

## Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations

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“Oi, mister! *Indo-Aryans*... it looks like I am Western after all! Maybe I should listen to Tina Turner, wear the itsy-bitsy leather skirts. Pah. It just goes to show,” said Alsana, revealing her English tongue, ““you go back and back and back and it’s still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than to find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think anybody is English? Really English? It’s a fairy tale!”<sup>1</sup>

For Alsana, an immigrant from Bangladesh to the multicultural mosaic of London, there cannot be a real Bengali or Englishman in the hybrid, free-flowing, unpredictable world that she has experienced. She tries to tell her stubborn, traditionalist husband, Samad Iqbal, to live and let live, but he fears his family is losing its culture. To reverse the irreversible he makes a ferocious attempt to save his family, only to destroy it. What Alsana calls a fairy tale – the attainment or recovery of a fixed, pure, eternal identity -- is a powerful and durable reality for her husband – and like many other fairy tales it shapes the world in which we live.

I met up with this kind of desperate loyalty to ethnicity and an unalterable sense of nation most dramatically in July 1997 at a conference at the American University of Armenia in Erevan. Returning to Armenia after a seven-year absence (a time in which Soviet Armenia became the independent Republic of Armenia), I entered a world I thought I knew but that had changed significantly. Armenians had gone through a decade of devastation, beginning with the struggle over Karabakh, an Armenian-populated region in the neighboring republic of Azerbaijan. This

was followed by a destructive earthquake that killed twenty-five thousand and from which the country had never fully recovered; war with Azerbaijan with tens of thousands of victims; economic blockade; the collapse of the old Soviet economy and political order; and the creation of a new political system ridden with corruption, cronyism, and cynicism.<sup>2</sup> Optimists spoke of a “transition to democracy” and the foundation of a market economy, but ordinary Armenian citizens experienced rapid impoverishment, radical social polarization, and dismal prospects for the future. Hundreds of thousands voted with their feet and left the country for Russia, Europe, or Los Angeles. In place of the tattered and discredited Soviet ideology, many in the political and intellectual elite espoused a fervent and increasingly intolerant nationalism.

The conference organizers invited me to speak about “prospects for regional integration” in the South Caucasus, a truly utopian topic at that moment of ethnic conflict among Armenians and Azerbaijanis; Georgians, Abkhazians, and Ossetins. Reviewing briefly the nationalist reconceptualization of the Armenians in the nineteenth century from a primarily ethnoreligious to a secular national community, I discussed how the tiny Armenian state had become ever more ethnically homogeneous and nationally conscious during the Soviet period and raised the question: how can Armenians (or Georgians and Azerbaijanis for that matter) reconcile the idea of relatively homogeneous nation-states with the realities of Transcaucasian politics and demography, which were formed by centuries of multinational empire and migration? Among ethnonationalists in South Caucasia the discourse of the nation – the notion that political legitimacy flowed upward from a culturally coherent community, “the people” constituted as a “nation” – had narrowed to the view that the people must be ethnically, perhaps racially, singular. The result has been ethnic cleansing and killing, deportations and forced migrations, and a series

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<sup>1</sup> Zadie Smith, White Teeth, a Novel (New York: Random House, 2000), p. 196.

<sup>2</sup> For accounts of developments in Armenia since the end of the Soviet Union, see Nora Dudwick, “Political Transformations in Postcommunist Armenia: Images and Realities,” in Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott (eds.), Conflict, Cleavage, and Change in Central Asia and the Caucasus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 69-109; Gerard J. Libaridian, The Challenge of Statehood: Armenian Political

of enduring conflicts in Karabakh (between Armenians and Azerbaijanis), Abkhazia (between Georgians and Abkhazians), and South Osetia (between Georgians and Osetians).

My cursory survey of the three-millennium history of the region emphasized the long constitution of a shared Caucasian culture, a polyglot, migrating population, cities inhabited by diverse peoples, and soft, blurred, shifting boundaries between ethnic and religious groups. As examples of what I meant, I mentioned that “Baku and Tbilisi [the current capitals respectively of Azerbaijan and Georgia] were models of interethnic cohabitation; Tbilisi at one time had an Armenian majority, and Erevan was primarily a Muslim town at several points in its long history.” The thrust of the talk was to question the usefulness of ethno-nationalism in the current situation by proposing a more constructivist understanding of nationness in place of the primordialist convictions of the nationalists.

At this point the positive effects of anti-imperialist nationalism metamorphose – one is tempted to say metastasize – into the negative effects of exclusivist, even expansionist, ethno-territorial nationalism. At this point, something else is needed – a revival of the more cosmopolitan pan-Caucasian tendencies of the past....

