

Michael G. Smith

»The Hegemony of Content: Russian as the Language
of State Assimilation in the USSR, 1917–1953«

»Freewill is content: Necessity is form«.
Leo Tolstoi, *War and Peace*

»Russification« has become a topic of renewed interest in the U.S. scholarly community. Something of a relic of Cold War scholarship, the term once meant a veiled condemnation of Russian or Soviet imperialism. It referred to that period of force and repression, especially after the 1860s under the Tsars and during the 1930s under Stalin, when the state imposed the Russian language on its subject minority peoples, especially in the western borderlands, only to incite more national resentments as a result. In this traditional sense, russification defined the linguistic chauvinism of the »Russian« (*Russkij*) nation against the diverse languages of the national peripheries. Following the new trends in the scholarship, I define the term here in a broader sense, meaning a point of leverage, something less ethnic and more purely political, a hinge, by which the territorial »Russian« or »Soviet« (*Rossijskaja* or later *Sovetskaja*) state engaged in a subtler language politics, sometimes employing force, sometimes negotiation, but always with the Russian language as the centerpiece of political power¹. We need, in other words, to parse this double meaning of »Russia«, one that describes an ethnic people engaged in coercion and domination; the other that describes more of a subtler, statist process of territorial gathering and hegemony². We ought to detach national from statist russification, to discover the rarity of the one and the constancy of the other.

1 See the selected articles in Michael DAVID-FOX/Peter HOLQUIST/Alexander MARTIN (ed.), *Orientalism and Empire in Russia*, Bloomington, In. 2006, pp. 157–226; as well as Theodore WEEKS, *Nation and State in Late Imperial Russia: Nationalism and Russification on the Western Frontier, 1863–1914*, DeKalb Ill. 1996; and Edward THADEN (ed.), *Russification in the Baltic Provinces and Finland, 1855–1914*, Princeton 1981.

2 On the relationships between »Russia« (*Rus'*) as »motherland« (*rodina*) and »Russia« (*Rossija*) as »fatherland« (*otečestvo*), see Ladis KRISTOF, *The Russian Image of Russia. An Applied Study in Geopolitical Methodology*, in: Charles A. FISHER (ed.), *Essays in Political Geography*, London 1968, pp. 345–353.

As the Russian language was a hinge, so was the time period of the 1920s and 1930s, between the two world wars, only a generation, when the Russian (*Rossijskaja*) Communist Party of Bolsheviks (RKPb) put the political practices and state structures in place that lasted, albeit with many modifications, for the remainder of the Soviet era. Scholars have come to a consensus, at least, that the Soviet Union was an empire, if a strange and contradictory one. By the 1918 constitution that established the Russian (*Rossijskaja*) Soviet Federated Socialist Republic (RSFSR), and by the 1924 constitution that consolidated the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the party created a central government over a hierarchy of national territories. This was a means of efficiently ordering and managing a rather disparate multinational state, what Francine Hirsch has called an »Empire of Nations«, by way of what Jörg Baberowski has termed its Russian »civilizing mission«. It was also a means of blunting the force of nationalism by modernizing it, turning its various national »forms« to revolutionary purpose, what Terry Martin has termed an »Affirmative Action Empire«³.

This mosaic of the state structures was a function of historical necessity more than of creative design. The RSFSR became a republic of federated parts, the USSR an even stronger »union« of republics, because the Bolsheviks reconstituted what was left of the old Russian empire in a new age of nationalism. No other state had ever faced quite such a dilemma. Imperialism and nationalism were the first stages of Soviet socialism, so to speak. The Bolsheviks sought to retain some of the old, as territorial inheritance and as practical state administration, but also faced the newly-independent regions and states that had broken away from it. In the campaigns of the Civil War, waged by the Red Army as a military force under the political command of Bolshevik commissars, they employed the terms of both empire and nation, speaking to each other from the place-names written upon Tsarist maps, yet also negotiating with the newly-independent states from within their own new boundaries. In this interim and war, Soviet Russia lost Finland, the Baltic States, Poland, and parts of Romanian Bessarabia. What remained to form the basis of the grander USSR constitution in 1924 were the broken, once-independent parts of Belarus, Ukraine, and the three states (Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan) of the Trans-Caucasus Soviet Federated Socialist Republic. The rest of the »Eastern« nationalities of the Caucasus, the Volga-Urals, Central Asia, and the Far East and North, were initially relegated to autonomous national republics and regions (never states) within these »union

3 Francine HIRSCH, *Empire of Nations. Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca 2005; Jörg BABEROWSKI, *Auf der Suche nach Eindeutigkeit: Kolonialismus und zivilisatorische Mission im Zarenreich und in der Sowjetunion*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47 (1999), pp. 482–503; Terry MARTIN, *The Affirmative Action Empire. Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union*, Ithaca 2001.

