

## REVIEW ESSAY

### **E Pluribus Unum? Searching for a common language in Russian ethnicity and nationality studies**

*Natsii i etnichnost' v gumanitarnykh naukakh*, edited by A.Kh. Daudov and S.E. Fedorov, St. Petersburg, Aleteia, 2015

In February 2014, the Historical Institute of St. Petersburg State University hosted an international interdisciplinary conference on “Nationality and Ethnicity in the Human Sciences” (*Natsii i etnichnost' v gumanitarnykh naukakh*) in conjunction with an ongoing university project focused on the History of Nationality entitled *Historia Nationem Gignit* (History Begets the Nation) (*Historia Nationem Gignit* website). Dozens of scholars – well-recognized experts as well as undergraduate and graduate students – participated in the meeting, offering papers on questions of nationality stretching from the late medieval era to the present and representing a range of disciplines from history and cultural anthropology to media studies and political science. The thinking behind the meeting was ambitious but straightforward: identify a range of scholars of different levels of expertise working on a common theme from diverse disciplinary angles in the humanities and social sciences, bring them together under a single roof, and get them to start talking. As the organizers put it, the goal was not to generate answers as much as to foster “collegial,” “interdisciplinary dialogue” and, in the process, elucidate the major questions defining the field.

Scholarly meetings are short-lived affairs, of course, which makes their significance difficult to assess. But in this case, the gathering yielded a volume edited by two of the organizers – Professors A.Kh. Daudov and S.E. Fedorov, both of St. Petersburg State – which showcases 72 papers together with a short but informative introduction offering a description of the proceedings<sup>1</sup> (Daudov and Fedorov, 2015; *Historia Nationem Gignit* e-journal). Indeed, on the face of it, the volume does exactly what the organizers say they aimed to achieve with the meeting itself: it opens the window on a moment of interdisciplinary dialogue, in particular, with a Russian inflection given that some 80% of the contributors hail from universities and research institutes in the Russian Federation.<sup>2</sup>

The volume, then, offers something of a snapshot of the current state of the field and begs a number of useful questions: What does an international interdisciplinary dialogue on nationality and ethnicity actually sound like at the present moment? What do historians bring to the exchange? Finally and perhaps most interesting: What conclusions can be drawn about the way in which Russian and foreign scholars study the topic? Do they (we) share a common academic language? A quarter century removed from the collapse of the USSR, is it appropriate to speak of a single international research community with regard to the history of ethnic and national questions and concepts? If not, why not – and what divisions remain? In the review below, I offer a summary of Daudov and Fedorov’s intriguing volume and propose some tentative responses to these questions.

### Multiple approaches, major themes

Dudov and Fedorov divide their volume into 12 sections, reflecting the overall organization of the conference. Of these, a handful focus on concrete periods, the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era, for example, or on nationality politics in the contemporary world. In addition, one section centers on a single state/political area (the British Isles). All the rest, however, are organized around themes, such as the history of national and ethnic identity formation, interethnic relations (including interethnic conflict), the relationship between nations and empires, and the politics of nation-building. Rather than focusing on a given period or area, these sections are wide-ranging and provocatively diverse, mixing periods and regions in unusual combinations.

Overall, this thematic approach succeeds well. The decision to group the papers in sections allows the reader to quickly identify the key questions that animated the conference, and the preference for broad themes underscores revealing breaks as well as continuities across eras and regions. Interethnic conflict, for example, despite the great attention it receives today, is obviously not an exclusively modern phenomenon, so uniting papers on the distant and recent past together in a single section sparks useful comparisons and contrasts. Indeed, the creative jumble of the sessions, that includes combinations of papers on medieval Lithuania, modern Mexico, and imperial Russia, on art and language, law and economics, and so forth, is one of the great intellectual strengths of the volume.

