

Minorities in the Soviet Union

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Soviet minorities were set in a system readily distinguishable from the polyglot Indian and the homogenised European nation-state types. The first and obvious feature was the overwhelming domination of the Russians, through the autocratic state and Orthodox Church during the empire, as the Russian nation before, during, and after the Soviet Union, and through the Communist Party, in ideology, organisation, and culture during the Soviet epoch.

The second was the dominant Russian nation's compact with fourteen non-Russian nations, constituted as Soviet Socialist Republics (SSRs), commonly called Union Republics, jointly to rule their combined territories as a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). The Russian Republic (RSFSR) alone was in itself a federation and known as the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR) or Russian Federation for short. These fourteen non-Russian nations were minorities in the Soviet Union in relation to the Russian but majorities within their respective Union Republics. The Kazakhs and Kirghiz were exceptions even to this general rule as they were minorities, albeit pluralities, within the Kazakh and Kirghiz SSRs respectively, also known as Kazakhstan and Kirghiziia. All of them enjoyed the attributes of national statehood short of international independence; within those limits they developed their social institutions and bureaucracies to the point that the Union resolved itself neatly and asto-nishingly peacefully into fifteen (including Russia) independent states in 1991.

The third was a subjacent series of Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics (ASSRs) and Autonomous Regions or *Oblasts* (AOs), often called 'autonomies', set within the Union Republics. These were doubly minorities, first with respect to the Russians in the Union and further in relation to the dominant titular nationality of the Union Republic. Such lesser minority nations were typically Abkhasia in Georgia and Karakalpakia in Uzbekistan. As a subspecies of these were the autonomies within the Russian

Federation. They had to contend with only a Russian majority; and the most well-known of these are the Tatars and Bashkirs of the Volga country or the Caucasian nationalities in the North Caucasus.

These three features set them off from the Indian Union and the European nation-states. India does not know a dominant nationality and nation akin to the Russian in the Soviet Union. The Hindi-speaking population is not remotely comparable to Russia. It is not a nation, it is not the seat of a religion more authoritative than any in the rest of the country, it did not conquer India, and at best it is still only aspiring to see Hindi as the dominant language of the country. Yet the second feature, that of a series of national units constituting the Soviet Union, is obviously comparable to the linguistic states of the Indian Union. The equally obvious difference would be that while none of the Indian linguistic states suffer from any sense of minority status in the Union (given the absence of a single dominant nationality or linguistic state), the Soviet Republics laboured under a palpable minority complex against the Russians. It is perhaps in the third feature that the Soviet and Indian systems share so much in common. A number of regions in India with aspiration to statehood, e.g. Jharkhand, Uttarakhand, Vidarbha, others like the Gorkha Hill Council with semi-statehood, and yet others like the North Eastern States which, while in status equal to the other linguistic states, have typically minority grievances like swamping by powerful neighbours, economic discrimination etc., all these are comparable to the autonomies of the Soviet Union. The Soviet one was a more formalised structure of minorities hierarchically organised; in India they have as yet only partial recognition and are more fluid, still in the process of agitation for recognition.

This particular combination and hierarchy distinguished the Soviet minority problem altogether from those of the European and other nation-states. There the nation has been so homogenized that there is no combination of dominant and developed internal nations. (Yugoslavia is a major exception to all observations about European nations here). One dominant nation has in effect erased all the putative ones, even in Britain or Germany, despite varying degrees of federalism. Perhaps only Spain, with such a powerful internal nation as Catalonia, offers a worthwhile comparison. Consequently, minorities in such nation-states, are, or are conceived as, marginalized groups

defined by colour, race, religion, language, or immigrant status, whereas in the Soviet system, even the autonomies were far from being marginalized conceptually or constitutionally.