republics«, or primarily within the original RSFSR state⁴. As makers of the world's last great quasi-imperial state, the Bolsheviks had no choice but to recognize the new nations, if always after military conquest, if always choosing their new leaders from among the native elites loyal primarily to them. This was an imperative that both Vladimir Lenin and Iosif Stalin grasped even from their earlier approaches to the national question, their understanding that national-territorial autonomy was essential for any future Russian state. It was a premise of their several essays on the national question. It was a condition of the first Soviet government, in the form of the Commissariat of Nationalities, headed by Stalin, a Georgian by nationality but a Russian by choice. It was a provision of the first Bolshevik declarations on the rights of the nationalities. It was a principle of the first Soviet constitution of 1918, conceiving of the new state as a »free union of free nations, as a federation of soviet national republics«. Lenin's nationality policies, at least as legal and constitutional decrees centered on the »free self-determination« of peoples, sounded so much like the internationalist principles of Woodrow Wilson that helped to end the First World War and to shape the fragile peace. Both were both functions of the new age of nationalism.

In all of these contexts, Leninist nationality policy prohibited forced russification, the contra-posing of one language against the other. On this point, in public and private forums, Bolshevik policy statements were consistent and forthright after October of 1917. They had to be, for native-language rights were a program minimum, a *sine qua non* of most national political movements of the late Russian empire. Moreover, at the moment of the revolution and founding of the new state, a majority of Bolshevik party leaders (up to two thirds) were themselves members of the empire's ethnic minorities, although mostly from its »European« and Christian parts. They were »marginalized yet assimilating elites«, who sought to remake and rededicate the old empire for a new »Russified, universalist class politics«⁵. They often prefaced their statements with the claim that the days of Tsarist chauvinism were over, that the plurality and equality of the national languages counted. Instead, as intellectuals russified by language and manner, they advocated russification for their brethren in a more neutral and gradual way, though they never used the term as such. One leading Soviet educator rallied against a »purely Russian« (*čisto russkij*), instead of a more balanced »all-Russian« (*vserossijskij*), approach to the nationalities. Another noted that Soviet power marked the end to the Tsarist policies of »forced assimilation and russifi-

4 Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan became union republics of the USSR in 1924. A number of territorial transformations and elevations followed, as surveyed in Robert KAISER, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*, Princeton 1994.

5 Quoted from Liliana RIGA, *The Ethnic Roots of Class Universalism: Rethinking the »Russian« Revolutionary Elite*, in: *The American Journal of Sociology* 114/3 (2008), pp. 690–691.

cation«, but also the beginning of the equitable development of the native languages, as well as the role of Russian as the language of Lenin, of developing socialism, of science and technology, indeed of »Great Russian proletarian culture«⁶.

This policy meant juxtaposing the Russian and the native language together as equals, or as one party pamphlet put it with regard to Bolshevik policies in Central Asia in 1918, to place Russian and Uzbek together »side by side« as the co-equal »state languages«. Stalin expressed this principle at a Communist Party plenum in November of 1920, flush with the recent victory of the Red Army over the military forces of independent Azerbaijan. Returning to Baku as something of a hero, a local boy done well (he had spent several years in the city as a young Bolshevik conspirator), he lectured the Caucasus delegates, »I believe that you have two state languages: Russian, since you are part of the federation; and Turkic, since it is your local language«. This was his preface to a more serious statement that, regardless of Soviet federalism and multilingualism, despite named communist parties for some of the nationalities, only the Russian Communist Party counted. It was the sole authority, truly independent, really free⁷.

Time and again, Bolshevik leaders repeated that Russian was the language of the federation and of the party, but that the native »non-Russian« (*ne russkij*) language would remain the local language of state business. Official parlance defined the Soviet language community in these so-called neutral terms: what was Russian, and what was not. Yet the very act of juxtaposing the two languages side by side was to underscore and highlight the superiority of Russian, the language through which these very legal accommodations were given, the language to which all politically and career-minded nationals aspired mastery. Russian was the language of what constitutional provisions termed the »socialist fatherland« (*socialističeskoe otečestvo*), the »one socialist family« (*odna socialističeskaja sem'ja*), the »single united state« (*odno sojuznoe gosudarstvo*). Russian was the language of this Soviet patriarchal state, protector of the many native mother tongues that it upheld and encouraged, that it set in form. From my own experience surveying archi-

6 Quoted from P.N. MAKINTSIAN's report, Narkompros i vopros prosveščeniia narodov ne russkogo jazyka RSFSR (1918), in Gosudarstvennyi Archiv Rossiiskoj Federacii (GARF), fond 296, opis' 2, delo 7, ll. 1–5. Also quoted from the report, Russkij jazyk i prosveščenie nacional'nostej (1929), in GARF fond 298, opis' 2, delo 76, ll. 1–5.