It is important to remember that nations are congealed histories. They are made up of stories that people tell about their past and thereby determine who they are. Histories in turn are based on memories organized into narratives. Whatever actually happened is far less important than how it is remembered. What is remembered, what has been forgotten or repressed, provides the template through which the world is understood. Nationalist violence or inter-ethnic cooperation and tolerance depend on what narrative, what tales of injustice, oppression, or betrayal are told. Tellers of tales have enormous (though far from

absolute) power to reshape, edit, share their stories, and therefore to promote a future of either violence or cooperation.<sup>3</sup>

The reaction to the talk was explosive. Leaflets were distributed the next day to all participants, pointedly challenging the assertion that Erevan had had a Muslim majority; newspapers and radio broadcasts attacked the speech.<sup>4</sup> Hostile questions were directed to me at the conference, along with accusations that I was an “agent of the oil companies” and shared a secret agenda with the State Department! (After years of being suspected of being part of “the international Communist conspiracy” or, from the Soviet side, accused as a “bourgeois falsifier, I did not know whether to be relieved or embarrassed.) An angry crowd surrounded me as I was leaving the hall, shouting that I was davejan. (a “traitor” in Armenian). My first response was to shout back that I was a scholar and an Armenian, only to be told that I was no scholar and no Armenian (hai ches). Security guards took me away to avoid further trouble. Personal attacks continued in the press, and a year later a book appeared in Erevan bitterly denouncing Western scholarship on Armenia, particularly my own work.

In Erevan that summer two fundamentally different languages of analysis met in a moment of mutual incomprehension. The virulence of the clash of views evident in that confrontation have deeply affected, indeed distorted, scholarship on Armenia (as well as Georgia, Azerbaijan, and other former Soviet republics). In this essay I would like to explore the tension

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Robert O. Krikorian, Armenia at the Crossroads (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> The essay has been published in The Transcaucasus Today: Prospects for Regional Integration, June 23-25, 1997, Edited Conference Report (Erevan: American University of Armenia, 1998), pp. 51-57; and in AGBU Magazine, “Living with the Other: Conflict and Cooperation Among the Transcaucasian Peoples,” AGBU News Magazine, VII, 3 (September 1997), pp. 27-29.

<sup>4</sup> Some Armenian academics claimed that there was no evidence at all that there had ever been a Muslim majority in Erevan and that I had used inaccurate data. I had relied on official Russian censuses and the work of George Bournoutian and Richard Hovannisian. See, George Bournoutian, Eastern Armenia in the Last Decades of Persian Rule, 1807-1828: A Political and Socioeconomic Study of the Khanate of Erevan on the Eve of the Russian Conquest (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1982), pp. 61-77; and Richard G. Hovannisian, Armenia on the Road to Independence, 1918 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 13, 15.

between investigations by scholars of the historical formation of ethnic, cultural, and national identities (considered subversive and dangerous by ethnonationalists), on the one hand, and the actual practice of nationalists, constructing (and simultaneously denying the constructedness) of identities, on the other. In some ways that tension can be expressed as the fundamental and apparently contradictory difference in the way the term identity is employed by academic analysts and in ordinary speech. Following the distinction made by Pierre Bourdieu between categories of analysis and categories of practice, it may be noted that identity is both a category of intellectual analysis and of practice, i.e., a category of “everyday social experience, developed and displayed by ordinary social actors, as distinguished from the experience-distant categories used by social analysts.”<sup>5</sup> The analytical use of the term involves a recognition of the fragmented and contested process that goes into self or group identification, whereas the more common, everyday use of the term in normal “identity-talk” usually defaults to an essentialist, often primordialist, naturalized language about a stable core, an actual unity and internal harmony. In this essay I explore the ways in which nation and national identity are reified, made into something real, that, while infinitely contestable, is no longer permitted to be contested in the public arena – at least not in certain proscribed ways. Those who question what has been set up as the “national” are either excluded from the national community – “you are no Armenian” – or punished, disciplined, and brought into line.<sup>6</sup>

Identity is understood here as “a provisional stabilization of a sense of self or group that is formed in actual historical time and space, in evolving economies, polities, and cultures, as a

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<sup>5</sup> Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, “Beyond ‘identity’,” *Theory and Society*, XXIX (2000), p. 4. Brubaker and Cooper dispute the analytical validity of the term “identity” and propose substitute terms, such as identification, self-understanding, and commonality. They make a persuasive case for use of the term “identification” as an active processual term, but my own use of identity preserves the actual ambiguity of the term “identity” and is directed at investigating the tension between the analytical and practical uses of the term that they articulate so well. \_\_\_

<sup>6</sup> Stephanie Platz has pointed out that the phrase “hai ches” (You are no Armenian) is often used by Armenians in a less exclusionary way. Rather than excise someone from the community, as in the reference to being a traitor, it may be employed as a rebuke that the person has violated some customary way of behaving or some traditional norm. (personal communication)

continuous search for some solidity in a constantly shifting world – but without closure, without forever naturalizing or essentializing the provisional identities arrived at.”<sup>7</sup> Yet at the same time when people talk about identity their language excludes a sense of historical construction or provisionality and instead almost always accepts the present identity as fixed, singular, bounded, internally harmonious, distinct from others at its boundaries, and marked by historical longevity, if not rooted in nature.

