

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1 Post-colonialism and borderland identities

As the dust of the immediate post-Soviet transition settles, we are now better placed to begin to examine how national identities are being reformed in the fourteen borderland states of what up until December 1991 constituted the non-Russian union republics of the former Soviet Union.¹ Having secured sovereign spaces following the collapse of the world's largest multiethnic federation, the borderland states are now embarking upon nation-building. And herein lies the paradox. The post-colonial desire to recreate national identities can facilitate solidarity, play a positive role in state-making and form a basis for popular participation in politics. A politics defined in relation to a particular national community may not in itself be incompatible with processes of democratisation. The problem arises when national or ethnic identity is predicated on a form of imagined community that reifies the importance of national or ethnic boundaries to the detriment of the wider political community. In this regard, there is as yet only limited evidence to suggest that the post-Soviet borderland states are on the threshold of entering such a post-national era in which national and ethnic identities have been superseded by understandings of cultural difference based on a broader and more inclusive vision of political community. Rather, although the scale of inter-ethnic violence as witnessed in TransDniester, Nagorno-Karabakh and Georgia in the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s has now diminished, national identities continue to be caught up in power struggles, leadership elections, legislative acts and in the state distribution of social goods. In short, the ethnification or even racialisation of identity politics remains an important ingredient of borderland politics and cultural life. If, as Simon During notes, 'the post-colonial desire is the desire of de-colonised communities for an identity',² then that identity in the post-Soviet borderlands is being shaped as much by the ethnic politics of exclusion and division as it is by inclusion and coexistence.

Throughout the multiethnic borderlands, there remains a predisposition amongst dominant national groups and minorities alike to recognise and overemphasise the importance of collective rather than individual

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 Post-colonialism and borderland identities

actors as the constitutive elements of political community. Above all, this tendency is being played out through the state and its major institutions and is bound up with what Rogers Brubaker identifies as the tendency by political and cultural elites ‘to see the state as an “unrealised” nation-state, as a state destined to be a nation-state . . . and the concomitant disposition to remedy this perceived defect, to make the state what it is properly and legitimately destined to be, by promoting the language, culture, demographic position, economic flourishing or political hegemony of the nominally state-bearing nation’.³ Thus the articulation of interests and the design of public institutions and policies tend to reflect the interests of the dominant national group. Most straightforwardly, such ‘a nationalising tendency’ refers both to those states that explicitly define themselves in constitutional law as national homelands or the embodiment of long-held national goals of statehood, and to those states whose political policies and practices reveal similar ‘nationalising’ aspirations despite the lack of explicit words to this effect in their founding or other legal documents.⁴ Thus, in the most extreme cases, nation-building has become caught up in a form of identity politics which is designed to produce and reproduce nationally defined contours of community and to reflect nationally defined interests and values predicated on fulfilling a normative concept of statehood in which nation and state should be spatially congruent. Such political practices have also resulted in members of national minorities being disadvantaged and in their informal exclusion from important spheres of public life.

While such nationalising tendencies centre on the political practices of the state, they are by no means confined to political elites. Rather, it is part of a far broader enterprise of nation-building in which cultural elites – especially intellectuals – play a crucial part in the production and representation of nationhood. Nor do the representatives or agents of such nationalising regimes necessarily understand or clearly acknowledge and articulate such a form of political rule; rather, the importance of the notion of a nationalising regime is that it has relational implications for those within the polity who are most affected by it, especially national minorities. In turn, the behaviour of nationalising states is also in part a product of reciprocal monitoring of ‘the other’, as a registering or transcription of what is happening *vis-à-vis* those whom it is argued do not belong. In addition, by our labelling of the borderland states as nationalising regimes it should not be inferred that they are all engaged in their nationalising projects to the same degree of intensity or that they all pursue the same policies. There is, for instance, a very different set of political and cultural practices taking place with regard to language policy in Belarus, where Russian is officially acknowledged as a state language, compared to Latvia

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

where the Russian language now has no official status and where all citizens are expected to speak Latvian as a condition of citizenship.

