

University of Vermont

UVM ScholarWorks

UVM College of Arts and Sciences College
Honors Theses

Undergraduate Theses

2015

Russian and Soviet Nationalities Policy in the Baltic States, 1855-1991

Rubin B. Goldberg

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/castheses>

Recommended Citation

Goldberg, Rubin B., "Russian and Soviet Nationalities Policy in the Baltic States, 1855-1991" (2015). *UVM College of Arts and Sciences College Honors Theses*. 10.
<https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/castheses/10>

This Undergraduate Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at UVM ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM College of Arts and Sciences College Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of UVM ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uvm.edu.

Russian and Soviet Nationalities Policy in the Baltic States, 1855-1991

Rubin B. Goldberg

UVM Honors

Spring 2015

When Emperor Alexander II came to power, the Russian Empire spanned more than 8 million square miles between the Baltic and the Pacific. Not since the days of the Mongols had the world seen such a tremendous amount of land joined together under a single ruler. Despite a recent military defeat in the Crimean War, the Russian Empire presented a picture of remarkable stability to the outside world. As revolutions rocked Prussia and Austria in 1848, Russia, untroubled by any serious incidents, was secure enough to send its own soldiers to prop up neighboring monarchies. It was not only an absolute monarchy, but also the paragon and defender of the very concept.

Internally, however, the Russian Empire seemed entirely different. After a stay in 1839, the Marquis de Custine found the Empire “vast as it is, [...] only a prison to which the emperor holds the key[.]”¹ Custine’s comment was not only directed at the millions who remained in serfdom. The fact that the founders, leaders, and language of this massive state were Russian could lead an outside observer to assume it was fundamentally Russian, but this was far from the truth. Russians were a mere plurality in terms of the overall population, just 43.3% of the total at the turn of the twentieth century.² Starting with the Polish uprisings of 1830-1 and 1863-4, nationalism among the subject peoples began to play a dramatic role in Russian politics. Over time, de Custine’s original quotation assumed a new form: the Russian Empire as a “prison of nations.”

¹ Marquis Astolphe de Custine, *Journey for our Time: The Journals of the Marquis de Custine, Russia 1839* ed. and trans. Phyllis Penn Kohler (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), 162.

² Theodore R. Weeks, “Russification: Word and Practice 1863-1914,” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 148, no. 4 (Dec., 2004): 476.

Russia's revolutionaries, regardless of political affiliation, took notice of the dissatisfaction among national minorities. None other than Vladimir Lenin made reference to the Russian Empire as a prison of nations.³ As a radical Marxist, Lenin initially stood opposed to nationalist movements, but as revolution gripped Russia in 1917, he found his fledgling state in need of support as the prospect of civil war loomed. Through a mixture of compromise, appeasement, and force of arms, the newly-formed Soviet Union triumphed over its ideological rivals and inherited most of the lands once ruled by the Russian Empire. From their rocky start to their eventual collapse, the Soviets were dogged by the national question to a greater degree than their predecessors had been. Over the course of eight decades, the USSR would try and fail to resolve the issues that plagued its beginnings.

Despite obvious dissimilarities, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union were both massive multiethnic empires: Russia among the first, and the Soviet Union perhaps the last. For much of the last two centuries, they both grappled with the issue of maintaining control over their ethnically varied subject populations in the era of nationalism. This work aims to examine the development of both states' nationalities policies, their similarities and differences, and how effective they were in achieving their aims. Considering the sheer number of national minorities exposed to regional variations of central policy (if indeed a central policy existed at the given time), a truly thorough examination of the topic is outside of the scope of this project. Instead, the

³ Vladimir Lenin, "On the Question of National Policy" in *Lenin Collected Works* vol. 20, trans. Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 219. Accessed from Marxists Internet Archive.

Baltic region of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia will serve as something of a case study from which to draw conclusions about Russian and Soviet practices as a whole.

Defining “The Baltic”

Why the Baltic region? Many peoples in many regions experienced the yoke of Russian and Soviet rule throughout the centuries, from Ukrainians to Kazakhs to Chechens, and most occupied a more concretely defined space than the nebulous “Baltic.” To this day, the idea of “Baltic states” remains controversial in the very countries it seeks to label. And thus, one who seeks to lean so heavily on the concept must first offer some kind of justification.

The three peoples who inhabit the land on the southeastern portion of the Baltic littoral defy true commonalities. In language, two of their tongues (Latvian and Lithuanian) share the Baltic language branch, but the third (Estonian) belongs instead to the Finno-Ugric. In religion, Latvia and Estonia are historically Lutheran, while Lithuania remains strongly Catholic. Latvia and Estonia share historical and cultural ties with Germany and Sweden, Lithuania and Latvia with Poland. Based on these criteria, Finland has just as much cause to be “Baltic” as the three countries currently labeled as such. Even Latvia, the common denominator, has taken pains to emphasize its differences with its neighbors.⁴ The Baltic region is an obvious construct, and one which seems increasingly outdated.

Two defenses of the construct can be offered. The first is the one true shared experience of the three Baltic peoples: Russian and Soviet rule. In the late 1700s, the

⁴ Aldis Purs, *Baltic Dreams: Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania since 1945* (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 11.

Russian Empire became the first power to secure the whole of the region, which had passed through the hands of Germans, Poles, and Swedes for much of the preceding centuries. From that point on, these Baltic provinces of the Empire walked a similar path, experiencing varying degrees of Russian repression before gaining independence in the wake of the October Revolution. After 22 years, the three were promptly occupied and annexed by the Soviet Union and remained Soviet republics until 1991. Unhappy though the shared experience may be, Russian occupation provides a geopolitical reason for grouping Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

The second defense, on the other hand, lies in the creation of national identities in the Baltic region. Before the nineteenth century, Lithuania was largely subsumed by Poland, and Latvia and Estonia were held by a German landed nobility. But starting in the 1850s and 60s, all three began the process of nation-building. The names Latvia and Estonia were coined in 1857, just as Lithuanian, Estonian, and Latvian grew in popularity as literary languages.⁵ The Baltic peoples are not only linked politically through the creation of their independent states, but also socio-culturally through the creation of their nations.

For a study of Russian and Soviet nationalities policy, the aforementioned evidence is significant enough to overlook the controversy implicit in the use of the Baltic construct. The shared experience of the Baltic peoples under Russian and Soviet control allows them to be easily grouped, but differing cultural and historical roots allows for a diverse picture of the nationalities question from the time of their “national

⁵ Andres Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 76-81.

awakenings” to final independence. Therefore, the Baltic states prove to be entirely suitable for the role given to them.

Russification and Sovietization

There remains another matter integral to the study of Russian and Soviet nationalities policies: that of russification, a concept often prone to exaggeration or distortion. The etymology of the word, both in English and in Russian (*obrusenie*) suggests an extreme meaning: to create or transform someone into a Russian, essentially a form of forced assimilation. This idea of russification causes it to remain an emotionally-charged topic for much of the former Russian Empire and Soviet Union, especially in the Baltic’s small nations, mindful of this perceived threat to their very existence. Even professional historians are not immune, with one Latvian scholar suggesting that russification was the work of those “for whom it was unacceptable that any part of the empire should remain non-Russian linguistically and culturally.”⁶

In reality, treating russification as fundamentally identical to forced assimilation oversimplifies and unnecessarily vilifies a number of different Russian state initiatives. In my further analysis of russification I will employ the categories established by Edward Thaden, which divide russification into three varieties: cultural, unplanned, and administrative.⁷ Cultural russification is the typical view of russification: forced adoption of Russian language and culture, advocated by the more radical among the St.

⁶ Andrejs Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 256. It is worth noting that this is a momentary lapse among Dr. Plakans’ otherwise more nuanced looks on the topic, largely owing to the nature of the source as a general history.

⁷ Edward C. Thaden, ed. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 8-9.

Petersburg elite. Unplanned russification has similar results, but the process occurs without coercion; the new Russians gradually assimilate simply due to contact with or life in Russian society. The final type, administrative russification, indicates the replacement of minority languages with Russian in the official sphere. By far the most common of the three in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, administrative russification and its effects occupy the most prominent place in this study.

The process of sovietization is also worth mentioning in the context of Soviet nationalities policy, though it is less central to the study of the Soviet era than russification is to the study of Imperial Russia. Sovietization simply indicates the process of assimilating a region into the Soviet system, including (but not limited to) mass arrests and deportations, collectivization of agriculture, and the buildup of heavy industry. Whether these measures constituted an indirect form of russification throughout much of the Soviet Union is still very much a matter of debate, and something this work seeks to address.

Russification is not the sole focus of this project. It was not the only noteworthy policy of either the Russian Empire or the USSR, but it has received tremendous attention and remains central to the Baltic national narratives. Therefore, russification must be addressed to analyze effectively the policies of both Russian and Soviet regimes towards the Baltic nationalities.

Historiography of Nationalities Policy

The study of Russian and Soviet nationalities has existed for decades, but it has until recently been a difficult topic to engage critically. It began to be studied in the wake

of the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, with both the new Soviet state and the fledgling nation-states of Eastern Europe offering research and theories. Early studies, however, were characterized by the biases of the scholars who wrote it; nationalities policy, especially Russification, remained a point of contention in the non-Russian communities of the former empire, and Soviet research contained, naturally, an overtly Marxist point of view. Following the 1940 annexation of the Baltic states by the Soviet Union and the postwar establishment of communist governments throughout Eastern Europe, studies of nationalities policy were affected by the Cold War-era mentalities of the authors: Baltic and Eastern European emigres wrote with a nationalist bent, Soviet and Eastern European governments continued to focus on Marxist critique of imperial politics, and Western authors focused primarily on the Russian imperial experience.⁸ Before the 1980s, it was nigh impossible to find a source that was not “marred by the excessively national and ideological preoccupations of their authors.”⁹

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and subsequent restoration or acquisition of full independence to the Soviet republics and Warsaw Pact countries by 1991, historians gained unprecedented access to materials unavailable to them for seventy years. While the field is still not free of nationalist influences, the last twenty years has generally seen a relative explosion in quality material on nationalities in both the Soviet Union and Russian Empire. It is in the context of these that this study is written, attempting to link both studies of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Over the course of my examination of nationalities policy between Alexander II and Mikhail Gorbachev, I aim to

⁸ Darius Staliunas, *Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 4-11

⁹ Thaden, *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*, 3.

demonstrate that Russian and Soviet approaches in the Baltic states were not grand ideological projects with transformative goals, but rather were born out of pragmatism and a desire to maintain control. By focusing on short-term stability, Russian and Soviet authorities unintentionally aided Baltic independence.