This loss of a processual sense of identification taking place over time is particularly acute in the rhetoric about national identity, which has become the universal category for modern political communities marked by an purportedly shared culture. Modern nations may be defined as those political communities made up of people who believe they share characteristics (perhaps origins, values, historical experiences, language, territory, or any of many other elements) that give them the right to self-determination – perhaps control of a piece of the earth’s real estate (their homeland), even statehood and the benefits that follow. Like other identifications, they can be thought of as arenas in which people dispute who they are, argue about boundaries, who is in or out of the group, where the “homeland” begins and ends, what the “true” history of the nation is, what is “authentic” about being national and what is to be rejected. Nations are articulated through the stories people tell about themselves. The narrative is most often a tale of origins and continuity, often of sacrifice and martyrdom, but also of glory and heroism.<sup>8</sup>

The post-Soviet states present a veritable laboratory of modern national identity formation. Comparison between republics, as well as intensive investigation of single cases demonstrate the ways in which identification is a multiple process that involves, first, the historical social positions (fluid, shifting, and discursively constituted as they may be) in which people find themselves, which shape, influence, and limit the possibilities of identification with

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<sup>7</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, “Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia,” *International Security* XXIV, 3 (Winter 1999/2000), p. 144.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145. See also, Ronald Grigor Suny, “History,” *Encyclopedia of Nationalism*, I, ed. Alexander J. Motyl (San Diego, CA, and London: Academic Press, 2001), pp. 335-358.

some others and not with other others. A young woman born in Stockholm of parents who speak Swedish and identify themselves and her as Swedish, educated in Sweden, is more likely to identify as Swedish than as American, until, years later, she marries an American, migrates to Ann Arbor, and raises children born and educated in the United States. Proximity, distance, and length of time are key influences on stable and lasting associations and networks, whether kinship, friendship, collegial, or national and have powerful determining effects on identification with groups, location, and nation.

But a woman born in Tbilisi during Soviet times, of parents who speak Georgian and identify themselves and her as Georgian, and educated in Georgian will be more likely to identify as Georgian even after she marries a Russian, moves to Russia, and raises children born and educated in Russia. Her ethnic identity as Georgian remains fixed on her internal Soviet passport, and in a multinational state in which ethnicity is almost universally conceived (and enforced) as a primordial – indeed biologically determined – essence, national identity provided both opportunities for social mobility (within the Georgian republic in this case) or serious disadvantages. The Soviet example illustrates a second influence on identification when identity categories are externally-generated, ascribed, or imposed by state or other authorities. In the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union state practices fixed subjects and citizens into legal categories – sosloviia (estates) and religious and ethnic designations in tsarist times; class and nationality categories in Soviet times – that gave them both privileges in some cases and disadvantages in others.<sup>9</sup> Post-colonial studies in particular has contributed enormously to our understanding of how mapping, naming, census categories, statistical enumeration, and other practices of the modern state have delineated and fixed the more fluid distinctions generated by

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<sup>9</sup> See, Gregory L. Freeze, “The Soslovie (Estate) Paradigm and Russian Social history,” American Historical Review, XCI (1986), pp. 11-36; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia,” Journal of Modern History, LXV, 4 (December 1993), pp. 745-770.

people, turning blurry differences into more visible, seemingly unalterable differences.<sup>10</sup> For the post-Soviet states the Soviet experience, for all the efforts to eradicate it, has been an indelible influence. The practice of fixing nationality in each citizen's internal passport on the basis of parentage rendered an inherently liquid identity into a solid commitment to a single ethnocultural group. Young people with parents who had different national designations on their passports were forced to choose one or the other nationality, which then became a claim to inclusion or an invitation to exclusion in a given republic. In some cases people could opportunistically change their nationality officially, or change their names, to ease their situation in the national republics.<sup>11</sup>

More elusive as sources of identification, but perhaps most influential, are the self-generated subjective identifications that individuals make spontaneously and that stem from the most local locations – family relations, birth position in the family, sexual preferences, etc. Self-identification is seldom a simple rational calculation but is deeply implicated in emotional attachments and subjective preferences. And, finally, identifications are influenced by the discursive context in which people find themselves, the pervasive narratives that surround them, giving shape to their perceptions and understandings of the world. Although identification “invites specification of the agents that do the identifying,” as Brubaker and Cooper put it, “identification does not *require* a specifiable ‘identifier’; it can be pervasive and influential without being accomplished by discrete, specified persons or institutions. Identification can be carried more or less anonymously by discourses or public narratives.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Benedict Anderson, “Census, Map, Museum,” in Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso Press, 1991), pp. 163-185; Bernard S. Cohen, Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); and James C. Scott, Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> A young friend in Georgia with an Armenian mother and an Armeno-Georgian father (whose mother was Georgian but had his father's nationality, Armenian, on his passport) chose Armenian as his nationality. A gifted handball player, he was thrown off the Georgian national team when he refused a coach's demand to reclassify himself as a Georgian.