7 Quoted from S. MURAVEISKII, Očerki po istorii revoliucionnogo dviženiiia v Srednej Azii. Opyt kratkogo posobija dlja sovpartškol i škol politgramoty, Taškent 1926, p. 34. Stalin quoted from a rare transcript of the Plenum of the Central Committee and Baku Commissariat of the Azerbaijani Communist Party (AKPb) and Caucasus Bureau of the Central Committee of the RKPb, 8 November 1920, in the Archive of Political Parties and Social Movements of the Republic of Azerbaijan (Baku), fond 1, opis' 1, delo 14, list 20 (Azərbaycan Respublikası Dövlət Siyasi Partiyalar və İctimai Hərəkatlar Arxiv).

val documents (in Moscow, Baku, and Tashkent), except for the odd written paper or typed form in a nationality language, the overwhelming mass of documents of ideological or strategic or policy substance are in Russian. In the case of the eponymous Azerbaijani Communist Party (AKPb), the only thing truly »Azerbaijani« about party protocols through the 1920s and 1930s were the names: the full name of the AKPb, neatly scrolled in the new Latin alphabet at the top of the bureaucratic forms, and the names of the participating Azerbaijani members of the various committees, sometimes dutifully obeying, sometimes negotiating challenges to, party commands from above. As a rule, the linguistic forms of the Azerbaijani and other nationality languages were otherwise relegated to the meager forms of lower Soviet state administrative business: petitions to the bureaucracy, court documents, all manner of mundane applications and records.

Like the structures of national-territorial autonomy, Soviet native-language rights were often formal and legalistic. They were political gestures, signs of respect to the nationalities. They were also an investment in the future, a way to appeal to the developed nations of Europe and to the developing nations of the colonial world that Soviet revolutionary politics were truly internationalist, grounded in the realities of native circumstances and languages. They were also practical means of governance, a way to reach the millions of new Soviet citizens who did not speak Russian, an ironic mark of just how incomplete and inept Tsarist russification had actually been, especially in the backward »East«⁸. This was a signal demand of the moment, to actually speak to and engage in dialogue with the nationalities in their own languages, some of which were without functional scripts or linguistic standards in grammars and dictionaries (like the languages of the Far North, or the dialects of Turkic, or the languages of the North Caucasus). The RKPb formalized these precepts at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923, establishing the official policy of »nativization« (*korenizatsiia*), the promotion of native cadres and state business and national schools – all in the native language. Stalin summarized the policy in his famous slogan of 1925, describing the Soviet state as »proletarian in content and national in form«, engaged in one massive project of translation between the Russian language of the center and the many national languages of the peripheries beyond⁹.

The party's various nationality policies always represented this essential compact between unity and multiplicity. We tend to reframe it in any number of striking paradoxes: between empire and nation, center and periphery, socialism and nationalism, hierarchy and equality, russification and nativi-

8 I. ARKHINCHIEV, Problema prosveščeniia otstal'ych nacional'nostej s točki zrenija leninizma, in: *Žizn' nacional'nostej 1* (1924), pp. 45–55.

9 Joseph STALIN, *Marxism and the National Question*, New York 1942, p. 196.

zation, content and form. We tend to build these very paradoxes, one upon the other, in order to arrive at the ultimate irony, that the Soviet state became the maker of its own undoing, »creating« the very nations that unmade it in 1991. But all of these paradoxes actually turn out to be the momentary conflicts and challenges of a political system in dynamic, tenacious motion. The Bolsheviks were the original multi-taskers, modernizers intent on mobilizing the masses, both Russian and non-Russian, for a radical developmental politics. They were often working upon several different platforms and fronts at the same time, along several different approaches, even seemingly contradictory ones. This is what Stalin meant when he described the elasticity of the Soviet party-state system, a system that was elastic because tense, often pulled between centripetal and centrifugal forces, as for example between the Russian and nationality languages. Such elasticity gave the party and state immense flexibility and range between strategies and tactics, ends and means. This is also what Communist Party theorists meant when they spoke of the »dialectic» at work in history, societies being pulled between past and future, backwardness and modernity. Dialectical meant teleological, of course, a goal-centered politics. In the case of language politics, cultural assimilation (expressly not ethnic) by way of the Russian language was the ultimate goal, no matter how far off it was often delayed¹⁰.

We know that the Communist Party was the hinge that made all of these various nationality pieces move: commanding them, coaxing them, developing them, drawing and redrawing their borders. Soviet »federalism« was a complex set of policies: sometimes of negotiation and accommodation, at other times of assimilation, at still other times of forced migration and destruction. But the many new and valuable studies of the Soviet »nations« can only take us so far. These nations were formal quantities of a kind. They were political acts, propaganda platforms. Places on a map, names on a chart, rote terms to be written in a blank box on a routine bureaucratic form. They were anthems sung on festive occasions, or separate flags and constitutions, or folk ensembles of song and dance. None of these quantities, the bare necessities of nationhood, really offer us any deep insight into national »identity«, which has become such a favorite catchphrase in the scholarship. They surely speak to »identities« commanded or assigned from above, if often negotiated with local realities and needs in mind. But they do not speak to the busy challenges and decisions of people's everyday lives.

