

# Introduction

In the modern age history emerged as something it never had been before. It was no longer composed of the deeds and sufferings of men, and it no longer told the story of events affecting the lives of men; it became a man-made process, the only all-comprehending process which owed its existence exclusively to the human race.

—Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 1968

*1991 was a year of phenomenal events*—bearing witness to the collapse and dissolution of the Soviet Union and the official end of the Cold War. The geopolitical map of Europe and Asia changed rapidly and dramatically. Observers in the West looked with awe, concern, and confusion on the emergence of national movements and national conflicts, and the formation of new nation states, in the lands of the former USSR. Accustomed to seeing the Soviet state as a monolith and to thinking about “Russians” and “Soviets” as one and the same, many politicians, journalists, and scholars asked: Where had all these nations come from? What kind of state had the Soviet Union been? What was the Soviet socialist experiment all about? These were some of the questions that I had on my mind when I first set foot in the archives of the former Soviet Union in 1994 and began to research the institutional, political, social, and scientific processes that had shaped the formation of the Soviet Union. They are the questions at the heart of this book.

## *1991 and the Paradigm Shift*

From the perspective of today, it is perhaps difficult to remember just how surprised people were by the fracturing of the Soviet Union along national lines in 1991. But even some of the most astute observers of Soviet affairs were nothing less than shocked—and with good reason. For decades, national conflicts

and national tensions within the Soviet Union had been a “blank spot” on the historical record. Throughout the Cold War, most Western histories of the Soviet Union focused on Russia and the Russians. To be sure, these years saw the publication in the West of some excellent monographs about the USSR’s non-Russian nationalities, and following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, European and American scholars wrote a number of important books about Islam under communism.<sup>1</sup> But such works constituted their own subfields outside of the mainstream and were not integrated into any of the “master narratives” of the Bolshevik Revolution that were then vying for dominance. Moreover, these works reflected the general biases of the time. Many portrayed the non-Russian nationalities as the hapless victims of “Soviet-Russian” rule, as inmates of the Soviet “prison of peoples,” and as nonparticipants in the revolution. Most took a “top-down approach” and gave limited attention to the complex nature of local-level interests and conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

How can this conflation of “Russian” and “Soviet” be explained? What accounts for the relative lack of interest that most scholars in the West showed towards the non-Russian nationalities of the USSR during the Cold War? To some degree, this orientation toward “Russia” reflected practical considerations. It was difficult enough for scholars to gain access to archives in Moscow and Leningrad; it was all but impossible for them to do so in the national republics. But even more important, this orientation was the consequence of seeing the Soviet Union through the lens of the Cold War. As the Soviet Union and the United States became embroiled in conflicts across the globe, Western observers became accustomed to thinking about “the Soviets” as an undifferentiated whole, and as the polar opposite of “the Americans.” The Soviet lead-

1. See, for example, Nicholas P. Vakar, *Belorussia: The Making of a Nation, A Case Study* (Cambridge, MA, 1956); John Stephen Reshetar, *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–1920: A Study in Nationalism* (Princeton, 1952); Alfred Senn, *The Great Powers: Lithuania and the Vilna Question, 1920–1928* (Leiden, 1966); Jurij Borys, *The Sovietization of Ukraine, 1917–1923: The Communist Doctrine and Practice of National Self-Determination* (Edmonton, 1980); Teresa Rakowska-Harmstone, *Russia and Nationalism in Central Asia: The Case of Tadzhikistan* (Baltimore, 1970); Gregory J. Massell, *The Surrogate Proletariat: Moslem Women and Revolutionary Strategies in Soviet Central Asia, 1919–1929* (Princeton, 1974); Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemerrier-Quelquejay, *Islam in the Soviet Union* (London, 1967); Alexandre Bennigsen and S. Enders Wimbush, *Muslim National Communism in the Soviet Union: A Revolutionary Strategy for the Colonial World* (Chicago, 1979); and Alexandre Bennigsen and Marie Broxup, *The Islamic Threat to the Soviet State* (London, 1983). Some of the most insightful works about the Soviet approach to the nationality question were written before the start of the Cold War. See, for example, Hans Kohn, *Nationalism in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1933), and Oscar J. Janowsky, *Nationalities and National Minorities* (New York, 1945).

2. In this, many followed the approach of the “totalitarian school” which gained dominance during the Cold War. For a work that strongly aligns itself with the totalitarian school but also gives a detailed account of local-level interests see Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917–1923*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA, 1997). Pipes’s work was first published in 1954.

ership, for its part, encouraged this view with its own claims about the existence of a unified Soviet people (*Sovetskii narod*).<sup>3</sup>

The end of Soviet rule brought about a major paradigm shift. As new nation states emerged out of the Soviet colossus, a new literature appeared, making what was at the time a controversial and original argument: that the Soviet regime had deliberately “made” territorial nations. As described in one of these works, the Bolsheviks had pursued a policy of “compensatory nation-building”—actively “creating” many of those nationalities (such as the Uzbeks and the Belorussians) that subsequently claimed independence in the face of the Soviet economic and political collapse.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, at the same moment that scholars in the West were writing about the unexpectedly “progressive” character of Soviet nationality policy, leaders and scholars in the post-Soviet nation states began using the language of decolonization to hail the demise of a communist empire that had subjugated non-Russians to Moscow’s will.<sup>5</sup> In creating a postcolonial narrative, these leaders and scholars drew on Western works from the height of the Cold War that characterized the Soviet Union as a colonial empire and “breaker of nations.”<sup>6</sup>

3. See, for example, D. T. Shepilov, *Velikii sovetskii narod* (Moscow, 1947), and Viktor Sherstobitov, *Sovetskii narod: Monolitnaia obshchnost' stroitelei kommunizma* (Moscow, 1976).

4. Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53, no. 2 (1994): 414–52. See also Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford, 1993); Rogers Brubaker, *Nationalism Reframed: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe* (Cambridge, 1996); Ben Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union: A Study in the Rise and Triumph of Nationalism* (New York, 1997); Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23* (Houndmill, UK, 1999); and Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society* (Boulder, 1991). Simon’s work first appeared in German in 1986, before the Soviet collapse. Some authors such as Suny attributed the Soviet collapse to the nationality question. Others did not make that causal link. Much of this literature was influenced by works that appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, discussing the “construction” of modern nations. These include Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, 1983); E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990); and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London, 1991). The authors of these works wrote from a Marxist perspective (or, in the case of Gellner, with the Soviet example in mind). Like Marx, and like the Bolsheviks, they saw “the nation” as the product of the capitalist era—arising with industrialization, the spread of print culture, and so on.

5. See, for example, Stephen Velychenko, “The Issue of Russian Colonialism in Ukrainian Thought: Dependency Identity and Development,” *Ab Imperio*, no. 1 (2002): 323–67. Velychenko notes: “Eight of Ukraine’s thirteen political parties referred to the country as an exploited country in their programs” in 1991. He also discusses a 1995 Ukrainian textbook that “specifically identified Soviet Ukraine as a colony and its party organization as a colonial administration serving the interests of an ‘occupation regime.’” See also Rakhim Masov, *Istoriia topornogo razdeleniia* (Dushanbe, 1991), and Masov, *Tadzhiki: Istoriia s grifom “sovershenno sekretno”* (Dushanbe, 1995).

6. In particular, they drew on the work of British scholars who had been writing as the British Empire was undergoing its own painful process of decolonization. Examples of this British scholarship include Robert Conquest, *The Last Empire* (London, 1962); Olaf Caroe, *Soviet Empire*:

*Empire, Nation, and the Making of the Soviet Union*

Following the wave of post-1991 scholarship, historians have engaged in a lively debate about whether the Soviet Union was an empire, a new type of state that “made nations,” or some combination thereof. Some scholars have addressed this question by taking a comparative approach, by sketching out typologies of “nations” and “empires” and then suggesting where the Soviet Union fits in.<sup>7</sup> Others have mined the theoretical literature about nation-building, nationalism, and colonialism—borrowing models or key phrases from other historical contexts to describe Soviet policies and practices, and making arguments about the Soviet case largely by means of analogy.<sup>8</sup> And still others have attempted to locate the roots of the Soviet approach to the “nationality question” (*natsional'nyi vopros*) within the broad context of “European modernity.”<sup>9</sup> All of these approaches place the Soviet Union within a larger international context, refrain from making claims of Soviet exceptionalism, and (rightly) treat the Soviet regime’s handling of the nationality question as fundamental to the narrative of the Bolshevik Revolution. But when it comes to discussing the unique form of the Soviet state and the nature of Soviet rule, ultimately all have more descriptive than explanatory power.

This book takes a different approach. Taking as a given that the Soviet Union bore a strong resemblance to other modernizing empires and that its constituent parts, the national republics and national oblasts (districts), looked somewhat like nation states, it sets out to explain exactly *how* and *why* this came to be so. More specifically, it investigates how European ideas about “nation” and “empire” crossed into Russia and then changed form in the Soviet context with its Marxist vision of historical development. Arguing that the

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*The Turks of Central Asia and Stalinism* (London, 1953); and Walter Kolarz, *Communism and Colonialism* (London, 1964). Conquest restates and expands on his arguments in *Conquest, Stalin: Breaker of Nations* (London, 1991).

7. See, for example, Alexander J. Motyl, “Thinking About Empire,” in *After Empire: Multi-ethnic Societies and Nation-Building*, ed. Karen Barkey and Mark von Hagen (Boulder, 1997), 19–29, and Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrot, eds., *The End of Empire? The Transformation of the USSR in Comparative Perspective* (Armonk, NY, 1997). For a comparison of the Soviet Union and other empires that avoids such typologizing see Dominic Lieven, *Empire: The Russian Empire and Its Rivals* (New Haven, 2000).

8. For the application of the term *affirmative action* to the Soviet context, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, 2001). Paula Michaels, in her work on medical propaganda in Soviet Kazakhstan, draws from the literature about British imperialism and medicine, but does not explain why the Soviet and the British cases were similar. See Paula A. Michaels, “Medical Propaganda and the Cultural Revolution in Soviet Kazakhstan, 1928–41,” *The Russian Review* 59, no. 2 (2000): 159–78.

9. See, for example, David L. Hoffman, “European Modernity and Soviet Socialism,” in *Russian Modernity: Politics, Knowledge, Practices*, ed. David L. Hoffman and Yanni Kotsonis (New York, 2000), 245–60. Hoffman draws on the ideas of Zygmunt Bauman. See Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Ithaca, 1989).

Soviet Union took shape through a process of selective borrowing, it traces the transmission of ideas and practices from the West into the Soviet Union; the efforts of Soviet leaders, experts, and local elites to redefine those ideas and practices to pursue specific, and sometimes competing, agendas; and the “activation” of those ideas and practices “on the ground” among different population groups.