<sup>12</sup> Brubaker and Cooper, “Beyond ‘identity’,” p. 16.

Narrative is central to identity formation, as Margaret R. Somers reminds us:

[I]t is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities.... [A]ll of us come to *be* who we *are* (however ephemeral, multiple, and changing) by being located or locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*.<sup>13</sup>

Somers goes on to specify four dimensions of narrativity: ontological, public, conceptual, and metanarrativities. Ontological narratives are about who we are and why we do what we do. Public narratives are those attached to cultural and institutional formations beyond the single individual, to intersubjective networks of institutions. Conceptual narrativity are the concepts and explanations that are constructed by social researchers, such as “society,” “culture,” “structure,” and “agency.” And, finally, metanarratives or master narratives are the grand overriding stories in which we are historically embedded, such as stories of the nation, progress, decadence, or the end of history.<sup>14</sup> Identities, then, are always formed within broad discourses, universes of available meanings, and are related to the historic positionings of the subjects involved, which are themselves constituted and given meaning by the identity makers.

Some theorists are already asking (as probably some of the readers of this essay are as well): why bother about identity? Why indulge in so much theorizing about such a abstract and contested term? The payoff of employing the concept of identity is threefold. Sensitivity to the fluidity of identities, as well as the naturalizing tendencies of identity-talk, helps the researcher avoid, first, essentialism and, second, reification. Essentialism may be defined as the attribution of behavior or thinking to the intrinsic, fundamental nature of a person, collectivity, or state. Identity theory proposes an alternative to essentialist models of people or social groups by claiming that rather than having a single, given, relatively stable identity, persons and groups

have multiple, fluid, situational identities that are produced in intersubjective understandings. Reification “is the apprehension of the products of human activity *as if* they were something else than human products – such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness. The reified world is...experienced by man as a strange facticity, and opus alienum over which he has no control rather than as the opus proprium of his own productive activity.”<sup>15</sup> Identity theory instead emphasizes the historical and contextual generation of both categories and their effects. In this approach human agency remains central to the production of identities. Third, identity as a focus of analysis displaces interest as the unmediated causal explanation for action. Instead of appealing to a notion of a universal social agent that acts because of inherent interests in predictable ways in similar circumstances, theories of identity propose that predictability from interest must consider the ways in which individuals or groups of people in similar social positions with similar experiences identify themselves, how stable or unstable that identity is, and how fractures or multiple commitments will affect ideas of interest. This is an important move toward contextualizing, historicizing, and relativizing actions. Interests themselves should be seen as tied to identities – what we think we need is linked to who we think we are – and are themselves affected by historic positions discursively constituted and embedded in narratives.

Although individual senses of the self may differ radically from one society or culture to another, it is possible to assert that there cannot be a group that does not possess some sense of shared commonality, even if just being in a certain room at ten past twelve, and a sense of difference with others, those in another room or with no room of their own. Cohesion of a group

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<sup>13</sup> Margaret R. Somers, “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relationship and Network Approach,” Theory and Society, XXIII, 5 (October 1994), p. 606.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., pp. 617-620.

may depend on the particular articulation of the sense of commonality, and here a sense of shared past experience, that is, history, becomes important as a record of what binds the group together and distinguishes it from others. Nations are particular forms of collectivity that are constituted by a process of creating histories. Just as there are few groups without a sense of continuity, so there can be no nations without a sense of its own history. History contributes in several significant ways. Like the genealogies of ancient and medieval kings, history provides ancestry that legitimizes present-day loyalties. The art of “seizing and recording one’s own history,” writes Natalie Zemon Davis, not only contributes “a deepened sense of identity” but “an affective-political gain in enablement.”<sup>16</sup> National histories followed religious histories and borrowed modes and modalities from them. Both were written to advocate a particular sense of fidelity; light and dark images of the self and other distanced those within the fold and those outside; a sense of enemies, persecution, sacrifices, martyrdom, heretics, and true believers passed from the lives of the saints and the clerical chronicles to the stories of the nation. The longue durée of the past also gives this particular form of imagined community a potent claim to territory, the “homeland,” which the people constituted as nation argues that it held first. The national history is one of continuity, antiquity of origins, heroism and past greatness, martyrdom and sacrifice, victimization and overcoming of trauma. It is a story of the empowerment of the people, the realization of the ideals of popular sovereignty. While in some cases national history is seen as development toward realization, in others it is imagined as decline and degeneration away from proper development. In either case an interpretation of history with a proper trajectory is implied.