10 Ibid., p. 79, 160, 209. For a fine survey of Stalin's »dialectical« national and language ideologies, see Gerhard SIMON, *Nationalismus und Nationalitätenpolitik in der Sowjetunion*, Baden-Baden 1986, chapter 6. I discuss these issues in Michael G. SMITH, *The Tenacity of Forms: Language, Nation, Stalin*, in: Craig BRANDIST/Katya CHOWN, *Politics and the Theory of Language in the USSR, 1917–1938*, London 2010, pp. 105–122.

Only language offers us that deeper insight, that looking and sounding into the realities and the varieties of people's experiences. Language enjoys a particular relevance and value because it is real, certainly more real to people than a flag, or national anthem, or territory upon a map. It is always both a medium and result, a beginning and end, a process and product of lived experience. But even »language« ought not to imply identity, a term that belongs to psychology, not history. Language here means the way that politicians and people both codified and represented themselves to each other in letters and words. Language in this sense belongs to the spaces between rather than the spaces within people. True, we must appreciate how it is always problematic and multivalent. It is that thing in our lives that is always ridden with presumptions and prejudices, with ideologies and complications all its own¹¹. Yet our discussions of nationality policies must always return to it, to the relational, the existential, the real. So many of our studies of are top-down, from the center looking out. Or they are inside-out, speaking to identities and mentalities. We need more of a bottom-up, in-between history, just as the present volume provides, centered on the mechanics of language ideologies and practices.

The closest thing to the Communist Party in terms of power and influence, what I will term a hegemony of content, was the Russian language. It too was a hinge, likewise fastened upon the imperial inheritance. The Russian commands of the party depended upon the great Russian literary language and the many urban and provincial dialects of its speakers. But those commands also depended upon the structures of the neighboring non-Russian languages. The simple and unavoidable linguistic truth of the early Soviet era was that the state could not speak to the nationalities in Russian until they had first properly learned their own languages. The vast project of political translation depended on a deep project of linguistic comparison. This was true for script and language standardization. Linguists had to diagram the »backward» native languages in »comparison and parallel« with Russian before they could ever hope to create the bilingual dictionaries and grammars necessary for learning and translation¹². This was especially true in education, where these very native-language standards, written into curriculums and textbooks, were the precondition for the teaching of Russian. The RSFSR Commissariat for Education, for example, legislated this principle into its plans for nationality schools, approving a flexible scale of pri-

11 I am working from the discussions in Bambi B. SCHIEFFELIN/Kathryn A. WOODWARD/Paul V. KROSKRITY, *Language Ideologies. Practice and Theory*, New York 1998.

12 I discuss these and related language issues in Michael G. SMITH, *Language and Power in the Creation of the USSR, 1917–1953*, Berlin 1998, pp. 72–73. Quoted from P. KHADZARAGOV, *Zabytyj učastok*, in: *Prosveščenie nacional'nostej* 6 (1930), p. 96.

mary and secondary grades in the native languages, but only in preparation for the eventual learning of and instruction in Russian, the »language of the federation«¹³.

These methods were by no means unique to the Soviet Union in the 1920s. They had their antecedents in Tsarist Russia, in the first era of russification. Although we often associate that period with conservative nationalism and pan-Slavism, its russification policies included such nuanced and accommodating measures as the system of educator, N.I. Il'minskii, which provided for discrete alphabets and language standards for several of the minority peoples of the Volga-Urals, in the dual interests of conversion to Orthodoxy and phonetic and vernacular learning¹⁴. The Russian language and the native languages of close and conquered neighbors were locked into this sometimes coercive, sometimes accommodating dialectic. Russification was always a kind of nativization, and nativization always a kind of russification. These very linguistic mediations have been a universal fact of imperial rule in modern times. In defining and codifying native languages, in creating alphabets and grammars and dictionaries for them, linguists have always served two masters: their own imperial patrons, and their clients in the native themselves. Or, as Bernard Cohen has termed it, based on his research of the British empire in India, the »language of command« (in our case Russian) depended on the »command of languages« (in our case the many non-Russian languages in and around Russia). Before they could speak to their colonial subjects, the colonizers (or at least the linguists among them) had to learn and understand their subjects' native tongues. Before the colonized could learn the language of their new masters, they had to learn the standard variations of the own native languages. Both processes involved a literal and equitable process of learning and translation, as well as a more figurative process of transposition and comparison, always weighing the language of the empire as inherently superior to the languages of its parts¹⁵.

13 See *O principach perechoda nacional'nykh škol na rodnoy jazyk*, in G.G. MANSUROV/M.S. EPSHTEIN, *Voprosy vseobščego obučeniia (sredi natsmen)*, Moscow 1927, pp. 189–190. The debates are in GARF, fond 296, opis' 1, delo 169; and fond 2306, opis' 69, delo 603.

