complex, interethnic "Russian/Soviet" past. However the area may be defined in the future -- "Eurasian," "post-Soviet," "post-Communist" studies are only some of the suggested possibilities -- it remains meaningful as a loose unit for study, an intellectual location for exchange of information and ideas (institutionalized in the AAASS and the field's journals), and a powerful claimant on state and university funding.

Nationality studies in general is now a growth industry. In the post-Communist world the evident power of ethnic political claims in mobilizing masses of people to the point of civil war and ethnocide requires a major reassessment of our approaches to
nationality and nationalism. No longer a problem of the Soviet bloc, no longer to be
framed only as colonial struggles against multinational empires, nationality studies are
part of the larger field of post-colonial studies. The problem of our times is imbedded
in larger issues of decolonization and the transition from authoritarian to democratic
polities. How nationalism in the former Soviet Bloc will perform as the heir of the
Communist empire will be connected with the particular understandings of the national
that national elites will generate. Here scholars of the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences
can play a significant role in shaping the visions of emerging national leaderships, not
by pandering to their preferred views of themselves, but by challenging the unexamined
myths and assumptions that have too often paved the roads to Karabagh and South
Osetia, Transdniestria and Sarajevo, and are already constructing signposts on the way
to Narva and Crimea, Kazan and Dushanbe.