Beyond the specific narratives of particular nations is the metanarrative or discourse of the nation, the cluster of ideas and understandings that came to surround the signifier “nation” in modern times (roughly post-1750). This available universe of meanings allowed for the power of

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, The Social Construction of Reality (New York: Anchor Books,

nations and nationalism to constitute collective loyalties, legitimize governments, mobilize and inspire people to fight, kill, and die for their country. This cluster of ideas includes the conviction that humanity is naturally divided into separate and distinct nationalities or nations. Members of a nation reach full freedom and fulfillment of their essence by developing their national identity and culture, and their identity with the nation is superior to all other forms of identity -- class, gender, individual, familial, tribal, regional, imperial, dynastic, religious, racial, or state patriotic. Though the nation may be divided or gradated along several axes, it is politically and civilly (under the law) made up of equals. All national members share common origins, historical experiences, interests, and culture, which may include language and religion, and have an equal share in the nation. The discourse of the nation both acknowledges that each nation is unique, with its own separate past, present, and destiny, yet recognizes the developmental process that gives every nation the conviction that the nation is always present, though often concealed, to be realized fully over time in a world of states in which the highest form is a world of nation-states. The national may be in people unconsciously and may need to be brought forth or willed into consciousness, but in this discourse the nation is never completely subjective but always has a base in the real world.

Like other discourses, talk about and everyday embodiments of the nation both constitute the felt presence of the national and hide the fractures, divisions, and relations of power within the nation. But, then, that is why intellectuals and politicians, military bands and postage stamps, have so much work to do. Ultimately more fragile than it would admit, the nation must constantly be reproduced in thousands of ways until it becomes as ordinary and quotidian as the water in which fish swim. Ultimately, ordinary people must join in that daily plebiscite of which Ernest Renan spoke, or what at times seemed so evident and permanent can give way to more tangible concerns.

With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of dozens of new states, pundits, journalists, and often scholars made the simple assumption that coherent nations already existed, prefigured in the republics of the Soviet union republics or federal Yugoslavia or Czechoslovakia. The prevailing narrative in the Soviet case, taken up by local nationalists, was that these nations had existed prior to the imperial conquest by the Bolsheviks, that they had been suppressed and denied their national expression during the long dark years of Soviet rule, and that they represented a population yearning for freedom, democracy, and capitalism. Left out of this narrative were the powerful effects on nation-making, rather than nation-destroying, of Soviet policies.

### **Soviet Roots, Post-Soviet Plants**

In the last decade of the Cold War scholarship on Soviet nationalities shifted from a dominant view that the USSR was primarily a “prisonhouse of nations” in which national characteristics were being eroded by repressive and Russifying program to a new paradigm which emphasizes the constructive formation of new national identities and the social consolidation of nations in many republics that occurred despite the more assimilationist, anti-nationalist, and often brutal policies of the Soviet regime.<sup>17</sup> Following the conceptual lead of theorists and researchers like Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, Eric J. Hobsbawm, and Miroslav Hroch, a number of students of the USSR -- among them Rogers Brubaker, Robert J. Kaiser, David Laitin, Theresa Rakowska-Harmstone, Yuri Slezkine, and Ronald Grigor Suny -- have emphasized the ways in which a complex process of nation-making occurred as the ironic result of Soviet

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<sup>16</sup> Natalie Zemon Davis, “Who Owns History?” *Studia Historica*, LXI ( ), p. 21.

<sup>17</sup> The idea that the Soviet state-initiated policies had assisted national self-awareness, rather than simply promoted assimilation or repressed national culture, was once a radical idea among Western Sovietologists, who in general emphasized the denationalizing effects of the Soviet system, but in the last fifteen years it has now become something of the reigning orthodoxy in nationalism studies. For a review of Western writing on Soviet nationalities’ policies, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “Rethinking Soviet Studies: Bringing the Non-Russians Back In,” in Daniel Orlovsky (ed.), *Beyond Soviet Studies* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1995), pp. 105-134. See also, Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Revenge of the Past: Nationalism, Revolution, and the Collapse of the Soviet Union* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993) and Robert J.

nationality and modernization policies and thwarted the Leninists' goal of a post-nationalist amalgamation of the peoples of the federation.<sup>18</sup> Increasingly based on archival sources opened since the Soviet collapse and informed by the turn toward constructivism in nationalism theory, the work of a whole generation of younger scholars – Adrienne Edgar, David Brandenberger, Francine Hirsch, Terry Martin, Paula Michaels, Douglas Northrop, Matthew Payne, Serhy Yekelchik, and others -- reveals the lasting effects of early Soviet policies, such as korenizatsiia (indigenization) and the delineation of ethnic boundaries, that deeply shaped the contours and identities of Soviet and post-Soviet nations.<sup>19</sup> The picture is not a neat one. While some policies led to assimilation of smaller peoples, particularly in the Russian Federation, in many of the union republics the titular nationalities became demographically more consolidated, better positioned in the intelligentsia and administrative apparatus, and more expressive in their national idiom. While most of the larger nationalities identified with their home republic, which effectively became territorialized nation-states (though without full political sovereignty),

