Introduction: national subjects

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THE CHALLENGE OF IDENTITY

In the twentieth century the people on the territories between Libau and Vladivostok (the two ports to extreme west and east of the Russian Empire)[1] underwent two sociopolitical experiments on a massive scale. The first of these, the creation of a highly integrative Soviet culture which succeeded the formation of the new state in 1917–22, has been abundantly documented.[2] The second – the disintegration of the Soviet state in 1991, accompanied by express marketization (the aptly named 'shock therapy' programme of Yegor Gaidar) – is still in the process of being understood.

What happened to Soviet culture in 1991? To what extent was the upheaval predictable? What did being 'Soviet' actually mean, and how far have Soviet attitudes and behaviour patterns survived the demise of the state in which they were created? What was the relationship between 'Soviet' identity and *natsional'nost'* (national identity/ethnic identity)? These are some of the questions that we set out to examine here, twenty years after the collapse. Of the many ambivalences and contradictions woven into the fabric of Soviet civilization, nothing was more ambivalent and contradictory than the question of national identity. On one hand, the orthodox Marxist position – at least as articulated by Marx himself – was clear enough. Both as real/existing political 'nation states' and as the subjective sources of affective group identity, nations were stigmatized as reactionary 'remnants' of capitalist civilization which would have no place in the socialist order of the future. This was a position which most Bolsheviks prior to 1917 endorsed, and they believed with Marx that bonds of class solidarity would quickly and definitively replace those of ethno-nationality.[3] By the 1920s, however, the realities of managing the still nationally conscious population of the former empire had necessitated a more conciliatory approach, such that the concept of 'socialist nations' was accepted by the political leadership of the Soviet Union.[4]

Indeed, from this point on, the recognition and endorsement of nationality became one of the most fundamental political and social principles of the Soviet system. Ethno-nationality was the primary criterion for the political-administrative organization of the USSR as a federal state, and from the 1930s all Soviet citizens were required to maintain a sort of dual identity that was inscribed in their internal passports: on one level as Soviet citizens but more especially as members of a specific nationality who belonged to a particular national territory. The imperative for the precise territorialization of nationality was an indication of its critical importance to the Soviet system.[5] Across the country, boundaries were drawn to delimit ethnic homelands that had never really existed as such, and in those cases where there simply was no historical association with a particular region – most obviously the USSR's Jewish population – one was assigned arbitrarily.[6]

Despite the apparent importance of nationality and national identity in the USSR, however, their status remained highly ambiguous. Official disregard for the integrity of the cultures and identities of the Soviet nationalities was succinctly expressed in the Stalinist dictum 'national in form, socialist in content'. National identities would be tolerated, that is to say, only to the extent that they could be shaped and controlled by the central authorities. Moreover, the legacy of Marxist hostility to the principle of national identification and the determination that class solidarities should override and destroy the tribal bonds of attachment to national groups remained powerful. Beginning in the post-Stalinist 1960s, this emerged explicitly in the form of a powerful state-sponsored discourse about an emergent supranational and 'meta-ethnic' *sovetskii narod* or Soviet people, whose development would inexorably subsume existing nationality structures and render them irrelevant. Nikita Khrushchev went so far as to contemplate doing away with the ethno-territorial principle in Soviet federalism altogether, and although subsequent leaders carefully stepped back from this extravagant radicalism, the doctrine of *sliianie* or the merging of all Soviet nationalities into one continued to receive official endorsement.[7]

This ambivalence regarding the status of nationality was reflected in Western research on the USSR. A special category of study was devoted to so-called 'nationalities' issues, but for the most part this research tended to focus on the policies of the Kremlin leadership (or its regional representatives) for the day-to-day management of these issues. This management was effected through a complex array of legal structures, programmes of social mobilization and exclusion, party-political machination and ideological campaigns, the evolution of which was carefully tracked across the

decades. In a country as highly centralized and authoritarian as the USSR, such an approach was entirely logical, and this research told us a great deal about many aspects of social and political development in the country.[8] But it did not tell us very much at all about just how important genuine national affections and identities really were among the Soviet population. If only implicitly, official narratives about an emergent 'Soviet people' were given a significant degree of credence in the Western literature, which seemed to suggest that affective attachments to local nationality identities were indeed being increasingly eroded and thus did not represent a significant autonomous force.[9]

