Chapter 4. Nationalism and Socialism: The Soviet Case
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The question about the functions and possibilities of the national ideology’s existence in a socialist society divides Western literature into two opposing camps. In one of them the fundamental belief about the Soviet Union is the premise that the revolution pitted communism against nationalism and that the Bolshevik victory was a military conquest by Russians over the authentic national and separatist aspirations of non-Russians. The most influential early interpretation of the national issue in this tradition was given by Richard Pipes in *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923*. In accordance with the canons set up in this book, the Soviet Union was interpreted as a colonial amalgamation of Russia and its frontier regions. Following the logic of this approach, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse—in her symptomatically titled *The End of the Soviet Empire: The Triumph of the Nations*—wrote about the Soviet Union as an example of a “classic” empire organized around a common ideology (whether monarchy, Christianity, or communism) imposed on everyone by the illusory pretext of a higher power or historical necessity and colonial progress. “The USSR was the last empire of this kind, which gave it considerable might but also condemned it to turn its back on genuine modernization. Once the empire broke up, the nations—each of them—needed to decide the way to go in attempting the hitherto-failed modernization.” Simon writes about the disintegration of the Soviet state as a completion of the decolonization process. “What started in 1552 with the first imperial annexation of Mongolian Kazan came to an end with the de-colonization process in the early 1990s. And the political ideology of


nationalism has proved to be the only possible heir to the failed project of social engineering during the Soviet era.”

A few basic arguments of this approach are worth mentioning. First, Stalin’s policy of deportation, employed in order to weaken certain ethnic groups. Shortly before, during and immediately after World War II, Stalin conducted a series of deportations on a huge scale which profoundly affected the ethnic map of the Soviet Union. At the same time, large number of the Russian-speaking population moved to the Union republics. Second, it is a high degree of centralization that proved that the essence of tsarist Russia, the subordinate relationship between the periphery and the center, was preserved in the Bolshevik Union. From this perspective, “The USSR became in a certain sense more a prison-house of nations than the old Empire had ever been. […] The Russian-dominated center established an inequitable relationship with ethnic groups it voluntarily helped to construct.” Another essential factor of the negative impact of the Soviet national policy was Russification. This was the so-called demographic russification, which resulted in the dispersion of the Russian speaking population throughout the entire territory of the Soviet Union. Another form is linguistic russification. Anderson and Silver distinguish three periods in the evolution of the Soviet language policy. The first period (prior to 1938) they characterize as an egalitarian one, when the development of national languages was strongly supported. The second period (1938–59) they describe as a time when a differentiated bilingual education was adapted, while Russian became a mandatory subject of study in non-Russian schools. In the third period (from 1959 on) the study of Russian became a voluntary act, giving the parents the right to decide for their children. Indeed as Terry Martin says, this move toward bilingual education signified the beginning of Russification, and Russians became “the first among equal.”


6 Winderl, Nationalism, Nation and State, 66–67.


Pipes’s approach stands in direct contrast to those theories that see the Soviet state as “almost all effectively multinational.” As Winderl writes, “the simplistic argument of suppressed nations which slowly awakened in the Gorbachev period belongs, rather, to the nationalist discourse than to historic truth.” A paradoxical feature of Soviet history and ideology was the fact that counting on class awareness, it eventually strengthened, and in some cases even created “nations.” Ronald Suny describes this phenomenon as a “complex, if less melodramatic, story of nation-building and even nationality formation, which for many peoples of the empire belongs more appropriately to the Soviet period than to the years before the civil war.”

Sergei Maksudov and William Taubman write that the Soviet Union rested on three main pillars—“ideology, dictatorship and nationalism” against the three pillars of tsarist Russia—orthodoxy, autocracy, and narodnost [national spirit], thus, giving place to nationalism as a significant premise of state ideology during the Soviet time.

Among theorists who give a relatively positive account for the national development within the framework of the Soviet state were those who subscribed to the modernization theory, which stated that industrialization, whether in a capitalist or in a communist form, fundamentally transformed traditional societies in similar ways. One of the general features of this process was the tendency of substituting “ethnic” or “tribal” identities to give way to a common civic national identity.

American scholar Ronald Suny characterizes the essence of socialist transformation as an alternative design of modernization. The Soviet Union can be considered both as a part of the general process of modernization and as a variation from the Western modernity. Such an approach, however, is related to a broader understanding of the very category of modernity: various social and political groups in post-Soviet Russia or revolutionary Iran can be considered as offering different combinations of the dominant Western type of the modernity with local or traditional elements. From this perspective, the “great achievement of the Soviet experiment

10 Winderl, *Nationalism, Nation and State*, 64.
was the rough modernization of a backward, agrarian society."¹⁴ Suny sets the Soviet experience against the background of the 1960s Western modernization theory. He acknowledges that the Soviet modernization excluded such aspects as democratic institutions and “a consumer-driven economy.”¹⁵ In another work, Suny makes a curious remark that modernization with its inherent developmentalism became the reason for the Soviet Union’s decline: “When empires, which justified their rule as agents of modernity and modernization, as instruments of development and progress, achieved their stated task too well, supplied their subordinated populations with a language of aspiration and resistance, and indeed created subjects who no longer required empire in the way the colonizers clamed.”¹⁶

George Schöpflin characterizes the transformation of societies in the socialist epoch as a “one-sided modernization revolution.” Although it was a reduced form of modernization it was nevertheless related to those spheres of public life that directly affected nationalism. The first sphere is connected to the changes in the social structure of society. “The communist transformation effectively liquidated the traditional peasantry of the area, of the type bound by the village, illiterate and suspicious of the city and urban life.”¹⁷ As a result, a large section of backward population was subjected to the initial impact of modernization, whether through the market or by the state. The second area is associated with the transformation of communicative facilities in social space: the communist revolution “very effectively extended the power of the state over society and constructed a modern communications network that has allowed the state to reach virtually the whole population, in a way that was not true of the prewar era.”¹⁸ This, in turn, created conditions for a new way of thinking about the “nation” as a whole. At the same time, especially during the first decade of the Soviet rule, a development of national languages as well as a creation of the national cultural environment took place. In the 1920s the Bolsheviks decided that each of the 169 recognized nationalities should have its own language. This decision helped to consolidate the national identities of larger nationalities, and to create new languages based on existing spoken dialects for less developed ethnic groups. As Hélène Carrère D’Encausse writes, an aspect of creating mass popular culture was printing of news-

¹⁴ Suny, The Soviet Experiment, 505.
¹⁵ Suny, The Soviet Experiment, 505.
¹⁷ Schöpflin, “Nationalism and Ethnicity in Europe,” 54.
¹⁸ Schöpflin, “Nationalism and Ethnicity in Europe,” 55.
papers and books in local languages, where, despite the material problems, great efforts were made in the 1920s.\textsuperscript{19}

From this perspective, non-Western socialist modernization had a considerable impact on nationalism comparable with that the “classic” capitalist modernization had had in creating conditions for nation-building projects. In this context it is quite explicable that the classic of the modernist theory of the nation E. Hobsbawm gives a positive assessment of the Soviet state’s creative functions in relation to a number of nations. In his interpretation many “nations” were designed by the Soviet state. “The idea of Soviet Republics based on Kazakh, Kirghiz […] ‘nations’ was a theoretical construct of Soviet intellectuals rather than a primordial aspiration of any of those […] people.”\textsuperscript{20} In Hobsbawm’s view, the Soviet state created “national contracts” by means of the educational system, media, civil rituals, and so on. The state invented Union Republics and created nations in full accordance with the practice established in other territories.

A number of texts published in \textit{A State of Nations}, edited by Ronald Suny and Terry Martin are devoted to various aspects of the Soviet nationalist policy, and they are united by an attempt to see a positive experience in solution of national problems behind the curtain of a totalitarian political system, as well as to describe the Soviet design of nation-building. Joshua Sanborn—in his chapter on “Family, Fraternity and Nation-Building in Russia, 1905–1925”—suggests that the creation of a Soviet political community was analogous to other nation-making projects, even if it renounced the crucial term of “nation” itself.\textsuperscript{21} In the Soviet state leaders sought a civil national, rather than an imperial or ethno-colonial base for the political community. David D. Laitin, Roger Petersen, and John W. Slocum’s chapters show that state building in the peripheries of the Soviet Union shared many characteristics with state building in France, Britain, and Spain. The major difference was the outcome—a low level of assimilation in the Russian peripheries. These authors emphasize “the general phenomenon of central rulers seeking to pressure peripheral peoples into learning the language of the center.”\textsuperscript{22} They call this the logic of state rationalization.