This book is about the formation of the Soviet Union. It is concerned both with the official creation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922 and with the far longer and more intensive process of transforming the lands and peoples within that state’s borders.<sup>10</sup> In particular, it seeks to understand how the Bolsheviks went about changing the individual and group identities of the population of the former Russian Empire. Eschewing the “prison of peoples” view of the Soviet Union, this book treats the “Sovietization” of all of the peoples within Soviet borders (non-Russians and Russians alike) as an interactive and participatory process. The Bolsheviks did not wish to just establish control over the peoples of the former Russian Empire; they set out to bring those peoples into the revolution and secure their active involvement in the great socialist experiment. To meet such ambitious goals, the Bolsheviks could not rely on coercion and force alone. They forged alliances with former imperial experts, secured the loyalties of local elites, and introduced administrative and social structures that encouraged or demanded mass participation.

No issue was more central to the formation of the Soviet Union than the nationality question. The Bolsheviks had set themselves the task of building socialism in a vast multiethnic landscape populated by hundreds of different settled and nomadic peoples belonging to a multitude of linguistic, confessional (religious), and ethnic groups. That they were attempting to do so in an age of nationalism, against the backdrop of the Paris Peace Conference’s exaltation of the “national idea,” only added to this enormous challenge. Before 1917, the Bolsheviks had called for the national self-determination of all peoples and had condemned all forms of colonization as exploitative. After attaining power, however, they began to express concern that it would not be possible for Soviet Russia to survive without the cotton of Turkestan and the oil of the Caucasus. In an effort to reconcile their anti-imperialist position with their strong desire to hold on to all of the lands of the former Russian Empire, the Bolsheviks integrated the national idea into the administrative-territorial structure of the new Soviet Union. With the assistance of former imperial ethnographers and local elites, they placed all of the peoples of the former Russian Empire into a definitional grid of official nationalities—simultane-

10. On the official formation of the Soviet Union in 1922 see Pipes, *Formation of the Soviet Union*; Smith, *Bolsheviks and the National Question*; and E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, vol. 1 (New York, 1950). On the Soviet attempt to transform non-Russian regions see Douglas Northrop, *Veiled Empire: Gender and Power in Stalinist Central Asia* (Ithaca, 2004), and Adrienne Lynn Edgar, *Tribal Nation: The Making of Soviet Turkmenistan* (Princeton, 2004).

ously granting these peoples “nationhood” and facilitating centralized rule. With the assistance of former imperial economists, they articulated a program of “Soviet colonization,” which they defined as a plan for the state-directed development of productive forces, without the imperialistic exploitation of “less-developed” peoples by “more-developed” peoples.

It is impossible to understand the Bolsheviks’ approach to the nationality question without considering their Marxist-Leninist view of the world.<sup>11</sup> The Bolsheviks took from Karl Marx the ideas that there was a “logic” (or “telos”) to history, and that it was possible to get on the “right side” of the historical process by carefully interpreting its inner dynamics and figuring out where one stood on the timeline of development.<sup>12</sup> They also took from Marx and from Friedrich Engels the basic precepts that all social orders were built on economic structures; that the development of “productive forces” propelled societies forward; and that societies would evolve from their primeval origins through the stages of feudalism, capitalism, and socialism before making the final transition to communism.<sup>13</sup> It was with these ideas in mind that the Bolsheviks made a careful study of the European nation states and their empires. They saw Western Europe as occupying a position ahead of Russia on the timeline of development, and thus as an indicator of where Russia was heading. However, the Bolsheviks hoped to do much more than follow in Europe’s footsteps. They held the conviction that it was possible—and desirable—not just to interpret the inner dynamics of the historical process, but to seize control of history and push it forward.<sup>14</sup> Marx had suggested that changes to the “economic base” would bring about corresponding changes in social forms and culture (which he considered part of the “superstructure”). The Bolsheviks, by contrast, set out to accelerate the historical process by acting on the economic base, social forms, and culture *all at the same time*. Before the Bolsheviks could even begin to attempt this monumental task, they needed accurate information about the social forms and cultures that prevailed in the former Russian Empire.

The Bolsheviks could not have realized their goals without assistance. The leaders of the new party-state had a comprehensive worldview and a secular

11. An important premise of this book is that ideology mattered a great deal to the Bolsheviks. For discussions of the importance of ideology to the Soviet project see Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995); Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914–1921* (Cambridge, MA, 2002); Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, 2000); Martin Malia, *The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia, 1917–1991* (New York, 1994); and Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, 2001).

12. On the Bolshevik understanding of history see Halfin, *From Darkness to Light*, 82; Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*; G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History: A Defense* (Princeton, 2000); and Hoffman, “European Modernity and Soviet Socialism.”

13. For an elaboration of this idea see Cohen, *Karl Marx’s Theory of History*.

14. See Halfin, *From Darkness to Light*, and Malia, *Soviet Tragedy*.

vision of progress, but lacked even the most basic knowledge about the lands and peoples of the former Russian Empire.<sup>15</sup> From the start, they found themselves relying on former imperial experts such as ethnographers and economists—who themselves looked to Europe for approaches to solving Russia's economic and social problems. Many of these experts had lived and studied in Europe. All were well versed in the politics of nationalism and in the practices of empire. Like the Bolsheviks, these experts saw Russia's problems and potential through the prism of Europe's experiences, and like the Bolsheviks they had enormous faith in the transformative power of scientific government and in the idea of progress. Vladimir Il'ich Lenin and other Bolshevik leaders had the good sense and the good fortune to forge an alliance with these experts, who helped them to spread the revolution, attain the conceptual conquest of their domain, and feel their way toward a revolutionary nationality policy.