Another plus, though it might initially appear a shortcoming, is a certain unevenness among the chapters. Having begun as conference presentations, the contributions are perforce short, even extremely so – all run under 10 pages. But their internal variety is striking: some draw on primary sources, others on theories and models, still others seem closer to opinion pieces with few or no references at all. Some surrender to jargon, others to narrative. Reading the chapters one after the next thus offers a tour through the disciplines as well as individual scholarly styles. Overall, I found myself drawn to the historical rather than the anthropological, culturological, or political science papers, which reflects my personal disciplinary sympathies, but others will have their own favorites, and the mix overall is instructive.

Fittingly for a sprawling interdisciplinary endeavor, Section one of the collection, which replicates the opening plenary of the conference, focuses on defining terms (“What is the Nation?” [*Chto takoe natsiia?*], 14–63). The seven authors in the section include a political scientist, a philosopher, three historians, and two specialists in cultural and media studies, writing on topics ranging from the general surveys of “basic approaches to the understanding of ethnicity” (A.I. Lipkin), the challenges of creating a shared collective memory in “polyethnic states” (R.E. Barash), and the relationship between globalization and nationalism (Ia.A. Bakhmet’ev) to the particular discussions of “ethnos and ethnicity in the discourse of classical Eurasianism” (A.B. Panchenko) and “the imagological problem of nationality and ethnicity in Russian documentary film” (I.V. Genshou [Ganschow]).

Perhaps not surprisingly, given the volume’s emphasis on dialogue rather than solutions, the section does not actually answer the question posed in the title. There are no tidy summaries of the meaning of “nation” or, for that matter, related terms such as “ethnicity,” “nationality,” and “nationalism,” which appear in the papers just as much. Instead, the stress is on approaches and categories. We thus read of scholarly efforts to distinguish between political vs. cultural or civic vs. ethnic nations, as well as the essentialist (primordialist), instrumentalist, or constructivist paradigms that have dominated scholarly thinking on ethnicity and nation over the last 100 plus years, with the latter being ascendant in our time but each of which, according to the philosopher Lipkin at least, has its merits and deserves to be applied depending on the period and case at hand (39).

“Identity” appears as another key term of the section, much as it does for the book as a whole. It, too, however, remains largely undefined, though the authors seem to agree that identity formation, whether of groups or individuals, is influenced by both internal and external factors and is therefore unavoidably implicated in social relations and processes. Why and when individuals and groups begin to see themselves in ethnic or national terms is obviously critical, though again, with the exception of brief reflections on the evolutionary path from confessional to ethnic identity traveled by European societies in the late medieval period offered by the medievalist Fedorov in his essay on “Ethnicity in the Contemporary Human Sciences” (14–20), these introductory papers do not reflect much on how this process actually occurred.

Other papers take up the issue, however. In fact, identity amounts to a leitmotif for a number of sections in the volume. Qualified as “ethnocultural” and “ethnoconfessional,” the word appears in the titles of Sections three and four. Section 12 is entitled “Issues of Modern Identities and Nationalism” (*Problemy sovremennykh identichnosti i natsionalizma*), and the term figures without an adjective in the title of Section five (“The Issue of Identities in the British Isles” [*Problema identichnosti na Britanskikh ostrovakh*]). Even those sections that do not feature the word in the title nonetheless include papers that do, and papers without it in the title, still engage it in the text. In sum, “identity” is practically everywhere here.

One obvious question is: Why? Another is: To what effect? That is, how is the word “identity” used in these papers and what role does it play in the interdisciplinary dialogue that the conference organizers are urging us to follow? In a basic sense, if the word is so common here, it is because it speaks to a fundamental human aspiration: “the desire to belong, affiliate, and individuate.” *Ethnic* identity represents only one of the many imaginable expressions of this cultural need, but given that our times stress its special importance, it is not surprising that we would also stress the need to study it, all of which explains the wide proliferation of ethnic studies programs and centers across the international academy in recent decades (Santos and Umaña-Taylor 2015, 3). Ethnic identity and related terms, such as “ethnocultural,” “ethnoconfessional,” and “national” identity, thus predominate here, at least in part it seems, because they offer a familiar comfortable vocabulary for interdisciplinary discourse. If a historian explores “ethnic identity,” a media studies specialist will be able to follow along, as will the literary scholar and the political scientist. Medievalists can talk to modernists and vice versa. Even allowing for varieties of disciplinary usage, everybody can at least engage the term because everyone knows it. Other terms do not cross over so well.

