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978-0-521-11131-7 - Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and After the Ussr

Jeremy Smith

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RED NATIONS

Red Nations offers an illuminating and informative overview of how the non-Russian republics of the Soviet Union experienced communist rule. It surveys the series of historical events that contributed to the break-up of the Soviet Union and evaluates their continuing resonance across post-Soviet states today.

Drawing from the latest research, Professor Smith offers comprehensive coverage of the revolutionary years, the early Soviet policies of developing nations, Stalin's purges and deportations of entire nationalities, and the rise of independence movements.

Through a single, unified narrative, this book illustrates how, in the post-Stalin period, many of the features of the modern nation-state emerged. Both scholars and students will find this an indispensable contribution to the history of the dissolution of the USSR, the reconstruction of post-Soviet society, and understanding the lives of non-Russian citizens from the years of the Russian Revolution through to the present day.

JEREMY SMITH is Professor of Russian History and Politics at the Karelian Institute, University of Eastern Finland. He has written extensively on the non-Russian nationalities of the Soviet Union, including two books: *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–1923* and *The Fall of Soviet Communism, 1985–1991*.

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RED NATIONS

*The Nationalities Experience in and after
the USSR*

JEREMY SMITH

*Professor of Russian History and Politics at the Karelian Institute,
University of Eastern Finland*



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In memory of my father, Christopher Smith,
and to my mother, Tessa Smith

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Preface

In a perceptive article published in 1981, Radio Free Europe's Jaan Pennar wrote: 'It would seem, on the basis of the evidence on hand, that the Soviet Union is currently somewhat short on nationality policy.'¹ What Pennar understood more clearly than many of his contemporaries was that the national federal structure of the USSR, while ultimately derived from early Soviet policies, had for a long time ceased to provide the framework for implementing any coherent approach to the reconciliation of national differences with the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Soviet state. Equally inadequate was a characterisation of the Soviet Union as a russifying regime intent on destroying those national differences – the survival and flourishing of national languages and cultures under the official patronage of the union republics in the late Soviet period provided sufficient evidence against such a characterisation, even if this was not always apparent to outside observers in the early 1980s. In reality, the last meaningful debates on Soviet nationality policy took place in 1924. What followed over the next sixty-seven years was a series of individual pronouncements and actions, ranging from the banal to the brutal, which at some times followed identifiable patterns or trends, but at other times were purely *ad hoc* and improvised responses to particular pressures. This 'shortage of nationality policy' is one of the considerations that has led me to write a book about the Soviet nationalities experience, rather than

¹ Jaan Pennar, 'Current Soviet Nationality Policy', *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 12, 1 (1981), 13.

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Soviet nationalities policies, which has been the focus of much of my earlier work. The policies of the Soviet government, both broad ones and specific ones, undoubtedly impacted on the lives of non-Russians and are a part of this narrative, but I have tried to recount something more than that. Leaders in the Soviet republics and post-Soviet states, cultural figures and, at key moments, the broad population have also shaped the way the nationalities have developed and how they experienced Soviet and post-Soviet rule. In describing the nationalities experience I hope to have captured in general brushstrokes some of the cumulative effects of a combination of factors.

The story of the non-Russian nationalities of the USSR is, then, best presented as a more or less straightforward narrative, which this book aims to do. This is now possible thanks only to the determined efforts of a group of scholars who have been engaged in the study of the Soviet nationalities since the opening up of archives in Russia and elsewhere from the late 1980s. With the exception of a few sections, where I had recourse to my own archival research or one of the several excellent collections of published archival documents, I have drawn on the products of these scholars' research as published in books, journals and doctoral dissertations, or presented as conference papers. As soon as I started writing, it became obvious that in a single volume I could scarcely do justice to the rich and complex stories and cultures that these secondary works present. In particular, I was forced to narrow the focus of this account to the biggest nationalities of the USSR – specifically, the fourteen nationalities that, by the late 1940s, had their own union republics which, alongside the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, constituted the federal Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. The numerous smaller nationalities – Chechens, Tatars, Abkhaz, Jews and others, who either were granted autonomous status or were recognised as