14 See Isabelle KREINDLER, *The Non-Russian Languages and the Challenge of Russian: The Eastern versus the Western Tradition*, in: Isabelle KREINDLER (ed.), *Sociolinguistic Perspectives on Soviet National Languages*, Berlin 1985, pp. 345–367; and the more recent works of Robert GERACI, *Window on the East: National and Imperial Identities in Late Tsarist Russia*, Ithaca 2001; Wayne DOWLER, *Classroom and Empire: the Politics of Schooling Russia's Eastern Nationalities, 1860–1917*, Montreal 2001; and Paul WERTH, *At the Margins of Orthodoxy: Mission, Governance, and Confessional Politics in Russia's Volga-Kama Region, 1827–1905*, Ithaca 2002.

15 Bernard S. COHEN, *The Command of Language and the Language of Command*, in: Ranajit GUHA (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV*, Delhi 1985, pp. 276–329. On similar developments in other imperial and colonial settings, see Barbara A. YATES, *The Origins of Language Policy in Zaire*,

In these terms, nativization was not some altruistic end in itself. It was a function of russification. We overate the 1920s as some fabled era of national »flowering« and native-language rights, an era of benevolent multilingualism only to be punctuated by the return of russification under the despotic Stalin¹⁶. The relationship between russification and nativization was much more complex and sustained. Take the case of the ideological formula approved at the Twelfth Party Congress of 1923, proscribing the two extremes of »Great Russian chauvinism« and »local bourgeois nationalism«. From time to time, the party decreed that one was more dangerous than the other. But Stalin always implied, and even explicitly said it best, that »the major danger is the deviation against which we have ceased to fight«. Each was as threatening, and politically valuable, as the other¹⁷. Russian chauvinism and local nationalism were the two negative poles within which party and state agents were presumably free to entertain a range of positive actions. The implication, of course, was that some measures of both russification and nativization were allowed. But proponents of the one or the other were always taking a risk of lurching to one of the extremes, or of suffering the accusations of extremism from one of their opponents on any given policy question.

This is exactly what happened at several nationalities conferences throughout this period. Representatives of Moscow often treaded carefully, cautioning against the extremes. Some nationality representatives, flirting with local nationalism, championed the separate languages and phonetic learning necessary for mass education. Others decried these as »discord« (*raznoboje*) and »estrangement« (*otdalenie*) that divided and weakened their peoples and languages, especially with the new Latin alphabets of the Soviet era. They invited accusations of »pan-Islamism« and »pan-Turkism«. Amid it all, a regular refrain (almost always by non-Russians) was for increased instruction and attention to Russian, the only language that counted in the end, above all¹⁸. In sum, nativization was a political initiative from above that led to some rather noisy and fractious debates from below. Yet the elasticity of ideological and political formulas gave the party wide latitude to discipline and

in: *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 18/2 (1980), pp. 262–267; and Edward G. GRAY, *New World Babel. Languages and Nations in Early America*, Princeton 1999, p. 29.

16 See, for example, the tendencies in two of the classic studies: Jeremy SMITH, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–1923*, New York 1999, pp. 144–171; and E. Glyn LEWIS, *Multilingualism in the Soviet Union. Aspects of Language Policy and its Implementation*, The Hague 1973.

17 STALIN, *Marxism and the National Question*, p. 216, from remarks at the Seventeenth Party Congress (1934).

18 From debates in the *Komissija po izučeniju nacional'nogo voprosa i institut sovetskogo stroitel'stva (1929–1930)*, in *Archiv Rossiiskoj Akademii Nauk (ARAN)*, fond 361, opis' 2, delo 1, ll. 6–43; delo 6, ll. 28–39, delo 8, ll. 30–43; and the reports of the meetings of the *Zasedanie terminologičeskoj komissii, Sektor Nauki Narkomprosa (1932)*, in *GARF*, fond 2307, opis' 17, delo 6, ll. 1–81.

calibrate nationality and language policies. Politics drove the policies. As a consequence, our own scholarly research into these issues demands constant attention to correlations: between the stated public policies of the Soviet past and their often hidden, complex, and multi-dimensional internal politics¹⁹.

Given the weight of all of these disputes, nativization became a fragile and contentious fact of everyday life in the 1920s and 1930s. The mundane records of the bureaucracies are filled with complaints about its deficiencies. Politicians complained about too few linguists available to codify or refine standard alphabets, grammars, and school texts. Administrators complained about financial cutbacks and scarce resources, meaning too few actual books for people to read or too few teachers to actually staff native-language schools. Parents complained that native-language instruction was so poorly outfitted with teachers and books that it was a dead end for their children, who desperately needed Russian-language instruction as a means of social mobility²⁰. Ironically, just as russification under the last Tsars had inspired national political movements, now nativization in the Soviet context often inspired the demand for russification. What seemed like a process of adding peoples and places and languages to the mosaic of the Soviet state actually turned out to be a process of subtracting resources and influences and power. Whether by design or effect, nativization only promoted the nationalities so far. It served more as a mechanism to prime them for socialist content, either expressly in the Russian language or indirectly based upon it through translations.