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Kaiser, The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, Imagined Communities; Ernest Gellner, Nations and Nationalism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983); E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Miroslav Hroch, Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Rogers Brubaker, Reframing Nationalism: Nationhood and the National Question in the New Europe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny (eds.), Becoming National: A Reader (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996); Robert J. Kaiser, The Geography of Nationalism in Russia and the USSR (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); David D. Laitin, Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Theresa Rakowska-Harmstone, "The Dialectics of Nationalism in the USSR," Problems of Communism, XXIII, 3 (May-June 1974), pp. 1-22; Yuri Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism," Slavic Review, LIII, 2 (Summer 1994), pp. 414-452; his Arctic Mirrors: Russia and the Small Peoples of the North (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994); Ronald Grigor Suny, The Making of the Georgian Nation (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988, 1994; and his The Revenge of the Past.

<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Edgar; David Brandenberger, "National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956" (Ph.D. diss, Harvard University, 2000); Francine Hirsch, "Empire of Nations: Colonial Technologies and the Making of the Soviet Union, 1917-1939" (Ph.D. diss, Princeton University, 1998); Terry Martin, An Affirmative-Action Empire: Ethnicity and the Soviet State, 1923-1938 (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, forthcoming); Paula Anne Michaels, "Shamans and Surgeons: The Politics of Health Care in Soviet Kazakhstan, 1928-1941" (Ph.D. diss, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1997); Douglas Northrop; Matthew Payne, "Turksib: The Building of the Turkestan-Siberian Railroad and the Politics of Production During the Cultural Revolution" (Ph.D. diss,

hundreds of thousands of Soviet people migrated from their original “homelands” to become dispersed throughout the vast Union that they considered their extended homeland.

Before the revolution most peoples of the Russian Empire were only beginning to develop a national self-consciousness, and then largely among their elites. The peasant masses had only very slowly moved from an identification with village or district to, what Robert J. Kaiser refers to as, “a more geographically expansive sense of spatial identity” that was consonant with the nation.<sup>20</sup> This growth of a mass consciousness of a national homeland was most developed in the Baltic region, Poland and Finland. In South Caucasia or Central Asia identity was primarily with co-religionists, fellow speakers of one’s language, and regional “civilizations,” rather than with a fixed and bounded homeland. Shared foods, dress, and music linked rather than divided kavkaztsy (Caucasians) or “Turks” in Central Asia, even as religious practices, distinct languages or dialects, and kinship networks contributed other forms of affiliation. Soviet nationality policy, based as it was on national territorial autonomy and korenizatsiia (the “rooting” of national culture and cadres in the national areas), enhanced a sense of national homeland. At the same time the modernization program that promoted rural to urban migration contributed to “the more rapid nationalization of the masses.”<sup>21</sup> In the 1920s Soviet officials attempted to draw the boundaries of administrative units as close as possible to the apparent boundaries of ethnic communities. The aim, however, was to have ethnicity, territory, and political administration correspond as clearly as the science of the day enabled. But since ethnicity was an inherently fluid identity and lines between groups were often blurred, officials and ethnographers had to make sometimes arbitrary decisions about who belonged where. Through the course of Soviet history boundaries were changed to conform with new understandings of national distinctions, but the basic principle of territorializing ethnicity and

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University of Chicago, 1995); and Serguei Ekelchik, “History, Culture, and Nationhood Under High Stalinism: Soviet Ukraine, 1939-1954” (Ph.D. diss, University of Alberta, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Kaiser, The Geography of Nationalism in Russia, p. 87.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 123.

linking both to politics remained constant. Even after Stalin shifted the Russophobic emphasis of early Leninist nationality policy toward promotion of Russian language and culture in the early 1930s, the regime continued to support the ethnic nationalization of a reduced number of the larger republics. The Caucasian republics, for example, became over time increasingly homogeneous, and in the last decades of Soviet power Russians as well began gradually to migrate out of the region.

Committed as it was ideologically to the international equalization of its peoples and raising the more backward to the levels of the most advanced, the USSR engaged in what has been referred to as affirmative-action programs designed to advantage the indigenes in their own national territories.<sup>22</sup> In the early Soviet years affirmative-action programs aided non-Russians to achieve native language education, to advance socially, and gradually to occupy positions of power in industry, education, culture, the party and the state. But later, in the post-Stalin period, affirmative action in a context in which the “disadvantaged” nationality to be advanced now was in fact politically advantaged, even entrenched, in its own republic gave the titular nationality a double advantage – both in access to education and jobs, and as the principal distributors of advantages. Such programs only reinforced the sense of non-titulars, like “Europeans” in Central Asia or Armenians in Azerbaijan, that their ethnicity was a positive mark of discrimination. An Armenian KGB officer in Georgia remarked to me in the 1970s that everyone understood that “this was a Georgian shop.” There was a widespread sense among Armenians in Georgia that they would occupy subordinate positions, do most of the real work, while the Georgians on top would receive most of the prestige and privileges.