The central aim of this book is not so much to question the significance that such a politics of national identity continues to play in structuring the social, political and cultural lives of those who live in the borderland states as to explore how such national identities are being reformulated, revitalised and contested as symptoms of the perceived post-colonial status of these states. The aim of this chapter is therefore to provide a conceptual and theoretical context for examining such national identities. As Roxanne Doty reminds us, 'national identity is never a finished product; it is always in the process of being constructed and reconstructed'.⁵ In subsequent chapters, we will therefore have much to say about how such national identities are being refashioned by political and cultural elites in the light of their new and changing circumstances, of how a politics of nation-building is linked to practices of social inclusion and exclusion, and of how for post-colonial subjects the question of language has become a political, cultural and literary issue for both majority and minority groups alike. With this end stage in mind, this chapter turns to consider ways in which we can provide a conceptual and interpretative basis for understanding the interrelationship between identity, nation-building and post-coloniality.

A post-colonial politics

There is now a commonly held assumption in the literature that the post-Soviet borderland states, having secured sovereign control over their national homelands, have entered a new or post-colonial phase in their histories. To take 'post-colonial' only at face value, however, is to assume that the post-Soviet borderland states were once subjects of a colonial project, part of an empire-driven political formation named the Soviet Union, and that it is only as a result of their post-1991 status as sovereign polities that they have escaped from the vicissitudes of empire. Indeed, even from those commentators who during the late 1980s were uneasy about labelling the Soviet Union 'an empire', a historical revisionism is now underway in which, in the light of the USSR's collapse along multi-ethnic lines, the Soviet Union is busily being reinvented as empire 'since it now appears to have been an illegitimate, composite polity unable to contain the rising nations within it'.⁶ For the borderland states, moreover, the colonial analogy is invariably treated in a less ambivalent and more forthright fashion. Indeed, for many in the borderland states, having experienced 'imperial disintegration', the question on the agenda is now one of 'potential imperial [Russian] reconstruction'.⁷

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

4 Post-colonialism and borderland identities

How then are we to interpret the place of these borderlands within the Soviet Union? Were they simply colonial territories of an empire similar to that ruled over by Britain or France and whose sense of national self was either wholly or partly structured by their subject status? After all, their sense of imagined community and the nature and form of post-1991 nation-building are bound up with their place, real and imagined, within such previous political formations. Thus any conceptual framing must take cognisance of the reality of the relationship of the borderland ethnorepublics as part of such a shared political formation and practices, while at the same time acknowledging that such a relationship to the Soviet state also constituted part of a discursive formation imbued with normative and subjective understandings of the nature of that state.

Most commentators are willing to accept that the relationship between the borderland ethnorepublics and the centre was in certain important ways unique amongst twentieth-century empires.⁸ If we are to acknowledge as an empire a state in which a centre dominates a periphery to the disadvantage of the latter, then there seems little doubt that the borderland ethnorepublics were subject to subordination and inequality. The Soviet federation was certainly not the ‘federation of sovereign and equal states’ proclaimed by official Soviet discourse. Incorporation of the borderland territories was often extremely brutal, as in the cases of Georgia in the early 1920s and the Baltic states in 1940. Nor should we underemphasise the role that the coercive technologies of the centre and their deployment by the central state apparatus played in the pacification of the borderlands. It is hard to think of a worse crime perpetuated by an imperial power than Stalin’s deliberate mass starvation of Ukrainians and Kazaks in the 1930s. Yet it is also important to acknowledge the paradox that reflected the relationship between the borderland republics and the centre, a relationship that might better be termed ‘federal colonialism’.⁹ In other words, explicit within such a labelling is the claim that the Soviet Union was neither wholly ‘federal’ nor ‘colonial’ but contained elements of both systems. Thus, while sovereignty resided with the centre rather than in the ethnorepublics, the particular nature of the Soviet federation ensured that nation-building took place at both the ethnorepublic and all-union levels. In short, it can be suggested that the ‘federal colonial’ nature and status of the borderland ethnorepublics were based on the following.

First, the centre denied the borderland ethnorepublics the *de facto* (although not *de jure*) right to national self-determination. Only a minimal degree of political manoeuvrability was granted to the local party-state machines in running their union republics. However, provided that nationalism did not become part of the local political agenda, a degree of localism was tolerated. For the union republic leadership, this

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

meant that their role was far more complex than that of obedient lieutenants carrying out directives from the centre. Within the arena of fiscal federal politics in particular, native political elites were able and willing throughout the post-Stalin years to champion and politicise ethnorepublic economic interests and needs, but only in so far as such a politics did not undermine what the centre deemed to be politically permissible. In turn, local political leaders could be relied upon to ensure that nationalism remained off their ethnorepublic agendas. To be sure, there were occasions when this failed, most notably in Latvia and Estonia in the late 1950s and in Ukraine in the late 1960s. However, by and large, the local political leadership could be trusted to ensure the repression of nationalism. It was only when the centre under the reform-minded leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev relaxed these rules in the late 1980s in an attempt to facilitate local democratisation that nationalism inadvertently became problematic and subsequently capable of challenging the centre.