From the beginning to the end of the Soviet era, only the Russian language intersected both the horizontal and vertical frames of Soviet life. Russian enjoyed a unique valency and currency. Like the party, it was the essential force of upward mobility, both between periphery and center, and within the peripheries themselves. Russian was the means by which the center spoke to the nationalities, by which they spoke back to it, and through which they

19 On this approach, see V.M. ALPATOV, *150 jazykov i politika, 1917–1997*, Moscow 1997; T.Iu. KRASOVITSKAIA, *Modernizacija rossii. Nacional'no-kul'turnaja politika 20-ch godov*, Moscow 1998; and M.N. GUBOGLO/F.G. SAFIN, *Prinuditel'nyi lingvicism. Sociolingvističeskie očerki ob etnopolitičeskoj situacii v SSSR v 1920–1930-e gody*, Moscow 2000.

20 These kinds of complaints fill the records of the Komitet po prosveščeniui nacional'nych men'sinstv pri Narkompros RSFSR, in GARF, fond 296. They are substantiated in the work of Bernard V. OLIVIER, *Korenizatsiia*, in: *Central Asian Survey* 9/3 (1990), pp. 77–98; William FIERMAN, *Language Planning and National Development. The Uzbek Experience*, Berlin 1991, pp. 180–206; and Yuri SLEZKINE, *Arctic Mirrors. Russia and the Small Peoples of the North*, Ithaca 1994, pp. 221–223. For more recent, corroborating scholarship, see Beth Yocum, *Creating a Socialist Tower of Babel. Nationality Policy in Soviet Belarus, 1924–1931* (PhD Dissertation, Brandeis University, 2004); Matthew PAULY, *Building Socialism in the National Classroom: Education and Language Policy in Soviet Ukraine, 1923–1930*, PhD Diss., Indiana University, Bloomington 2005, pp. 274–285; and Robert MONTGOMERY, *Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Cultural and Nationality Policy. The Buryats and their Language*, Lewiston N.Y. 2006.

spoke between themselves. It was always more of a dominant *lingua imperia* than a neutral *lingua franca*. Only the Russian language was free, was mobile throughout the whole realm of the Soviet Union. Only it was inclusive. Only it was pan-Soviet. Only it was »everything» (all-Russian and all-Soviet). Russian represented the dynamic and complex projection of Soviet power over space and through time. It was the perfect union of content and form.

People became culturally russified as they learned to speak Russian. Their native languages became russified too, once the Communist Party more actively intervened in the mechanics of language reform, a function of Stalin's political and economic transformations, as well as of the growing numbers of Russians working within the RKPb and living in the USSR. By the end of the first Five-Year Plan (1929–1933), party-state officials began to forcefully impose standard Russian terms onto the ideological, scientific, economic, and academic terminologies of the nationality languages. After 1937, they imposed new Cyrillic scripts in place of the formerly Latinized alphabets. By 1938, the party-state decreed the compulsory teaching of Russian in the non-Russian schools. What had been *de jure* only for the RSFSR (at least for its schools) now became *de jure* for the whole USSR²¹. In all of these senses, the party reneged on Stalin's promised public compact between content and form. Russian forms now became nationality forms. Yet remarkably, in all of these cases, russification initiatives still depended upon, indeed were constrained by, the very linguistic codes and language standards that they were meant to co-opt. Russian terms had to adapt to nationality literary languages that still maintained an immense and living native lexicon. However willfully and poorly, Russian letters still had to adapt to native sound and meaning systems. The classics of Marxism-Leninism, and the daily commands of the party-state, always had to be translated into the local vernaculars. The 1938 decree on the compulsory teaching of Russian was itself predicated upon the new 1936 Soviet Constitution, namely Article 121, which promised the nationalities the right to education in their native languages, the essential conduit to eventually learning Russian.

In their print cultures, some national languages survived this new wave of national and statist russification largely intact. Established literary languages like Georgian and Armenian avoided script russification altogether; developing ones like Ukrainian and Uzbek, with large numbers of speakers and beginning readers, maintained a modicum of print media (newspapers and books and school instruction). Other languages suffered precipitous decline.

21 For a comprehensive survey of the decree, of the continuing failures of nativization, and of the powerful attraction of Russian, see Peter BLITSTEIN, *Stalin's Nations: Soviet Nationality Policy between Planning and Primordialism, 1936–1953*, PhD Dissertation, University of California, Berkeley 1999, pp. 91–178.

Karelian and Moldovan, which the Soviet state sponsored as new and rather artificial languages in order to separate them from Finnish and Romanian speakers just across the borders, fell into decay. Soviet Yiddish, the language of Russia's Jews in diaspora, without a stable homeland or literary culture, wasted away over time into what Gennady Estraiikh has called a »huge storehouse of spare parts, the bulk of which were rusted«. Most of the languages of the smaller peoples, surrounded by Russians or other majority nationalities, developed only the barest of literary cultures²².

