

INTRODUCTION

The Soviet people: national and supranational identities in the USSR after 1945

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(Received 3 August 2014; accepted 6 August 2014)

World War II and the death of Stalin precipitated a major crisis of identity in the Soviet Union. In the shadow of the Cold War, faced with new domestic realities, party leaders and ordinary citizens developed diverse views on what it now meant to be Soviet. Exploring such phenomena as youth cultures (Furst 2010), Russian literature (Jones 2013), and workers' unrest (Kozlov 2002), historians have recently described the period between the 1940s and the 1960s as a "relaunch" of the Soviet revolutionary project that encompassed new utopian hopes and "the troubled awareness of past ambitions, whether realized or thwarted" (Furst, Jones, and Morrissey 2008). During this era, Soviet society experienced both important continuities and radical breaks from the Stalinist 1930s. The 1970s and the 1980s brought new dilemmas that led to further renegotiation of Soviet identities. Although Brezhnev abandoned Khrushchev's bold reform agenda, Soviet society was shaken up by new forms of cultural consumption (see Roth-Ey 2011), Westernization (see Zhuk 2010), and political crises in Eastern Europe (Weiner 2006; Wojnowski 2012).

The impact of these changes on interethnic dynamics in the Soviet Union has yet to be fully explored. Arising from a symposium held at the University of Toronto in April 2012, this special section analyses the ways in which changes of the postwar era and de-Stalinization shaped, and were themselves conditioned by, interethnic relations in the USSR.¹ It focuses in particular on the relationship between ethno-national identities and notions of a supranational "Soviet people" between the late 1940s and the 1980s.

Interethnic relations in the USSR have mostly been studied in the context of modernization, decolonization, and state building between the October Revolution and World War II. Although Soviet policies toward non-Russians fluctuated, the creation of ethnically designated political and administrative units, as well as the policies of *korenizatsiia* (the promotion of non-Russian languages and elites), encouraged the invention of new and the transformation of old ethno-national identities among Soviet citizens in the 1920s and the 1930s (Martin 2001).

That a highly centralized communist state engaged in nation building is key to understanding the scope and nature of revolutionary changes in the first two decades of Soviet history. Party apparatchiks perceived ethnic identities as key to state building after the collapse of Tsarism. Ethnographers therefore studied and categorized the population, a task

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essential for the establishment of a new system of administration (Hirsch 2005). Creating cultures that were to be “national in form and socialist in content,” Soviet leaders in Moscow aimed to undermine regional, religious, and clan identities and, more broadly, to create what they defined as modern societies in the non-Russian regions of the USSR (Slezkine 1994). Responses varied and, as Edgar (2006) shows, inhabitants of the non-Russian republics and non-Russian communist party elites sometimes turned Soviet ethnic policy on its head, evoking the rhetoric of ethnicity to resist social and cultural changes, or to redefine Moscow’s ideas of what it meant to be Soviet.

The looming threat of war in the 1930s and the war itself had a drastic impact on Soviet ethnic policy and interethnic relations. After the mid-1930s, in anticipation of a major war, top Soviet leaders mobilized ethnic identities to foster a sense of loyalty to the Soviet state and its institutions (Brandenberger and Dubrovsky 1998). The promise was that the USSR would protect its numerous ethnic groups from nationalists, racists, and imperialists abroad.² Yet the identification of “Soviet people” with particular ethnic groups had very tragic consequences. From the mid-1930s, but especially during and after the war, some ethnic groups were deemed inherently less loyal to the Soviet homeland than others and, as such, they were subject to repressions and deportations (Brown 2004).³ Violent nationalist resistance against Soviet rule plagued the western borderlands into the early 1950s (Statiev 2010). Still, the age of crafting new national narratives to further the USSR’s revolutionary goals was over by 1945, and the borders of Soviet republics solidified after the incorporation of new western territories during World War II.⁴

This helped to turn ethnicity into a key marker of belonging in the imagined Soviet community. For example, Ukrainian identities in Soviet Ukraine were used to create a uniform, homogeneous space intended to overshadow the multi-faceted identities of the borderlands (Brown 2004; Frunchak 2010). After the war, to be Soviet meant to belong to one of the USSR’s titular nationalities.