The turbulence of the *perestroika* years and the ensuing collapse of the Soviet Union served to transform quite completely our understanding of the significance of identity as a political, social and cultural factor. Three separate elements of this transformation were of particular importance. On the one hand, the surge of ethno-national affirmation across the Soviet population, which spread with remarkable speed and intensity after 1985, ended all doubt about the ubiquity and enduring vitality of national identification in the country. Experts may argue as to whether or not this sustained wave of national mobilization was in fact the primary cause for the collapse of the Soviet Union, but there can be no question that it figured among the principal factors fatally destabilizing the *ancien régime*.[10] The second element was the final recognition by the country's largest and most dominant national group, the ethnic Russians, that they themselves were in fact a subject 'nationality' like all the others. Many Russians now decided that they had not benefited but suffered from their traditional identification with the Soviet state *in toto*. Indeed, they felt that over many decades they had been the primary object of a deliberate programme of state-sponsored discrimination, as a consequence of which they had suffered a sort of special national depredation qualitatively worse than that experienced by other national groups. Not merely had the Soviet state disrespected and destroyed their unique national traditions and values, it had never even recognized that they had possessed such distinctions in the first place.[11] From this standpoint it was entirely natural that the Russians opted to align with the other national groups in 1991, first in rejecting the supranational structures of the USSR in favour of national consolidation, and then in joining the post-Soviet project of redefining the precise contours and content of their national identity. As the papers in this collection indicate, this latter project continues unabated down to the present day, with issues such as language use, appropriate symbolism, national origins (what in the late Soviet period came to be known as 'ethnogenesis') and the relationships of one particular

nationality with others (up to the level of overt declarations of superiority) all the subject of vigorous debate.[12]

The final element in this transformation related to the adoption of new analytical perspectives on the nature of nationalism and national identity. The disintegration of the cold war order engendered an entirely novel appreciation of the essentially volatile and protean nature of nationalism and national identity. Early in the 1980s a robust scholarly literature on these subjects began to develop powerful concepts such as the 'construction of nationhood' and 'imagined communities', arguing that identities were not fixed and static structures but rather dynamic, malleable and contested.[13] It was now suggested that, although nationalist narratives generally envisioned their respective nation as primordial and unitary, all nations in fact exist in multiple versions, which differ a great deal from each other in content and appeal to different constituencies within the group as a whole. Moreover, such national ideas or identities were open to ongoing manipulation and rearrangement, which did not necessarily weaken their appeal but indeed could enhance it decisively. Identities, that is to say, were essentially contingent: they were shaped by specific historical-political contexts, and had their primary meaning and effects within them. It is important to note, moreover, that the inherent variability of national identification did not in any way diminish its significance. Indeed, rather the contrary was the case. It was precisely the fact that identities were flexible and open to shaping that rendered them maximally appealing and effective.

The extent to which these insights contributed to altering our understanding of Russia became very clear after 1991. One of the areas most dramatically affected was the historiography of the Soviet period. The collapse of the Soviet Union called for a fundamental re-examination of the manner in which the country had been established and reasons that it had developed in the way that it did. Fresh research into these questions was of course aided immeasurably by the opening of previously closed archival sources, but it was also directly stimulated by the heightened appreciation of the inherent importance of identity as a driving dynamic of social and political organization. As a result, the early history of the Soviet Union has already been rewritten in significant ways, with notions of constructed nationhood and invented communities now placed at the very centre of inquiry. The pervasive importance of ethno-national identity in the establishment and organization of the Soviet state has been stressed in a series of analyses which show how the particular accommodations the Soviet Union eventually made with this factor served to determine the fundamental character of the state and its policies.[14] Over the decades and in all corners

of the realm, the Soviet state devoted immense resources and efforts to manipulating (and occasionally effectively creating) the manifold identities of the Soviet population. The particular fate of ethnic Russia in this process has also been examined, and we can trace how the palpable ambivalences underlying Russia's position, apparent already in the 1930s, were repeatedly renegotiated right down to the end of the regime.[15] As part of this, the more general and abstract question about Soviet conceptions of the nature of ethno-national identity has become a subject of study in its own right.[16]