In spoken terms, the Soviet Union was a great empire of accents. Armenian or Georgian professionals could find each other within their significant ethnic diasporas throughout the Soviet Union, chat with each other in their broken Russian or in their own languages. So could Azerbaijan's traders at Russia's city bazaars, or its oil men and engineers in the Siberian fields; or the Korean academics and managers of Central Asia. Yet their native languages were, in contrast to Russian, purely exclusive: the things within walls, within the walls of homes and elementary schools, of national republics or regions, of small groups of extra-territorial nationalities or migrants. Soviet nationality forms took on the shape of these smallish circles as compared to Russian. Some were multiple and larger circles (like Tatar), some fewer and smaller circles (like Chuvash), some of the larger ones even encompassing the smaller ones (like Georgian, whose speech community included neighboring Abkhazian). But these national forms were always rather static, limited, enclosed. They were subaltern: languages that sometimes moved in response to Russian-language commands, sometimes did not, and sometimes only ever pretended to move.

Historians have come to recognize this prestige status of Russian through the popular phrase, »speaking Bolshevik«. Stephen Kotkin made it famous in his book, *Magnetic Mountain*, a study of the industrial complex and budding »Stalinist civilization« at Magnitogorsk after 1929. The phrase addressed the ways by which Soviet citizens learned the correct behaviors and new »language« of identity and »self-expression«. »Bolshevized« Russian was a core value and means of forming a »strong sense of Soviet nationhood and citizenship«. It was a means of political belief and popular participation, of social mobility and »positive integration« into the Soviet system. To speak Bolshevik meant to speak Russian. But not just any Russian. It was a peculiar political idiom, a combination of words and phrases, mixed with a formulaic and

22 See Paul M. AUSTIN, Soviet Karelian: The Language that Failed, in: *Slavic Review* 51/1 (1992), pp. 16–35; and Charles KING, The Ambivalence of Authority, or How the Moldovan Language was Made, in: *Slavic Review* 58/1 (1999), pp. 118–142. Quoted from Gennady ESTRAIKH, *Soviet Yiddish. Language Planning and Language Development*, Oxford 1999, p. 175. For the contexts, see Bernard COMRIE, *The Languages of the Soviet Union*, Cambridge 1981.

authoritative syntax, combined with a confident personal style and gesture²³. This idiom was the coin (*koine*) of Stalin's realm. It must have been exciting to speak or write in these years, a mark of distinction and status, like the leather caps and jackets and boots that Bolshevik commissars often wore, part of their public swagger. Over time it became a mark of mutual communication and deference and loyalty to the regime, inundating political statements and newspapers, filtering into school textbooks and academic scholarship. Individuals appropriated this idiom and style in their petitions to the party and state, even in their own autobiographies – the social and cultural markers of »Soviet subjectivity«²⁴.

For ethnic Russians, this idiom was part of the very language of their »motherland« (*rodina*), as well as the language of the Soviet »fatherland« state (*otečestvo*). Only they enjoyed this advantage, this doubling power of language. For the nationalities, speaking or fumbling about in this Bolshevik idiom or in Russian more generally did not mean that they became ethnic »Russian« (*Russkij*). It meant that they became citizens, Russian speakers (*Rossijskij* or *Sovetskij*), active participants in state discourse, to whatever degree it was »civic«, however relative the term. It meant becoming Soviet. The late Stalinist state did suggest, through the term »Soviet people« (*Sovetskij narod*), that the USSR was becoming a nation in formation. It was not quite a »motherland« and not yet a nation, but certainly one with potential. It had all the hallmarks of a nation coming to be. It had a flag, an anthem, a territory, a constitution and state. It had a Russian ethnic core, with a new Sovietized history and traditions. And it most definitely had their language, Russian. Stalin's famous 1950 essay on linguistics provided a depth of scope and scholarly authority on this score, affirming the central and dialectical role of Russian, still dominant over a hierarchy of lesser and ever-tenacious nationality languages. His personality cult furnished one of the most remarkable of hallmarks of this Russian-Soviet nation in becoming: Stalin as »father« of the peoples, by implication a founding father²⁵.

For all its familiarity, this paternal image did not survive Stalin. True, his successors could not and did not forsake the multi-national state compact

23 Stephen KOTKIN, *Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization*, Berkeley 1995, p. 230. For the typical syntactic forms, see Patrick SERIOT, *Analyse du discours politique soviétique*, Paris 1985. On the new Russian language culture in context, see Michael GORHAM, *Speaking in Soviet Tongues. Language Culture and the Politics of Voice in Revolutionary Russia*, Dekalb, Ill. 2003.

24 For a recent interpretive survey of the new scholarship in this field, see Choi CHATTERJEE/Karen PETRONE, *Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective*, in: *Slavic Review* 67/4 (2008), pp. 967–986.