The fourth type of minority was the religious. All religions were minorities in the Soviet Union, but in a more complex fashion than this bald statement might suggest. All Christians were persecuted minorities; but Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and especially Greek Catholics suffered as religious minorities with a dominant (if persecuted) Russian Orthodox presence. Independently of these, Buddhists and Muslims, and other local religions, each painfully underwent the travails of a minority and sectarian existence. These religious minorities within a majority Soviet secularism were persecuted as required by the logic of secular discourse; yet this was unique. Indian secularism has found its apparent solution in the attempted equality of status of religions, not in their erasure, which remains only an extreme, dogmatic, and not realistic theoretical position in the secular discourse. On the other hand, European secular states have virtually universally adopted a confession of the dominant Christian religion while tolerating the minority religions and even confessions; and the secularized mode of the dominant religion has entered the definition of the national culture such that all non-Christian religions exist as obvious minorities. India alone suffers the extraordinary cleavage of major political movements periodically engaged in bloody conflict legitimized through different religious affiliation: despite the vast numerical strength of Islam in the Soviet Union, there is no history of communal tension comparable to the Indian situation.

Fifth, certain nationalities had grouped themselves as economically exploited minorities: the Baltic through Slavic immigration, or Central Asia as relatively underdeveloped and colonized in a straight continuation of a pre-revolutionary colonial relation with Russia. The economic minorities arising out of unbalanced growth again is a feature reminiscent of Indian developmental problems which attract charges of internal colonialism; these imbalances are generally not so acute in Europe although such accusations are periodically made with respect to regions like Scotland or southern Italy.

Finally, the attempted integration of the Soviet Union through migration, settlement, and inter-national (or inter-ethnic) marriages led to the creation of a series of nonterritorial minorities in different regions, the most important being the

Russian. Russians therefore have the unique experience of being an undisputed dominant majority in the Soviet Union coupled with the objective status and subjective feeling of a minority in a number of Republics in which they have settled, from Estonia to Tajikistan. The Soviet experience of minorities embraces most types the world has known except for caste and race; and it has contributed a few others in addition. But the circumstance of the dominant nation becoming a minority everywhere else, and combining in ambiguous form the advantages of majority and the grievances of minority, are uniquely Soviet and Russian.

The placing and integration of minorities in the Soviet Union may be understood best by examining first the determining symbiotic relation between the Russian and the fourteen dominant minority nations. All the major fourteen nations, and the lesser ones known as autonomous Republics and *oblasts* contained within them, and the still lesser groups without state institutions, had all elaborated their national identities around their language, territory, folklore, and history in the course of the 19th century along with the Russian. As the pre-revolutionary empire developed in an increasingly Russian nationalist direction, especially from the 1880s, all their national identities suffered various degrees of persecution. But the Bolsheviks, more alert than all the other parties, exploited rather than suppressed the national identity, first to overthrow the imperial and Provisional Governments, and then to raise the Soviet edifice. Acutely conscious of the potency and significance of national identity to modernity, the Soviet strategy of state-building assumed the shaping of national identity as far more effective than its repression. Russia was fully included in this exercise. As such the Soviet state and the Communist Party posited and promoted a series of national states, the fourteen Union Republics, each defined by a language, a history, a compact territory, and a common culture. These were minority nationalisms specifically identified and assigned a territory for state-building. Out of the great welter on offer, only these fourteen were so privileged. Each of these Republics and their titular nationalities then homogenized the population through universal primary schooling, provided further opportunities through secondary and post-secondary educational institutions, established the full range of cultural bodies like museums, theatres, writers' unions etc., published numerous newspapers, periodicals, and appropriate quantities of academic literature, ensured radio and television

stations for the Republic and most of all, provided for the titular nationality to assume political and cultural leadership within the Republic, a single culture representing the whole of the Republic and rubbing out or prevailing over all local variations and particularisms. Since all these were carried out under the aegis of the Communist Party from the thirties, a Soviet uniformity was imparted to the lot. The only variation was in language and the picturesque details of the culture which were now underpinned and overlaid by a uniform Soviet culture of communism. This was the Soviet squaring of the circle that all modern states must carry out. It engendered a Union-wide common culture and standardized Soviet man while it stimulated the fourteen diverse cultures to represent themselves as minorities. The two processes were simultaneous, mutually reinforcing, in friction with each other at various points, yet not contradictory.