The Baltic Region in Imperial Russia

During its centuries of expansion, the Russian state had acquired dozens of new peoples, new languages, and new legal systems. It had largely avoided assimilation; its territory was too vast and varied for those in centers of power to impose fundamental changes upon its subject populations. Therefore, as in many other expansionist empires, local power structures were adopted and local elites were integrated into the growing imperial bureaucracy. The ethnic groups traditionally subservient to the local elites remained in their previous positions, all but ignored by the central Russian government in favor of their masters.¹⁰ By the nineteenth century, the situation had begun to change: a series of emperors and empresses had carried out a gradual process of centralization aimed at increasing control over non-Russian territories and reducing dependence on local nobles, culminating with Nicholas I's attempts to bring local laws across the empire into line with the Russian standard.¹¹ By the reign of Alexander II, the Russian Empire still sat uncomfortably between a decentralized patchwork empire and a modern centralized state.

¹⁰ Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*, trans. Alfred Clayton (New York: Longman, 2001), 150.

¹¹ Thaden, *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*, 21.



The Baltic region c. 1850. Estland, Courland/Kurland, and Livland, formerly the Duchy of Courland and collectively known as the Baltic provinces, are now part of modern-day Estonia and Latvia. Vilna, Augustów/Suwałki, Kovno, Grodno, and Vitebsk provinces formed the Northwestern territory, now modern day-Lithuania and the Latgale region of Latvia (then known by its Polish name, Inflanty).¹²

¹² Map found in Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 74.

At the time, the Baltic region had been fully under Russian control for over half a century. The former dominant states of the region, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and the Duchy of Courland, had been divided among eight provinces (*gubernii*): Estland, Livland, Courland, Kovno, Vitebsk, Grodno, Augustów/Suwałki and Vilnius. The province divisions poorly represented the ethno-linguistic makeup of the region, but had succeeded in splitting it politically. True to the traditions of Russian expansion, local Polish and German nobles had largely stayed in power over the Baltic peoples. But as the state began to exert greater control over the Baltic, its policies came to be defined through conflict with established elites and the rising consciousness of their subjects.

The Northwestern Territory - Imperial Lithuania and Latgale

For the purposes of this section, an examination of a unified Baltic region is, at best, anachronistic and impractical. Due to significant differences in the social composition of Lithuania and the different Russian attitudes towards it, it must be dealt with independently of the more easily comparable Latvian and Estonian territories of the Russian Empire. The roots of the divide lie in Lithuania's historical affiliation with Poland: since the fourteenth century, Poland and Lithuania had shared a king, eventually leading to their constitutional union in 1569 as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Numerically inferior to Poles, Lithuanian nobles largely adopted Polish language and customs. Integration became the norm for Lithuanians seeking to elevate their social status.¹³ The upper classes of the former Commonwealth defied

¹³ Theodore R. Weeks, "Defining Us and Them: Poles and Russians in the 'Western Provinces,' 1863-1914," *Slavic Review* 53, no.1 (Spring 1994):29-30

categorization along ethnic lines, instead tying their identity to their Catholic faith or vanished state.

When much of the former Commonwealth was seized by the Russian Empire in the mid-to-late eighteenth century during the partitions of Poland, the existing social order remained largely intact. This caused anxiety among its Russian administrators, who feared the existence and influence of such a “historical nation” and culture within its own borders.¹⁴ Following the 1830-31 November Uprising throughout the Russian-controlled territories of Poland-Lithuania, their fears appeared justified. The privileges enjoyed by the Polish-Lithuanian nobility were largely abolished, Russian laws replaced local legal codes, and the Catholic Church became subject to official discrimination. And yet, Nicholas I left untouched most of the lower nobility, who remained dominant in local administration throughout the former Commonwealth.¹⁵ So long as the region remained pacified, the Russian central government was content to leave much of the local system in place.

When Alexander II took the throne, enough time had passed since the November Uprising for his liberalizing reforms to include a general softening of repressive policies in Poland-Lithuania. But in 1863, the January Uprising broke out across the region, swiftly halting any concessions. With control soon reasserted over Lithuania, dramatic new Russian policies came about in direct response to this second major uprising, occurring only 22 years after the first had been crushed.. It had become clear to the

¹⁴ Ibid., 29.

¹⁵ Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*, 249-50

Russian government that cooperation with local elites could no longer guarantee stability, but few knew what could replace it.

In 1863, Mikhail Nikolayevich Muravyov was appointed as Governor General of the Northwestern Territory, an area roughly corresponding to the former Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The measures adopted during his tenure would make him known as a “notorious voice of russification” throughout the region.¹⁶ Muravyov’s rhetoric presented a radical departure from the moderation of Nicholas I’s time, referring to the Northwestern Territory as “decisively Russian” and an “ancient property of Russia.”¹⁷ He recommended the Emperor take steps to protect the Russian element present¹⁸ in the Territory by exiling seditious elements and confiscating their land and property, then filling the vacancy with Russian settlers. The Orthodox Church was to be supported at the expense of Catholicism, and elementary schools in the Territory would begin to teach “Russian and Slavic reading and writing [...] and the basic tenets of Orthodoxy.” Lithuanian schools, if teaching in their native tongue, could no longer use books written with Latin characters, a ban which would remain in effect until 1904.¹⁹ Muravyov appeared to be advancing one of the first programs of cultural russification.

And yet, despite his aggressive promotion of Russian and Orthodox interests in the Northwestern Territory, it would be difficult to claim that Muravyov actively sought to

¹⁶ Theodore R. Weeks, “Russification: Word and Practice, 1863-1914,” *The Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 148, no. 4 (Dec. 2004):477

¹⁷ Mikhail Muravyov-Vilensky, “Zapiska o Nekotorikh Voprosakh po Ustroystvu Severo-Zapadnovo Kraya,” in “Chetyre Politicheskie Zapiski Grafa Mikhaila Nikolayevicha Muravyova-Vilenskovo,” *Russkiy Arkhiv* 5 (June 1885): 186

¹⁸ An element which largely consisted of Belorussians, then considered essentially Russian by the state.

¹⁹ Muravyov-Vilensky, “Zapiska o Nekotorikh Voprosakh po Ustroystvu Severo-Zapadnovo Kraya,” 187, 189-92.

assimilate the Poles, Lithuanians, and Jews who formed a large part of the region. Officially-encouraged mass migration of Russian settlers to the territory, an effort to strengthen the local position of Russian and Orthodox culture, certainly constituted a gradual form of cultural russification, but the intent was less to russify and more to depolonize. Muravyov was obsessed with “mad rushes of Polish propaganda” and the “influence of the fanatical Catholic clergy.”²⁰ His fears exemplified Russian fears of the strength and appeal that Polish Catholic culture could have over the peoples of the former Commonwealth, especially Ukrainians and Belorussians, but not excluding Lithuanians. Konstantin Kaufman, Muravyov’s successor, shared similar radically anti-Polish and anti-Catholic views, organizing a series of mass conversions of the Catholic population.²¹ These ardent russifiers in Baltic history generally desired the expanding of Russian presence at the expense of the Poles, if not the total cultural conversion of the Northwestern Territory. As the fires of the January Uprising died down, however, such radical ideas became increasingly hard to defend in the face of opposition in Petersburg, where they had been tolerated if never wholeheartedly supported.

Both immediately before and after the January Uprising, an alternative to russification and depolonization was offered by prominent Slavophile thinker and linguist Alexander Hilferding. While Muravyov primarily targeted the ruling Polish nobles, Hilferding advocated for a strategy which scholar Darius Staliunas terms “divide and rule,” avoiding assimilation in favor of pitting a loyal regional minority against a

²⁰ Ibid., 186, 191.

²¹ Staliunas, *Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863*, 139-141

potentially disloyal regional minority, in this case the Lithuanians against the Poles.²² At the time, the prevailing view of Lithuanians among Russian officials was dismissive at best, with one Russian governor of Vilnius suggesting that an autonomous Lithuania outside Russian or Polish influence ran “counter to history and common sense.”²³ Hilferding disagreed, attempting to emphasize historical ties between Lithuanians and Russians and claiming that Poland had driven a wedge between historical allies. To bring the Lithuanians back as friends of Russia, Hilferding stressed education for their recently emancipated peasantry, eschewing both Polish and Russian language education in favor of Lithuanian itself. Teaching Russian to Lithuanians, he concludes, “would mean [...] teaching them nothing at all.”²⁴

“Divide and rule” never became the official position of the Russian government in the Northwestern Territory, but its influence was still felt. Governor General Vladimir Nazimov, Muravyov’s predecessor, encouraged introduction of peasant reforms, elementary schooling in Lithuanian, and increased printing in Lithuanian.²⁵ “Divide and rule” appeared even among Muravyov’s forceful programs. Muravyov pushed for redistribution of land from Polish landlords to Lithuanian and Belorussian peasants, as well as the growth of vernacular education for Lithuanians.²⁶ Even the notorious ban on

²² Darius Staliunas, “Between Russification and Divide and Rule: Russian Nationality Policy in the Western Borderlands in the mid-19th Century,” *Jarbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 55, no. 3 (2007): 358

²³ Quote by Ivan Shestakov in Staliunas, *Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863*, 40.