In regard to post-Soviet studies, the centrality of identity is yet more pronounced. As had been the case after 1917, so the rearrangement of political power and social allegiances after 1991 served to destabilize established categories of identification and to initiate new phases of renegotiation and redefinition. In contrast to post-revolutionary Russia, however, our heightened appreciation of the nuances of identity discourses today ensures that they are recognized and analysed as such. In a sense the former Soviet Union can be treated as a veritable laboratory of identity construction and manipulation, within which identity operates in different ways and at various levels. Most fundamentally, each of the fifteen newly independent nation states is engaged in its own process of so-called 'nation-building', whereby an aspiring leadership seeks to provide – along with novel constitutional arrangements and legal structures – freshly crafted narratives of national belonging.[17] The post-Soviet experience demonstrates, moreover, that the practice of identity construction is not restricted to these sorts of coordinated exercises in the macro-management of official state ideologies. Along with this, identity discourses today are highly fragmented, and can be driven not from the top but from below, by social sub-groupings within a given national context who are seeking to establish and defend their position in the novel social and political circumstances. Russia provides an indicative example of this. While the problem of defining a post-Soviet Russian national identity obviously stands as a principal challenge in its own right,[18] identity narratives now also play an explicit part in the mobilization of particular constituencies within Russia, defined by affinities such as gender, youth, sexual orientation, religion or geographical region.[19] The role of identity is also emphasized in analyses of migration, the Russian diaspora, globalization, national politics and even Russian foreign policy.[20]

PLACING NATIONAL IDENTITY

Early studies of post-Soviet culture generally emphasized rupture with the Soviet past: the overturning of political symbols, the creation of new

national myths to replace the transnational myths of 'Soviet' belonging, the triumph of 'savage capitalism' and the cult of individual success, the explosion of consumerism that greeted the end of the shortage economy.[21] Since 2000, on the other hand, more hesitancy about the extent of deep change has emerged. It has become common to talk of 'nostalgia' – the longing for the return of the past, with the implication that the post-Soviet population regrets the disappearance of the communist system and is unprepared to confront the legacy of political repression.[22]

However, 'nostalgia', with its overtones of sentimental passivity, offers an unduly constrictive model for the understanding of the relationship between post-Soviet culture and its Soviet predecessor. 'Nostalgia' can be simply a lifestyle choice, an exercise in 'retro-chic', not much different from the commercialization of the past in other cultures – the phenomenon of the Irish pub, for example.[23] Contributors to the many online forums about the Soviet past are quite capable of waxing lyrical about the vanished taste of 1970s ryebread, yet also expressing cynicism about the political assumptions of state socialism.

In any case, if we are to understand the relationship between Soviet and post-Soviet culture, we need to look not only at topics such as the arguments over Soviet history – important as these are – but to raise the question of how social institutions, attitudes and practices have weathered change. We need to combine the study of memory (the conscious relationship with the past) and the analysis of tradition – the habits, institutions, practices and linguistic formulas that characterized Soviet society. A broad disciplinary range is also advantageous: work by anthropologists and sociologists, in particular, can help us understand the deeper levels of national affiliation, half-articulated and only partly conscious elements in collective belonging. The failure of political nationalists to make real headway in the post-Soviet world has been much emphasized.[24] Yet 'banal nationalism' (to use Michael Billig's term)[25] is endemic in post-Soviet society. The interethnic conflicts that specialists in politics and international relations profess not to find at the level of relations between successor states are rife in villages and cities, and lay assumptions about national characteristics make their way into important areas of political policy too, above all the handling of migrants.[26] The sense that Russian national identity, under Soviet power, was simply a 'blank space' (often adduced as an explicatory device for the nature of Soviet intranational politics)[27] is hard to sustain when one, say, studies closely the material that was used for teaching in the Soviet schoolroom.[28]

Soviet and Post-Soviet Identities is intended as an introduction to these issues, and to the ramifications of political changes in attitudes and social

practices. We share the insights of recent work on the anthropology of post-socialist states, with its emphasis on the fact that categories such as 'ideology' and 'the economy' do not simply 'exist', but are constantly reinterpreted and debated, becoming discursive fields.[29] To polarize 'ideology' and 'daily life' or 'myth' and 'reality' would be misleading, because everyday practices are often shaped by highly self-conscious interpretations of the past, and by relationships with political institutions. In this sense, the collection acts not just as a companion to, but also an extension of, the collection edited by Simon Franklin and Emma Widdis, *National Identity in Russian Culture: An Introduction* (2004). Where that collection concentrated on 'Russian' identity (as manifested in art forms such as music, in ideas about language and everyday life etc.), and was primarily concerned with intellectual culture, this collection addresses the vexed issue of a 'Soviet' identity from a perspective shaped by the recent interest in the history of Soviet everyday life.[30] Innovative also is the detailed consideration given to the *late* Soviet period, which is just starting to be the subject of scholarly enquiry.[31]

The articles do not attempt to provide a potted history of what happened to different republics under Soviet power ('identity in Lithuania', 'nationalism in Uzbekistan' etc.) – which would be to risk repetition and an over-abundance of local detail. Instead, our case studies examine issues, ideologies and institutions that had an impact across the different Soviet republics. The opening articles by Ronald Suny and Nancy Condee address questions that are of central interest in the study of nationalism worldwide, as well as in the Soviet Union and its successor states, focusing on the role played by emotions in national identification, and on the contradictory heritage of nationalism, as both a path to freedom and a path to the subjugation of others. This is followed by articles assessing key institutions that disseminated national ideas to the Soviet population. Birgit Beumers addresses cinema, the art form nominated by Lenin as 'the most important of all the arts' for its propaganda values, the purveyor of ideas about the national and local past to the Soviet population, and more recently of concepts of 'the Soviet self' of a retrospective and nostalgic kind. Dmitry Baranov's article discusses the ethnographical museum, a repository for national memory and a didactic space where visitors were taught about the meaning of the constituent Soviet 'peoples' and about the overarching Soviet nationality. Albert Baiburin turns to the Soviet passport, the fundamental identity document that conferred a sense of collective belonging ('citizen of the USSR'), and the everyday practices and threshold rituals which reinforced the sense of its importance.

From institutions we move to myths, the invention of national histories and traditions that granted legitimacy to individual Soviet 'peoples' (particularly the so-called 'titular nationalities' of the republics, that is, those that enjoyed the status of the main national groups within a given republic, whose language was taught in schools – in the non-Russian republics, alongside Russian – and whose culture was promoted as the main focus of local identity). Vitaly Bezrogov looks in detail at the stories about origins and belonging that were purveyed in Soviet textbooks and in the post-Soviet didactic materials that succeeded them. While there was a good deal of change in these narratives over the Soviet period, the late Soviet representation of national identity has proved tenacious in post-1991 Russia, despite official commitment to multiculturalism. The section also assesses the legends of heroic self-sacrifice and death-defying endeavour that signified 'Soviet' in its highest possible meaning. Andrew Jenks's article about Yuri Gagarin analyses the cult of a hero whose persona was markedly different from the heroes of the early Soviet or war epochs: Gagarin was presented as more approachable and less severe than his predecessors, yet paradoxically this innovative figure came to stand, in the post-Soviet era, for a highly positive understanding of 'Soviet identity'. The section is rounded off by Sergei Abashin's discussion of nation formation in post-Soviet Central Asia, and of the role played in this by heroic visions of the pre-Soviet past, now represented as having been suppressed in the Soviet era itself. At the same time, he emphasizes that national self-assertion has taken different forms in the various republics; in by no means all of them is Russia seen as the 'historical enemy'.

The next section of the book shifts from myths about nation to the spaces of national identity – the sites of memory and sentiment where people constructed a sense of belonging. All Soviet citizens looked to Moscow as the ultimate capital, the focus of awe and the model of an 'exemplary socialist city', as examined in Dina Khapaeva's article. Khapaeva looks at how the celebratory rhetoric of the Stalin years has now been replaced by a Gothic vision of the post-Soviet Russian capital as a threatening and violent place, less the home of the 'bright future' than of the despoiled present. Local regions had their own centres, with their own hierarchy of construction and urban space, and our next chapter is a case study of one of these – Elista, the capital of Kalmykia. Elza-Bair Guchinova shows how, in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, the city symbolized the renaissance of the formerly disgraced Kalmyks, yet was at the same time thoroughly standardized. Thus, space could be at once profoundly meaningful in a local sense and the token of a wider sense of Soviet belonging. In the post-Soviet era Elista has become the centre of a reinvented Kalmykian past that owes much to a

'globalized' version of Chinese culture. The kitsch 'orientalization' described here is both specific to place (the entire point being to make Elista a town like nowhere else) and typical of other post-Soviet cultures, where zoomorphic sculptures and 'traditional' decorative elements are also used to destandardize a common architectural and sculptural legacy.[32] Victoria Arnold's discussion demonstrates the transformation of post-Soviet space from a different point of view. She shows how plans for the reconstruction and construction of mosques in different parts of the Russian Federation have initiated at times agonized debate on the rights to existence of the 'sacred spaces' belonging to different religious cultures. In all three papers the understanding that the construction of urban space represents a version of Soviet and post-Soviet culture to which all observers assent is challenged.[33] Here, city monuments and the city imaginary are shown to be the arena of conflict and uncertainty.