The Commission for the Study of the Tribal Composition of the Population of Russia (*Komissiiia po izucheniiu plemennogo sostava naseleniia Rossii* [KIPS]) was one group of such experts. Formed in February 1917, KIPS was made up of ethnographers who had evaluated Russia's ethnographic composition during the First World War, as the nationality question began to take on international political significance. Russia's ethnographers had long envied their Western counterparts for the influence they imagined them to have in their own governments' colonial projects. As expert-consultants to the Bolsheviks, the KIPS ethnographers would play a far greater role in the work of government than most European or American anthropologists had ever done. These ethnographers would produce all-union censuses, assist government commissions charged with delimiting the USSR's internal borders, lead expeditions to study "the human being as a productive force," and create ethnographic exhibits and civic education courses about "The Peoples of the USSR." Indeed, scholars of European colonialism who have asserted that anthropologists were "never indispensable to the grand process of imperial power" and played a "trivial" role in "maintaining structures of imperial rule" might want to reconsider their arguments in light of the Soviet case.<sup>16</sup>

The KIPS ethnographers did not just provide the Soviet regime with much-needed information, but also helped it formulate a unique approach to transforming the population. This approach, which I call "state-sponsored evolutionism," was a Soviet version of the civilizing mission that was grounded in the Marxist conception of development through historical stages and also drew on European anthropological theories about cultural evolutionism (which, like Marxism, subscribed to a teleological vision of "spatialized

15. I use the terms *party-state* and *Soviet regime* interchangeably. The Soviet Union is often referred to as a party-state because it was a one-party state with overlapping party and government personnel.

16. Quoted from Talal Asad, "Afterword: From the History of Colonial Anthropology to the Anthropology of Western Hegemony," in *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (Madison, 1991), 315.

time").<sup>17</sup> State-sponsored evolutionism put a unique spin on the national idea, gaining its impetus from the Leninist position that it was possible to speed up the evolution of the population through the stages on the Marxist timeline of historical development. Beginning in the 1920s, the Soviet regime and its ethnographers attempted to take charge of the process of nation formation in regions where clan and tribal identities prevailed and where local populations seemed to lack national consciousness. They did so on the grounds that clans and tribes were "feudal-era" social forms—and that the amalgamation and consolidation of clans and tribes into nationalities (which had taken place in Europe during the transition to capitalism) was the requisite next step on the road to socialism. Ethnographers tried to help the regime predict which clans and tribes would eventually come together and form new nationalities—a task that required great leaps of faith. Ethnographers, along with local elites, then worked with the Soviet government to create national territories and official national languages and cultures for these groups. State-sponsored evolutionism was thus premised on the belief that "primordial" ethnic groups were the building blocks of nationalities *and* on the assumption that the state could intervene in the natural process of development and "construct" modern nations. Indeed, discussions in the post-1991 literature about whether the Soviet regime had a constructivist or a primordialist conception of nationality create a false dichotomy given the Bolsheviks' Marxist-Leninist view of the world.<sup>18</sup>

What were the goals of state-sponsored evolutionism? First of all, state-sponsored evolutionism was not the same thing as national self-determination. Nor was it a program of "making nations" for their own sake. Even as the Soviet regime was amalgamating clans and tribes into nationalities, it reneged on (or "reinterpreted") its earlier promise of national self-determination and condemned all attempts to separate from the Soviet state as "bourgeois nationalist." Second of all, state-sponsored evolutionism was not a form of "affirmative action" intended to promote "national minorities" at the expense of "national majorities."<sup>19</sup> The short-term goal of state-sponsored evolutionism was to "assist" the potential victims of *Soviet* economic modernization, and thus to differentiate the Soviet state from the "imperialistic empires" it disdained. The long-term goal was to usher the *entire* population through the Marxist timeline of historical development: to transform feudal-era clans and tribes into nationalities, and nationalities into socialist-era nations—which, at

17. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* (New York, 1983), chapter 1.

18. Here I disagree with Martin, who argues that during the mid-1930s "there was a dramatic turn away from the former Soviet view of nations as fundamentally modern constructs and toward an emphasis on the deep primordial roots of modern nations." *Affirmative Action Empire*, 443. See also Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," *Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (December 2001): 862–96.

19. Here, too, I am arguing against Martin, *Affirmative Action Empire*.

some point in the future, would merge together under communism.<sup>20</sup> This larger vision provides an important context for understanding the regime's effort in the 1930s to amalgamate nationalities into a smaller number of "developed" socialist nations. Some historians have characterized this later effort as a "retreat" (from an "affirmative action" agenda, for example).<sup>21</sup> This book, by contrast, makes the case that it was in line with the Soviet regime's long-term goals—and that it marked an attempt to further accelerate the revolution and to speed the transition to the communist future.

The Bolsheviks took state-sponsored evolutionism very seriously, putting far more effort into realizing its ends than the European colonial empires had put into their own civilizing missions.<sup>22</sup> Characterizing "backwardness" as the result of sociohistorical circumstances and not of innate racial or biological traits, Soviet leaders maintained that all peoples could "evolve" and thrive in new Soviet conditions. The party-state devoted significant resources to furthering the population's ethnohistorical evolution, establishing official national territories, cultures, languages, and histories. It also made a major push to "indigenize" local institutions—training Uzbek, Belorussian, and other "national communists" to serve in government and party bodies in the national republics, oblasts, and regions.

