

“The Soviet Union: A Multiethnic Empire of Eurasia”

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Summarized by Timothy Doran

Bolshevik revolutionaries denounced all forms of imperialism. Yet they ended up administering a distinctly Eurasian state that bore much in common with the region's past empires, and enshrined ethnic difference as the main principle for ordering society. Being Soviet meant living in a diverse society created by a surprising mixture of national cultures, in which internal ethnic diasporas were encountered when one went to the market, listened to the radio, watched television, or studied the names of the members of the Politburo. Among these diasporas, the Georgians were perhaps the most visible. An examination of this group reveals the complex processes of assimilation and differentiation, as well as exchange and intermixing, that blurred the lines between colonizer and colonized in the Soviet empire.

I. The Anti-imperialist Empire.

Lenin railed against imperialism, which he considered “the highest stage of capitalism.” Imperialism was both bad and good news if you were a socialist revolutionary. The highest stage of capitalism entailed global exploitation but had to be – according to Marxist ideology – the eve of socialist revolution. Lenin was right that empires would fall, exhausted by war, and within one year of Lenin’s statement about imperialism, the Czar would abdicate in Russia. He was right that the age of imperialism was the eve of Soviet revolution, but the end of empire in Eurasia was not nigh. The Soviet Union can be thought of as a new form of Eurasian empire. When the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917 they thought that an international revolution was really about to happen. They created a model multiethnic society at home: they were sincere in their effort to address oppressions of all forms, and created a collection of 15 ethnically divided republics. They abolished class, but made nationality, or ethnic difference, society’s main organizing principle. Although the Bolsheviks were anti-imperialists, they were by no means cultural relativists and believed that society evolved in set stages. The Bolsheviks wanted to usher entire populations through the stages of development as populations. The Soviet Union has accordingly been described by scholars as “an empire of nations,” and as “the affirmative action empire,” since non-Russians enjoyed special privileges in their “native” republics.

As an empire, the Soviet Union went through a number of important changes. The 1930s were a time of consolidation. If an individual was not a member of a republic that existed within Soviet borders he might be subject to deportation, such as happened to the Koreans and Germans within the Soviet Union in the late 1930s. After the Second World War, the Soviet Union grew, annexing the Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia. Yet the Soviet Union continued to be a multiethnic but anti-imperialist empire where local elites were given preference.

As a Eurasian empire, the Soviet Union can be compared to the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires, among others. The end of the Cold War has meant the end of polarization of Soviet history. For much of Soviet history, the world was divided into those for and against the Soviet project. Twenty-five years ago, talking about the Soviet Union as an empire was popular mainly among those who supported Reagan’s concept of an “evil empire.” Today, historians are reevaluating the concept of empire. They have stopped defining the nation-state as the only legitimate form of social organization. The real utility of the concept of

empire is comparative. Upon comparison, other empires—especially those of Eurasia—bear a “family resemblance” to the Soviet Union.

II. The Soviet Union and Other Empires

Like imperial Britain and France, the Soviet Union was ruled from the center and it subjugated new territories to its control. Unlike Britain and France, it was not a maritime empire, and its states were contiguous. Like other empires, it had a civilizing mission. But this was not about transforming its subjects into ideal Russians. The mission instead was about making all Soviets better communists. Eventually, it was believed that national differences would wither away. Although a utopian vision, it was effected brutally. The closure of mosques in Central Asia might seem like a form of European imperialism, but in Russia churches too were closed and even destroyed. Efforts were made to settle the nomadic populations of the steppe, but also to transform the habits of the Russian peasant.

III. Life in the Multiethnic Soviet Union.

As a Eurasian empire, the Soviet Union included diverse populations, and tolerated and encouraged publications in various languages. Like the Turks of the Ottoman Empire, the Russians were its core nationality, but like the Ottoman Empire the Soviet Union ruled by a multiethnic elite and bound together by a universalist, supernational ideology.