To conclude that the centre's policy of imposing limits on the degree of national self-determination that was permitted was part of a project designed to create a nation-state is therefore misleading. Although the centre did initiate policies of cultural standardisation, such policies were neither consistent through time nor uniformly practised throughout the ethnorepublics. Thus within the all-important arena of language policy, while the adoption of Russian as the state lingua franca provided Russians with greater opportunities for social and geographical mobility, it would be wrong to conclude that the Soviet state practised a language policy designed to promote the building of a Russian nation-state. Rather, a number of phases in the centre's attitudes towards language is evident: an initial post-revolutionary period in which the centre purposely encouraged the flourishing or even in some cases (as in Central Asia) the creation of literary languages other than Russian; the Stalin years, when in direct contradiction of Leninist federal principles, Russian was decreed as a compulsory subject in all non-Russian schools; a period from the late 1950s until the mid-1980s in which bilingualism was promoted but the choice of language of instruction became a feature of central policy, with the Russian language being held up as the hallmark of the Soviet people; and, finally, as a consequence of greater centrally initiated local democratisation in the late 1980s under the Gorbachev administration, a concluding phase in which local language laws were initiated by the ethnorepublics, which was to lead to titular languages becoming the state languages of sovereign statehood.¹⁰

Secondly, while the centre was engaged in institutional state-building and in creating all-union symbols of nationhood, one of the major paradoxes of the Soviet empire was that it provided the social space for nation-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

6 Post-colonialism and borderland identities

building at the ethnoregional scale.¹¹ Thus, in federalising what became the Soviet Union, Lenin in effect bequeathed to the ethnorepublics the institutional space to carry out limited 'nationalising' policies. This was affirmed in the practice of encouraging the upward mobility of natives within their own national homelands through affirmative action policies (*korenizatsiia*) that contributed to the indigenisation of the local political leadership and to the growth or consolidation of an indigenous intelligentsia through preferential access to higher education and to membership of the local Communist Party. As a result of union republic status, each of the borderland ethnorepublics was provided with a degree of institutional protection that enabled their native languages and cultures to flourish. Not only did such a form of institutionalised nation-building facilitate the preservation and reproduction of established niches for incumbents drawn from the indigenous cultures, it also enabled nationality divisions to remain an integral part and reference point of native public life and an organisational basis for reinforcing local national identities. Indeed, in some instances, notably in Central Asia, by federalising ethnic homelands into ethnorepublics, the Soviet state actually created nations whose sense of nation-ness had previously barely existed.¹² Moreover, this form of nation-building also encouraged ethnorepublic nation-builders to think of the ethnorepublic as the identity-marker of their homeplace. Where the centrally imposed federal map did not coincide with national boundaries, where ethnic minorities either found themselves on the wrong side of an ethnic border or found their ancestral homeland incorporated into such an ethnorepublic, such encouragement to selective nation-building was to prove highly problematic following the collapse of the Soviet Union. In short, the nature of the federation exposes the post-Soviet nationalist myth that for the borderland states the process of nation-building was interrupted by Soviet rule and could begin again only with statehood in 1991.

This borderland bias towards nation-building also carried implications for both Russia and the Russians. Unlike the borderland ethnorepublics which possessed their own national institutions (including their own Communist Party, Academy of Sciences and even KGB), neither Russia nor the Russians possessed an obvious national homeland endowed with such national institutions. Consequently, the idea of the Russian Federation 'was not taken seriously by Russians or non-Russians as the Russian nation-state or the national homeland of the Russian people'.¹³ However, like the other nationalities, they were encouraged to think of the Soviet state as their homeland (*sovetskaia rodina*) and to believe that what was central to their national sense was what Khrushchev in the late 1950s had first referred to as to the emergence of a new Soviet community, that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of the Soviet people (*sovetskii narod*).¹⁴ The difference was that, while the institutional supports of nation-building inadvertently provided the peoples of the borderland ethnorepublics with a choice of identity, for Russians, given the absence of a particular association between union republic status and nation-building, there was a far greater tendency to identify with the Soviet Union as homeland. As John Dunlop notes, ‘the concepts of “Union” and “Russia” in the minds of Russians were one and the same’.¹⁵ This notion that the boundaries of the Soviet Union coincided with a Russian sense of identity was further reinforced by the encouragement that the centre gave to the migration of especially Russians into the borderland ethnorepublics; by 1991 some twenty-five million were residing outside the Russian Federation. It may therefore be not that surprising that, more than any other nationality, the end of the Soviet empire affected the Russian sense of national identity: whereas the borderland nations felt that they had finally regained their homelands as a result of the collapse of the Soviet empire, for many Russians the abrupt end of the Soviet Union marked the beginning of an intense crisis of identity.

