

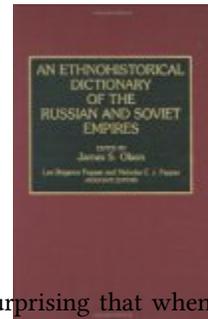
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James S. Olson, ed. *An Ethnohistorical Dictionary of the Russian and Soviet Empire*. Westport and London: Greenwood Press, 1994. viii + 840 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-313-27497-8.

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This thick volume treats some 450 different nationalities or ethnic groups living now or formerly on the territory of the Russian Empire or the Soviet Union. Included are such unlikely entries as “American,” “Spaniard,” and “British,” all of which were entered as nationalities in the 1989 Soviet census and thereby merit inclusion. On the other hand, such equally likely candidates as “Canadian,” “Chilean,” “Angolan,” or “Egyptian” are among those excluded. The vast majority of entries are for ethnic groups native to areas included within the boundaries of the Russian Empire and Soviet Union at their greatest historical extent. After the nationalities that had their own republics, autonomous republics, autonomous areas, territories, or other administrative-political units, the smaller ethnic groups of the Caucasus and of Siberia and the Far East predominate. To each entry is appended a brief bibliography, sometimes consisting of only one work. These short bibliographies, as well as the 18-page selected bibliography that appears at the end of the volume, are limited to works published in English, leading to the conclusion that only English-language sources (or those available in English translation) were consulted in the volume’s preparation. The dictionary can be taken as a companion volume to Ronald Wixman, *The Peoples of the USSR: An Ethnographic Handbook* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1984), on which it seems to have been heavily dependent.

One of the most helpful features of the dictionary is its inclusiveness. Every alternative name known to the editors, with variant spellings, is listed for each ethnic group and referenced to the main entry so as to eliminate confusion. For example, a partial listing of the contents of page 108 includes all of the following terms, each one referenced to the main entry “Altai”: “Bii Kalmuk,” “Bii Kalmyk,” “Bii Qalmuq,” “Bii Qalmyq,” “Biy Kalmuk,” “Biy Kalmyk,” “Biy Qalmuq,” and “Biy Qalmyq.” Given

this degree of thoroughness, it is surprising that when looking under the entry “Altai,” one does not find any reference to the preceding terms. The reader is left to wonder how they relate to the larger ethnic group “Altai.” Similar problems can be found with “Goldi,” referenced to “Nanai” but then not mentioned in that entry, and “Michigiz,” referenced to “Michikiz” and “Chechen.” The entry “Michikiz” in its entirety reads, “The Michikiz are one of the constituent groups making up the Chechen people. See Chechen.” (p. 470) But the term “Michikiz” does not appear in the entry “Chechen.”

The attempt has been made to treat each ethnic or nationality group historically, but the result is often superficial. Treatment is strongest for the Soviet period; indeed, it is frequently imbalanced in that direction. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in particular are treated less thoroughly. For example, the article on the Bashkirs does not tie their rebellion of 1773 to the Pugachev Rebellion of which it became a part. Not a word is devoted to the situation of the Bashkirs throughout the nineteenth century. Neither the article on the Finns nor that on the Karelians (several paragraphs of the two entries are identical) makes mention of the measures of autonomy granted to Finland by Emperor Alexander II in the 1860s (a parliament, a separate currency in the Finnmark, for example), although the last two emperors, Alexander III and Nicholas II, are condemned for their russification of Finland. Of the (only!) three pages devoted to “Pole,” less than a paragraph is given to the period prior to the twentieth century, despite the fact that well over a million ethnic Poles lived within the borders of the Soviet Union and that Polish-Russian relations extend back for centuries. “Carpatho-Rusyn,” descriptive of a small ethnic group over whose very existence anthropologists and linguists still debate, merits five pages (article by An-

thony J. Amato). The nineteenth-century Imam Shamil is alternatively identified as a leader of the Avars and the Chechens. The “Khant,” a Far Eastern group numbering some 21,000 people, are discussed in a four-page entry, while “Gypsy” is relegated to barely more than two. These examples indicate some of the problems of imbalance in the volume. On the other hand, there are individually noteworthy entries. “Kazakh,” by associate editor Lee Brigance Pappas, presents a chronologically balanced discussion of the history of the Kazakhs under Russian rule. “Jew,” by Samuel A. Oppenheim, offers a brief but exhaustive account of the various Jewish groups that over time came under Russian and Soviet rule, including Caucasian Jewry, Crimean Jewry, Khazars, Karaites, Central Asian (Bukharan) Jewry, and Ashkhenazic Jewry.

There are no maps, an unforgiveable shortcoming given the large number of ethnic groups relatively unknown in the English-speaking world. It is true that many of them cannot be accurately placed on a map, in part because of their own movements over time and in part due to Soviet population policies. One or more maps would still make it possible for readers to plot general locations. There should be at least three maps: one showing the entire Russian Empire/Soviet Union, to help in locating populous or far-flung nations; one of the Caucasus—surely the most variegated ethnic map on the face of the earth—and one for Siberia and the Far East. In this regard, the articles do not distinguish with sufficient vigor between Siberia and the Far East, often identifying ethnic groups more appropriately designated Far Eastern as Siberian. Given the historical emphasis of the dictionary, it might be appropriate to have additional historical maps indicating the expansion over time of the Russian Empire into regions inhabited by non-Russian peoples.

While the absence of maps is lamentable, the editors have included some other helpful information in a series of appendices. They include an alphabetized list of the major ethnic groups by republic of the USSR in 1990; a

summary of the ethnic populations of the USSR in 1926, 1959, 1970, 1979 and 1989; an essay by Gary R. Hobin on the history of Islam, with particular attention to its bearing on Russian and Soviet history; a chronology of the Russian and Soviet empires referencing in particular their geographical expansion; a list of the major political subdivisions of the USSR in 1990; a chart showing nationality, language loyalty, and religion in the USSR in 1989; a chart revealing residence patterns in the USSR in 1989 by major nationality group; and a chart of the ethnic composition in autonomous units (republic, province, region) of the USSR in 1991. The chronology contains a few errors. It implies that there was a Russian Empire prior to 1721. It gives the year 989 as the date of Kiev's conversion to Christianity, cites Alexander Nevsky as Grand Prince of Muscovy, relates that Emperor Paul died in 1801 (he was assassinated), omits the treaties of Aigun (1858) and Peking (1860) by which Russia established its claim to the Amur-Ussuri region, dates the end of the Russo-Finnish War to 1941, not 1940. These and other examples of misdating or mistaken attribution of events detract from a volume that contains a considerable amount of reference information.

The editors are aware that the matter of ethnic identity is still evolving. The Meskhetians are offered as an example of an ethnic group that did not exist prior to the 1950s and 1960s (p. 468). To be fully consistent, however, the recent ethnogenesis of other groups should likewise have been noted, including the Belarusians, who according to many authorities did not exist until created by Joseph Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s.

These minor critical points notwithstanding, this is an impressive work to have been authored principally by one person.

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