IV. Soviet History through Georgian Eyes.

Not only political life, but also popular culture and popular entertainment were multiethnic in the Soviet Union. Many ethnicities traveled throughout the Soviet Union: being Soviet meant an incredible mixing of populations. The Georgian internal diaspora gives us one non-Russian perspective on the Soviet state. Georgians came from a far away place distant from Russia. Georgia was separated from Russia by the Caucasus Mountains, and had a very different climate, favorable to orange groves and tea plantations. Like Russia, Georgia was historically an Orthodox Christian country. Georgians were a small nation of some 4 million (2% of the Soviet population). Georgian is very different from other languages, so different that “mama” means “father.” Because of their distinctive and adaptive practices of culture, they became the most visible diaspora within the Soviet Union as they traveled from periphery to the center. After Stalin’s death in 1953, the Georgians did not enjoy such political success, but found many other niches in Soviet life. The Georgian restaurant became a vital Soviet institution when consumption and leisure became important qualities of Soviet life. Georgian entertainers became recognized performers of ethnic song and dance. And in an age of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, the Georgian film *Repentance* pushed the limits of what could be said. Eventually, Georgians came to the forefront of dismantling the empire.

Many national groups existed in the empire and became distributed in various fields in different ways. As is discussed by Yuri Slezkine in *The Jewish Century*, Jews, like Georgians, were eager participants in the Soviet project until they became disillusioned, and they composed 50% of leading party officials in 1918 in Petrograd. Latvians made up 52% of the early Soviet secret police. Polish socialists too became prominent in the Socialist movement. Large groups within each nation saw their future as part of the Soviet project. Georgians and Ukrainians swelled the ranks of the Red Army; some Red Army songs are in fact Ukrainian folk songs. An influential circle of Bolsheviks from the Caucasus accompanied Stalin in his rise to power, and the leader of the Soviet industrial effort was Georgian. Georgians, including Stalin, were renowned as speechmakers and toastmasters. Georgian food made great advances in conquering the Soviet table, which was intrinsically multiethnic.

Kruschev’s Thaw in the 1950s produced many opportunities for cultural expression. The promotion of ethnic culture in the 1950s shows the effort to forge a multiethnic society. These ethnic motifs blend with international music trends. The Georgian republic was far from Moscow and provided an ideal base for artistic expression. Political autonomy was quelled but cultural expression was encouraged: even rock and roll and other styles that were greeted suspiciously were later embraced in a limited, Soviet way. And starting in the 1960s, one saw vocal instrumental ensembles, which were really rock bands: Georgian polyphonic singing was combined with electric guitars. These artistic forms were all about engaging in skilled displays of self-representation. Russians and other Soviets came to associate

Georgians with women in flowing dresses and acrobatic men whose war dances and wedding dances seemed to blend together.

This perspective offers a new way of looking at the late Soviet period, since historians have traditionally looked at the 1960s and 1970s as a time of stagnation. Even as the official economy stagnated, an unofficial multiethnic second economy rose to meet the demands of the Soviet consumers. Limited market activity was now tolerated. If you went to the Soviet marketplace in the 1960s and 1970s you could find jeans, records made on X-rays, and more, and you found entrepreneurial diaspora groups including Georgians, Azeri entrepreneurs, Jews, and Armenians in key positions. This perception is not limited to stereotypes but reflects the realities of the marketplace. The Georgians are an interesting economic case study within the Soviet Union. They acquired a virtual monopoly on oranges, tobacco, tea, flowers, wine, and a few other things. The first secretary of Georgia was dismissed for corruption in early 1970s because he tolerated a remarkably developed Georgian underground economy. A subgenre of Soviet ethnic jokes exists from the period. Ethnic jokes were important because Soviet citizens believed that they described essential differences.

In addition to providing new elites and new forms of popular culture, the Soviet state helped to promote ethnic intelligentsias. State-funded campaigns created one of the most literate societies in the world. Each republic had its own music halls, many had film schools, many had avant-garde artistic music.

By creating and training highly educated specialists, the Soviet Union created its own opponents. Georgian success bred discontent. In the 1980s, these national intelligentsias become increasingly nationalist. In April 1989 a demonstration was brutally suppressed in Tbilisi. Georgian intellectuals began to think more critically about Soviet rule and believed they would be more successful as an independent state. They thought of themselves as Georgians first and Soviets second, then as Georgians suffering under Soviet rule. They were among the first to secede from Soviet Union.

The leading role played by diasporas in the Soviet Union reminds one of the role of Scots in the British military and the Armenian commercial elite in the Ottoman Empire. The Soviet Union was not the first or last state to forge a consciously multiethnic society. In the United States, we too see a culture based on mixing, driven by the movement of people and the formation of diasporas. And we can wonder whether a federative European Union will lead to a multiethnic European culture. The breakup of the Soviet Union led to 15 separate republics, but we should not think of the Soviet Union only as an empire of nations, but also as an empire of diasporas.