Instead of equality two kinds of hierarchy developed in the USSR: an imperial relationship between the Soviet center and the non-Russian peoples, in which the increasingly territorialized nations remained subordinate to the dictates and requirements of Moscow’s all-

Union goals; and – what Jeremy Smith has called – a “national hierarchisation,” in which certain nationalities, like the titular nationalities of the republics, were considered superior to others within the republic, and Russians often held a special place of privilege no matter where they lived.<sup>23</sup> From the earliest years of the Soviet state the Bolsheviks spoke of “backward” and “civilized” nations, “peasant” and “proletarian” peoples, and Russians were among the more civilized and proletarian. The state categorized ethnicities by size and development – natsiia (nation), natsional’nost (nationality), narod (people), narodnost’ (small or less developed people), and plemia (tribe) -- implying that some were superior to others, existing contemporaneously at various levels of historical development. Hierarchy was reinforced in most republics as the titular nation or nationality developed a sense that it possessed that republic and that other ethnicities, except perhaps the Russians, were not entitled to the same advantages. Such policies were particularly egregious in Georgia, where Abkhazians and Osetins experienced discriminatory treatment, and in Azerbaijan, where the Armenians of Karabakh protested against restrictions on their language and culture and repeatedly petitioned for merger with the Armenian republic next door. Union-republic nations had more advantages than nationalities whose homeland was merely an autonomous republic, and peoples without territories of their own fared worst of all. Even as non-Russians experienced upward social mobility, the very linking of ethnicity and various social benefits – admission to university, advancement in the workplace – created resentments that would later be exploited by nationalists. Tatar nationalists in the early 1990s, for example, chafed at the perceived advantages enjoyed by Russians in their republic, even though Tatars had been the chief beneficiaries of the state’s affirmative-action programs. Elise Giuliano reports that nationalists spoke of “underrepresentation of titulars vis-à-vis Russians in the

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<sup>22</sup> Suny describes korenizatsiia as “in effect ‘affirmative-action programs’” (The Revenge of the Past, p. 109), and Terry Martin employs the concept as a central metaphor in his An Affirmative-Action Empire.

<sup>23</sup> Jeremy Smith, “National Hierarchisation and Soviet Nationality Policy from Lenin to Putin,” paper presented at the VI ICCEES World Congress, Tampere, Finland, August 1, 2000; see also his book, The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917-1923 (Basingstoke: 1999).

professional sphere,” and characterized their compatriots as “‘subjects’ of Russians within their ‘own’ homelands.”<sup>24</sup>

In contrast to the expectations of both Marxism and modernization theory – that industrialization and urbanization in either its capitalist or socialist variant would lead to an end to nationality differences and conflicts – not only was nationality preserved in the Soviet Union, but the power and cohesion of nationalities and their elites were enhanced. The achievement of greater (though hardly complete) equality among nationalities did not lead to the “withering away” of inter-ethnic hostilities. Rather social mobilization intensified inter-ethnic competition for limited social resources, while urbanization and education led to “heightened national self-consciousness and increasing national separatism among the more socially mobilized members of each national community.”<sup>25</sup> Russification occurred, both spontaneously and through government programs, but in some of the union republics (most notably, the Baltic and Caucasian republics and Ukraine) indigenous intellectuals defended and promoted their own culture and language. Powerful national elites emerged in the late Soviet period, as Khrushchev and particularly Brezhnev permitted national Communists to remain in power for many years. The Tatar Communist boss, Talbaev, for example, headed the local party for twenty years and built up a cohesive republican elite by recruiting Tatars from the rural areas.<sup>26</sup> Zemliaki (people from the same ethnicity or region) networks were particularly tight in the Caucasus and Central Asia, where local traditions emphasized loyalty to kin, clan, region, and close friends.<sup>27</sup> The highly centralized command system of the Stalin years loosened its grip on the national republics, and by

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<sup>24</sup> Elise Giuliano, “Paths to the Decline of Nationalism: Ethnic Politics in the Republics of Russia” (Ph.D. diss, University of Chicago, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> Kaiser, The Geography of Nationalism in Russia, p. 248.

<sup>26</sup> Giuliano, “Paths to the Decline of Nationalism,” p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, Looking Toward Ararat: Armenia in Modern History (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1993), pp.180-185. See also, the excellent work of Kathleen Collins on Central Asian elites, “Class, Pacts, and Politics: Understanding Regime Transition in Central Asia” (Ph.D. diss, Stanford University, 1999).

the last decades of Soviet power nationalities experienced an unprecedented degree of local autonomy.