The nature of this compact by which minority nations were stimulated and privileged may be studied through case histories, starting with the Ukraine, the most famous and important non-Russian minority. The Ukraine did not exist as a political and administrative entity until after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. The Hetmanate, a mere rump of the Ukraine, had been dissolved in 1764 by Catherine II into a series of provinces. In 1918 the Bolsheviks accepted the boundaries and provinces prescribed by the anti-Bolshevik nationalist Ukrainian Rada to create the new Soviet Republic. In 1939, after the Soviet-German Pact, the Czech, Hungarian and Polish districts of Galicia and Carpatho-Ukraine were incorporated into the Ukrainian Republic. For the first time in history, as a result of the Russian revolution and the much-reviled Soviet deal of 1939 with the Nazis, all ethnic Ukrainian lands were united under one political authority dominated overwhelmingly by Ukrainians. In 1954, as a pure bonus that became the poisoned chalice, Khrushchev bestowed the very non-Ukrainian and almost wholly Russian Crimea on this Republic. As early as the 1920s Ukrainian had become the state language; it held its own during the Stalinist offensive of the thirties; in the 1970s there was over 90% active use of the Ukrainian language at all levels in the state. By the 1960s the numerous localisms had merged into a single Ukrainian national identity. Sociological investigations showed how the Khokhly near Kharkov, and others like the Boykos and Hutsuls, all began to call themselves Ukrainian. At the same time,

Ukrainians steadily advanced and gained ever more control of the Communist Party of Ukraine, and the working class ukrainized at the expense of the Russian.¹

This is a good example of the Soviet system creating a major minority consciousness and striking a partnership between the majority Russians and a minority. What was a dispersed disorganized national feeling was now institutionalized and statized in the Ukraine to the obvious benefit and partial satisfaction of national sentiment. But a minority by definition can be no more satisfied than a majority; each is paranoid about the excessive claims of the other. It is well worth noting the Ukrainian sources of dissatisfaction.

In terms of internal colonialism and economic exploitation, it is said that 20 to 30% of budgetary receipts in 1923-27 went to Russia, and in 1959-70, as much as 34% went out of the Ukraine. During the twenties, no manufacturing capacity was developed, only raw materials and extractive industries were exploited. Typically enough, lumber was exported to Russia to return as timber, and sugar beet was raised in the Ukraine, but the distilleries and refineries remained in Russia. During the thirties, industrial growth was focused on the Dnepro-Donbass region as a stop gap during the development of Russian metallurgy. Consequently, the share of Donbass investment declined during the Second Plan. Most of all, 84% industrial capital was cornered by All-Union enterprises, which implied that the Ukraine was subsidising non-Ukrainian industrial development. In the already uneven Soviet distribution of industrial and consumer goods sectors, the Ukraine suffered from a lower than Union average in its proportion of consumer goods, 38% in 1937 against the USSR average of 42%. Throughout the thirties, the colonial structure of exporting raw material with stagnating manufacturing capacity persisted. Nor was this due to strategic security since other vulnerable areas of European Soviet Union, like Leningrad, saw an eleven-fold industrial growth in 1928-40. While these complaints are less heard of for the post-war years, it was still said that the Ukraine was subject to more food shortages than Russia.

As for the population structure, while Ukrainians gained a clear majority over Russians in the working class by 1970, it seems that Russians gained by moving into the white collar. A comparison of the degree of modernization of the Ukrainian and Russian social structures is always to Ukrainian disadvan-

tage. Using the percentage of working class within a national population as an index of modernity, the Russians were not merely consistently ahead of the Ukrainians from 1928 to 1970, but the gap was widening. It was the same with the white collar segment of the population: Russians were ahead and the gap was increasing.