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{20} Hobsbawm, \textit{Nations and Nationalism since 1780}, 166.
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Smith also gives a positive account of the Soviet style in promoting national (ethnic) identity. As he writes, “Lenin and Stalin provided not only a framework for categorizing the many ethnic groupings within the Soviet territories, but also the sociological basis for their modern redefinition and regeneration. The modern mythmakers were no longer the priests and scribes of the old demotic ethnie; their place was taken by the purveyors of language—the poets and philologists, lexicographers and grammarians, historians and novelists, academics and journalists and lawyers, whose raison d’etre derived from a capacity for critical discourse and for linguistic meanings.”

Indeed, one of the critical components of the Bolshevist national policy was language policy. It consolidated “nations,” equipping them with a powerful instrument of articulation for the national originality. Here one can observe a parallel with nation-building in the nineteenth century: “The central state promoted alphabets for people who had no writing, opened schools for those who had had none under Tsarism, and set up hundreds of national soviets for people living outside their national regions. In ways strikingly similar to the work of patriotic intellectuals on behalf of some nationalities in the nineteenth century, Soviet activists set out to create educational systems and literary languages for their peoples by selecting the dialect to be promoted and by systemizing, refining, and ‘purifying’ the lexicon.”

In order to capture the complicated matter of national policy in the Soviet state Terry Martin proposes the term “affirmative action Empire.” In his view, the Soviet Union was “the first of the old European multiethnic states to confront the rising tide of nationalism and respond by systematically promoting the national consciousness of its ethnic minorities and establishing for them many of the characteristic institutional forms of the nation-state.” When analyzing the Soviet state’s ideology and real

25 Author borrows the contemporary U.S. term for policies that give preference to members of ethnic groups that have suffered from past discrimination. Such policies are known internationally and have different names: compensatory discrimination, preferential policies, positive action, and affirmative discrimination. They often accompany decolonization.
actions directed at the solution of the national issue, he writes that nationalism was understood by main ideologists as a masking ideology that leads legitimate class interests to be expressed in the form of the above class national movement. The treatment of the national question in Bolshevism was governed by understanding that “national identity is not an essential and permanent quality, but rather an unavoidable by-product of the modern capitalist and early socialist world, which must be passed through, before a mature internationalist socialist world can come into being.”

Martin provides examples of legal support of nationality: Resolutions passed at the Twelfth Party Congress in April 1923 affirmed that the Soviet state would maximally support those forms of nationhood that did not conflict with a unitary central state, namely national territories, national languages, national elites, and national cultures. “Soviet power, was said in resolution of Party Congress in April 1923 which up to the present time has remained Russian power would be made not only Russian but international, and become native [rodnaia] for the peasantry of the formerly oppressed nationalities.”

In practice, it did this not only through the formation of national territories but also through the aggressive promotion of symbolic markers of national identity: national folklore, museums, dress, food, costumes, opera, poets, progressive historical events, and classic literary works. In this case nationalism was interpreted by Bolsheviks, on the one hand, as a temporary concession to an alternative ideology. As Hélène Carrère d’Encausse writes, “National cultures were accepted as a transitional phenomenon, a step toward a uniform, common culture that would express the values of the working class and the Party.”

On the other hand, behind these concessions to nationalism there was pragmatic instrumentalism that counted on a more efficient mobilization of masses. Acknowledgement of the nations’ right to self-determination helped to win the support of non-Russian groups in the Civil War, especially because the principal White leaders supported the restoration of the Russian Empire. Besides, granting nationhood to ethnic groups of the tsarist empire was a radical measure meant to completely “disarm” nationalism. Lenin believed that the right to self-determination of nations would prevent nationalism

and national consciousness just as “the right to divorce is not an invitation for all women to leave their husbands.”

Different researchers assess the result of this internally contradictory policy in different ways. Some authors believe that a true task of the Soviet policy was to create “the Soviet nation.” From this perspective, the disintegration of the Soviet Union is seen as a failure of the project of designing a homo sovieticus. To paraphrase Mikhail Heller: in the capacity of tools for realization of this project a whole arsenal of state ideology was used—fear, labor, corruption, education, culture, and language. At the same time, some authors suppose that the attempt to create Soviet identity did not mean that the Soviet Union was intended to become a true “nation-state.” Due to the excessive centralization, the Soviet Union could not be called a federation, but it was certainly not a nation-state either.

In contradiction to the British, Yugoslav, Indian, or U.S. identity, “the Soviet” one has never been viewed as a national identity. The Soviet national policy has never aspired to create “a Soviet nation.” “The Soviet equivalent of the core nationality of a modern nation-state—of German, French or Japanese—was not the “sovetskii narod,” but the Friendship of the Peoples.” Ian Bremmer calls this “matryoshka-nationalism” which implies the existence of nations inside a larger nation as a specific phenomenon of soviet nationalism. It gave birth to all national movements. As Dawisha and Parrot put it, the federal system chosen by the Bolsheviks “gave the principal ethnic groups an institutional focus for their national identity and reduced their inclination to regard all of the USSR, in equal measure, as their homeland.”

Rogers Brubaker offered an institutionalist analysis of the Soviet state in which he also emphasized the role of the Bolsheviks in creating national institutions that allowed for rapid nationalist mobilization. In his opinion, the myth about the USSR’s comprehensive suppression or elimination of the nations on its territory did not reflect the actual state. On the contrary, “nationhood and nationalism flourish today largely because of the regime’s

33 Martin, *An Affirmative Action Empire*, 76.
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policies. Although antinationalist, those policies were anything but antinational. Far from ruthlessly suppressing nationhood, the Soviet regime pervasively institutionalized it. The regime repressed nationalism, of course, but at the same time [...] it went further than any other state before or since in institutionalizing territorial nationhood and ethnic nationality as fundamental categories. In doing so it inadvertently created a political field supremely conducive to nationalism. On the one hand, the Soviet state was divided into over fifty national territories, and each was defined as a “motherland” of a separate ethnonational group. On the other hand, the regime divided the citizens into exhaustive and mutually exclusive nationalities. Thus codified, ethnic nationalities served not only as statistic categories, but also as a necessarily ordered status of the individual. The national-territorial system of the Soviet Union “extended downward into smaller and smaller national territories (national districts, village soviets, collective farms) until the system merged seamlessly with the personal nationality of each Soviet citizen. The result was a grandiose pyramid of national soviets consisting of thousands of national territories of varying sizes.”

There were two different modes by which nationality and nationhood were institutionalized in the Soviet Union—territorial and political versus ethnocultural and personal. In this manner nationality was institutionalized into social and cultural forms. The Soviet regime suppressed political nationalism, but it established and consolidated “nationhood” and nationality as fundamental cognitive and social forms. The institutional crystallization of nationhood and nationality were by no means empty forms or legal fictions, although this was how they were viewed by most Sovietologists. “The Soviet institutions of territorial nationhood and personal nationality comprised a pervasive system of social classification, an organizing ‘principle of vision and division’ of the social world to use Bourdieu’s term, a standardized scheme of social accounting, an interpretative grid for public discussion, a set of boundary-markers, a legitimate form for public and private identities, and when political space expanded under Gorbachev, a ready-made template for claims to sovereignty.”

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38 Brubaker, Nationalism Reframed, 17.
39 Martin, An Affirmative Action Empire, 73.
40 Brubaker, Nationalism Reframed, 18.
41 Brubaker, Nationalism Reframed, 24.
This constructive approach to nation-building within the Soviet state is critical for understanding the developments in post-Soviet Belarus. Acknowledgement of the fact that the Soviet policy has led to shaping a definite format of national identity (and not to its erosion or elimination) makes it possible to assume that it laid the foundation of the official national idea. This enables us to differently estimate the alternative Belarusianess position as a resurgence of the pre-Soviet national tradition and formation of the anti-Soviet version of the national idea. It also allows us to present the current situation in a different light and to speak about contemporary Belarus not in terms of a lack of identity or its weakness, to which the national idea articulated by the oppositional discourse is contrasted, and in relation to which the majority of Belarusians manifest an inexplicable and paradoxical lack of receptivity. It seems more adequate to speak about a coexistence of two national ideas, and each of them appeals to its own concept of Belarusianess. The task of this book is to reveal how in cases of the official and the alternative Belarusianess, different strategies of articulation and manifestation of the national idea work.

The next chapter will trace the historical roots of these concepts. The initial stage of Belarusianess formation was connected with the national movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At this stage of the so-called cultural nationalism, the leading role in the nationalization of Belarusians’ consciousness was played by representatives of intelligentsia. It was followed by the transformation of Belarusianess in the process of socialist modernization, in which state institutions and practices were the leading actors. This resulted in the shaping of a kind of matrix of Belarusianess, which after the attainment of independence in 1991, faced the problem of deidentification with Sovietness. Representatives of the new Belarusian nationalist movement and Belarusian authorities have been solving this problem in different ways.