And the volume indeed suggests a great deal of common ground. Some papers problematize the identity concept more directly than others, but the overall conceptualization is the constructivist or subjective one that predominates in the international field today. All the authors seem to share the view that identity itself, regardless of the *type* of identity in question, is plastic and mutable, and thus, in that sense, a fundamentally historical category, subject to change over time as well as from one discrete sociopolitical or socioeconomic context to another.

At the same time, the volume does not push things too far. There is an elusive quality to definitions of “identity,” both historically and in our own time, and our own current wisdom about the best way to interpret the term has its own limitations (Gleason 1983). As Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper argued in a seminal article some 20 years ago, one drawback of the “constructivist stance on identity” is the tendency to see subjectiveness in everything, which ends up exaggerating the fluidity, constructedness, and omnipresence of the identity concept and reduces its usefulness as an analytical tool. As Brubaker and

Cooper aptly put it, “When identity is everywhere, it is nowhere” (2000, 1–2), essays here seem mindful of this critique and, even as they take up the term frequently, the prevailing approach of the volume is to carefully situate it within specific institutional and sociopolitical settings, including discrete locations, texts, and historical moments (Okamura 1981). As Daudov and Fedorov note in the introduction, one of the concerns of the meeting was to “concretize” the “academic discourse” by making sure that the terms being used lined up appropriately with the phenomena they were meant to describe (Daudov and Fedorov 2015, 8). Generally speaking, the contributors indeed do this with regard to the “i”-word. Though it is used across widely divergent periods and cultural contexts here, it almost always appears in a carefully grounded rather than a free-floating way.

The essays also seem to concur with the current scholarly consensus on the overall timeline and relative importance of ethnic and national identification, notably the observation that ethnic identities far predate national ones, and that the rise to prominence of ethnic identity is an extremely recent historical phenomenon, a question of a few centuries at best. Drawing on the case of late medieval and early modern Muscovy, for example, M.V. Dmitriev argues that the idea of “Holy Rus” (*Sviataia Rus*) or the much-discussed theory of “Moscow, the Third Rome,” both of which have been repeatedly interpreted by later scholars as national or proto-national ideas, in fact, had little to do with national or even ethnic orientations but were instead expressions of a “metaphysical-confessional discourse.” T.G. Chernykh similarly emphasizes the absence of an ethnonational component in his essay on medieval Serbian identity, while T.P. Gusarova describes the late medieval “Hungarian nation” (*natio Hungarica*) as a sociopolitical institution composed of a medley of ethnically diverse nobles whose critical bond was neither culture nor language but rather their common membership in the dynastic community of the “Holy Crown.”

Dmitriev suggests a key intra-European difference in this regard. The cultures of Catholic and Protestant Europe, he argues, proved much more conducive overall than Orthodox societies to the emergence of proto-national identities in the premodern era. (The essays in the section on early modern Britain also seem to underscore this claim, at least by implication (see Daudov and Fedorov 2015, 196–231). The insightful paper by A.I. Filiushkin, however, is a reminder that the distinction between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Europe in this respect may be more of degrees than of absolute difference. As he shows through a study of the “geopolitical cataclysm” and social turmoil of the Livonian War, interstate conflict in Eastern Europe was a factor that accelerated proto-national identification in non-Orthodox and Orthodox states alike. Thus “on both sides of the front,” as he puts it, the Livonian contest intensified perceptions of ethnic difference and, in the process, helped to speed the transformation of “medieval nations” into “nations of the early modern era.”