Finally, despite the fact that the fourteen borderland nations that emerged in 1991 as states had all been designated as union republics and enjoyed the same level of institutional supports as part of the Soviet federation, they differed in their relations with the centre. They were not all treated uniformly by the centre, nor in turn were relations between the ethnorepublics and the centre predicated on similarity. The nature of such relations was based on a whole host of criteria. These included the differing nature of incorporation. Whereas support for becoming part of a Russian-dominated Soviet Union was at least ambiguous amongst urban elites in Armenia, Ukraine or Belarus, the incorporation of the Baltic republics and Georgia, in contrast, was achieved through unreserved force: hence the idea of Russia as an expansionist metropole was always going to remain far more central in their relationship with the central government in Moscow. Similarly, for some of the ethnorepublic titular nations, the sense of imagined community transcended the boundary markers of nationality, as in the case of many Ukrainians and Belarusians with regard to their Slavic brethren, the Russians, whereas for Georgians or Latvians such a sense of overlapping identity with Russians remained weak. Moreover, the ethnorepublics also differed in their perceived economic relations with the centre. While by the late 1980s nationalists in the economically more advantaged Baltic republics and Ukraine could claim that redistributive economic policies had worked against their people’s material prosperity, for the Central Asian republics, which were net fiscal beneficiaries of Soviet rule and which had gained most from the ‘welfare

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 Post-colonialism and borderland identities

federalism' of the Brezhnev era,¹⁶ the idea of being subjected to a straightforward form of economic colonialism could hardly stand up to scrutiny. In contrast to the Baltic republics or Ukraine, this difference thereby weakened the argument that their politics could easily adjust from dependency on Russia, and undermined the appeal of secessionist-nationalist politics in the region.¹⁷ Instead, the rhetoric of local nationalist discourse in Central Asia tended to focus on the claim that the central authorities in Moscow had exploited the region's raw materials for the centre's own ends. The differentiated nature of such relations between the centre and the ethnorepublics therefore sheds light on why the mobilising potential behind the idea of nation-statism was to become a less problematic affair for the Baltic states and Georgia than it was for even Ukraine or certainly Central Asia.

Coloniality and post-coloniality, however, cannot simply be reduced to 'objective criteria'; like empire, state or nation, they are also social constructs, a set of value judgements bound up with the very constitutive nature and meaning of national identity. Thus, despite claims to the contrary, few of the centre's political elites took the view that they were presiding over a Soviet empire. Similarly, with the possible exception of far right-wing Russian nationalist parties, few within post-Soviet Russia would recognise or judge Russia's activities in Tajikistan, TransDniester or even Chechnya in the mid-1990s as part of a grand scheme to rebuild a Russian Empire. By introducing into post-Soviet studies Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, Beissinger enables us to take on board such a perspective by rethinking how 'empire-building', 'state-building' and 'nation-building' are products of how relations between different groupings are formed and become highly contested and politicised.¹⁸ For Bourdieu, the notion of *habitus* is defined as a system of embedded dispositions, anticipations and expectations. In turn, they are themselves the products of social and cultural practices that structure the ways in which actors construe the social and political reality that they confront.¹⁹ Thus *habitus* constitutes a kind of 'feel for the game' that is produced as a result of experience and which is itself the product of history. People tend to 'read' their future through a set of expectations and inclinations built up through the past. In the post-colonial context, what therefore becomes important is how the borderland states and their peoples envisage the Soviet experience within such discursive worlds in which meaningful action takes place on the basis of perceptions, values and culturally formed expectations. Thus the borderland post-Soviet states can be considered as post-colonial in the sense that they are constructed and labelled as such by their nation-builders. Post-coloniality does not need to follow from an actual 'colonial situation'. Rather, as De Alva notes with

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

reference to Latin America, 'post-coloniality is contained both within colonialism . . . and outside of it, by its questioning of the very norms that establish the inside/outside, oppressor (colonising)/oppressed (colonised) binaries that are assumed to characterise the colonial condition'.²⁰