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nationalities but with no territorial status – are dealt with only when their experience was of particular importance in the overall picture of the Soviet Union, as for example with the mass deportations of the 1940s. This is in no way to belittle the history and culture of these smaller peoples, many of whom are fully deserving of individual treatment. Not only was it impractical to cover the more than one hundred official nationalities of the USSR, but also a focus on the union republics allowed me to develop a number of the main themes of this book in a more coherent and comprehensible manner. Even when it comes to the larger nationalities, I have had to be selective as to which events or developments I have covered, and no doubt many readers will be disappointed at the neglect of particular episodes or the lack of application of particular themes to certain nationalities. In offering advance apologies to such readers, I also hope that the wide-ranging narrative presented here, however sketchy it may be, will increase understanding of the broader context in which particular nationalities experiences were played out.

I have also had to be selective in my use of secondary sources. No doubt there are important works that I have neglected, given the huge volume of literature on the peoples under consideration. There are numerous exceptions, but I have generally followed two rules of thumb – first, I have generally assumed that more recent works of scholarship are more reliable than earlier works. It is (or should be) generally the case in historical studies that later works build on and incorporate the findings of earlier scholarship. But in the case of the study of the Soviet Union there is a more specific reason for favouring later writings, namely the earlier inaccessibility of the archival sources which have been at the core of the most significant post-1990 studies, and which have considerably revised our appreciation of the experience of non-Russians throughout the Soviet period. The second rule of thumb is perhaps

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more controversial: I have preferred recent scholarship from outside the former Soviet Union, most of it in the English language, and have largely passed over the numerous works produced by scholars from Russia or from the nationalities which are treated in this book. Access to secondary sources was one factor, but an equally important consideration has been the high level of politicisation of history in the states that emerged from the rubble of the Soviet Union, including Russia. As a discipline, history has been neglected in many of the post-Soviet states, providing poor career opportunities and often subjected to the designs of political authorities and pursuing a functional nationalist agenda. In seeking to avoid works which are too biased or unreliable in terms of accuracy, I regret to have painted most scholars with the same brush, and to have neglected the contributions of those scholars who have succeeded in carrying out serious and objective research in the most trying of circumstances. As international contacts increase and opportunities for serious historical work develop, I look forward to the future acquaintance with and publications of those historians whose work deserves more attention than I have been able to afford them here.

An up-to-date account of the Soviet nationalities experience is long overdue – the last works that provided similarly broad coverage, Gerhard Simon's *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union* and Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda's *Soviet Disunion*, both appeared towards the end of the Soviet period.² Both are outstanding accounts for their time, and I have

² Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991); Bohdan Nahaylo and Victor Swoboda, *Soviet Disunion: A History of the Nationalities Problem in the USSR* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

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drawn freely on them where there are gaps in later historiography. But neither was able to benefit from the fruits of archival research or to link the nationalities question in the USSR to its eventual collapse and the subsequent development of independent states. Since 1994, Yuri Slezkine's groundbreaking article, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism',³ has become the most commonly cited secondary work for an overview of Soviet nationalities questions. While Slezkine's conceptualization of the nationalities experience has deservedly informed subsequent understandings, the article's limited aims and coverage renders it insufficient as an overall account. Likewise, Ronald Suny's *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*⁴ has inspired this book, among many other works, and established a clear framework for exploring the Soviet nationalities, but its focus is on the beginning and the end of the Soviet period and does not seek to provide an overall historical survey of the entire Soviet era.

This book draws on the work of the preceding twenty years of research to provide, in however sketchy a form, an overview of the Soviet nationalities experience. It is aimed at a broad audience – while some basic knowledge of the history of the USSR and its leading events and personalities is assumed, I have included a brief presentation of its main nationalities in Chapter 1 and have endeavoured to situate the nationalities experience within the overall development of the Soviet Union. Specialists on particular nationalities will be familiar with much of the content, but I hope will enjoy some benefit from seeing the subjects of their research

³ Yuri Slezkine, 'The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism', *Slavic Review*, 53, 2 (Summer 1994), 414–52.

⁴ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford University Press, 1993).

