

IS RUSSIA STILL IMPORTANT? THE BEGINNING OF HISTORY AGAIN

Nationalities Papers was conceived when Russians dominated the peoples of the Soviet Union and, in turn, through the USSR, ruled over multi-ethnic Eastern Europe. That political reality no longer prevails. Not only has Soviet (*i.e.*, Russian) hegemony, for the time being, become history, but many, if not most, of the post-communist successor states have either broken apart or are showing unmistakable signs of disintegration. Irrevocably, the nationalist demands of ethnic groups are challenging the status quo: for greater cultural and political autonomy, for full independence, or for territorial reunification. As the implosion of 1991 recedes, the force of ethnonationalism has taken stage center as the primary determinant of change in an increasingly unstable region. In Caucasia, Ossetians seek to merge their northern and southern enclaves, as do Lezgins, in defiance of heretofore Soviet-imposed colonial-like lines, as have done (murderously) the Serbs and Croats in Bosnia. There are, again, ethnic Hungarians contemplating an eventual “in-gathering” of all Hungarian populated territories, as there are Azeris on both sides of the international border long ago drawn by Imperial Russia and Persia that now divides Azerbaijan from Iran. Not to mention Russians who dream of annexing northeast Estonia or northern Kazakhstan.

Among those peoples most effected by the new post-Soviet ethno-driven dynamics are the Russians themselves. Following the *Bol'shoi Raspad* (the Great Collapse) of that unprecedented edifice of national strength and international hegemonic superpower—the USSR and its satellites in Eastern Europe—the Russian people are confronting a multi-dimensional crisis. It begins with having to come to terms with the artificial, indeed a-historical, boundaries of the Russian Federation as their “homeland” (which they must share with a fast-growing non- and anti-Russian population), and includes a new, perplexing sense of fragmented ethnic identity, with an unclear past and a chaotic present.

As an amorphous ethnic population, Russians face an uncertain and much divided future: over three million ethnic Russians have immigrated from the non-Russian successor states, and more are on the way; tens of thousands are migrating from the Arctic North and East Siberia back to the Russian heartland, wherever that might be. Meanwhile, mass poverty is a bitter reality and the average life-span continues to fall precipitously in a social and environmental climate poisoned by decades of ill-planned industrial expansion and criminal neglect. It does not help that the last vestige of national pride, the Russian (ex-Soviet) armed forces, have proven hopelessly and tragically impotent against the inspired Chechen *independistas*.

EDITORIAL NOTE

That nearly two year-old anti-colonial war of secession has unambiguously demonstrated every weakness and cruelly exposed all the corruption of a once mighty imperial institution. Next to the ruins of Grozny are the ruins of demoralized, elite Russian military units. And next to them lies the undeniable evidence of a potentially lethal political crisis, of a faction-riddled leadership in Moscow, hopelessly unsure of Russia's future direction. Russia and its Russians are psychologically if not pathologically adrift. Not since 1917, when military defeat, revolution and civil war tore at the fabric of Russian statehood and society, have the Russian people had to face themselves in such radical circumstances.

It is not accidental, therefore, that this issue of *Nationalities Papers* includes four articles—those by Parthe, Simonsen, Jersild and Brooks—that probe aspects of past and present Russian searches for *Russianness* and Russian principles of behavior towards themselves and others. The need to probe the complex ethnic world of the small (the Pomaks in Bulgaria) as well as of the large (the Russians) has become even more imperative as this journal enters into its twenty-fifth year, a time when we seek to understand the ethnic dimension of a post-imperial era.

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