It would be a mistake, however, to idealize the Soviet approach to its population. The party-state was both high-minded and vicious at the same time—combining its more "beneficent" policies with the use of violence and terror. It attacked traditional culture and religion, destroyed local communities, and persecuted individuals and groups that exhibited "spontaneous nationalism." It imprisoned, deported, and in some cases executed individuals and entire communities for the "crime" of "bourgeois nationalism." Moreover, the policy of state-sponsored evolutionism itself did not mean that all clans and tribes would have the opportunity to develop into *separate* nations. During the 1920s, at the height of what some historians describe as the regime's period of "ethnophilia," Soviet leaders and experts endeavored to *wipe out* the languages, cultures, and separate identities of hundreds of clans and tribes in

20. On the evolution of peoples through the stages on the Marxist timeline see Yuri Slezkine, *Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North* (Ithaca, 1994).

21. Martin argues that the regime abandoned its "affirmative action" programs in the 1930s—missing the fact that *from the start* Soviet policies were oriented toward the amalgamation of ethnohistorical groups. The 1930s saw the *acceleration* of this process, not a retreat from it. In arguing that this period saw a "retreat," Martin is drawing on the work of Nicholas S. Timasheff, *The Great Retreat: The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (New York, 1946).

22. The Soviet drive to transform the most remote areas of its domain stands in marked contrast to the British Empire, where "only a minority of the subjected peoples" had real cultural, political, and economic ties with the center. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 92. On the British case also see George W. Stocking, Jr., *After Tylor: British Social Anthropology, 1888–1951* (Madison, 1995), and David Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (New York, 2001).

order to “help” them to “evolve” (and/or amalgamate) into new official nationalities.<sup>23</sup>

### *Ethnographic Knowledge*

A major concern of this book is the role of ethnographic knowledge in the formation of the Soviet Union. I use the term *ethnographic knowledge* to refer to two main types of information. The first is the “academic, but practical” knowledge that professional ethnographers, anthropologists, geographers, and other experts collected and compiled for the Soviet regime, often with the explicit intention of facilitating the work of government.<sup>24</sup> Russian and early Soviet ethnography (*etnografiia*) was a broad field of inquiry, which included under its umbrella the disciplines of geography, archaeology, physical anthropology, and linguistics. It shared important similarities with European cultural anthropology, but was distinct from Russian and Soviet anthropology (*antropologiia*), which was a narrower field, focusing on physical anthropology.<sup>25</sup> Former imperial ethnographers provided the party-state with ethnographic reports, inventories of lands and peoples, maps, charts of kinship structures, and other materials, which it used to make sense of local populations, spread the revolution, and consolidate Soviet rule. These experts also developed a standardized vocabulary of nationality, using specific terms (such as *narodnost'*, *natsional'nost'*, and *natsiia*) to refer to ethnic groups at different stages of development.

The second type of information is the local knowledge that local leaders and administrators supplied to central party and government institutions about the lands and peoples within their direct purview.<sup>26</sup> Some of these local elites were self-defined communists and held official Soviet positions. Others had a more tenuous relationship with the Soviet regime. Most were engaged in local power struggles and seized on the national idea as a means of promoting the interests of their particular communities or constituencies. In some cases, local elites and administrators did their own research, compiling old data and digging up historical materials from local archives. They provided the party-state with

23. On Soviet “ethnophilia,” see Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment,” 415.

24. George W. Stocking, Jr., “Maclay, Kubary, Malinowski: Archetypes from the Dreamtime of Anthropology,” in Stocking, ed., *Colonial Situations*, 64.

25. Ernest Gellner, ed., *Soviet and Western Anthropology* (London, 1980), x–xi. Before the revolution and up through the 1920s, the terms *ethnography* (*etnografiia*) and *ethnology* (*etnologiiia*) were frequently used as synonyms in Russia. However, the term *ethnology* also came to refer more specifically to the study of physical or racial characteristics.

26. I use the term *local knowledge* somewhat differently from Clifford Geertz. Geertz is interested primarily in how ethnographers, lawyers, and other experts interpret, use, and influence thought and sensibilities. I am interested in how local elites and administrators put together local knowledge for official or expert use. Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretative Anthropology* (New York, 1983).

their own maps, reports, and surveys—which sometimes confirmed, sometimes contradicted, and sometimes even drew on the experts' information.

Ethnographic knowledge is never value-neutral, although it can appear to be so when it is obtained through scholarly or scientific inquiries. In fact, it is always the product of a series of decisions and judgments, and more often than not it embodies the assumptions and ambitions of those doing the collecting, classifying, and compiling.<sup>27</sup> Ethnographers and other experts chose to use particular approaches or criteria to map out the population based in part on their own training, institutional ties, and preconceived ideas about different peoples and regions. Local elites, for their part, presented party and government commissions with maps or data that supported their own groups' claims to disputed land and other resources. The biases or aspirations of those individuals providing the regime with information mattered a great deal. Whether ethnographers used language, physical type, ethnic origins, or self-definition to ascertain an individual's (or a group's) national membership had an impact on the creation of ethnographic maps that were used to parcel out land. Whether they included only "pure ethnic groups" or "mixed groups" on a list of nationalities determined which peoples were entitled to national rights. Whether local elites claimed to represent local populations on the basis of a shared language, kinship ties, or cultural similarities affected the delimitation of new national territories. This book shows how all of these choices shaped the administrative-territorial structure of the Soviet Union, the allocation of resources to different population groups, and the development of "Soviet" national identities.