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presented in a wider context. Researchers interested in other aspects of Soviet history, or of nations and nationalism in general, scholars of contemporary post-Soviet states looking for broad historical background, and students from a variety of disciplines looking for an introduction to the general topic or to the history of specific nationalities will, I hope, get some use from this book. I have also tried to write in a style that is accessible for the general reader, anyone who is just interested in the topic. Given the extent to which characterisations and understandings of the Soviet nationalities promulgated during the Cold War still persist not only in the popular imagination, but also among a large number of scholars from disciplines other than history, my purpose in synthesizing the products of recent research is to present as clear a picture as possible, albeit inevitably in a simplified form. In promoting understanding of the Soviet and post-Soviet nationalities experience, my book is only a starting point – there is plenty of excellent literature in circulation which goes into particular issues in much more detail, and there remains a good deal of work to be done.

As a historian, I have endeavoured to show how one set of circumstances and experiences derives from earlier ones. In particular I have attempted to link the post-Soviet experience to that of Soviet rule, and a central idea of this book is that the nation-building efforts which some approaches view as beginning in 1991 had in many respects been completed or embarked upon much earlier. For the most part, then, the book is chronologically structured, although there are exceptions. Most notably, I have gone back into the pre-Second World War history of the Baltic and other nationalities only at the point at which they entered the Soviet Union after 1945. Likewise, I have followed the story of the nationalities deported during the war through to their later Soviet experience in the same chapter. The book largely consists of

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narrative, and I have eschewed discursive theoretical or comparative discussion, while hoping that other scholars will find this book of use in such explorations of their own. I have, however, gone beyond pure narrative in analysing reasons and impacts of particular episodes. In doing so I have drawn extensively on analyses presented by other authors but, where such analysis is contested or unclear, I have drawn my own conclusions and it is exclusively my understanding that is presented in the text.

Rather than interrupt the narrative and analysis with historiographical discussion, for the most part I have indicated the sources of my own ideas or have presented alternative understandings in the footnotes. The main exception to this approach concerns the treatment of the great famine that caused horrific hardship and loss of life in Ukraine and elsewhere in 1932–1933. Here two considerations led me to include discussion of competing historiographies in the main text. First, western scholarship has become so polarised over the interpretation of the causes of the famine that I have so far found it hard to reach a conclusive opinion as to which is correct, or if the truth lies somewhere in between. Secondly, the debate among mostly western historians has become part of the history of Ukraine itself, especially when the *Holodomor* became a major part of the Ukrainian national self-narrative in the 1990s. Elsewhere, I hope that the notes, references and bibliography will provide sufficient guidance to those readers wishing to pursue in detail alternative interpretations of events.

The difficulty of standardising names and place names is a familiar one to writers dealing with sources and cultures which use different alphabets from that employed by the writer. This becomes especially problematic where changing states and regimes have resorted to wholesale policies of rewriting and renaming. As a rule, where there are widely accepted English-language versions of

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names and place names, I have used those rather than seeking to apply systematically any standard system of transliteration from Cyrillic or other alphabets. For many less well-known, or less-standardised, spellings, I have benefitted from the insistence of the post-Soviet states themselves in providing standard Latin forms of place names. Where place names have been deliberately changed, I have employed the name in use at the time which is being written about – so Petrograd, Leningrad and St Petersburg are all used for the same city. In a handful of cases, there is something of a grey area as to whether spellings have changed or a new name is in use. The most important of these is the country now almost universally known as Belarus, at the insistence of the independent state's political leaders in the early 1990s. At the time of the adoption of this official state name, there was extensive discussion as to the etymological link with the Russian name 'Belorussia'. The difference is in any case sufficiently great to consider there was never a Soviet Socialist Republic of Belarus, but a Belorussian SSR. Hence I use the name Belorussia for the Soviet republic, but Belarus for the post-Soviet state (and Belorussians up to 1991 but Belarusians afterwards).