²⁴ Alexander Hilferding, “Litva i Zhmud,” in *Sobranie sochineniy* vol. 2 (St. Petersburg: V. Golovin Publishing, 1868), 369-70, 379-80

²⁵ Staliunas, “Between Russification and Divide and Rule: Russian Nationality Policy in the Western Borderlands in the mid-19th Century,” 361.

²⁶ Muravyov-Vilensky, “Zapiska o Nekotorikh Voprosakh po Ustroystvu Severo-Zapadnovo Kraya,” 188-91

Lithuanian publications in the Latin alphabet came from Hilferding's ideas on splitting the Lithuanians and Poles.

Russification and "divide and rule" were never mutually exclusive policies, and both were used in attempts to weaken the power of local elites in Lithuania. In general, however, more radical ideas rarely prospered in the region during Imperial Russian rule. Despite the dramatic efforts of men like Muravyov, neither russification nor "divide and rule" fully replaced the old imperial system of cooperation. By the turn of the twentieth century, the regional administration had begun to question whether they had achieved anything at all since 1863.²⁷ Vaguely defined goals and inconsistent implementation had failed to reinforce Russian control over Lithuania beyond the short term restoration of the status quo.

Estland, Kurland, and Livland - Imperial Latvia and Estonia

In the northern Baltic, the lands of the former Duchy of Courland appeared vastly different from their restless southern neighbors in the Northwestern Territory. Compared to the violence and poverty that characterized Lithuanian territory in the 1860s, the Baltic provinces were generally among the most developed in the Empire. Hilferding noted that some had even hoped to solve the issue of unrest in the Northwestern Territory by transferring a portion of it to the Baltic provinces, using the logic that the calm experienced in the north would perhaps carry over.²⁸ Estonian and Latvian serfs had been emancipated nearly fifty years before their Russian counterparts, and their position gradually had improved to include elementary education in their native tongues

²⁷ Weeks, "Russification: Word and Practice, 1863-1914," 481-2

²⁸ Hilferding, "Litva i Zhmud," 383.

and the right to private property. The ruling classes were predominantly German, present in the region since 12th-century Baltic crusades. In contrast with the Poles of the Northwestern Territory, Russian relations with the Baltic Germans were amicable: Germans had long played a disproportionately large role in both local and central government, and their loyalty was rewarded with the preservation of their traditional privileges and legal system.²⁹ But their reprieve was only temporary. The Baltic provinces would experience a struggle similar to, if far more muted than, the one taking place in turbulent Lithuania.

The creation of a unified Germany marked the beginning of the end of relative autonomy for the Baltic Germans. After seeing Prussia seize territories with a German-speaking population from both Denmark and France, some Russians feared that Kurland, Livland, and Estland could be next. Prominent Slavophile Yuri Samarin called for a program in the Baltic provinces similar to Muravyov's in Lithuania, demanding the interests of the Orthodox Church and the Russian people be advanced at the expense of the Germans.³⁰ Alexander II, however, prevented significant action against the traditional rights of the Baltic Germans and Lutheran Church. He held little regard for Samarin's position, telling the representatives of the Baltic nobility that he "spit[s] upon this press which tries to put you on the same level with the Poles."³¹ For the remainder of Alexander II's reign, the Russian government largely resisted the increasing pressures to enact reforms in the Baltic provinces.

²⁹ Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*, 251.

³⁰ Michael Haltzel, "The Baltic Germans," in *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*, ed. Edward C. Thaden (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981) 150.

³¹ Quoted in Haltzel, "The Baltic Germans," 126.

In the 1880s, Emperor Alexander III broke the traditional tolerance Russian tsars had held for Baltic Germans since the time of Peter the Great. Confronted by a unified German state as a rival on the European stage, Alexander III was wary of such a powerful German-speaking minority within the Russian Empire and adopted policies more in line with the ignored radicals of his father's reign. His government began to concern itself with bringing about administrative russification in the Baltic provinces.³² Under his rule, Russian was made the official language for municipal government, the judiciary, police, and correspondence with regional governors.³³ Russification was not limited to the administrative sphere: as in Lithuania, a degree of cultural russification was introduced to the region. After an inspection showed that the inhabitants of the Baltic lacked "respect and understanding for Russian language, history, and literature[.]" Russian became the language of instruction in elementary schools. The state also began to reinforce the position of Orthodoxy in the region by funding proselytizing Orthodox brotherhoods and the construction of churches.³⁴ By the turn of the twentieth century, the example of Muravyov's Lithuania seemed to have been replicated in Latvia and Estonia.

Elements of "divide and rule" were also present in Russian policies towards the Baltic provinces. Along with the Slavophiles, some of the first voices to demand state intervention in the press had been prominent Latvian and Estonian activists. To the native Baltic population, Russian rule was preferable to continued German hegemony.³⁵

³² Weeks, "Russification: Word and Practice, 1863-1914," 475. Weeks also claims that Alexander III's Danish wife played a role in his anti-German stance.

³³ Haltzel, "The Baltic Germans," 154-5.

³⁴ Thaden, *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*, 58-9, 68-9.

³⁵ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 258.

Russian officials of the time often responded positively: their administrative reforms allowed for greater social mobility among Latvians and Estonians, even adopting a proposal to create Riga and Reval provinces along ethnic lines. The resulting provinces would have almost totally ended the dominant position of Baltic Germans in the region.³⁶ While recommended to the emperor, the plan was ultimately rejected.

The rejection was in line with the hesitancy which characterized imperial policy in the Baltic provinces. Nicholas II largely kept to the same path his father had followed, but without the same conviction: during his reign the state ceased active promotion of mass conversion to Orthodoxy and began to once again show preference for Baltic German political parties over Latvian and Estonian nationalist groups.³⁷ Russian reforms had damaged the social standing of the Baltic Germans, but the Estonians and Latvians who benefitted from this were angered by the implementation of cultural russification.³⁸ As in Lithuania, the Russian Empire had shown itself to be incapable of adopting a consistent policy. As revolt and revolution became a greater threat in the Baltic, the state continued to seek short-term stability instead of long-term control.

Baltic Nationalism and Independence

In 1855, few foresaw a future for the Baltic region outside of Russian, German, or Polish hegemony. Yet just over 60 years later, the independent states of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were created, wholly independent and coexisting with Russian, Polish, and German states. To suggest Russian nationalities policy was responsible for

³⁶ Thaden, *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*, 65-6

³⁷ Haltzel, "The Baltic Germans," 158.

³⁸ Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*, 259.

the growth and success of the Baltic national movements would be an oversimplification: Baltic nationalism, representative of a complex historical phenomenon, can hardly be attributed to a single cause. At most, the Russian Empire can be credited with facilitating an environment in which national sentiments could thrive. Nevertheless, to understand fully the consequences of the Imperial era and the difficulties faced by the Soviets in ruling the region, the experience of the Baltic nations from “awakening” through independence must be explored.

When discussing the administration of Lithuania, Alexander Hilferding claimed that because it “is so small and pushed between Russians, Germans and Poles, it cannot think of independence[.]”³⁹ Instead of separatism, Hilferding desired the preservation and strengthening of Lithuanian language and culture, a plan similar to those held by many intellectuals towards the Baltic peoples. While not without German and Russian supporters, such a view was commonly held by Baltic nationalists themselves.⁴⁰ The names Latvia and Estonia would be created only in 1856,⁴¹ soon after which the Lithuanians would rise up to fight for an increasingly Polish national concept. With their national ideas still in infancy, the most radical Baltic thinkers sought increased cultural, linguistic, and economic autonomy from German and Polish ruling classes. Vernacular language printing exploded in the northern Baltic, with newspapers, poetry, and national epics written by Latvians and Estonians emerging in the 1860s. In Lithuania, where decreased literacy and the ban on Roman characters hindered local authors, a cultural lifeline began in the form of smuggled texts from the small Lithuanian

³⁹ Hilferding, “Litva i Zhmud,” 379.

⁴⁰ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 226-7.

⁴¹ Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 77.

population in East Prussia.⁴² Over the next few decades, Baltic natives gained an ever-increasing foothold in the cultural, administrative, and economic spheres.

As nationalists came into conflict with traditional elites, they encouraged cooperation with Russia to strengthen their position, as previously mentioned, but were soon rewarded with the onset of Russification during the 1880s. Frustrated by the continued power of traditional elites and the misguided and uneven Russian attempts at intervention, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian nationalists declared their desire for full autonomy within the Russian Empire in the wake of the 1905 Revolution. Independence was still not strongly considered: even after German occupation in the First World War, only Lithuanian nationalists pushed for true statehood instead of a national autonomous zone within a larger power.⁴³ If support for the idea among Baltic nationalists themselves was mixed, it held even less sway over their rivals: Poles, Baltic Germans, Jews, and large Socialist parties. The latter came into their own after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, with the Latvian Rifles providing the fledgling Soviet government with a core of professional military supporters. When nationalists felt confident to declare the creation of three new states in early 1918, their future was far from certain. In the ensuing chaos, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania were able to carve out a niche for themselves among the struggles of the Red Army, “White” anti-communists, the Polish and German armies, and the forces of Baltic Germans and domestic communists. The victory of the Baltic nationalists owed much to opportunism, but this does not diminish

⁴² Ibid., 80.

⁴³ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 294-7.

the accomplishment. In just 60 years, the Baltic states had gone from idea to reality.

Nearly all of the



*The interwar Baltic states, with disputed/occupied territories marked.*⁴⁴

constituent peoples of the Russian Empire experienced a period of independence following the Revolution. With the exception of Finland, all of them were later integrated into the Soviet Union. Still, these brief triumphs of the nation did much to influence both the nationalities and the Soviet policies designed to accommodate and control them. Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania's unusual 22-year period of independence nearly outlived all other breakaways from the Russian Empire, and therefore had a proportionally greater impact.

Initially, all three Baltic states became democratic republics, operating on the principles of Western European parliamentary democracies. Such a system helped to curry the favor of Britain and France, as well as soothe the serious political divisions which had emerged in each country's war for independence. With the exception of the banned Communist Party, the former political opponents of nationalism were well represented: Socialist blocs typically dominated in the more educated and urbanized states of Latvia and Estonia, while the significant national minorities of all three were granted extensive freedoms in addition to ample political representation.⁴⁵ The newfound political power of Baltic natives allowed them to rapidly and radically redress grievances against the traditional Polish and Baltic German elites. Massive land reform acts confiscated 94% of the land of noble estates in Estonia, 84% in Latvia, and 77% in Lithuania.⁴⁶ While still wealthy, politically active, and allowed to use their native tongues, Poles and Germans had been removed from their dominant positions in Baltic societies.

⁴⁴ Map from Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 121.

⁴⁵ Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 106-107, 117-118

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 113.

In the first years of independence, the Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians had at last become masters over their lands.

The Baltic democracies were fractious and unstable, with coalition governments regularly rising and falling. Eventually, like nearly all the interwar nations of Central and Eastern Europe, authoritarian regimes took power: in Lithuania in 1926, in Estonia and Latvia in 1934. The dictators of the three countries (Konstantin Päts in Estonia, Kārlis Ulmanis in Latvia, and Antanas Smetona in Lithuania) had all been moderate nationalists and founders of their respective states. Compared to fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, the Baltic regimes were relatively benign, but similarly based their political power on the will of the dominant ethnic group.⁴⁷ The most radical expressions of nationalism, such as the fascist groups *Geležinis Vilkas* in Lithuania and *Pērkonkrusts* in Latvia, were repressed; at the same time national minorities lost some, but not all, of the privileges granted to them by democratic governments. Moderate in character, the dictators of the Baltic still advanced a clear nationalist agenda. By the time the Soviet Union annexed the Baltic states in 1940, the once seemingly accidental countries had become true nation-states.

Development of Nationalities Policy in the Early Soviet Period

Following the overthrow of the Imperial Russian government in the February Revolution of 1917, the weakening of central power allowed all the varied opponents of the former regime to assert some degree of influence over the future of the country. For some, this entailed a transition to a more liberal state, retaining the borders of the

⁴⁷ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 326.

Empire. For the dozens of minorities populating the borderlands, it meant seizing an opportunity to gain concessions from the government, or even full independence. But the most prevalent factions of revolutionary Russia were followers of Marxist philosophy: the socialists and the communists. Just eight months after the initial revolution, Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik Party seized power in a swift coup and proclaimed the creation of the world's first socialist state. The new government was immediately challenged by its many rivals in a civil war driven by ideology and nationality, forcing the Bolsheviks to rapidly adapt in order to maintain control.

The Bolsheviks had given much thought to the seizure of power, but were less prepared for the administration of a massive and multiethnic state, particularly evident in the evolution of their stance towards the national question. Before the October Revolution, Lenin held a disdainful view of nationalism, claiming that national culture is "the culture of the landlords, the clergy, and the bourgeoisie." The culture of the oppressed workers and peasants would be naturally inclined towards socialism and internationalism, were it not suppressed by the dominant bourgeois nationalism.⁴⁸ Lenin rejected special privileges of linguistic and cultural autonomy for minorities, instead favoring equal linguistic and cultural rights for the whole population. Shared culture and language would be derived through economic ties, free of arbitrarily assigned borders and state coercion.⁴⁹ The Bolsheviks were confident of the ability of socialism to cross ethnic lines. They outwardly supported the right of nationalities to secede from imperialist states, but did not believe that secession from a free, socialist society would

⁴⁸ Vladimir Lenin, "Critical Remarks on the National Question," in *Selections from V.I. Lenin and J.V. Stalin on the National Colonial Question* (Calcutta: Calcutta Book House, 1970), 4-5.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 4, 13

be an issue. Stalin himself claimed on the eve of revolution that nine-tenths of the minority peoples would not want to secede.⁵⁰

Reality proved far different from the expectations of Stalin and the other Bolsheviks, who found themselves battling not only their expected ideological opponents, but also national uprisings across the periphery of the former empire. Desperate for support, Bolsheviks compromised their initial stance on the nationalities by acknowledging and encouraging military units organized on ethnic, rather than partisan, lines, a measure forbidden under Imperial Russian rule.⁵¹ Soon after, the Bolsheviks endorsed the creation of autonomous regions organized on national lines, particularly for Muslim regions in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Often these regions received barely any authority over central government decisions, but the gesture was important both symbolically and as a rejection of early Bolshevik principles; the Party began to assert that autonomy was necessary to economically and socially prepare the borderlands for socialism.⁵² These massive improvised alterations of their stance toward the national question proved successful: through compromise and military force, the Bolsheviks gained control over nearly all of the former Russian Empire.

With civil war successfully concluded, the Bolsheviks did not adjust their conciliatory attitude towards the nationalities. Instead, with the creation of the Soviet Union in 1924, they enshrined it at the heart of their new state. Lenin, who had once

⁵⁰ Gerhard Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*, trans. Karen and Oswald Forster (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 21.

⁵¹ Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 34-35

⁵² *Ibid.*, 50-52, 65

argued that “Marxists will never, under any circumstances, advocate either the federal principle or decentralization[,]”⁵³ became the leader of a federation of ostensibly sovereign republics. Each republic of the USSR was constitutionally granted the right to diplomatic relations with other states, control over much of its internal affairs, and the right to secede. The latter right was considered by Lenin to be an important step towards the ultimate erasure of national distinctions: because coerced peoples would never assimilate, a period of complete liberty was necessary.⁵⁴ In practice, however, the constitutional rights of the republics were marginalized before the central government. Stalin personally believed that exercising the right to secede was a counter-revolutionary act.⁵⁵

In the build-up to the formation of the Soviet Union, Stalin had begun to exert greater and greater influence over the nascent Bolshevik nationalities policy, eventually clashing with Lenin himself. While Stalin initially agreed with Lenin on the need to “work solidly and indefatigably against the fog of nationalism” and reject national-cultural autonomy,⁵⁶ his very definition of a nation differed from Lenin’s. For Stalin, a nation was not merely an ephemeral side effect of economic factors, but rather a “historical construct which could not be abolished.”⁵⁷ In general, Stalin was far more concerned with the nationalities issue as a persistent threat to a socialist state than Lenin, with

⁵³ Lenin, “Critical Remarks on the National Question,” 11. Lenin later softened his stance on federations, considering them preferable to national inequality if it led to democratic centralism. See “The Socialist Revolution and the Right of Nations to Self-Determination.” (1916)

⁵⁴ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 23.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁶ Josef Stalin, “Marxism and the National Question” in *Selections from V.I. Lenin and J.V. Stalin on the National Colonial Question*, 66, 94

⁵⁷ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy Towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 22.

some even suggesting that he considered nations a more important historical catalyst than classes.⁵⁸ During the Civil War, Stalin was placed in charge of The People's Commissariat for Nationality Affairs (Narkomnats), responsible for addressing the problems of national minorities. In this capacity, he advanced the implementation of autonomous regions for the nationalities, attempting to parcel the various peoples of the Caucasus and Central Asia into ethnically homogenous units. Stalin hoped territorial autonomy within the existing Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) would prove sufficient to quell the national problems of the new state, but Lenin, fearing accusations of Russian chauvinism and continued unrest, overrode him, pushing for a federal state.⁵⁹ Ultimately, Lenin's vision for the construction of the USSR triumphed, but his illness and death in 1924 left Stalin largely unopposed in the realm of nationality affairs.

In the Soviet republics, the 1920s became a time of nation-building. Stalin believed that to end the national question, the masses of each republic should become engaged in the administration of their own territory and develop their language and culture. Thus began the policy of *korenizatsiya* (nativization, or "making roots,") a major push to include more representatives of national minorities in the Party. Never completely effective, *korenizatsiya* managed to raise the number of native participants in local Party structure to 53.8% by 1932.⁶⁰ For the first time, many ethnic groups with no history as an independent state before the Civil War had now had both

⁵⁸ Eric Cahn, quoted in Walter A. Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 55-56

⁵⁹ Jeremy Smith, *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and after the USSR* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 63-65

⁶⁰ Simon, *Nationalism and the Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 31.

clearly-defined borders and national leaders. Soviet leadership also concerned itself with the standardization of languages across the republics, creating writing systems for peoples who lacked them in order to advance literacy throughout the USSR. Many nativizing policies were conscious rejections of the former regime: new national histories were actively encouraged to emphasize the struggle against Russian imperialism.⁶¹ With Lenin gone, Stalin could actively alter Lenin's theories towards the national question to suit the new reality, claiming that the erasure of national differences would not occur until after the success of the world revolution, and that it was "obvious that Lenin was entirely and completely in favor of developing national culture under the dictatorship of the proletariat[.]"⁶² The Bolsheviks had gone from reluctant adoption of autonomy to a full-blown embrace of national differences within socialism. The national question had been put to rest, all while allowing the central government to retain its grip on the country as a whole.

However, starting in 1932, Stalin began to restrict privileges granted to the republics in the previous decade. He declared that improper implementation of *korenizatsiya* had allowed bourgeois nationalists and other counter-revolutionaries to infiltrate the local Party structures of the republics, beginning a long period of national repression.⁶³ National communist leaders had often held conflicting views to the central party, seeking greater autonomy, expansion of federal powers, and de-russification of their territory.⁶⁴ Stalin's desired balance between national autonomy and central power

⁶¹ Smith, *Red Nations*, 92-93

⁶² Josef Stalin, "Deviations on the National Question" in *Selections from V.I. Lenin and J.V. Stalin on the National Colonial Question*, 184-185.

⁶³ Smith, *Red Nations*, 97.