25 For the wider contexts, see David BRANDENBERGER, *National Bolshevism. Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931–1956*, Cambridge, Mass. 2002; and Matthew Cullerne BOWN, *Art under Stalin*, New York 1991.

that he had helped to forge, nor the historical dialectic from multiplicity to unity that he had helped to redefine. They did retain the concepts of Soviet »people« and »fatherland«. They also revived the dialectic in the form of »merging« (*sbliženie*) of nationalities. It took practical shape in policies that encouraged the mastery of Russian as a second language, as for example the promotion of Russian-language schools and print media under Nikita Khrushchev. It took ideological shape in political and historical and literary essays under Leonid Brezhnev that drew the Soviet nationalities together in a common cause of Soviet nationhood, united under the standard of the one Russian and the many neighboring languages that surrounded it. It was a staple of Mikhail Gorbachev's nationality policies just before the collapse of the USSR, calling for the »consolidation and unity of all Soviet peoples«, even amid the fracturing of those policies in places like Lithuania, Moldova, and Azerbaijan²⁶. These initiatives were not so much a function of strength as of weakness, the fault-line of the rising numbers and influence of the Russian population and their language, still ruling over so many millions of non-Russians who did not really speak or understand it very well at all (as revealed in the 1970 census). However different now by degrees, this was the same imperial dilemma that the Bolsheviks had faced in 1918: the bind of dominance and dependence, control over the nationalities if always through them.

In practice, the dialectical process slowed. Rather than the creative tension of multiplicity becoming unity, of process and conflict becoming synthesis and resolution, the Soviet state fell into a more static pattern of multiplicity against unity, locked into a dialectical moment of confrontation: the nationalities against the Soviet state. In response to the political influence and economic monopolies, to the demographic power and in-migration of ethnic »Great Russians«, the non-Russian nationalities formed into political elites that represented and manipulated their own »nations«, lobbying for political and economic and even cultural rights and privileges. This was real nationalism of a sort, if not yet quite independent or sovereign. Or, to apply the terms of several poignant analyses at the time, Soviet »affirmative action« policies transformed into a series of negative reactions against further russification, assimilation, and impoverishment²⁷.

26 See Barbara A. ANDERSON/Brian D. SILVER, Equality, Efficiency, and Politics in Soviet Bilingual Education Policy, 1934–1980, in: *The American Political Science Review* 78/4 (1984), pp. 1019–1022; and A.Iu. NADŽAFOV, *Sbliženie kul'tur socialističeskich nacij*, Baku 1970. Quoted from the news announcement, *Teorija i praktika mežnacional'nych otnošenij*, *Pravda* (5 July 1989), p. 2.

27 Teresa RAKOWSKA-HARMSTONE, The Dialectics of Nationalism in the USSR, in: *Problems of Communism* 23 (1974), pp. 1–22. Ronald G. SUNY, *The Revenge of the Past. Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union*, Stanford 1993. On »affirmative action«, see Mark SAROYAN, The »Karabagh Syndrome« and Azerbaijani Politics, in: *Problems of Communism* 39 (September–October 1990), p. 16.

In the end, the linguistic community of the USSR took the shape not of one great circle of the Russian language, but of a series of interlocking, concentric circles: between the Russian language of the center and the native languages of the peripheries, distinct circles in themselves. The overlaps between them represented those among the nationalities who were privileged enough to speak and write Russian best. Imagine these middling, elliptical shapes, and they take on the look of one great crisscrossed fault-line, central points of inclusion that really end up highlighting all the points of exclusion beyond. Once the center could no longer hold, the dialectic broke in full, and rather than leap forward and up to the socialism of Moscow (in Russian), the nationalities had little choice but to fall back and downward upon the nationalism of Kiev, or Baku, or Tashkent (in Ukrainian, or Azerbaijani, or Uzbek). What seemed to be a linguistic line of unity was really a scissored line of division. Soviet multilingualism, in this sense, was a fiction. It really turned out to be just a series of many and separate bilingualisms. In either case, so long as the center held, the multiplicity and polarity of languages only put into greater relief the natural and seemingly pre-ordained superiority of Russian.

The irony is that all of this later »dialectic« of conflict took place in the Russian language. It had become, like the Communist Party itself, the inclusive circle of »Soviet«. Socialist content became a form. The free had become something of necessity. In the end, the idiom of Soviet Russian became little more than a series of emptied and superficial clichés, evidence the newspapers of the Communist Party or its Youth League just before the collapse of the USSR in 1991, a political slang almost totally divorced from reality, locked into patterns of self-reference and rote repetition. The state's commands in Russian had lost their sting²⁸. But only the nationalities, remember, were truly bi-lingual. Only they enjoyed the dual power of the Russian and the native language. They could speak to the center and to the other nationalities in Russian, but also speak the native language amongst themselves. They could return to their homelands and find sometimes thriving, sometimes just surviving, native languages in print and culture; or huddle amongst themselves at party or academic conferences, plotting strategy and tactics in their native tongues. Their national forms, however tentatively and incompletely, became contents. Necessity became free.

28 See Alexei YURCHAK, *Soviet Hegemony of Form: Everything Was Forever, Until it was No More*, in: *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45/3 (2003), pp. 491–492.