The centrality of ethnic identities in Soviet politics and public culture had an ambiguous impact on state–society dynamics, especially after the death of Stalin. On the one hand, as Maïke Lehmann puts it in her study of postwar Armenia, the “local reinvention of the Soviet project on the national periphery ... was to lend new legitimacy and stability to the Soviet system” (Lehmann 2011, 482). At the same time, however, ethnic identities were mobilized to challenge the Soviet state. Taking advantage of the cultural openings of the Thaw, members of the creative intelligentsia called on state apparatchiks to better protect the cultural and linguistic rights of the USSR’s ethnic groups (Farmer 1980). Despite Brezhnev’s crackdown on such “permitted dissent” (Spechler 1982), literature and environmental protection movements continued to address the issue of ethnic rights well into the 1980s (this was especially common among ethnic Russians (Mitrokhin 2003); for a Kazakh example see Kudaibergenova (2013)). Meanwhile, nationalist dissent ranged from calls to return to a more tolerant ethnic policy of the 1920s to expressions of separatist sentiments (Farmer 1980). Yet the most serious challenge to Soviet stability came from within the communist party. Smith (2011, 84–85 and 90) writes of a “growing tide of anti-Russian nationalism” among republican elites during the 1950s, which had “deeper popular roots” in the Baltics and the South Caucasus. More broadly, during the second half of the twentieth century, Komsomol and Party apparatchiks developed client networks based around ethnically designated administrative units and institutions (Kaiser 1994). Communist apparatchiks in the republican capitals identified their personal interests with those of their republics, which helps to account for what Beisinger (2002) has described as a “tide of nationalism” that spread from the unstable Baltic republics to parts of the USSR which witnessed relatively little popular support for national

opposition to Soviet rule. In other words, it appears that strong ethno-national identities and institutions acted as important limits on centralized authoritarian control over society.

Although ethnicity remained a key identity category, Party leaders also pledged to create a supranational “Soviet people” (*sovetskii narod*) in postwar USSR. They were never quite clear on the role that ethnic identities would play in the future Soviet community, celebrating both the supposed *sliianie* (merging) and *sblizheniie* (coming closer together) of ethnic groups. Sovietness was a contested and multi-faceted identity. For some members of the political and cultural elites in Moscow, the Soviet state was supposed to protect Slavs from Western liberalism – from this perspective, the “Soviet people” was often tantamount to ethnic Russians and an idealized vision of a conservative Russian culture. Other prominent cultural and political figures opposed this so-called “Russian party” and saw “Soviet people” as a multi-ethnic community united by common political structures or socialist values (Mitrokhin 2003). For the intelligentsia, the “Soviet people” was not only a despised smokescreen for state-sponsored destruction of ethnic cultures (Kasianov 1995), but also a set of institutions that cultivated ethnic languages and cultures (for example, see Yekelchik 2004). From the latter perspective, it was perfectly possible to be a Soviet Ukrainian or a Soviet Latvian. The “Soviet people” entailed a promise of ethnic tolerance and equality. As Sahadeo (2012) has recently shown, Central Asian migrants “tested expectations of inclusion” in Soviet society as they moved to Moscow and Leningrad during the late Soviet period. The “Soviet people” meant unity grounded in familiarity with the Russian language and culture – an ambition that was not so much unattainable, frustrated though it was by day-to-day xenophobia, but ultimately unimaginable in a society where every citizen was assigned one ethnic identity (“Soviet” was not an option) in his or her internal passport (Edgar 2007). To be sure, “Sovietness” was also defined in opposition to the world outside the USSR’s borders. As war rumors spread through the USSR in the late 1940s, for example, citizens conceived of the Soviet Union not only as “a unique Socialist civilization” or a hated regime that was about to collapse, but also a community that needed news and social cohesion in the face of an outside threat (Johnston 2006).

To analyze the relationship between ethnic identities and new notions of what it meant to be Soviet that emerged after 1945, this special section builds on these findings, but also approaches the history of Soviet interethnic relations from a new angle. It examines the importance of ethnicity in defining the boundaries of Soviet citizenship after 1945. The increasingly widespread identification of Soviet citizens with particular ethnic groups extended imagined citizenship to former “class enemies,” “bourgeois nationalists,” and most Party members and nonmembers alike. Emboldened by this, many residents of the USSR negotiated the boundaries of permissible national expression and sought access to such rights and privileges as health care, education, or international travel. They used primary party meetings and letters addressed to the authorities to claim that civic Soviet institutions should represent their ethnic nations. Even members of non-titular ethnic groups seemed to take the idea of Soviet citizenship seriously. At the same time, ethnicity was used as a marker of loyalty, as a result of which some ethnic groups enjoyed more rights than others. Party officials ignored vital needs of individuals simply because they belonged to particular ethnic groups. Likewise, the efforts and sacrifices that members of some ethnic groups made were obscured from public view.