I first embraced the idea of writing this book far too long ago, in 2000. I was only able to start serious work on it thanks to a generous Leverhulme Trust Study Abroad Fellowship awarded for 2005–2006, and I am extremely grateful to the Trust for its support, and to the Aleksanteri Institute in Helsinki which hosted my fellowship. I am greatly appreciative of my numerous friends and colleagues at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Russian and East European Studies, who were a constant support and inspiration when I worked there from 1999 to 2010, and whose efforts have kept the reputation of this renowned centre afloat during the most trying of times. I spent five months in 2010 at the Department of

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History of the University of Michigan, where I learnt much from the acquaintance of several colleagues and was able to use the excellent university library in drafting a number of the chapters. Since the summer of 2010, I have enjoyed the outstanding atmosphere of the Karelian Research Institute at the University of Eastern Finland in Joensuu, and would especially like to thank my colleagues Ilkka Liikanen, Pekka Suutari, Paul Fryer and others there.

My most direct debt for this volume goes to the numerous scholars of Soviet nationalities whose works have formed the basis of this book, many of whom I have got to know personally and from whom I have profited from reading and hearing their understanding of Soviet nationalities. First and foremost among these is Ronald Grigor Suny, whose 1993 book *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* inspired a whole generation of Soviet nationality scholars, myself included. His groundbreaking ideas run right through this book, and I apologise if I have not acknowledged his influence on every occasion I have drawn on it. Ron and his wife, Armena, became highly valued personal friends, inspirational in many ways. Armena's passing in November 2012 was a devastating loss to all of us.

Over the years I have benefitted greatly from discussions with many other scholars with whom I have shared interests, including Levan Avalishvili, Mark Bassin, Peter Blitstein, David Brandenberger, Juliette Cadiot, Robert Davies, Adrienne Edgar, the late Neil Edmunds, Yoram Gorlizky, Francine Hirsch, Geoffrey Hosking, Melanie Ilic, Kamala Imranli, Salavat Iskhakov, Oleg Khlevniuk, Nataliya Kibita, Giorgi Kldiashvili, Gerard Libaridian, Terry Martin, Mikko Palonkorpi, the late Brian Pearce, Hilary Pilkington, Michaela Pohl, Arsene Saparov, Robert Service, Alexander Titov, Valery Vasiliev, Stephen Wheatcroft and Galina Yemelianova, to name just a few. I have drawn freely on their ideas and hope I have provided suitable

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acknowledgement of most of them in the footnotes. Any omissions and errors are entirely my responsibility. Last but by no means least, I owe the deepest gratitude to my immediate family – to my wife Hanna, from whom I derive most of my understanding of international relations in the post-Soviet region as well as the love and support that has kept me going. I owe my children Saga, Max and Taika, for bringing me so much pleasure, for keeping me sane and for their patience at my frequent absences (both physical and mental).

I am extremely grateful to Michael Watson at Cambridge University Press, not least for his inexhaustible patience as agreed deadline after agreed deadline have passed. The usual regrets for taking much longer than intended over a manuscript are especially poignant and deep-felt in this case. In the course of 2010, when much of this work was drafted, three of the people whose opinions of the final version I would have valued as highly as anyone's left us. Soviet historical studies lost two of its greatest figures in the course of that year, Moshe Lewin and Richard Stites. I never got to know Moshe Lewin beyond a couple of email exchanges, but he was an early pioneer of the approach to Soviet history which has informed so many later historians, myself included, and his little book *Lenin's Last Struggle* first stimulated my interest in Soviet nationalities many years ago. No less a figure in the study of Soviet history was Richard Stites, who I became well acquainted with through his regular sojourns in Helsinki. His great passion was for Russians and their culture and he had less interest in non-Russians, but he always provided stimulating insights into whatever topic was at hand. He is irreplaceable both as a colleague and a great entertainer. A few days after Richard passed away, my father, Christopher Smith, followed him. I had regularly used him as a reader to provide the 'layman's view' on my earlier writings, and

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the absence of his input has no doubt left this book poorer than it would have been. He was a wonderful father, an unassuming man but hugely successful in all his endeavours, much loved and greatly missed. It is to his memory, and to my mother, Tessa Smith, whose lifelong support and love has made me what I am, that this book is dedicated.