⁶⁴ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 77-78.

had been challenged, and he thus sought to remove the troublesome elements while still giving the required platitudes to the idea of sovereign republics. Throughout the 1930s, the leaders of every republic or autonomous region (with the exceptions of Azerbaijan and Georgia) were purged. The nationalist histories of the 1920s were officially condemned, replaced with “primordialism,” which shifted the focus of national history from resistance to Russian imperialism to the ancient past. The Russian people and their culture were placed in the center of the Soviet project, and Russian language education was made mandatory.⁶⁵ *Korenizatsiya* was reversed: by 1937, minority membership in local Party organizations had fallen back to 45%.⁶⁶ Caught up in the broad sweep of Stalinist terror, the national communism of the 1920s had been brought to heel.

Yet at the end of the 1930s, the national question in the USSR was far from settled. The inefficacy of Imperial Russian policies in the borderlands had embittered the minorities and empowered national groups to a degree unexpected by the Bolsheviks, forcing a compromise to ensure the survival of the socialist state. By organizing the USSR in line with the concessions to nationalities, Lenin and Stalin established a dangerous precedent of granting rights to the minorities which they had no intention of allowing them to truly use. Previously vague and disparate peoples united thanks the creation and codification of national subunits in the 1920s, only to promptly experience marginalization and repression in the 1930s. The uneasy

⁶⁵ Smith, *Red Nations*, 116-119.

⁶⁶ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 31.

compromise at the heart of the Soviet system would only be weakened by the annexation of the three independent Baltic states.

The Second World War in the Soviet Union and the Baltic States

Throughout the 1930s, the Baltic states, like many Eastern European countries, attempted vainly to preserve their independence in the face of Nazi and Soviet aggression. Militarily, they stood little chance of defeating or even checking any advances into their territory; geography granted them no advantages akin to those enjoyed by Finland⁶⁷ and the three states were not allied to even each other, let alone any larger power. They relied instead on diplomatic measures: France and Great Britain were courted, non-aggression pacts were signed with the Soviet Union, and Lithuania ceded the Memel/Klaipėda territory to Germany. Acutely aware of their lack of bargaining power, the Baltic states hoped a strategy of appeasement would at least ensure their existence.

Appeasement reached its height soon after Germany and the Soviet Union invaded Poland in September 1939. Unbeknownst to the Baltic states, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact had determined not only Poland's future, but also their own: the Soviets, free of German interference, now considered Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania as part of their sphere of influence. Under threat of military force, the Baltic states were compelled to sign treaties of mutual assistance with the USSR in October and November. They retained their independence, but tens of thousands of Soviet soldiers

⁶⁷ During the interwar period, Finland was generally included among the Baltic states. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact specifically names them as such. Smith, *Red Nations*, 173.

were now stationed in their territory. Of the three nations, only Lithuania, which was awarded Vilnius from conquered Poland, received significant compensation.⁶⁸ After several months, the Baltic countries' continued claims of neutrality ended by Soviet ultimatum in June 1940. Accused of failing to abide by the terms of the earlier treaties, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania accepted free movement of Soviet troops and the formation of new governments. New elections voted in leftist governments by over 90% of the vote after the suppression of all other parties,⁶⁹ and in August the Baltic states formally became part of the Soviet Union. After just 22 years, Baltic independence was over, one of the first casualties of growing European conflict.

The First Soviet Occupation, 1940-1

Even before officially joining the USSR, the inhabitants of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania began to experience life under Stalinism. The small local communist parties took power following their legalization in June of 1940, supplemented by trained Soviet communists of Baltic descent and the might of the Red Army.⁷⁰ Their objective was to rapidly bring the formerly independent states in line with the Soviet model and suppress potentially disloyal elements. With the exception of the Lutheran and Catholic churches, most organizations, large businesses, and industries were seized by the state. Some attempts were made to endear the new governments to the people: another wave of land reform saw remaining estates redistributed to poor or landless farmers, and wages for the working classes increased on paper. These changes were rendered pointless,

⁶⁸ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 339.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁷⁰ Walter C. Clemens, Jr., *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 44.

however, by rising prices and the nationalization of banks.⁷¹ For the most part, the Baltic states were initially spared the worst aspects of Stalinism to prevent local unrest, but sovietization was gaining momentum.

The most extreme sovietizing measure used in the first occupation of the Baltic states could be seen in its reliance on deportations. Beginning in June 1940, highly-placed military and public officials were quietly imprisoned and removed from the region by the new authorities. Their numbers were in the thousands, but the piecemeal nature of the arrests kept them from reaching the scale of previous Stalinist purges.⁷² But after a year of Soviet rule, the deportations abruptly accelerated. On the night of June 13th, 1941, approximately 10,000 Estonians, 15,000 Latvians, and 18,000 Lithuanians were arrested and sent to camps without trial.⁷³ Only some had been named as enemies of the working class: most were the families of the accused.⁷⁴ It seemed as though the brief period of quasi-sovereignty in the Baltic region was ending and being replaced with a new era without any concessions to soften the heavy-handed tactics of the Stalinist regime. But just a week after the first round of mass deportations, Operation Barbarossa left the future of the Baltic states uncertain. Even before the Germans arrived, thousands of guerrillas had killed hundreds of retreating Soviet soldiers and established a provisional government in Lithuania.⁷⁵ The first period of Soviet occupation in the Baltic region had left the process of sovietization incomplete:

⁷¹ Purs, *Baltic Dreams*, 53-54

⁷² Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 343.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁷⁴ Purs, *Baltic Dreams*, 54.

⁷⁵ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 348.

instead of ending resistance to Soviet rule, it had only spurred resentment among the Baltic peoples.

Soviet Nationalities Policy during the Great Patriotic War

In the first months of the German invasion of the Soviet Union, the Wehrmacht captured much of the European part of the Soviet Union, including the entirety of the Soviet republics of Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, and Ukraine. These republics had either been acquired or expanded through Soviet force in the previous two years, and the memory of Stalinist excesses was still fresh. Often, the arrival of German troops was welcomed by the local population.⁷⁶ The Soviet minorities would eventually turn against the racially-motivated policies of repression and extermination practiced by the Germans, but their initial reception of the invaders clearly demonstrated the weakness of Soviet rule in its borderlands.

Its existence threatened, the USSR once again responded with compromise and contradiction. To mobilize the nationalities for the war effort, renewed stress was placed upon the unity and friendship shared among the Soviet peoples as they worked together to defeat the “fascist barbarians.”⁷⁷ In military terms, this entailed the resurrection of national military units, previously banned in 1938, and the acceptance of nationalist partisan units willing to cooperate with the Soviets.⁷⁸ Restrictions were loosened in the cultural realm as well: the war years saw a brief resurgence in the nationalist histories of the 1920s and the idolization of pre-revolutionary historical figures.⁷⁹ One of the most

⁷⁶ Smith, *Red Nations*, 127.

⁷⁷ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 182.

⁷⁸ Smith, *Red Nations*, 135, 140.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 141-142

significant official acknowledgements of the nationalities during the war occurred in 1944, when a constitutional amendment granted extensive privileges to the constituent republics of the Soviet Union. Formally, the republics gained the right to establish ministries of foreign affairs and raise their own troops, furthering the original goals of Soviet federalism. In practice, however, little changed for the republics.⁸⁰ Any wartime gains would prove temporary.

A more lasting consequence of the war was the continued growth of Russian chauvinism. From the outset of the conflict, the Great Patriotic War was framed as a distinctly Russian defense of the homeland. To a far greater extent than the subject nations, Russia, its history, and its national heroes were used to inspire patriotism among the populace. Russians became the “first among equals” or “older brother” to the other nationalities, leading the way to and assuming the primary burdens of socialism.⁸¹ Confusingly, the Soviet state advanced the message of Russian exceptionalism concurrently with its temporary tolerance of national histories. Until the end of the war, the state offered conflicting versions of patriotism in its attempts to motivate as much of the population as possible.

By the war’s end, the Soviet Union had to no small degree assumed the position of the former Russian Empire. It had advanced into the former imperial possessions of Poland, Finland, Moldova, and the Baltic states, and now stood on a platform of Russian chauvinism, once so decried by its founders. Unlike Imperial Russia, however, the USSR continued to offer its subject peoples rights which it would not allow them to

⁸⁰ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy towards the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 190.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 182.

exercise. By failing to present a consistent stance on the national question, the Soviets were only breeding resentment among the nationalities.

The Baltic Region in the Soviet Union

The Baltic region emerged from the Second World War deeply changed. The war had divided the populace: hundreds of thousands of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians had volunteered or were conscripted into the Red Army, the SS, or nationalist partisan movements. In the Baltic, the Second World War often resembled a domestic conflict when the national units of differing armies clashed.⁸² At the end of the war, approximately 30,000 Lithuanians, 15,000 Latvians, and 10,000 Estonians continued guerrilla resistance against the Soviet Union..⁸³ Additionally, the prewar diversity which characterized the interwar Baltic region had disappeared after five years of occupation and war. The Jewish population, particularly large in Lithuania, was a victim of the Holocaust; the Baltic Germans had left through a mixture of Nazi incentives and Soviet coercion in 1940; and a significant amount of the leadership and intelligentsia, fearing the return of Soviet rule, fled the country.⁸⁴ In 1944, the triumphant Red Army occupied a different region from the one they had seized four years earlier: the Baltic states were now ethnically homogenous and actively opposed to Soviet power.

The immediate resumption of aggressive sovietizing tactics did little to soothe tensions in the region. Deportations immediately resumed: between 1940 and 1954,

⁸² Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 356-357

⁸³ Ben Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 73.

⁸⁴ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 340, 354, 358.

