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Brigid O'Keeffe's *The Multiethnic Soviet Union and Its Demise* offers a concise, yet comprehensive introduction to nationality in the Soviet Union. As part of the recently launched Russian Shorts series published by Bloomsbury Academic, it is the most accessible of the available surveys of this topic.[1] As such, it is presumably intended to primarily serve first-time students of the Soviet Union and their teachers. In addition to its compactness, this excellent overview stands out through its refreshingly original approach to its subject.

Unlike most existing works that deal with the history of the Soviet Union's non-Russian population, *The Multiethnic Soviet Union* does not concentrate primarily on Soviet policies and debates that expressly targeted nationality. As O'Keeffe points out, “the Bolsheviks never enshrined a singular, unchanging Soviet nationality policy encapsulated in a tidy, programmatic text” (p. 16). In this regard, she follows Jeremy Smith’s recent argument that there was no nationality policy after the 1920s.[2] Hence, any attempt to answer the question of what nationality meant in the Soviet Union by focusing solely on explicit policies would yield an incomplete picture. The book instead seeks to trace all major developments in the Soviet Union as they affected its various ethnic groups. This is particularly visible in the chapter on Soviet nation building, the longest of the book's seven chapters, which mostly deals with more general Soviet modernization policies in the interwar period. In this regard, O'Keeffe's work lives up to its title as a book that could be summarized as a history of the Soviet Union as seen by its non-Russian population. This is a welcome change from textbooks and survey courses that often cover nationality in one unit and proceed to treat the Soviet Union as a tacitly Russian or at least anational state, prioritizing Russian or Russified voices and experiences. Indeed, O'Keeffe's work could be used to great effect to decenter Soviet history syllabi and teach surveys exclusively from the point of view of the country's non-Russians. The author amasses an impressive array of perspectives from virtually all parts of the country, collected both from published
primary sources and other scholarly works. At the same time, she remains sensitive to the specificity of nationality in the Soviet Union, including the very term “nationality,” which she renders as “ethnicity” for American readers. O’Keeffe explains that initially, many if not most people in the Soviet Union had little use for concepts of nationality. She lays out how the Communist Party promoted awareness for and ultimately enshrined this category in state and society until nationality came to be seen as primordial.

O’Keeffe could have nonetheless elaborated in more depth on the policies that undergirded this situation. She rightfully emphasizes the Soviet territorialization of nationality (pp. 36-37), but it would have been illustrative to explain the formation of this approach as a deliberate rejection of Austrian Marxist and Jewish Bundist ideas of nonterritorial, cultural national autonomy prior to 1917. The promotion of titular cadres (korenizatsiya) and languages in these national territories in the interwar period, a topic that has traditionally received most of the attention that scholars have devoted to Soviet nationality, is treated in one sentence (p. 9). O’Keeffe implicitly returns to these issues when she discusses the 1938 law that made Russian a mandatory school subject as well as the assimilation pressure that nontitular minorities faced. However, the topic merits a more comprehensive discussion of the trajectory of korenizatsiya and national languages from the 1920s to the 1980s. That being said, the book’s format puts restrictions on this, and it is admirable how much O’Keeffe managed to fit into the available space without it appearing rushed.

By prioritizing a broader view of the Soviet experience over explicit policies, O’Keeffe’s work raises fundamental questions about the Soviet Union. One concerns the significance of nationality for the life and experience of Soviet citizens compared to other factors such as social background, the divide between urban and rural life, location within the Soviet Union, education, occupation, and gender. How much can nationality explain? For example, did Uzbek school teachers living in Tashkent tend to have more in common with Uzbek kolkhoz peasants or with their urban Russian neighbors? Naturally, it would be futile to search for straightforward answers to such questions. O’Keeffe’s work is somewhat ambiguous on this issue. She emphasizes that “ethnicity was central to not only how ordinary people lived and died in the USSR, but also how they imagined themselves within the Soviet Union and the wider world” (p. 113). At the same time, the voices of shock over the loss of the common homeland in 1991 that she assembles in her last chapter suggest that there was a defining Soviet quality that united all of these perspectives, perhaps even overshadowing the purported centrality of their various nationalities.

A related question concerns the status of the Soviet Union’s Russians. Put simply, there are two ways to approach the significance of nationality in the Soviet Union. One would be to simply highlight different experiences of distinct national groups, including Russians. Another would be to emphasize a more fundamental distinction between Russians and non-Russians whose importance surpasses differences among the latter group. By their very nature, works on nationality policy and the Soviet Union’s non-Russians such as O’Keeffe’s at least implicitly suggest the second approach. There is good reason for adopting this perspective, considering that Russian identity and culture in many respects served as a default template forced upon non-Russian groups. However, by focusing on modernization attempts rather than explicit nationality policies, O’Keeffe’s chapter on interwar nation building begs the question of the extent to which the experiences she details were shared, at least in some regards, by the country’s Russian population, in particular peasants.

O’Keeffe emphasizes the national hierarchy that elevated Russians to first among equals, disadvantaged non-Russians without a republic of
their own, and deliberately oppressed alleged enemy nations (pp. 42, 78). She remains vague, however, about the rest of this hierarchy. Even when leaving aside these extremes at the top and bottom, some Soviet national groups were more equal than others. O’Keeffe rightly argues in favor of applying concepts of racism for instances of ethnic prejudice and discrimination, notwithstanding the very different connotation of this term in the Soviet Union’s two great foils, Nazi Germany and the United States (p. 84). However, her explanation that racism proliferated because Soviet policies unwittingly turned nationality in general into a primordial quality is not completely convincing. Not all national groups were racialized to the same extent, and some could pass as Russians.

There are also some minor omissions that are nonetheless worth identifying. In her account of national tensions during Perestroika, O’Keeffe leaves out the brutally suppressed Kazakh protests in Almaty in December 1986 that other standard accounts often use as a starting point, as well as the clashes in Abkhazia and Tbilisi in 1988 and Osh in 1990. The selected bibliography includes some works that are not primarily about nationality but omits other standard readings, in particular Ron Suny’s Revenge of the Past and Yuri Slezkine’s “The Soviet Union as a Communal Apartment.”[3]

Ultimately, O’Keeffe’s engaging work leaves its readers wondering how Russian or indeed multinational the Soviet Union really was. In her introduction, O’Keeffe emphasizes the multiethnic and broad geographic background of some key Bolsheviks prior to 1917. A few pages later, she explains that “the Bolsheviks” needed to “win over non-Russian peoples” after the revolution, without spelling out why, beyond the need to captivate the country’s population at large, the non-Russians would require additional convincing (p. 8). Did the Bolsheviks ever succeed in fully shedding their Russian origins? Even as it embraced ethnophilia and multinationalism, the Soviet project, its goals, aesthetics, intellectual foundations and geopolitical trajectory, maintained a certain Russian character, but this tension could have been teased out further in O’Keeffe’s work.[4] Conveying a nuanced understanding of this problem to undergraduate students remains a daunting task, now more than ever as, in the wake of Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the terms “Soviet” and “Russian” appear to become increasingly interchangeable again in everyday American parlance. In that regard, consider the context in which O’Keeffe’s work appeared: it makes sense, of course, that it is part of a series titled “Russian Shorts,” but it is also ironic for a book that highlights the Soviet Union’s multietnic character.

In short, O’Keeffe’s excellent work makes for a stimulating read, which is a remarkable achievement for an introduction of this brevity. Succinctly written and easy to follow, it should capture the attention of both undergraduate students and more advanced scholars. It is a welcome addition to reading lists and will certainly make a lasting impact on how we teach Soviet history.

Notes


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