In acknowledging the significance of such experiential lenses in shaping the post-colonial condition, it is important however not to see such relations only in interactive terms between post-Soviet Russia and the borderland states. Rather, as we have already signalled, we also need to take on board the role of national minorities that are judged neither by the nationalising state as 'the Russian other' nor by Russia as part of 'the nationalising other', but whose colonial and post-colonial experiences have also been shaped by understandings of 'nation-building' and 'empire-building'. Thus through the construction of the 'other' as 'empire', we can begin to comprehend how the borderland states' interpretations of their previous and current relations with the Soviet Union help structure the idea of empire as a continuing and uninterrupted Russian project, of how Russia itself responds to the actions of the post-1991 borderland states as nationalising regimes, and of how the experiences of national minorities are constituted in relation to such projects of empire-building, state-building and nation-building. Thus *habitus* is above all about the environment in which such boundary concepts as empire, state and nation are imbued and interpreted with deep identic and historical meanings by communities, and which in turn helps us to make sense of how such experiences have got inside post-colonial identities.

The borderlands inside Russia's identities

There are good reasons why post-Soviet Russia has found it more difficult than other empires to come to terms with the loss of 'the big homeland'. Russian political elites have not brought to decolonisation a clear awareness of the distinction between nation and empire as did, for example, British elites following their empire's eventual decolonisation.²¹ As a consequence, the question of what and where is Russia, what is its sense of national self, remains highly ambiguous. It is therefore within this context that we need to begin to understand how such competing discourses of identity within Russia concerning its relations with the borderland states have emerged and unfolded. In this regard, three such political discourses can be identified.

First, there is what we can refer to as the liberal discourse, one which dominated Russian politics in the 1990–2 period and which represents a break with both the Soviet and tsarist past.²² It is a discourse which, in

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-59968-9 - Nation-building in the Post-Soviet Borderlands: The Politics of National Identities

Graham Smith, Vivien Law, Andrew Wilson, Annette Bohr and Edward Allworth

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 Post-colonialism and borderland identities

embarking upon the wholesale de-Sovietisation of Russia, acknowledged the sovereignty of the post-Soviet states and which, despite having declared itself the successor state of the Soviet Union, accepted that it has no claims to the borderland territories. It is a discourse which emphasises the idea of *Rossiiia* (the post-1991 boundedness of Russia), and which made Russian state-building its top priority. Although the liberal ideology held that all citizens of the former Soviet Union, irrespective of nationality or place of residence, have an equal right to citizenship of the new Russia,²³ none the less it was overwhelmingly a discourse that accepted that Russian citizens should become citizens of their place of residence. In short, the homeland for Russia was firmly redesignated as *Rossiiia* and relations with the borderland states were to be based on co-operation, mutual respect and partnership.

This conception of respecting the sovereign difference of the borderland states has from the outset been challenged by what we can label a discourse of 'return to empire'. Instead of setting the bright future of post-communism against 'a dark past', it sets the identity crisis of the present against an earlier 'Golden Age'. There are two variants here. The first, that of the neo-nationalist right, looks back to pre-1917 and of a Russia associated with the empire-past, although the issue of exactly which boundaries of that empire (1772, 1913, 1917) should again exist remains hotly contested. Embedded in this vision are a whole variety of ethnic codes, the most vital of which is the idea of the Russian nation as a special world in itself, one based on an association between the Russian nation (*russkii narod*) and Slavdom's and Russia's historic homelands. What cannot be given up are 'the historic Russian lands', meaning Ukraine, Belarus and parts of neighbouring republics long settled by the Russian nation (northern Kazakstan, north-eastern Estonia, Crimea). However, although the criterion for inclusion remains ambiguous, it is made clear only *vis-à-vis* the ethnicised 'other' who do not belong. In contrast, the other variant, the neo-Soviet version, wants to recover *sovetskaia rodina*. The main organisational force of this form of neo-Sovietism is the Communist Party of the Russian Federation (CPRF), a political party which since its revival in 1992 has combined the rhetoric of socialism with an appeal to Russian nationalism.²⁴ It embodies a conception of Russia in which Russians again reside within a socialist multiethnic homeland. Extolling the virtues of inclusion through expressing universalistic aspirations of an 'international brotherhood', equality and common homeland for all citizens of Russia and the borderland states alike, it is committed to repealing the Belovezhskaia Agreement of December 1991 that recognised the formal dissolution of the Soviet homeland. In its place it wants 'to provide conditions for the gradual