203,590 Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were deported from the total combined population of 5,611,000, a loss of approximately 3.6%.⁸⁷ The Soviets had downplayed the possibility of collectivization during the first occupation,⁸⁸ but now implemented it in earnest. As small farms disappeared, so did the support base for nationalist guerrillas, whose numbers dwindled until their final eradication in the early 1950s. The largely destroyed industry of the region began rapid reconstruction, but the depleted populace was unable to fill the needed positions. Consequently, 400,000 Russians and 100,000 representatives of other nationalities (largely Ukrainians and Belarusians) arrived to seek employment in Latvia by the end of the 1950s, while 180,000 Russians came to Estonia. Lithuania, on the other hand, was able to escape the worst of the mass migrations due to its larger population, continued partisan activities, and agrarian economy.⁸⁹ Whether driven by economic factors or intentionally encouraged as a pacifying and russifying measure by the state (as many believed in the Baltic states themselves,⁹⁰) the influx of Russian-speaking immigrants helped stabilize the region and support the local communist parties, in which Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians only comprised 30-40% of the total membership.⁹¹ Upon the eve of Stalin's death in 1953, the Baltic region had become fully integrated into the Soviet system.

⁸⁷ Smith, *Red Nations*, 182.

⁸⁸ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 345.

⁸⁹ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 218.

⁹⁰ Purs, *Baltic Facades*, 64.

⁹¹ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 363.

Republic	1945	1959	1970	1979	1989
Estonia	94	75	68	65	62
Latvia	80	62	57	54	52
Lithuania	78	79	79	80	80

Percentage of Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians in the total population of their titular republics.⁹²

Republic	1959	1970	1979	1989
Estonia	20	25	28	30
Latvia	27	30	33	34
Lithuania	9	9	9	9

Percentage of Russians in the total population of the Baltic republics.⁹³

After Stalin: Reform and Reaction, 1953-82

Despite Stalin's efforts to "solve" the nationalities problem, his successors remained troubled by it. Like Stalin before them, Khrushchev and Brezhnev were forced to pander to the nationalities, beginning their periods of rule with a relaxation of nationalities policy in order to consolidate power before later attempting to reassert control.

⁹⁴ But as more powers devolved from the central government to the union republics, this cycle of reform and reaction became difficult. Unwilling or unable to use the degree of

⁹² Data from Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 155, and Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 385-387.

⁹³ Data from Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 385-387, and Smith, *Red Nations*, 249-250.

⁹⁴ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 134.

coercion employed by the Stalinist state, however, Stalin's successors garnered only ill will and open protest, not lasting stability.

Immediately after Stalin's death, this use of national and federal concessions manifested itself in the ensuing struggle for power. Lavrentii Beria, the powerful head of Soviet security forces, tried to parlay favor among the nationalities in a bid to edge out his rivals. In Lithuania and Ukraine, he introduced measures to increase the involvement of locals in Party apparatus of the republics, culminating in the naming of an ethnic Ukrainian to the position of First Secretary of the Ukrainian Communist Party. Beria had further plans for the Baltic in particular: the Russian Second Secretaries of the Baltic parties were all replaced with locals.⁹⁵ In line with these policies, the Soviet press strongly condemned Russian chauvinism and encouraged the development of national languages and cultures.⁹⁶ When Beria was arrested in June 1953, the charges against him included inspiring bourgeois nationalism in the republics.⁹⁷ His execution signaled the end of his radical approach towards national politics, but his opponents, Khrushchev among them, were aware that such a tactic could have been enough to propel him to power.⁹⁸ The nationalities factor had gained the potential to be a Soviet kingmaker.

⁹⁵ Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union*, 76.

⁹⁶ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 229-230.

⁹⁷ Smith, *Red Nations*, 193.

⁹⁸ Walter Connor and Jeremy Azrael, cited in Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 243.

Khrushchev (1953-1964)

Well aware of this fact, Khrushchev, the ultimate victor of the power struggle, adopted a similar, if slightly milder, form of Beria's nationalities policy. Some of Beria's changes were reversed: the Second Secretaries of Lithuania and Latvia were replaced by Russians in 1955 and 1956, respectively.⁹⁹ Rather than directly appeal to the nationalities as Beria had, Khrushchev instead positioned himself as a return to the Leninist roots of the party, claiming that socialism sought to develop the economy and culture of all different peoples.¹⁰⁰ A tremendous amount of economic and administrative powers were delegated to the republics, particularly after Khrushchev introduced his *sovnarkhoz* (an abbreviation for "national economic council") reform. Across the USSR, portions of the system of central planning were dismantled and replaced by a network of local economic councils, removing power from Khrushchev's opponents in Moscow and appeasing the republics by allowing them unprecedented control of their own economic affairs.¹⁰¹ The reform came soon after Khrushchev had successfully defended himself from a challenge from Stalinists within the party who had accused him of encouraging nationalism.¹⁰² With the support of the union republics, Khrushchev secured his place at the head of the Soviet Union, and in turn, the republics were rewarded.

In 1962, Khrushchev declared that the nationalities problem had been solved in the Soviet Union.¹⁰³ In spite of this optimistic proclamation, relations between

⁹⁹ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 229.

¹⁰⁰ Kemp, *Nationalism and Socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 136.

¹⁰¹ Smith, *Red Nations*, 205.

¹⁰² Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 240.

¹⁰³ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 158.

Khrushchev and the republics had been deteriorating for years. Unlike Beria, an outspoken critic of Russian chauvinism, Khrushchev subscribed to the Leninist idea of an eventual merger of the nations, with the Russians leading the way as first among equals.¹⁰⁴ As he had demonstrated by crushing the Hungarian uprising of 1956, Khrushchev held little love for nationalism, regardless of his support for the union republics. With his major challengers defeated, Khrushchev was worried by growing trends of nationalism and *mestnichestvo* (“localism,” or the tendency to meet local needs before contributing to others) in his own country. He addressed these concerns with the release of The Theses on Education in 1958, Article 19 of which included the following statement:

If a child attends a school where instruction is conducted in the language of one of the union or autonomous republics, he may, if he wishes, take up the Russian language. And vice-versa, if a child attends a Russian school, he may, if he so desires, study the language of one of the union or autonomous republics.¹⁰⁵

. Seemingly innocuous and couched in terms of parental choice, Article 19 in practice meant that Russian schools were free to drop local languages and local schools would still need to teach Russian, which Soviet media advanced as “the second native tongue” of socialist nations.¹⁰⁶ Protests against Article 19 were greeted with purges of local parties. By the early 1960s, Khrushchev, frustrated by a lack of economic improvement, began to bring economic decision-making powers back to the central government.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Smith, *Red Nations*, 208.

¹⁰⁵ In George S. Counts, *Khrushchev and the Central Committee Speak on Education* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1959), 46,

¹⁰⁶ Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 246.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 256-257.

When Khrushchev left power in 1964, he was in the process of reversing nearly all his previous decentralizing reforms.

The Baltic Republics under Khrushchev

As in all the union republics, Khrushchev's early reforms were well-received in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. They still felt the aftershocks of Stalinist repression; there were no calls for independence or armed resistance as in the previous decade. But the Baltic republics still sought to use whatever powers were granted to them to their fullest extent in order to improve their own territories.¹⁰⁸ By the latter half of the Khrushchev era, the leaders of each republic found different ways to balance their obligations to the central government and their local needs with varying degrees of success.

Of the three Baltic republics, Estonia was, at the time, largely unremarkable. It was led by Johannes Käbin, an Estonian raised in Leningrad and trained in the USSR to establish Soviet rule in Estonia.¹⁰⁹ Käbin was loyal to Moscow and had little love for Estonia, endearing him to Stalin and Khrushchev.¹¹⁰ Despite his lack of national sentiment, Käbin proved willing to stand up to Moscow on occasion, as seen in his opposition to Article 19 of the Theses on Education and continued insistence on Estonian language education. These brief acts of defiance earned him goodwill in Estonia (as did his willingness to learn the Estonian language and culture) without damaging his standings with the central government, enabling him to stay in power for

¹⁰⁸ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 371.

¹⁰⁹ Russian-born Estonians were colloquially known as "Yestonians" due to their Russian accents. Indeed, Johannes Käbin's birth name was Ivan and he spoke almost no Estonian upon his appointment as First Secretary.

¹¹⁰ Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 372.

26 years.¹¹¹ Such a figure was not atypical among the First Secretaries of the union republics.

In Latvia, however, a nearly opposite trend emerged. Jānis Kainbērzins, the First Secretary of the Communist Party of Latvia, struggled to keep other local party members in line, particularly Eduards Berklāvs, Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers. Berklāvs opposed the establishment of more heavy industry in Latvia, seeking to limit the influx of Russian-speaking immigrants, first by attempting to alter the economic plans set by Moscow, then more brazenly planning to evict residents who did not begin to learn Latvian after two years of residence.¹¹² The Latvian Communist Party also led the opposition to Khrushchev's language policies, first by passing a 1956 resolution requiring all Party leaders to be fluent in both Latvian and Russian, then by refusing to implement Article 19, choosing to add another year of secondary education instead.¹¹³ The union republics had received extensive privileges, but the actions of the Latvian SSR constituted outright defiance and localism, if not outright national communism. In 1959, Khrushchev personally flew to Riga and oversaw the removal of thousands of members of the local Party, including Berklāvs and Kainbērzins.¹¹⁴ The confrontation in Latvia, while quickly ended, demonstrated the dangers inherent in Khrushchev's reforms.

Lithuania, on the other hand, presents a unique case not just among the Baltic republics but in the entire Soviet Union. From 1940 to 1974, Lithuania was under the

¹¹¹ Smith, *Red Nations*, 230.

¹¹² Ibid., 202.