Much of the literature about Soviet nationality policy focuses almost exclusively on the party-state, on the grounds that party leaders in Moscow made all meaningful decisions. But in fact the production of knowledge cannot be easily disentangled from the exercise of power in the Soviet Union—or in any other modern state. To be sure, the party-state was the locus of political power. But the party-state did not have a monopoly on knowledge; on the contrary, it depended to a significant degree on the information about the population that experts and local elites provided. By compiling critical ethnographic knowledge that shaped how the regime saw its lands and peoples, and by helping the regime generate official categories and lists, these experts and local elites participated in the formation of the Soviet Union. Sometimes the party-state marshaled ethnographic knowledge to rationalize what were in essence purely political decisions. But more often the party-state used ethnographic knowledge to determine how to formulate its policies.<sup>28</sup>

27. For a similar argument about scientific knowledge see Helen E. Longino, *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (Princeton, 1990). See also Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York, 1972).

28. For a similar argument about the use of scientific knowledge in the Nazi state see Margit Szöllösi-Janze, "National Socialism and the Sciences: Reflections, Conclusions, and Historical Perspectives," in *Science in the Third Reich*, ed. Margit Szöllösi-Janze (Oxford, 2001), 1–35.

All this is not to suggest, however, that ethnographic knowledge can exist fully outside politics. Nor is it to suggest that the party-state and the groups supplying it with ethnographic knowledge had an equal or even reciprocal relationship. The balance of power between the Soviet regime and these groups was always uneven—and their alliance always tenuous. Former imperial experts and local elites shared with the Bolsheviks some short-term goals, but most did not share their Marxist-Leninist worldview or their dream of building socialism. Soviet leaders were willing to overlook these “faults” as long as they were in dire need of information about the population. By 1929, however, the Soviet regime had achieved the basic conceptual conquest of the lands and peoples within its borders, due in large part to the efforts of experts and local elites over the previous decade. That year, the party-state—with Joseph Stalin at the helm—launched an offensive on the “ideological front” in a push to establish control over all individuals and institutions that were engaged in the production of knowledge.<sup>29</sup> Over the course of the next decade, an intricate feedback loop developed: Ethnographic knowledge continued to shape Soviet policies at the same time as the coercive arm of the party-state exerted greater influence over the production of ethnographic knowledge. Ethnographers and other knowledge-producing experts re-created their disciplines from within in an effort to avoid persecution, accommodate the regime’s needs, and save their professions. Local elites learned how to show that their nationalism was the correct “Soviet” kind, devoid of “bourgeois” tendencies and ambitions.

### *Ethnographic Knowledge and Cultural Technologies of Rule*

In discussing the production of ethnographic knowledge in the Soviet Union, this book investigates what scholars of European colonialism call “cultural technologies of rule”: those forms of enumeration, mapping, and surveying that “modern” states use to order and understand a complicated human and geographical landscape.<sup>30</sup> It argues that in the Soviet Union, as in other modern states or empires, these techniques supported and strengthened centralized

29. This offensive accompanied the industrialization and collectivization campaigns that were part of Stalin’s “revolution from above.” The party’s campaign to seize control of scientific and cultural institutions during this period is often referred to in Western historiography as the “cultural revolution.” I prefer to discuss this as a campaign on the “ideological front” for two reasons. First, the campaign was about more than just culture. Second, Soviet leaders and experts *themselves* used the term *cultural revolution* to refer to their campaign to “bring culture to” or “civilize” “backward” regions. I discuss this in detail in chapter 5. Sheila Fitzpatrick, writing not long after China’s cultural revolution, was the first to use the term *cultural revolution* to refer to the party’s attack on scientific and cultural institutions. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington, 1978), 8–40.

30. Nicholas B. Dirks is the originator of the term. See Dirks’s “Foreword” to Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, 1996), ix, and Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, 2001). See also Clifton Crais, “Chiefs and Bureaucrats in the Making of Empire: A Drama from

rule, serving as a complement to force and coercion. It further argues that in the Soviet case, cultural technologies of rule were used with the intention of enacting a revolutionary agenda. Whereas the European colonial empires often used such technologies (intentionally or not) to “create new categories and oppositions between colonizers and colonized, European and Asian, modern and traditional,” the Soviet party-state used them to *eliminate* these oppositions—to “modernize” and transform all the lands and peoples of the former Russian Empire and bring them into the Soviet whole.<sup>31</sup> In the late 1930s, the Soviet regime used these same technologies to establish a different kind of opposition—between “Soviet” and “non-Soviet” (suspect, outsider, foreign) nationalities.

This book devotes special attention to the census, the map, and the museum—three cultural technologies of rule that brought ethnographers and other experts into contact with local contexts and with state power. To be sure, these are just a small sampling of the cultural technologies of rule that are fundamental to the work of state-building.<sup>32</sup> I focus on them in particular because of their important role in the production and dissemination of ethnographic knowledge. The population census, the administrative-territorial map, and the ethnographic museum were crucial to the creation of an official definitional grid of nationalities in the Soviet Union. Benedict Anderson’s work *Imagined Communities* first brought to my attention the possible connections among census, map, and museum in the modern state.<sup>33</sup> But whereas Anderson takes the “crucial intersection” or “linkage” of census, map, and museum as a given, this book explores the interconnections *and* disjunctures among them. It does so in part by focusing on a group of experts who had a significant role in all three enterprises. In the Soviet Union, the same ethnographers who were drawing up an official “List of the Nationalities of the USSR” for the Central Statistical Administration to give to its census takers were also creating new maps for government commissions and new museum exhibits about

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the Transkei, South Africa, October 1880,” *The American Historical Review* 108, no. 4 (2003) 1034–60.

31. The quote is from Dirks, “Foreword,” in Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge*, ix.

32. One could also look at the educational curriculum, the judicial system, print media, and so on.

33. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*. On the census also see Bernard S. Cohn, “The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,” in *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays* (New Delhi, 1987), 224–54, and Arjun Appadurai, “Number in the Colonial Imagination,” in Carol A. Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1993), 314–39. Also see the essays in David Kertzer and Dominique Aré, eds., *Census and Identity: The Politics of Race, Ethnicity, and Language in National Censuses* (Cambridge, 2002). On maps and border-making see Matthew Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Chicago, 1997). On exhibiting see Herman Lebovics, *True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900–1945* (Ithaca, 1992).