If it was agriculture, Ukrainian collective farms had to bear a disproportionate share of the investment in schools, hospitals, and housing. In 1970, only 28% of such investment in Ukrainian collective farms was furnished by the state, whereas in Russia it was 49%. Migration was always to Russian advantage since Russians could make better use of higher educational facilities, compete better for admission to universities and to the more skilled jobs, all thanks to the Russian language and discrimination by All-Union bodies. And, as usual, only one-fourth of the Russian urban population in the Ukraine had bothered to master Ukrainian.²

These were strong claims on both sides of the argument. On the one hand the Ukraine came into existence and was taken over by Ukrainians thanks to Soviet action; on the other hand they had to endure various forms of discrimination as a minority. The implied nationalist argument was that sovereignty would eliminate all problems. But this somewhat naïve assumption took for granted all the advantages accruing from membership of the Soviet Union without considering what might happen without such membership. To state the obvious, it is doubtful whether the Ukrainian territory itself could have been rounded off without the Soviet Union. Such arguments also are exclusively focused on the superordinate and majority Russian. It ignores the very real Ukrainian participation in the rulership of the Soviet Union along with the Russians. Thus migrations into the Baltic countries and into Central Asia to the detriment of local populations was a joint Slavic undertaking with the Ukrainians playing an especially important role in various parts of Central Asia. To the extent that Ukraine suffered any disadvantage at the hands of Russians, it was only in an intermediate position in a hierarchy of such negative features. Nearly every Republic has a similar list of grievances; and the Russian Republic itself complains of the equalizing drain of Russian wealth to all the backward regions of the Union, especially Central Asia. Russian nationalists for example present statistics to show that other Republics consumed more per capita than they produced, while

Russia alone produced more than it consumed.³

We thus encounter the perennial combination of rights objectively secured to a minority but subjectively experienced as rights denied to them. The reason would appear to lie not in the fact or the level of discrimination, but in at least two major factors independent of them.

The first is the historical one of a minority originally constituted through conquest. In the nationalist argument, this is a permanent stigma which no development or prosperity can erase, as the case of the Baltic Republics amply demonstrates. As it happens, all the non-Russian nationalities, with the possible exception of the Jews, entered the Russian empire through conquest. The Leninist policy on nationalities, while restructuring the Union altogether, could not undo these historical origins.

The second is the concept of a minority, arrived at statistically and validated through the arithmetic of democratic electoral procedures. Such procedures privilege majorities in the most empirical fashion; and the revolutionary principle of the equality of citizens can cut both ways. Oppressed minorities could be both emancipated from pre-modern constraints and coerced into conformity in a culturally homogenized modern nation-state. Privileges are anti-modern in principle and equality is modern but oppressive; so privilege must be reintroduced through affirmative action and reservations which necessarily then appear illegitimate to a majority. It is thus a source of permanent tension which can only be managed, not eradicated, in modern societies. As the Soviet Ukrainian example suggests, the conjunction of a memory of conquest in nationalist logic with being a statistical minority in modern citizen states generates permanent ambiguity and tension. But, as Soviet strategy well illustrates, a minority that has been bequeathed by history and is discernible in statistics, must therefore be deliberately constituted by the modern state. The two processes, of constitution and of its subjectivity, are simultaneous, internally related, and engender each other.

After the fourteen primary minorities, the Soviet system was remarkable for institutionalizing the secondary minority, the Autonomous Republic within the Union Republic. This represented now a triple compact, first between the Russians and the designated fourteen primary minorities (Union Republics), second between the Russians and the twenty secondary minorities (Autonomous Republics), and third, between the primary

and secondary minorities themselves. There were four such autonomous Republics within Union Republics. These were Abkhazia and Adzharia in Georgia, Karakalpakia in Uzbekistan, and Nakhichevan in Azerbaijan; and there are another sixteen within the Russian Federation. In this three sided agreement, their identity was recognized, but as of second degree, subject to the titular nationality of the Union Republic, yet protected by the Russians. Thus this level of minority found a protector in Russians or in Moscow against a local majority. The case history of Abkhazia might illustrate the point.