What the volume also underscores quite forcefully is that the ethnoconfessional principle, while far older than the national one, was also long lived, persisting well into what we would otherwise consider the national age. This is not a new finding, of course, but the cases highlighted here are interesting nonetheless and figure especially vividly in the papers on “Empires and Nations: Problems of Mutual Relations” (*Imperii i natsii: problema vzaimootoshenii*). V.A. Gerasimova, for example, demonstrates that Jews who converted to Orthodoxy in the eighteenth century obtained the same legal status as ethnically Russian Orthodox believers, proving that religion rather than ethnicity was the primary ordering principle of the tsarist system of the time. Likewise, the development of a sense of ethnic identity did not have to coincide with perceptions of rigid distinctions vis-à-vis other groups. As V.L. Sharova notes, over the early 1800s, Czech–German relations in Habsburg Bohemia gradually took on the aspect of “a serious social conflict;” yet, “for a long period, Czech ethnic identity did not rest on starkly drawn lines of difference or

resentment toward local Germans.” Meanwhile I.I. Barinov’s chapter reveals Ruthenian (western Ukrainian) peasants in Habsburg Galicia who may well have been self-aware in ethnic terms; yet, they acted on this consciousness selectively, according to the rules of their imperial context. Thus, even as they rose up against their Polish overlords in the 1846 revolution, they had no trouble remaining loyal to their obviously ethnically German “good Caesar,” Austrian emperor Franz-Josef.

The interesting papers by Sharova and Barinov are reminders of two additional themes emphasized in the volume: the analysis of interethnic relations, including a section of five papers under the rubric of “Ethno-Demographics and Ethnic Conflict,” and the history and contemporary context of state nationality policies (euphemized here in Russian as *natsional’naia politika*), a broad thematic area that serves as de facto focus of at least 12 essays. Again, the variety of cases and topics, and to a degree, the diversity of conclusions reached by the authors under these rubrics, is striking.

V.V. Gipich, for example, argues that conflict between ethnoconfessional communities (Ruthenian Orthodox, Polish Catholics, Jews, and Armenian Orthodox) in the towns of early modern Ukraine was frequent and driven principally by economic rivalry and competition. By contrast, E.V. Samylovskaia’s paper focusing on a different sort of urban conflict – that between various groups of Roman Catholics in St. Petersburg in the early eighteenth century – suggests that the lines of tension were overwhelmingly cultural. Surrounded by a majority Russian milieu, the capital’s Germans, Italians, Poles, and French butted heads less over economics than over perceived cultural differences. As Samylovskaia puts it, “Assimilation was a persistent factor [in the city]. Ethnic groups and languages mixed together. The result was a natural pushback (*reaktsiia*) as communities sought to preserve their way of life, language, culture, and traditions.” Papers on interethnic and inter-confessional conflict in more recent times cover an equally broad topical span, ranging from V.A. Gaikin’s examination of a rash of anti-Korean pogroms in Japan’s Kantō region in 1923 to E.S. Toktosunova’s study of the Kyrgyz-Uzbek riots that exploded in southern Kyrgyzstan (in particular the city of Osh) in 2010.

With the exception of essays on contemporary France, Catalonia, and the post-1917 Russian emigration, the emphasis on nationality policy tilts heavily toward the experience of the USSR and the post-Soviet states, with topics addressing both the “hard” and “soft” dynamics of nation-building. Drawing in part on suggestive sources from the St. Petersburg Eparchial Archive, I.V. Petrov explores the history of the Orthodox parishes of Estonia and Latvia following the two states’ annexation into the USSR after World War II, arguing that Soviet policy in the religious sphere ultimately resulted in Estonian and Latvian Orthodox believers abandoning Orthodoxy for Lutheranism in the postwar years as Orthodoxy became increasingly associated with the imposition of formal Soviet power.