“The Peoples of the USSR.” Each of these enterprises affected the others. And yet during the 1920s they did not correspond completely: many of the nationalities included on the list were not represented on the maps or in the ethnographic exhibits. The Soviet Union was a work in progress—and Soviet ethnographers working for the party-state would spend the next two decades trying to bring census, map, and museum into closer agreement.

Census, map, and museum all facilitated a process I call “double assimilation”: the assimilation of a diverse population into nationality categories and, simultaneously, the assimilation of those nationally categorized groups into the Soviet state and society. Census-taking and border-making were couched in the language of self-determination but were in fact powerful “disciplining” mechanisms that facilitated administrative consolidation and control. The categorization of the entire population according to “nationality”—including clans and tribes that lacked national consciousness—helped the regime to pursue its agenda of state-sponsored evolutionism. The establishment of new national territories and national institutions proved to be an effective means to integrate the entire non-Russian population into a unified Soviet state. Finally, the ethnographic museum served as an important venue for experts and administrators to work out and disseminate an official narrative about the transformation of the Russian Empire into the Soviet Union—a narrative that highlighted the development of peoples of the USSR under the aegis of Soviet power.

It must be emphasized that double assimilation was an interactive process. The regime did not just impose official categories or narratives on the population. Instead, these categories and narratives were generated as well as activated through expert and mass participation. Preparations for the All-Union Census involved unionwide deliberations among Soviet leaders, experts, and local elites about which peoples to include on an official “List of the Nationalities of the USSR.” The census itself was then conducted through one-on-one interviews between census takers and respondents. Indeed, while the census called for national “self-definition,” local populations often learned *through* these interviews how to define themselves in official terms. Border-making, too, involved intense expert and local participation. Border-dispute commissions consulted with experts and local elites, and also solicited petitions from the localities. Local elites, treating border delimitation as a means to obtain territories and resources, spread the Soviet “national idea” among their populations—and helped to integrate those populations into the Soviet whole. Meanwhile, visitors to the ethnographic museum (and other cultural institutions) were encouraged to imagine themselves into the emerging official narrative about the peoples of the USSR and were also asked to give their “socialist criticism” of the exhibits and presentations.

What does this model of “double assimilation” suggest about the nature of Soviet rule? This book, like a number of works written after 1991, attempts to move beyond a Cold War-era debate between “totalitarian-model” and “revi-

sionist-model” histories. The “totalitarian school” in many of its 1960s and 1970s incarnations assumed that the party-state had achieved total control over the population during the Stalin era, and thus that social processes did not bear studying. The “revisionist school,” by contrast, tended to focus on social processes—and interpreted the airing of local grievances and the pursuit of local agendas as evidence that Soviet state control was not “total.”<sup>34</sup> Both groups gave little credence to Hannah Arendt’s argument (set out in her 1951 work *The Origins of Totalitarianism*) that the Soviet regime established and maintained power through a process of mass mobilization.<sup>35</sup> This book argues that it is imperative to pay close attention to the particular vocabularies, categories, and narratives that individuals and groups used when expressing their complaints and aspirations, and to whether or not they were pursuing local agendas through official channels.<sup>36</sup> It suggests that insofar as people used official Soviet language and interacted with Soviet institutions, their participation “from below” actually helped to assimilate the Union’s disparate parts and strengthen Soviet rule. Even local populations who attempted to use official categories and vocabularies to “resist” Soviet power and pursue their own aims ended up reifying those categories and vocabularies—and were thus brought into the Soviet fold.

### *The Changing European Backdrop*

Soviet leaders and experts formulated their ideas about “nation” and “empire” not just in dialogue with each other, but also in dialogue with other states. The European “age of empire” and the First World War (which saw the popularization of the national idea) were the critical backdrop for the early years of Soviet state formation. But neither this backdrop nor the Soviet regime’s policies and practices remained static. The Soviet approach to the population continued to evolve in the 1930s, in large part in response to what I call the “dual threat”: the ideological challenge of Nazi race theories and the geopolitical danger of “imperialist encirclement.” The Nazi positions that cultural and behavioral traits were linked to racial traits, that racial traits derived from “immutable genetic material,” and that social measures could not improve the human condition all posed direct challenges to the Bolshevik worldview. At the same time, the Bolsheviks’ long-held fears of “imperialist encir-

34. Classic examples of the “totalitarian school” include Leonard Schapiro, “The Concept of Totalitarianism,” *Survey*, no. 73 (1969): 93–115, and Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge, MA, 1965). Classic examples of the “revisionist school” include Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York, 1985), and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, 1979).

35. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, rev. ed. (San Diego, 1979).

36. On the importance of participation to the Soviet project, and on the phenomenon of people learning to “speak Bolshevik,” see Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*.

element” began to seem all too real as the Japanese made incursions into the Soviet Far East in the 1930s and the Nazis claimed the right to intervene in the affairs of ethnic Germans in the Soviet Union. Challenging Soviet aspirations on ideological grounds and posing a threat to Soviet borders, the Nazis and their allies thus endangered the Soviet project of socialist transformation on two fronts at once.