¹¹³ Slmon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 248-249, 252.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 253.

control of First Secretary Antanas Sniečkus, a Lithuania-born but Moscow-trained communist. Sniečkus began his political career as a dedicated Stalinist and personally oversaw over the post-war deportations and attempted destruction of Lithuanian national culture. By the Khrushchev era, he had both thoroughly asserted his control over the Lithuanian Communist Party and proven his loyalty to Moscow.¹¹⁵ As Khrushchev reacted against his previous liberal attitude towards the nationalities, however, Sniečkus more and more treated the interests of his own republic with greater respect than the party line. Lithuania shared the same issues as Estonia and Latvia, such as native language education, Russian migration, and the development of heavy industry, but Sniečkus was aided by his established position in the Party hierarchy and by Lithuania's demography, unique among the Baltic republics. Like his Estonian and Latvian colleagues, Sniečkus protested Article 19, a more reasonable demand for a republic without a significant Russian population.¹¹⁶ Lithuania's industrial development began only in the late 1950s, nearly a decade after Estonia and Latvia. With economic powers in local hands, Sniečkus could shape the industries around Lithuania's needs and circumstances, encouraging smaller industries in areas with the labor pool to accommodate them. Drawing on Lithuania's larger and more rural population, there was little need for Russian migrant labor.¹¹⁷ Sniečkus also succeeded in altering the ethnic makeup of the Lithuanian Communist Party: by 1970, 67% of its membership were

¹¹⁵ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 160.

¹¹⁶ Smith, *Red Nations*, 211.

¹¹⁷ Kemp, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 167-168

Lithuanian.¹¹⁸ Through canny political leadership, Lithuania managed to advance its own agenda while avoiding purges.

The Baltic republics present a study in contrasts during the 1950s and 1960s. All three utilized their new powers under Khrushchev's reforms to varying degrees. In Estonia, obedience to Moscow was rewarded with only continued industrialization and Russian migration. In Latvia, a full embrace of the reforms revealed their shallowness: any overt attempts at defending regional interests were quashed by the state. Only Lithuania, with its astute leadership and unique socio-economic situation, was able to meet adequately both its own needs and those of the central government. The reforms, rather than addressing the concerns of the union republics, succeeded in demonstrating their desire for a different path.

Brezhnev (1964-1982)

When Khrushchev was ousted from power in 1964, the republics did not attempt to defend him. In gratitude for their support, Leonid Brezhnev, the new leader of the Soviet Union, did not accuse Khrushchev of nationalism and pledged to keep "national cadres" intact within local Party apparatus.¹¹⁹ In contrast to his predecessors, Brezhnev was content to ignore the nationalities issue for almost the first decade of his rule. Some reforms were rolled back, including both the network of *sovnarkhozy* and the Theses on Education, but the republics retained a large degree of control over their own territory. As long as Russians remained atop the central Party structure, the republics were

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 162.

¹¹⁹ Smith, *Red Nations*, 219 and Simon, *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union*, 258.

allowed to keep to their own affairs, a situation Ben Fowkes dubs “the corporatist compromise.”¹²⁰ Under this policy, the USSR remained stable, but the divide between Moscow and the republics only grew larger.

Brezhnev, like Khrushchev before him, considered the nationalities problem settled, with the 1977 Soviet constitution asserting that “a new historical continuity of people has been formed - the Soviet people.”¹²¹ To turn this proclamation into a reality, his regime began to advance Russian as a shared language, encouraging Russian language publications and schooling. Some rudimentary measures were undertaken, but Brezhnev was well aware of the response Khrushchev’s more forceful methods had received and did not attempt to go far beyond propaganda campaigns.¹²² He also avoided the controversial topic of Russian migration, tampering with census data to prevent its full extent from erupting into controversy.¹²³ His move towards Russian chauvinism proved just as subdued as his original period of national appeasement.

The Growth of Dissent in the Baltic Republics

In his bid to maintain stability in the USSR, Brezhnev had maintained the status quo in the republics. However, by giving in to regionalism while still preaching the advancement of Russian language and culture, he had allowed national sentiments to fester on the periphery of the Soviet Union. These manifested themselves particularly

¹²⁰ Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union*, 93-94.

¹²¹ 1977 Soviet Constitution, Preamble. Accessed April 12th, 2015, <http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/russian/const/77cons01.html#preamble>

¹²² Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union*, 96.

¹²³ Plankans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 378.

strongly in the Baltic republics, where resentment towards occupation and annexation had never truly vanished.

Small-scale public incidents such as anti-Soviet graffiti or the use of national colors were not uncommon in the Baltic republics during the 1950s and 60s. In the 1970s, they were joined by more extreme protests, started by events such as rock concerts, mass refusal to stand at the national anthem during football matches, or public self-immolation.¹²⁴ Dissidence was not contained to the youth: representatives of respected societal organizations also involved themselves. In Lithuania, as in neighboring Poland, the Catholic Church played a large role arranging mass challenges to the Soviet state over religious rights. The intelligentsia of the republics took a different tack, preferring to attract the attention of the Western world. In 1979, their efforts culminated in the Baltic Appeal to the United Nations, in which 45 Lithuanian, Latvian, and Estonian thinkers argued against the legality of the Soviet takeover of the Baltic states. Smaller protestations were not uncommon: by the 1980s, Lithuania in particular was responsible for more dissident publications per capita than any other republic.¹²⁵ Perhaps the most significant group of dissidents was the environmentalists, who used nature as a pretext for protesting the industrialization and militarization of the Baltic region without facing the same stigma from the Party as nationalists would.¹²⁶ Though small and divided, Baltic protest movements slowly gained momentum throughout the

¹²⁴ Purs, *Baltic Facades*, 80 and Plakans, *A Concise History of the Baltic States*, 379. It is worth noting that the Romas Kalanta, the self-immolator in question, likely suffered from mental illness, but his suicide is mentioned here due the nationalist riots it sparked.

¹²⁵ V. Stanley Vardys, "Lithuanian National Politics," in *The Soviet Nationality Reader: The Disintegration in Context*, ed. Rachel Denber (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 443.

¹²⁶ Smith, *Red Nations*, 262-263.

Brezhnev era, exploiting the growing weakness of the central government in regional affairs.

On the eve of Brezhnev's death, no serious threat to Soviet rule in the Baltic had emerged and the most outspoken dissidents had been jailed. But for the first time since guerrilla bands fought the Red Army in Baltic forests, Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were willing to engage in organized, civilian-led resistance to the Soviet government. These small acts of defiance were among the first to occur in the Soviet context and laid the groundwork for more significant protest in the near future.

Gorbachev: Glasnost, Perestroika, and Disintegration, 1985-1991

In quick succession following the death of Brezhnev, Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko each became the leader of the USSR and died after just over a year in office. Neither addressed the nationalities in any substantive way.¹²⁷ Upon the rise of the more youthful Mikhail Gorbachev, however, the republics, along with every other aspect of Soviet politics, experienced massive, sweeping changes. Gorbachev's reforms ultimately solved the nationalities problem, albeit by accidentally enabling the secession of the republics and the collapse of the Soviet Union.

At first, Gorbachev's reforms did not directly target the nationalities. Brezhnev's willingness to delegate power had left the union republics stable, and the nationalities issue had been dismissed or ignored for decades. Gorbachev's personal views corresponded to the official stance of the Brezhnev regime: there was only one Soviet people, comprised of equal and free nationalities. Addressing the 27th Party Congress in

¹²⁷ More specifically, Andropov led a purge of the Uzbek Communist Party, while Chernenko attempted to expand Russian language education.

1986, he asserted that, thanks to “Lenin’s doctrine and the gains of socialism [...] [n]ational oppression and inequality of all types and forms have been done away with once and for all.”¹²⁸ His main issue with the union republics was with their First Secretaries, entrenched powers whom he believed to obstruct serious reform.¹²⁹ By disregarding the nationalities issue and targeting the regional elites who had kept their peoples in line, Gorbachev inadvertently triggered a strong national response to his programs.

Unlike Khrushchev, Gorbachev did not use claims of localism or nationalism in his struggle with regional authorities. Instead, his opponents were removed via accusations of corruption or general opposition to reforming Party structure (*perestroika*).¹³⁰ While this was initially successful in several Central Asian republics, it encountered a serious challenge in Kazakhstan, where Gorbachev replaced the Kazakh First Secretary with an ethnic Russian and was greeted by riots and student demonstrations. The Soviet press was unwilling to blame nationalism, instead finding fault in supporters of the former First Secretary using “demagoguery about wounded national dignity [...] to stir up some young people, who [...] became the instigators’ blind tool.”¹³¹ Still, Gorbachev’s miscalculation had shown him how relevant the nationalities problem remained in the USSR.¹³² In response, Gorbachev opted for an increase in

¹²⁸ Mikhail Gorbachev, *Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to 27th Party Congress* (Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1986), 67.

¹²⁹ Smith, *Red Nations*, 258.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 260.

¹³¹ A. Lapin, “A Bitter Lesson - It Should Be Learned by Kazakhstan’s Young Communist League Aktiv and Those Engaged in the Upbringing of Young People,” *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, January 10, 1987. In *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 39, no.1 (January 1987), 4.

¹³² Kemp, *Nationalism and Socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, 193.

federalism, including an unheard-of measure: open, multi-party elections in each of the republics.

Residents of the Baltic republics welcomed the chance to elect their leadership. They had already benefited from the first years of Gorbachev's rule. Under the policy of *glasnost* (openness), Estonians, Latvians, and Lithuanians were willing to expand the scope of their dissident activities. Environmental issues were at the heart of their first large protests of the Gorbachev era, but they contained a nationalist element: the protested issues, such as the construction of a nuclear reactor or a hydroelectric dam, would have required thousands of migrant laborers to move to the region.¹³³ The central government actually encouraged similar movements throughout the Soviet Union, believing them to be an effective means of weakening local Party organizations opposed to *perestroika*.¹³⁴ The success of early mass protests emboldened the dissidents to launch more overtly political campaigns. By 1987, rallies celebrated pre-occupation holidays, protests erupted over the Stalinist deportations of the 1940s, and old national flags began to be flown openly.