The special section explores the tension between nationalism as an ideology facilitating the emergence of institutions and practices that provided a platform for the civic mobilization of ethno-national groups, and nationalism as an attempt to control and categorize Soviet people along ethnic lines. Kate Brown examines the deployment of ethnic categories

in the building of the first Soviet plutonium production plant in the 1940s and the 1950s, exposing prominent links between Soviet leaders' xenophobia, labor policy, and citizens' access to health care. Tracing the evolution of petition writing in Soviet Azerbaijan, Krista Goff analyzes the rise of a new language of rights among non-titular nationalities after the death of Stalin. Serhy Yekelchuk reconstructs the formative years of the "sixtiers" movement among young Ukrainian intellectuals, demonstrating that these champions of Ukrainian culture developed very diverse attitudes toward the Communist Party and the Soviet state in the 1960s. William Risch considers the role of the western borderlands annexed during World War II in the evolution of Soviet politics of empire, arguing that a peculiar and volatile form of Soviet identity shaped the ways in which young people and members of the creative intelligentsia from the Baltic republics and Western Ukraine engaged with the Soviet state. Finally, my article examines international travel in the socialist camp to show that Eastern Europe became a crucial reference point for the making of Soviet identities in Western Ukraine, which encouraged some groups of professionals and activists from the western borderlands to develop a strong attachment to Soviet institutions.

In order to explore the meanings of citizenship in postwar USSR, the authors analyze how the practices of "othering" ethno-national groups helped to construct the idea of who was Soviet. As Kate Brown, Krista Goff, and Serhy Yekelchuk demonstrate, state and party apparatchiks regularly deployed ethnic categories in allocating access to health care, education, and public cultural forums. Ethnic prejudices and the uneven strength of different ethnically designated organizations in the USSR meant that members of some ethnic groups found it difficult or nearly impossible to register their grievances and claim their rights as citizens. Kate Brown paints a tragic and sobering picture of Soviet citizens from certain ethno-national groups exposed to debilitating levels of nuclear radiation, demonstrating that pre-1945 xenophobic practices continued to shape policy during the Cold War. Because the resulting deaths and illnesses among certain ethnicities were obscured from public view, members of these groups suffer the consequences in silence even today. In Brown's account, to be a Soviet worker with rights meant to be a Slav.

The special section also looks at the changing range and nature of non-conformity among non-Russians in the USSR. It thus analyses how citizens evoked ethnic identities to express diverse attitudes toward the Soviet state. Non-conformity signified frustration and alienation from the Soviet community. Kate Brown documents riots, crimes, and cases of alcoholism among ethnic minorities that the NKVD considered "incorrigible." The authors further identify sources of creativity that underpinned more positive types of engagement between the Soviet state and the non-Russian populations. They explore how young rock music fans, writers, artists, diplomats, and officials in charge of cultural policy pushed and negotiated the limits of permissible national expression. In this vein, Serhy Yekelchuk traces the rise of "semi-autonomous spaces of cultural expression," where young Kyivans sought to establish a new role for urban, Ukrainian, Soviet intellectuals. William Risch and I take the story of de-Stalinization into the Brezhnev era, examining youth subcultures, Western popular music, conflicts between Soviet Ukrainians and East Europeans, and smuggling as important forums where residents of the USSR negotiated Soviet identities. At the same time, the authors do not lose sight of the state's ability to suppress non-conformist speech and behavior. For Yekelchuk, a series of government crackdowns of the mid-1960s dramatically shrank the limits of the "controlled freedom" that young intellectuals had enjoyed under Khrushchev. Similarly, William Risch shows that the consumption of foreign cultural products among young people in

the Baltic republics and Western Ukraine fed into complex debates about the status of the western borderlands and the loyalties of its inhabitants.

The papers help to identify the institutions and circumstances in which inhabitants of the USSR evoked their ethnic identities to comment on and criticize official policy as engaged members of Soviet society. Krista Goff analyzes the letters and petitions used in Lezgin and Georgian/Ingilo rights campaigns in Soviet Azerbaijan to gauge conceptualizations of rights that illustrate an evolution from suppliance toward citizenship among non-titular ethnic groups. Serhy Yekelchuk shows that Ukrainian intellectuals were forced to make political choices after the mid-1960s, illuminating the links between the national revivals of the Thaw and citizens' decisions to join the Communist Party, turn to dissent, or withdraw into the private sphere. While state–society relations were most dynamic during the Thaw, my paper suggests that residents of the USSR developed new ways to articulate demands and expectations of the Soviet state under Brezhnev. Presenting themselves as “reliable” Soviet and Soviet Ukrainian people, some categories of professionals and activists claimed an elite status in Soviet society and, on that basis, sought access to such perks and privileges as international travel.

Finally, the authors analyze the extent to which ethnicity divided Soviet society by examining the dynamics between ethnic identities, notions of Sovietness, and republic-level institutions. In some contexts, among groups that had their own ethnically designated republics in particular, strong ethnic identities helped to promote citizens' loyalty to the Soviet state. Serhy Yekelchuk shows that young intellectuals keen to promote Ukrainian language and culture identified themselves not just as Ukrainians but also Soviet Ukrainians. This is because they used specifically Soviet institutions that operated in Kyiv, such as the Komsomol, to promote the cultural and linguistic rights of Ukraine's titular ethnicity. My paper likewise argues that ethnic identities reinforced a sense of Soviet patriotism in the western borderlands. National tensions that manifested themselves during international travel helped to blur ethnic and regional divisions in the USSR itself – albeit “socialist,” Czechs, Slovaks, Poles, and Hungarians were the outsiders who provided an important source of in-group definition for Soviet and Soviet Ukrainian people. At the same time, Krista Goff's paper implies a more complex relationship between republican institutions, ethnic identities, and notions of the Soviet people. Goff shows that non-titular ethnic groups portrayed themselves as Soviet citizens to oppose republic-level policies. For members of minority communities, as well as the Party officials who responded to their petitions, the idea of a multi-national Soviet people helped to challenge Azerbaijani conceptions of rights defined in ethnically exclusive terms.

In sum, the authors identify the roots, boundaries, and nature of citizenship in postwar USSR. By examining xenophobic policies and attitudes in the USSR, the relationship between republican-level institutions and the Soviet center, and the nature of the Soviet encounter with the capitalist West and socialist Eastern Europe, the papers expose how apparatchiks and ordinary citizens defined loyalty. This of course has far-reaching implications for understanding the nature of Soviet governance and security policy, and further throws a new light on the making of social hierarchies in the USSR.

The papers proceed in chronological order. The section begins in a closed city deep in the Urals where ethnic prejudices produced spatial divisions that survived the death of Stalin. It then moves through the USSR's south and west borderlands, where citizens challenged the state's ethnic policy after the 1950s. It ends in the transnational sphere of cross-border travel where many Soviet citizens reimagined their notions of the ethnic “us” and “them” during the 1970s. The sources include internal party and security services' reports, citizens' letters and petitions, plans and accounts of international travel,

memoirs, and interviews. Whereas historians have mostly explored Moscow's perspective on interethnic relations in the USSR, this special section focuses more heavily on the voices emanating from Ukraine, the Baltic republics, and the Caucasus. In this way, it throws a new light on what it meant to be Soviet after 1945.

Notes

1. I would like to express gratitude to the Petro Jacyk Foundation that funded my postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Toronto. I would also like to thank University of Toronto's Petro Jacyk Foundation, Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies, Centre for Jewish Studies and the Dean of Arts and Science for funding the symposium.
2. For example, the closing scenes of the popular 1936 musical, *Circus*, showcased representatives of the USSR's different ethnicities singing a lullaby for a black baby whom they protect from a racist foreigner. *Tsirk*, Mosfilm, 1936. During the 1930s, Soviet patriotism was often defined in opposition to foreign states and nations. As Terry Martin argues, the concept was 'most frequently used in discussions of the need to resist potential foreign aggression' (Martin 2001, 450). The position of ethnic Russians in this imagined Soviet community remained ambiguous – before the mid-1930s in particular, Bolshevik leaders saw Russian nationalism as a threat, but they subsequently removed many obstacles to the promotion of ethnic Russian cadres and couched Soviet patriotism in terms of Russian language, history, and culture (Hosking 2006).
3. Weiner (2001) discusses the impact of Nazi racist ideas in Ukraine during and after the occupation.
4. The 1953 transfer of the Crimea from the Russian Federal Soviet Socialist Republic to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic was a notable exception.

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