The spread of national socialist ideas after 1930, and the consolidation of the Nazi German state in 1933, elicited a strong response from the Soviet regime—ultimately resulting in a push to further accelerate the revolution and its process of state-sponsored evolutionism. Beginning in 1931 (as national socialist ideas spread among German scientists), the Soviet regime called on its ethnographers and anthropologists to define race in Marxist-Leninist terms and to gather evidence supporting the Soviet position that social conditions—and not racial traits—determined human development. These experts set out to prove that nurture trumped nature, that “backwardness” was the result of sociohistorical (and not biological) factors, and that state-sponsored evolutionism had already proved a success. At the same time, the Soviet regime took measures to defend its borderlands and other regions of economic and geopolitical significance from “unreliable elements,” including the so-called “diaspora nationalities”—a group that included Germans, Poles, and other nationalities with homelands in other states. A line was drawn between “Soviet” and “foreign” nations, and the latter were brutally cast out of the Soviet whole. In effect, in its effort to counter the dual threat, the Soviet regime took a firm stand against biological determinism at the same time as it persecuted people with the “wrong” ethnic origins. This book explores the tension between these two policies and its implications for understanding the nature of the Soviet project.

### *Framework*

Many works about Soviet nationality policy adopt what has become a standard chronology for thinking about Soviet history. They begin with the years of the “New Economic Policy” (1923 to 1928), continue with the era of the “Socialist Offensive” and the “Cultural Revolution” (1928 to 1932), and then move on to the period of the “Great Retreat” (1933 to 1938). This book follows a somewhat different periodization and challenges some of these conventional labels. It explores continuities and disjunctures between 1905 and 1941 from the perspective of different historical actors, and looks at major events from the perspective of different regions of the Soviet Union. It also examines how Soviet leaders and experts themselves used terms such as *cultural revolution*.

Part 1, “Empire, Nation, and the Scientific State,” treats the period between 1905 and 1924 as a whole—analyzing a series of choices that the Bolsheviks made about how to “make a revolution” in a multiethnic empire and create a

new type of state. Chapter 1 asks how late-imperial experts and Bolshevik leaders came to form a working relationship after the Bolshevik seizure of power, and looks at the ideas and approaches that both sides brought to the table. It places particular emphasis on the impact of the First World War on the development of these ideas and approaches. Chapter 2 analyzes the interinstitutional debate about the administrative-territorial organization of the Soviet state. It looks at two competing models for Soviet state organization: the ethnographic paradigm (which took the “national idea” as its starting point) and the economic paradigm (which drew inspiration from the European colonial economies). Together, these chapters evaluate the influence of European ideas about nation, empire, and economic development on the Bolsheviks, on the former imperial experts, and on the process of Soviet state formation.

Part 2, “Cultural Technologies of Rule and the Nature of Soviet Power,” focuses on the decade from 1924 to 1934—analyzing the “Sovietization” of the new Soviet Union. It describes the period of 1924 to 1929 as one in which the regime attained the basic conceptual conquest of the lands and peoples within its borders, and the period of 1929 to 1934 as one in which the regime (now armed with critical information) attempted to make a “great break” (*velikii perelom*) with the past. Chapter 3 evaluates the First All-Union Census, which was conducted in 1926, as an important tool of state-building that provided the Soviet regime with ethnographic knowledge and also facilitated the revolutionary transformation of the population. Chapter 4 investigates the delimitation of new administrative-territorial units (national republics and oblasts) in accordance with ethnographic and economic criteria. Together, these two chapters suggest that the creation of official national categories, along with the introduction of policies that entitled nationalities (as opposed to clans and tribes) to territories and resources, encouraged people to rearticulate their identities and concerns in official “national” terms. Chapter 5 looks at the Ethnographic Department of the Russian Museum, tracing the efforts of experts and political-enlightenment activists to determine what “Soviet nationalities” should look like and to come up with an official narrative about the formation of the USSR. It examines museumgoers’ written responses to exhibits and discusses how those responses were used during the period of the “great break” to fuel the campaign on the ideological front.

Part 3, “The Nazi Threat and the Acceleration of the Bolshevik Revolution,” focuses on the period between 1931 and 1941, examining the Soviet regime’s reaction to the Nazis. It argues that beginning in 1931, in the midst of the “great break,” the regime reformed its alliance with former imperial experts in order to focus on an external foe: German race science. It depicts the period from 1934 to 1941 as one in which the regime attempted to secure the Soviet Union’s borders and to push forward (*not* retreat from) the process of revolutionary transformation. Chapter 6 focuses on joint ethnographical-anthropological research expeditions to Central Asia, the Far East, and other regions; it looks at the efforts of anthropologists and ethnographers to refute

German claims about the racial inferiority of the Soviet population and to come up with an appropriate explanation for the continuing “backwardness” of some of these regions. Chapter 7 looks at the efforts of ethnographers to use the Second All-Union Census (taken first in 1937 and again in 1939) to dramatically further the amalgamation of nationalities into Soviet nations. It also looks at the spread of the internal passport—another cultural technology of rule. It argues that the census and the passport together institutionalized a distinction between “Soviet” and “foreign” nations and enabled the regime to monitor and persecute (actual or suspected) members of the latter group.

This book investigates the Soviet approach to the nationality question and the development of the field of Soviet ethnography, with the aim of gaining insight into the dynamics of Soviet rule. Rather than focus exclusively on scientific institutions or the party-state, it looks at important sites of interaction among experts, local elites, the party-state, and the general population. It is my hope that by studying how the Soviet Union was formed, and by examining the connection between national-identity formation and Sovietization during the first several decades of Soviet rule, we can begin to understand not just why the Soviet Union fell apart along particular national lines in 1991, but how it endured for more than seventy years.