Identity could also be expressed in language. As Michael Gorham's contribution shows, there were 'all-Soviet' views of linguistic propriety that united the denizens of historically diverse areas, and this has resulted in a widespread sense that the violation of propriety (for example, through the use of obscene language on the Internet) signifies cultural breakdown and anomie on a large scale. Olivier Ferrando's essay shows the resonance of language in real-life choices. While Soviet language policy acknowledged the importance of linguistic diversity, the social function of communication was seen in homogeneous terms. The Russian language was not just a lingua franca, but a model of effective language use; parents were determined their children should be functional in Russian, sometimes to the exclusion of so-called 'native tongues'. Yet language was not simply about the espousal of a given tongue. It also had imaginative resonance. As Anna Kushkova's chapter shows, Soviet citizens responded to deprivation – a nationwide phenomenon – not just by complaining about deprivation and finding practical ways to combat this, but by talking about their experiences, converting their difficulties into stories that identified them as 'Soviet citizens', but also as individuals.

However, Soviet solidarity had its stresses, and not every aspect of identity formation proved viable in the post-Soviet era. Decades of religious propaganda left many of the population agnostic, if not actively atheist. But the multinational 'Soviet empire' was also an empire of different creeds. Particularly – but not exclusively – in rural areas, religious beliefs and practices proved tenacious. The least 'Soviet' members of the population before 1991, religious believers took a leading role in cultural change thereafter. At the same time, some aspects of religious belief – for example, the

emphasis on rituals – had a strongly 'post-Soviet' character (in the sense of bearing the obvious traces of the Soviet past). The contributions in the final section of the book address these paradoxes. Catriona Kelly shows how the official conception of a 'Soviet identity' was one inimical to religious belief, but the everyday relations between representatives of the state and representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church were more complicated and flexible than was suggested in ideology. At the same time, the very success of the Church's survival strategies in the Soviet era was to sap the authority of the hierarchy in the post-Soviet period, including, implicitly, among believers themselves.

Alexander Panchenko is concerned with how believers' attachment to particular holy sites became politicized in the context of the planned society. Efforts to stigmatize the cult of sacred springs as representative of backwardness, ignorance and superstition were pervasive, but also unsuccessful (in part because there was, by 1917, already a long history of attempted control of such cults); yet the history of popular belief shows that it is subject to historical transformation too. Galina Miazhevich's article, on the other hand, is concerned not with efforts on the part of Soviet administrators or the Orthodox hierarchy to press for religious hegemony, but with the on-the-ground diversity of religious belief. The case of Belarus – a multi-faith population like many others in 'post/Soviet space' – is used to illustrate how believers' sense of affinity has not observed simplistic confessional lines, and how confession and ethnic identity do not easily overlap.

As several of the contributors to this volume emphasize, the roles of memory in post-Soviet culture are more diverse than the 'nostalgia' paradigm would allow. Painful memory may be censored and repressed (as Dina Khapaeva argues here); recollections of the Soviet past can combine with glorification of the pre-Soviet past (a phenomenon that Sergei Abashin discusses with reference to Central Asia) – a tradition that itself draws on the Soviet heritage of representing history in a straightforwardly moralistic way. And memories of the Soviet past can be reshaped to highlight motifs that are relevant to the present – thus, Anna Kushkova's informants, discussing their strategies for obtaining food in the days of deficit, disparage and downplay the role of support networks and emphasize their own resourcefulness, since portraying community participation has the distasteful resonance of official Soviet collectivism. Always, our contributors underline that the relationship with the past was not one of unquestioning replication, or helpless 'cultural inertia', but a dynamic process in which Soviet and post-Soviet human subjects constantly reassessed their heritage and its significance as a model for the present, and a guide to everyday behaviour.