

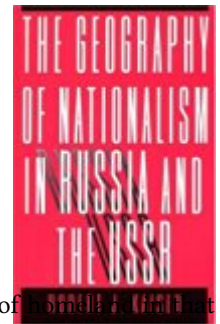
# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Robert J Kaiser.** *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR.* New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994. 471 pp. \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-03254-2.

Reviewed by Julian Birch (Department of Politics, The University of Sheffield, UK)  
Published on H-Russia (March, 1995)



This volume is not quite what its title would seem to indicate—that is a geography of nationalism, a guide to the recent and present day locales of nationalist activism which has served to transmute the USSR into the CIS. Rather, to this reviewer, it seemed more like a history of national identity and the consequent nationalism of the peoples concerned, all focused on the spatial dimension of their territories or homelands. Perhaps the term historical geography would catch its essence a little more clearly. Not that this is in any way a negative critique of the book. Far from it, for we have here a most extensive and useful addition to the still rapidly expanding corpus of works on nationalism in the USSR and Russia. Of late, a number of these have shown rather too many signs of being multi-authored collections designed more to meet the needs of a 'publish or be damned' environment in both the US and the UK than to contribute anything particularly new or of lasting value to our knowledge of the subject. Perhaps there is indeed little more that can be said in some areas and a moratorium should be called in order to save the trees!

Kaiser's work appears to bring together and expand on both his PhD and subsequent articles in this area. The PhD approach is certainly apparent in a fairly standard but thorough run through the literature on the key concepts of nationalism, national identity, and, most importantly here, national homeland. These are all rightly revealed as fluctuating variables rather than the constants the more extreme nationalists on the one side would have us believe, and yet no less significant for all that despite the efforts of Marxists to play down the continued relevance of such concepts.

The main body of the work looks at the nationalisation process, that is the formation of the nations, and

particularly at the role of the sense of homeland in the process—the homeland being the supposed birthplace of the nation and the locus of its exclusivist destiny. What Kaiser seeks to show here is that for many of the peoples of the Russian empire an identity was created for them by the authorities—Tsarist and Soviet alike, but particularly the latter—which eventually was to give many of them a greater sense of cohesion, a more common vision of origin and destiny than that which they, as scattered and even tribal groupings, previously possessed. Tribal identity was thus replaced by a larger national identity in quite modern times. The creation of distinct territories for so many groups must indeed be considered one of the greatest follies of the Soviet system—a folly which was ultimately to undermine it. This was the more so when detailed ethnographic distribution maps are examined for areas like the middle Volga, the north Caucasus, or the Ferghana valley. Populations there were, and are, just too mixed in reality, while straight lines across deserts on maps meant little to Kazakh and Turkmen nomads. Given that the goal of the Soviet regime was supposedly international—the replacement of local national identities with a pan-national Soviet identity—it was a bizarre compromise from a Commissar for Nationalities (Joseph Stalin) whose general view was that, 'principles do not compromise they triumph.' Temporary as these national territories may have been intended to be in Soviet eyes, and satisfying as they no doubt were for the ethnic groups themselves to have a homeland to call their own, it was often practically impossible to be that neat about it without treading on the toes of neighbouring groups. Indeed the Soviet federal system inevitably created a stronger sense of belonging, which was if anything reinforced the longer the system continued to exist without the ultimate switch over to a more unitary structure.

Melting pot it thus never was, and salad bowl it remained, with most of many of the ethnic groups located firmly within their eponymous territories. In the process, alternative levels of self identification such as class fell by the wayside.

This identity creating and reinforcing role of official policy and the federal structure is not quite as new an idea as has been claimed on the books cover by reviewers also mentioned in the acknowledgements. It has certainly been in this reviewer's lectures now for some twenty five years. Nonetheless it is far more fully worked out here than in previous accounts of the impact of Soviet nationality policies.

The potential for nationalist upsurges having thus been set, Kaiser turns then to the catalysts which have actually activated the nationalism—factors such as inter and intra—homeland migration patterns, social mobilisation and contact with others, integrationist pressures, and centralised decision making. These are all well documented here within an abundance of statistical data.

Finally he turns to the process of indigenisation, that is the drive to take control of the homeland, a bottom up challenge to Russification. He traces such national separation processes right up to the foundering of the USSR, and rightly points out just how many academic writers failed dismally to read the signs of ethnic fragmentation (some of them, it could be, added subsequently jumping on the bandwagon of writing about nationalism as though their ideas had never had to be changed).

The only real disappointment in the book is one which is nonetheless significant for a volume which styles itself a geography. This concerns the presentation of data in map form. Those acting as end papers are in colour but simply repetitive whereas changes in the distribution of the peoples (eg the deportees) could well have been illustrated. The Ossetians are shown here as straddling the Russian/Georgian border whereas by the end of the USSR most had been forced out into Russia alone. The key to these maps is some pages away and includes the somewhat unsatisfactory notation ON for other peoples of the north such as the Itelmen and the Evens. To that category are also consigned peoples such as Udegey, the Orochi, the Nanai and the Ulchi down near the Chinese border in the south-east of Russia. These and several other peoples merit no mention at all in the book, at least as individual groups, though this may be excused on the grounds that their development of a national identity is still incomplete. In the case of the other maps, they are confined to black and white and are not always very clear, especially that on page 160. These other maps also tend to lop off the Chukchi peninsular, an area where the Eskimo people disappeared as far as Soviet censuses returns were concerned, thus giving no chance of developing such an identity.

Overall this is however a very worthwhile piece of work and should be compulsory reading for anyone wishing to understand why the USSR collapsed as a single separate country.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

**Citation:** Julian Birch. Review of Kaiser, Robert J, *The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. March, 1995.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=35>

Copyright © 1995 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at [hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu](mailto:hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu).