

introduction is short, but covers a variety of topics and prepares the reader for the entire text well. The first chapter deals with the function of Königsberg as a German bridge to the East and a bulwark covering cursorily regional history since the Middle Ages. Being a relatively backward and overwhelmingly Protestant province of the Reich isolated through the Polish corridor, East Prussia turned to the Nazis in elections. In 1932 and 1933, proportionally more people here voted for them than the German average. The chapter ends with Hitler's invasion of Poland.

Ch. 2 covers East Prussian gauleiter Erich Koch's rule over his province, deriving occasionally from the party line. For example, he could apply quite a pragmatic approach towards the local Lithuanian and Masurian minorities, which could become Germans, as opposed to Jews, who could not. Koch and his administration participated in the exploitation of the German occupied east, with Koch becoming head of the civilian administration of Białystok and Reichskommissar of Ukraine. The next chapter looks at the end of the war and the downfall of Königsberg. Since fall 1944, the fight for East Prussia killed massive amounts of soldiers and civilians, mass evacuations came too late. Already in rubble, Königsberg finally had to surrender.

The following part bears the title "liberation and revenge," summing up perfectly the situation for the civilian population after the end of fighting. Being liberated from the Nazis, people now faced revenge from Soviet soldiers, who wondered why the "rich" Germans had attacked the USSR. The next chapter deals with the hopeless situation of the population after the war. Malnutrition had started during fighting, turning later into outright hunger. In addition, epidemic diseases took their toll and the remaining Germans were filtrated into special camps. Staggering death rates occurred.

Ch. 6 gives an overview of how the incoming Soviet settlers and the Germans, who were not entitled to leave, lived together. The German faced both inclusion and exclusion, but remained stateless. Due to the dismal living conditions, the Soviet population remained unstable. The final chapter analyzes the expulsion of the Germans 1947–48 and the way the new province was seen as "Slavic soil". The conclusion rounds off the text.

Altogether, this monograph is a fine read, rich in detail, new information, and interpretation. This reviewer can only recommend it for a broader readership. German and Soviet history are well interwoven in this excellent case study.

## **Brigid O'Keefe. *The Multiethnic Soviet Union and its Demise.***

**Russian Shorts. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. x, 134 pp. Bibliography. Index. Photographs. \$17.95, paper.**

Adrienne Edgar

University of California, Santa Barbara

Email: [edgar@history.ucsb.edu](mailto:edgar@history.ucsb.edu)

doi: 10.1017/slr.2024.415

Ethnicity (nationality or *natsionalnost'* in Soviet parlance) was a fundamental organizing principle of Soviet life. Over the past three decades, scholars have investigated various aspects of ethnic identity, nationality policy, and, more recently, ideas and practices of race in Soviet history. Yet works synthesizing this new research into a succinct and readable narrative, suitable for non-specialists, have been few. In *The Multiethnic Soviet Union and its Demise*, a new entry in the Bloomsbury Russian Shorts series, Brigid O'Keefe has made an important

contribution to understanding this rapidly evolving field. Her concise, well-organized, and highly readable book provides a wealth of insight into the multiethnic past of Russia and its post-Soviet neighbors.

O’Keeffe takes a chronological approach, beginning with early Bolshevik nationality policy and ending with the aftermath of Soviet collapse. Throughout the book, she traces the evolution of ethnicity (a term she uses interchangeably with nationality) within the Soviet Union and the tensions between ethnic specificity and internationalism that eventually undermined the multiethnic state. O’Keeffe’s main point is that ethnicity was central to Soviet history. Despite their primary interest in class and class struggle, she notes, the Bolsheviks built ethnicity “into the bedrock of Soviet civilization” (4). A second prominent theme is the contradiction between the insistence on distinct ethnic identities and the promotion of the “friendship of peoples,” which helped to anchor a “russocentric Soviet pride” (43).

The engagement with ethnicity began with the old Bolsheviks, an ethnically diverse group who even before the revolution were accustomed to cross-cultural encounters within a multiethnic empire. After coming to power in 1917, the Bolsheviks acknowledged the importance of ethnicity by building it into the structure of the new Soviet state, creating ethnic republics and promoting ethnically diverse elites, languages, and cultures. In this multiethnic state, there were new opportunities for previously oppressed and colonized peoples such as Jews, Gypsies, and Central Asians. In the mid-1930s, Stalin began to promote the “friendship of peoples” (41) under the tutelage of the Russians, who were “first among equals” (42). Yet this friendship had its limits. In the Arctic and Central Asia, Soviet rule resembled the “civilizing missions” (24) familiar from western colonial empires. The Ukrainian and Kazakh nations were decimated by severe famines during agricultural collectivization in the early 1930s. Under Stalin, moreover, certain ethnicities were persecuted and excluded from the Soviet family: Koreans, Germans, and others were deported to Central Asia as enemy peoples between 1935 and 1938.

World War II enhanced Soviet unity as all faced a common enemy. Non-Russian Red Army soldiers learned Russian, while all Soviet citizens listened to the same radio broadcasts. But the punished peoples continued to be persecuted and demonized. After the war, the era of “mature socialism” (77) saw a hardening of ethnic boundaries and ethnic hierarchies. Just as Russians were first among equals in the USSR as a whole, within each republic the titular nationality dominated minority groups. Official Soviet anti-racism collided with homegrown racism and rising antisemitism. Vocal condemnations of racism and colonialism in the United States and the capitalist world obscured racist treatment of visitors from the Global South as well as slurs and attacks on Soviet citizens from the Caucasus and Central Asia.

The growing transparency of the perestroika period brought these ethnic frictions and fissures into the open. Increasingly, the nationalism of ethnic minorities—in the Baltics, the Caucasus, and Ukraine—and the resentments of ethnic Russians undermined the “friendship of peoples.” Eventually these led to the disintegration of the multiethnic state—an unintended consequence of the enshrining of ethnicity as a cornerstone of the Soviet experience. In the aftermath, Soviet citizens expressed both jubilation and grief. Many felt nostalgia for a vanished civilization, having lost their “sense of a shared history, culture, and purpose” (115).

O’Keeffe, an accomplished historian who has written books on linguistic internationalism and Gypsy/Roma identity in the Soviet Union, includes some of her own research in this book. The fascinating story of Huldah Carter, daughter of an African American communist who attended boarding school in the USSR in the 1950s, will be unfamiliar to most readers. Mainly, though, the book synthesizes the extensive literature on Soviet nationalities published in the last thirty years. O’Keeffe does a fine job of combining concise analysis of broad historical questions with anecdotes that illustrate the impact of these historical events on individual lives, making for lively and compelling reading.