Meanwhile, in a related yet different vein, Patrick Kinville examines the “nativization” policies (*korenizatsiia*) pursued by the Bolsheviks toward the Volga Germans in the 1920s, concluding that Soviet power in this context aligned itself firmly on the side of the minority national group, promoting a German territorial administration as well as German language and culture as a means of creating a “Volga German Soviet nation loyal to the ideals of socialism.” S.V. Orlovskii’s paper on the Soviet “construction of the national” makes the same general point, though adding, in his view, that such policies of “nationality promotion” came at Russian expense. Russian resources were extracted to support the USSR’s non-Russian areas, while the Russians themselves, he argues, found themselves turned into the USSR’s only de facto “non-nation” because they alone were denied the nationally defined privileges and structures in their national republic (the RSFSR) that other national groups received in theirs.



From a simple juxtaposition of these three papers, one immediately senses the complexity of Soviet nationality policy, which exhibited changing and seemingly paradoxical features over the 70-some years of Communist power, most strikingly during the Stalin era when a platform of nationality promotion coexisted with policies of national persecution in the form of deportations of “enemy peoples,” NKVD “national operations,” and anti-Semitic smearing campaigns (Martin 1998). The legacies of Soviet nationality policy for post-Soviet states are no less complex, and aspects of this complexity are highlighted especially strikingly here in two papers by I.I. Verniaev and Dzh.Ia. Rakhaev, both of which examine nationality politics in the contemporary Russian Federation yet appear to reach diametrically opposite conclusions.

Verniaev’s chapter amounts to a trenchant critique of a multi-ministerial Kremlin initiative launched in 2014 to support the ethnocultural diversity of the Russian state and the consolidation of a “Russian nation” (*rossiiskaia natsiia*), arguing that the program is inherently flawed because it seeks to maintain a “dead-end Soviet vision” of Russia as a “state of nations” (*gosudarstvo natsii*), while at the same time promoting the creation of a would-be “civic form of Russian nationality” (*rossiiskaia natsiia uzhe v grazhdanskom smysle*) (“Ukreplenie edinstva rossiiskoi natsii,” 2014). As Verniaev sees it, however, the only way to truly create such a civic nation is to reject the Soviet model entirely and start afresh by doing away with all references to nationality in the self-conception and political organization of the country. As he puts it,

Understood in civic and juridical terms [...] the state consists of just one people (*narod*) [...] the citizens of the Russian Federation. Therefore allusions to any other identity or construct (whether ethnic, ethnoconfessional, confessional, or kinship-based) should be avoided as much as possible.

The business of government is to guarantee basic freedoms and create and maintain institutions that serve the citizenry, regardless of ethnic distinctions. Issues of confessional politics and other nationality questions, by contrast, are best left to “individuals and private groups.” In effect, Verniaev appears to be proposing something approximating the Kadet program of 1917 – the construction of a liberal, multinational yet unitary state. It is also possible that he is imagining something akin to the loose, non-ethnically based federalism of the American or Canadian type, though he does not elaborate.

Even assuming that the Kremlin might be open to such a change in course (which is unlikely), Rakhaev’s article, which immediately precedes Verniaev’s in the collection, is a reminder of how hard it would be to realize this sort of supranational turn in any case. As Rakhaev argues, taking up the issue of the memory of World War II in the Northern Caucasus, the Putin government has done much in recent years to promote a heroic Soviet-style narrative of the war as a means of consolidating a patriotic, pro-government consensus in Russian society. (Indeed, in many respects, this particular program of memory politics fits quite well with the multinational unity-making initiative critiqued in Verniaev’s article.) Yet, even as this official memory of the war presents the Soviet victory as a shared national achievement, it downplays many of the war’s painful or shameful episodes, such as the mass deportations of North Caucasus peoples ordered by the Stalin government toward the end of the war. Chechens and others thus find aspects of their suffering slighted, left out of a new government-supported “memory politics” much the same way they were left out of official memory in the pre-Perestroika period as well.

Reading these papers together, then, we see starkly different views of the “nationality question” in contemporary Russian politics. In a fitting summation of the complexity of the questions treated in the volume, Verniaev concludes that Russia’s problem today is that the

national principle and concerns about minority nationality figure too much in state politics, while Rakhaev's article seems to suggest that the problem may well be that concerns of this sort, in fact, do not figure enough.