With the Kazakh student protests still recent, the Party initially condemned the politicization of Baltic demonstrations. When the Latvian opposition group Helsinki-86 organized a protest in all three Baltic republics against the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 1987, they were roundly condemned. Soviet news organizations accused the protesters of seeking to celebrate fascist collaborators and of having ties to the West. The deportations of 1941, also an object of protest, were claimed to have largely

¹³³ Kasekamp, *A History of the Baltic States*, 161-162.

¹³⁴ Smith, *Red Nations*, 264.

targeted fascists.¹³⁵ While they were willing to employ this strong rhetoric to combat the protesters, the authorities mostly shied away from the use of force. By 1988, the official stance on nationalism had softened to the point that rallies in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to remember Stalinist deportations were heralded as a genuine effort to “restore historical justice [...] and to support the Party’s course of restructuring.”¹³⁶

In light of the gradual reversal of central policy, local Parties approved the formation of a new kind of organization in each of the three republics: the popular front. Starting in Estonia in October 1988 and soon expanding to the other two Baltic republics, the popular fronts ostensibly stood for the expansion and support of *perestroika*, but in reality represented an alliance of non-Party interests, including nationalists and environmentalists.¹³⁷ Their agenda was clearly national in character: they defended local languages, fought immigration, and sought to increase the extent of local sovereignty.¹³⁸ The concept proved immediately appealing and soon spread to the other union republics, aided by the original Baltic organizations. The Baltic Parties, noting the support the popular fronts enjoyed, similarly pushed for greater freedoms from Moscow, but to no avail: when elections took place in March of 1989, the Baltic popular fronts emerged triumphant, ousting a number of major senior officials.

¹³⁵ “There’s No Turning Back,” *Pravda*, August 24, 1987. In *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 39, no. 34. (August 1987), 1, 4.

¹³⁶ “Echo of Bygone Days,” *Pravda*, June 15, 1988. In *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 40, no. 24. (June 1988), 9.

¹³⁷ Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union*, 146.

¹³⁸ Gail Lapidus, “The Impact of Perestroika on the National Question,” in *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*, eds. Gail Lapidus, Victor Zaslavsky, and Philip Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 56.

Gorbachev's democratizing reforms enabled the success of the popular fronts and the consequent defeat of Brezhnev-era regional officials, but he was unprepared for the fallout of these events. He had already accepted the need to grant concessions to the Baltic republics, ultimately even announcing the existence of the secret protocols of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact through which the Baltic states had been annexed.¹³⁹ The demands of Baltic republics, however, accelerated far past what Gorbachev was willing to give. Emboldened by electoral success and the collapse of Soviet control in Eastern Europe, the new governments of the Baltic republics moved swiftly towards independence. Lithuania led the charge, declaring its independence from the USSR in March 1990, which Latvia and Estonia announced their intentions to gradually transition to full independence soon after. Gorbachev, under pressure from factions within the Party and fearful of the precedent set by allowing Baltic independence, elected to use force in a last bid to keep the Soviet Union intact. Soviet troops propped up faux-popular movements and seized communications centers in both Latvia and Lithuania, but were soon checked by mass demonstrations not only locally but throughout the USSR.¹⁴⁰ Unlike Khrushchev before him, Gorbachev's attempt at reversing his reforms came too late to succeed. Soon, the Baltic states would be joined by every other union republic in independence.

¹³⁹ Fowkes, *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union*, 157-158.

¹⁴⁰ Victor Zaslavsky, "The Evolution of Separatism in Soviet Society under Gorbachev," in *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*, eds. Gail Lapidus, Victor Zaslavsky, and Philip Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74.

Understanding the Nationalities Factor in Imperial Russia and the USSR

In 1991, the last European multi-ethnic empire came to an end when the Soviet Union collapsed. Many causes led to its demise, but the central role occupied by the nationalities is clearly visible from the abundance of post-Soviet states in our contemporary geography. But these nations were not born from the Soviet system: their roots lie in the history of its immediate predecessor, the Russian Empire. With its reliance on local elites challenged by those elites' desire for greater autonomy, Imperial Russia struggled to devise a replacement for its aging system of rule. Rather than employing a consistent strategy to ensure long-term control, it alternated between the contradictory policies of forced assimilation and encouragement of competition between local minorities, as seen in the Baltic region. Constant fluctuations in policy carried out on the whims of local administrators did little to endear the local populace to the Russian government and fueled nascent national movements, who nearly all attempted to secure independence in the wake of the collapse of the Empire, sometimes successfully. The Bolsheviks underestimated nationalist desires as they sought to keep the lands of the former Empire together and believed a federalist system would alleviate tensions long enough for ideology to overcome national boundaries. Instead, the Soviet Union often resembled Imperial Russia as each leader allowed greater national autonomy and increased the extent of federalism before reversing course and repressing the nationalities while preaching Russian chauvinism. To the budding nations within the republics, this proved irritating; to annexed territories like the Baltic states, it proved intolerable. After centuries of constant and capricious Russian

mismanagement, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania led the way for the ultimate disintegration of Russian empires.

The aftershocks of the collapse are still felt in Russia, the Baltic states, and all the former republics of the USSR. Russian and Soviet rule left tangible evidence of its existence, most clearly in the presence of a large Russian-speaking diaspora. As the ideological justifications for preventing national independence began to ring hollow, the Soviet state emphasized the potential plight of these Russian speakers of the breakaway republics. It is an attitude which can still be witnessed in the words and actions of the Russian government to this day, as the interactions between Moscow and its former subjects continue to be defined by the imperial policies of the past.

Bibliography

Clemens Jr., Walter C. *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991.

Conquest, Robert. *Soviet Nationalities Policy in Practice*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1967.

Counts, George S. *Khrushchev and the Central Committee Speak on Education*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1959.

de Custine, Marquis Astolphe. *Journey for Our Time: The Journals of Marquis de Custine, 1839*. Edited and translated by Phyllis Penn Kohler, London: Phoenix Press, 2001.

Denber, Rachel, ed. *The Soviet Nationality Reader: Disintegration in Context*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992.

Fowkes, Ben. *The Disintegration of the Soviet Union: A Study in the Rise and Triumph of Nationalism*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997.

Goldhagen, Eric, ed. *Ethnic Minorities in the Soviet Union*. New York: Frederick A. Praeger Publishers, 1968.

Gorbachev, Mikhail. *Political Report of the CPSU Central Committee to the 27th Party Congress*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency Publishing House, 1986.

Hajda, Lubomyr and Mark Beissinger, eds. *The Nationalities Factor in Soviet Politics and Society*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990.

Hilferding, Alexander. "Litva i Zhmud'," in *Sobranie Sochineniy* vol. 2, 363-385. St. Petersburg: V. Golovin Printing, 1868

Kappeler, Andreas. *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*. Translated by Alfred

- Clayton. New York: Longman, 2001.
- Kassekamp, Andres. *A History of the Baltic States*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Kemp, Walter A. *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999
- Lapidus, Gail, Victor Zaslavsky, and Philip Goldman, eds. *From Union to Commonwealth: Nationalism and Separatism in the Soviet Republics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- Lapin, A. "A Bitter Lesson - It Should Be Learned by Kazakhstan's Young Communist League Aktiv and Those Engaged in the Upbringing of Young People." *Current Digest of the Soviet Press* 39, no.1 (Jan. 1987): 4-6.
- Lenin, Vladimir. "On the Question of National Policy," in *Lenin Collected Works* vol. 20. Translated by Bernard Isaacs and Joe Fineberg. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972.
- Lenin, Vladimir and Josef Stalin. *Selections from V.I. Lenin and J.V. Stalin on the National Colonial Question*. Calcutta: Calcutta Book House, 1970.
- Muravyov-Vilensky, Mikhail. "Lichno Predstavlena Gosudaryu Imperatoru v Peterburge 5 Aprelya 1865 goda," in *Chetyre Politicheskije Zapiski Grafa Mikhaila Nicolayevicha Muravyova-Vilenskovo.* *Russkiy Arkhiv* 5 (June 1885): 197-199.
- Muravyov-Vilensky, Mikhail. "Zapiska o Nekotorikh Voprosakh po Ustroystvu Severo-Zapadnovo Kraya," in "Chetyre Politicheskije Zapiski Grafa Mikhaila Nicolayevicha Muravyova-Vilenskovo." *Russkiy Arkhiv* 5 (June 1885): 186-197
- Plakans, Andrejs. *A Concise History of the Baltic States*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

- Plakans, Andrejs. *The Latvians: A Short History*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1995.
- Purs, Aldis. *Baltic Facades: Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania since 1945*. London: Reaktion Books, 2012.
- Simon, Gerhard. *Nationalism and Policy toward the Nationalities in the Soviet Union: From Totalitarian Dictatorship to Post-Stalinist Society*. Translated by Karen and Oswald Forster. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991.
- Smith, Jeremy. *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-23*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999.
- Smith, Jeremy. *Red Nations: The Nationalities Experience in and After the USSR*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Staliunas, Darius. "Between Russification and Divide and Rule: Russian Nationality Policy in the Western Borderlands in mid-19th Century." *Jarbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 55, no. 3 (2007): 357-373.
- Staliunas, Darius. *Making Russians: Meaning and Practice of Russification in Lithuania and Belarus after 1863*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007.
- Thaden, Edward C., ed. *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855-1914*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981.
- Weeks, Theodore R. "Defining Us and Them: Poles and Russians in the 'Western Provinces,' 1863-1914." *Slavic Review* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 26-40.
- Weeks, Theodore R. *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863-1914*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1996.

Weeks, Theodore R. "Russification and the Lithuanians, 1863-1905." *Slavic Review* 60, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 96-114

Weeks, Theodore R. "Russification: Word and Practice 1863-1914." *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 148, no. 4 (December 2004): 471-489

Williams, Christopher and Thanasis D. Sfikas, eds. *Ethnicity and Nationalism in Russia, the CIS and the Baltic States*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1999.