Abkhazia is an autonomous Republic within the Georgian Union Republic. Being of mixed Christian and Muslim composition, but with more of the latter, they had been substantially expelled to the Ottoman Empire in 1866 after the Russian conquest and in 1877-78 after the Russo-Turkish war. Their population dropped from 1,28,000 to 20,000 by the end of the century. They have since suffered from Georgian immigration and linguistic and cultural absorption. Between 1926 and 1979, their population within their own Republic dropped from 30.1% to 17.1% while the Georgian presence went up from 36.3% to 43.9%. Their language belongs to the North West Caucasian group whereas Georgian belongs to the South Caucasian kart-v-el-uri language family. In the post-revolutionary settlement they were summarily included in the Georgian Republic by both the Menshevik and Bolshevik governments. The language was provided with first the Latin script, then the Georgian from 1938 to 1954, and thereafter the cyrillic. The most extreme phase of Georgianization was the Stalinist quarter century, with the Mingrelian Beria and the Ossetian Stalin acting as good Georgians. There were serious fears of deportation to Central Asia, but the Abkhazians came through unscathed. During the Brezhnev years, they demanded secession from Georgia and merger with the Russian Federation; the movement attained its peak in 1977-78 during the introduction of the Brezhnev constitution; but it was suppressed by both Georgians and Moscow along with typical concessions like more television and radio time for Abkhazian broadcasting, a pedagogical institute raised to the level of an university at Sukhumi, and more places for Abkhazian students at Tbilisi. In the 1991 referendum on the Union Treaty, Georgia boycotted but 52.3% of Abkhazia participated and 98.6% voted for a Union of Sovereign Republics to escape Georgian tutelage. Between 1992 and 1994, they went to war with Georgia with

covert Russian support; and the war has been concluded with Russian mediation but no secession.⁴

This is in many senses a typical Soviet minority story. A minority was formally recognized and invested with the attributes necessary to a modern political existence, namely a script and territory, and its political institutions with legislative rights as befits an Autonomous Republic. It possessed none of these in pre-revolutionary times; even a cyrillic script devised in 1862 did not gain currency. Abkhasians are now there to stay; not to merge into Georgia or emigrate, which seemed a likely prospect in the 19th century. But numerous processes of georgianization continue nonetheless. This is in part the result of the primary contract between Russians and Georgians by which the latter gain control of Georgia in the manner that Ukrainians acquired the Ukraine or Uzbeks Uzbekistan. But Abkhasians have been not only recognized but also protected from Georgia by Moscow. For this Moscow has used in part the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (all part of the Russian Federation) to whom the Abkhasians claim they belong, and who are generally hostile to Georgia. Yet, to an Abkhasian, the subjective assessment of the past century would not be happy. It appears as oppression by Georgians and treachery by Russians in the imperial and Soviet system. But it illustrates the point already made: Abkhasians have developed and secured their identity as a minority, fixed it in a specific hierarchy constitutionally, and thereby have acquired the ability to have their minority status recognized internationally, beyond Soviet politics. Their subjective misery is derived from or constitutive of their objective security as a minority.

There are sixteen other Autonomous Republics within the Russian Federation. Their situation is comparable to the Abkhasian as that of secondary minority status, but they do not have to contend with a non-Russian primary minority. Here they face the Russians directly. Their minority experience however follows the expected trajectory; they were recognized and institutionalized in territories through primary schooling in their own language, state institutions, and career opportunities. They were thus able to fix their presence instead of facing total assimilation by Russians, as was proposed before 1917, or otherwise degenerating into a recipient of official charity and hospitality. Such state institutions ensure a minimum of security, and appointments policies followed what we would recognize as reservations.