## Conclusion

What then can one conclude about this book as a statement of the current shape of ethnic and nationality studies in the Russian context? The first thing is to offer a caveat: the volume is at most a snapshot in time of a mobile and changing enterprise. The dynamic research group surrounding *Historia Nationem Gignit* has since gone on to hold additional conferences, and the broader field of ethnic and nationality studies is also larger than the sample featured here. Some 40% of the authors are linked to St. Petersburg, the home base of the *Historia Nationem Gignit* collective. Adding the Moscow-based scholars in the volume, one gets to over 60%. In other words, the Russian academic center is far better represented here than the Russian regions or the academic worlds of other states of the former Eastern Bloc or USSR. (About a fifth of the authors hail from universities outside the Russian Federation.) Also, related research communities, such as the diverse range of historians and other specialists associated with the Russian journal *Ab Imperio* or the international Association for the Study of Nationalities and its flagship publication *Nationalities Papers*, do not appear here. Like any book, then, the volume is an island, a country of its own rather than the world entire. One should not generalize too much about what it says or does not about the larger fields around it.

That said, the volume is more than thematically wide-ranging and ample enough to allow for a few tentative conclusions about a bigger picture. First, even a cursory glance at the papers makes clear that Russian specialists in ethnic and nationality studies draw on the same general vocabulary and body of theory and scholarly authority as their international counterparts. Many of the leading names cited in the notes are now familiar ones east and west: Anthony Smith, Rogers Brubaker, Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric Hobsbawm, Pierre Nora, Michel de Certeau, and Pierre Bourdieu. The terminology of the papers, too, is international. Much of the analysis here invokes widely circulating terms such as "discourse," "construct," and (as mentioned earlier) "identity." Most importantly, the contextualized constructivist approach to ethnicity and nationality on view here resonates with the broader trends of the field. All of this suggests that it is indeed appropriate to speak of the emergence of a common research community of ethnic and nationality studies uniting practitioners across the old Cold War European divides and, in this case, across disciplinary boundaries as well.

At the same time, there is an important criticism here worth noting. Overall, the sheer diversity of themes entertained in this volume deserves to be praised. The fact that the collection displays a range of disagreement and indeterminacy is also valuable and surely a fair reflection of the diversity of views existing in the field. But it is also true that the vastness of the horizons surveyed here combined with the brevity of the papers makes it hard for the reader to feel fully satisfied. The collection delivers an intellectual feast, but it is a menu of tapas rather than more filling main dishes. Going forward, it would be valuable to see a similar range of specialists engage in greater depth on some of the critical topics featured here – the ethnic origins of nations, for example, or the relations between empires and nations or the paradoxes of nationality in Soviet and post-Soviet space. That is, to have discrete interdisciplinary volumes on each of these topics with fewer but fuller papers. This would allow a still richer view of the contributions of Russian scholarship to the ongoing international dialogue on ethnic and nationality questions.

## Notes

1. The quoted references above are from the editors' introduction "Razmyshleniia o natsiakh i etnichnosti: opyt mezhditsiplinarnogo dialoga," 6. The volume itself includes only the papers presented at the conference. Of the 72 papers that appear in the book, six are in English, the rest in Russian. For the broader discussions that took place at the meeting, see the e-journal *Historia Nationem Gignit*.
2. Based on their academic affiliations at the time of the conference, the authors in the collection represent the following general break-down by city: St. Petersburg (29), Moscow (16), Vladivostok (1), Vologda (1), Voronezh (1), Kazan' (1), Nizhnyi Novgorod (1), Novosibirsk (2), Samara (2), Surgut (1), Ulyanovsk (1), Yaroslavl' (1), Baku (1), Budapest (1), Warsaw (1), Vilnius (1), Greifswald (1), Donetsk (1), Kyiv (1), Corinth (1), L'viv (1), Lublin (1), Tartu (1), Trier (1), Kharkiv (1), and Cherkasy (1).

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