While minority peculiarities were recognized and nurtured, they were nonetheless homogenized into a Soviet culture. This is not the same as russification. It consisted of creating a uniform or commensurable class and social structure throughout the Union. The structure was understood by Soviet sociologies to consist of intelligentsia, white and blue collar workers, and collective farm workers. Russia led in this process, with white and blue collar already predominating by the thirties. By 1970 this structure prevailed in all the Union Republics save Turkmenia and Moldavia, and by 1979 it had spread everywhere.⁵ The Communist Party and ideology penetrated such an uniform structure more effectively than one that was diverse. In each case the premodern culture was reoriented to this new class structure; and while many facets of culture disappeared or were irrevocably altered, many were recreated, revived, recalled from oblivion, and entirely new forms devised. These new cultural processes, underpinned by Soviet social uniformities, were not reducible to legacies of the past; instead they were the products of the professionalization of cultural activity, which itself belong to the new and uniform Soviet social system.⁶ This was how cultural variety and social uniformity coexisted, a pattern common enough to modern industrial societies, eg the Welsh or Scots in British culture. This social uniformity recognized, validated, and creatively nurtured varied cultural expression, especially in linguistic usage, research into history and memory, and the cultivation of local custom. State institutions provided for this symbiosis and legitimacy rather than marginalization as with aboriginals in America.

A special feature of this pattern of recognizing minorities should now be noted. With remarkable frequency, minorities were equipped with their own autonomous regions and even Union Republics despite being a minority in the territory so designated.⁷ As the table demonstrates, these are all examples of recognizing the historical claims of a minority to a territory; and the recognition rose to the level of the two Union Republics, Kazakhstan and Kirghizia. This flew in the face of the democratic dogma of legitimation through majority; but it accorded well with historical logic. The Soviet system refused to grant any nationality extra-territorial rights as famously suggested by the Austro-Marxists; but they bestowed on an astonishingly large number of nationalities their own territorial rights despite their minority position in such places.

Nationality	Name of Territory	Percentage in Territory	Census Year
Tatar	Tatar ASSR	47.6%	1979
Ossetian	North Ossetian AO	47.8%	1959
Balkara	Kabardino-Balkar ASSR	9.0%	1979
Karachai	Karachaevo-Cherkes AO	29.7%	1979
Cherkes	Karachaevo-Cherkes AO	9.4%	1979
Adygei	Adygei AO	21.4%	1979
Abkhasian	Abkhasian ASSR	17.1%	1979
Kazakh	Kazakh SSR	36%	1979
Kirghiz	Kirghiz SSR	47.9%	1979
Karakalpak	Karakalpak ASSR	31.1%	1979
Buryat	Buryat ASSR	20.2%	1959
Kalmyk	Kalmyk ASSR	35.1%	1959
Karelian	Karelian ASSR	13.1%	1959
Komi	Komi ASSR	30.1%	1959
Mari	Mari ASSR	43.1%	1959
Mordvin	Mordvinian ASSR	35.7%	1959
Udmurt	Udmurt ASSR	35.6%	1959
Yakut	Yakurt ASSR	46.4%	1959

The obvious question is whether all this elaborate hierarchy was purely cosmetic in terms of rights. There is a strong tradition of cold war scholarship that would argue that all rights in nationality areas, from the Union Republic downward, were fictional. This is to commit the common error of identifying Communist uniformity with Russian imposition because of the preponderance of the Russian nationality. It is true that many rights listed in their constitutions could not be exercised. The most notorious of these were the Union Republics' rights of secession, to diplomatic and consular relations etc. But the real powers that Union Republics conferred on the titular nationality were, as already shown, the consolidation of a national territory, the development of the language to post-secondary levels, the evolution of full state and cultural institutions, and the majority staffing of these bodies by natives. The Autonomous Republics for their part enacted their own constitutions and Supreme Soviets legislated there. The autonomous *oblast* did not enjoy the powers of legislation, but they could apply to the Union Republic for special legislation through a resolution of the Soviet of Workers' Deputies. But in each of these cases, state institutions nurtured the

language of the nationality in question through schooling, publication, and broadcasting, and provided members of the nationality an area of local decision-making which would be especially important in cultural activities.

Soviet policy was unique in the world for recognizing and territorially encasing a host of national minorities which, by democratic logic, had no hope of such protection; but Soviet practices joined most of the world in providing no such relief to such minorities scattered outside their national territories. According to the census of 1989, there were 55 million or about 20% of the Soviet population living outside their national territories and without any special rights as minorities. Among them were 25 million Russians outside the Russian Federation and 7 million without a territory at all. Thus, in the Russian Federation today, 42 ethnic groups do not have their mother tongue available as a medium of instruction at school, and 14 of them cannot study this mother tongue at all at school. Among the latter are such major nationalities as the Abkhazian, Belo-Russian, Karakalpak, Crimean Tatar, Lithuanian, Moldavian, Tajik, Uzbek, Uighur, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Polish, and Yukagir.⁸ Such extra-territorial neglect is the direct result of territorial logic. This has been a simmering problem throughout the Soviet Union; held in check by the power of the Communist Party, it has become a major issue without the party.

The most important are the 25 million Russians today outside the Russian Federation. This was particularly so with Russians in Central Asia. Sociological surveys suggest strong Russian feelings of discrimination against them by the titular nationalities which insist on quotas according to ethnic proportionality in university admissions and the civil service. While the process of the titular nationality gaining at the expense of the Russian might be understandable in countries where they have a majority, it is surely unusual in a Republic like Kazakhstan where the Russians and Kazakhs are evenly divided. Yet it was generally accepted in Moscow that Kazakhs have a superior right in this country, perhaps because the reality of the balance of power, as against visibility, clearly tilts in favour of the Russians.⁹ This half of the problem was only glimpsed during the Soviet regime because nationalities outside their own territories were subject to the uniform predominance of the Russian, and Russians outside Russia enjoyed the security of Russianness itself. Both conditions collapsed with the Soviet Union, and an altogether new series of

problems emerged throughout the Soviet territory without the beginnings of a strategy to handle them being evident as yet.

The other process in which Russia is no exception in the modern world is the tendency for the number of ethnic groups and minorities of that type to decrease even as national identity has become a necessary attribute of citizenship. This phenomenon has been observed the world over: nationalism has killed more nationalities than it has created; but what it has created have become permanent. In terms of nationality groups, of the more than 100 peoples of the USSR, only 60 have been recognised and been banded together in 53 national territories. The census itself is the first step to recognition, and despite the Soviet record of recognition, the tendency has been for many ethnic entities and languages to disappear. The 1926 census listed more than 200 ethnic groups; in 1979 they came down to a mere 104.¹⁰ The 1993 Bill on the Lesser Peoples of the Russian Federation excised 63 from the list of 1989. These numerous changes, mismatches, and discrepancies are the source of much political and cultural tension.

The Soviet system was perhaps the most elaborate one for dealing with national minorities, and it did not deal with any other type of minority. It made the most explicit constitutional arrangements for recognizing minorities whose presence, however statistically deficient, was firmly established historically and politically. This amounted to a choice from among the existing nationalities; and the further choice lay in the hierarchy of rights into which they were arranged, that is, Union Republics and the three levels of autonomies. The final choice lay in the decision to cast the rest into oblivion. Finally, no minorities were recognized outside their national territory. This pattern corresponded to the worldwide phenomenon of the age of nationalism permanently establishing a small number of nations and abolishing the rest. But the Soviet one was exceptional for both the hierarchical arrangement of recognition and for the titular status accorded to nationalities that were minorities in their own territories.

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