Nationality was institutionalized into the Soviet system as a category of identity, a passport to privilege (or discrimination), and a claim to political power in national republics. Moreover, the idea of nationness fluctuated between a more contingent understanding of nationality as the product of historical development to a more primordial sense that nationality was deeply rooted in the culture, experience, mentality, even biology of individuals. Soviet theorists held contradictory views: that national differences would eventually grow less distinct and Soviet peoples would meld into a single Soviet people (the process of sblizhenie [rapprochement] and sliianie [full merger]); and that nationality was passed on, like genetic traits, from one generation to another. The tension between seeing nations as ontological entities and conceiving of them as transitory and shifting is caught nicely by Slezkine's summary of Lenin's views: "Nations might not be helpful and they might not last, but they were here and they were real."<sup>28</sup> But, he goes on, "Insofar as national culture was a reality, it was about language and a few 'domestic arrangements': nationality was 'form.' 'National form' was acceptable because there was no such thing as national content."<sup>29</sup> Yet, even as class evaporated as an official status in Soviet life, nationality became ever more primordial. At the end of the 1930s the Soviet authorities celebrated the putative "anniversaries" of the epics of various Soviet peoples: the Georgian vepkhistqaosani (Knight in the Panther's Skin) by Shota Rustaveli (1937), the Russian Slovo o polku Igoreve (Lay of the Host of Igor) (1938), the Armenian Sassuntsi David (1939), and the Kalmyk Jangar (1940). An industry of ethnographers and ethnologists developed an enormous body of theory in the post-World War II years elaborating the ancient roots and ethnogenesis of Soviet peoples. The famous "fifth point" in the Soviet internal passport, which

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<sup>28</sup> Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," p. 416.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

listed the holder's nationality, was based on parentage.<sup>30</sup> "Every Soviet citizen was born into a certain nationality, took it to day care and through high school, had it officially confirmed at the age of sixteen and then carried it to the grave through thousands of application forms, certificates, questionnaires and reception desks. It made a difference in school admissions and it could be crucial in employment, promotions and draft assignments."<sup>31</sup>

With the political openings offered by Gorbachev, the autonomous political movements that emerged in the Soviet Union quickly became the vehicles of nationalist expression in non-Russian republics. Ecological, politically democratic, and nationalist activists, as well as "liberal" Communists, took advantage of glasnost and perestroika to push for greater public participation in decision-making. The progressive weakening of the central Soviet state and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union opened the way for three distinct political patterns in the non-Russian republics. First, in a few republics – Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, and Latvia (and in Chechnya and Tuva within the Russian Republic) – non-Communist nationalist leaders took power with broad support of the population. Second, in a number of republics – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, and Ukraine – former Communists quickly adapted their political agendas to fit the new post-Communist period of nation-building and to varying degrees adopted programs of democratization and marketization. Third, old Communist elites – in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – stubbornly attempted to hold on to power, thwarted the aspirations of nationalists, and threw up a façade of democracy and nation-building while essentially maintaining a Soviet-style distribution of power.

These patterns were quite unstable, however, and republics shifted from one to another. In general democratic institutions and practices gave way to more authoritarian ones in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. Civic nationalism tended to be

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30 Sven Gunnar Simonsen, "Inheriting the Soviet Policy Toolbox: Russia's Dilemma Over Ascriptive Nationality," *Europe-Asia Studies*, LI, 6 (September 1999), pp. 1069-1087; Victor Zaslavsky, *The Neo-Stalinist State: Class, Ethnicity, and Consensus in Soviet Society* (M.E. Sharpe: 1982).

<sup>31</sup> Slezkine, "The USSR as a Communal Apartment," p. 450.

undermined by ethnocultural nationalizing in the newly independent states. In the absence of powerful constituencies favoring Western-style capitalist democracy, a furious search for an “authentic” national identity and politics occupied both state officials and the cultural intelligentsia. Although difficult to measure, popular adherence to a national identity appears to have strengthened over time, while identity with the old Soviet Union has declined. Particularly strong in Armenia and Georgia, national identity competed less well with local identities or supranational Islamic (non-European) identifications in Azerbaijan and Central Asia.<sup>32</sup> The Soviet practice of ascribing ethnonational identities at the republic level had powerful popular resonance, but older patterns of clan, tribe, and regional identification undermined effective commitment to the nation in several republics, most notably Azerbaijan and Tajikistan.<sup>33</sup> The overriding identity with the Soviet Union, deeply ingrained in Russians in particular, gradually evaporated in the course of the 1990s, although not without regret and even resistance among the older, more conservative generation.

To illustrate the struggles over constructing national identities in the post-Soviet period, I shall look at two polar cases – one in which national identity was largely a Soviet product and where linguists and historians are actively “recovering” and consciously constructing identities (Kazakhstan); and a second with an unusually strong primordial identity and a fierce opposition to notions of constructivism (Armenia).

### **Kazakhstan**

When in 1992 political scientist Bhavna Dave asked her Kazakh informants about the “plight” of the Kazakhs, how they, their language and culture had “become marginalized” in their own homeland, she heard consistent responses: “it was the Soviet system, its unmitigated policy of Russification and colonization, the ‘genocide’ [the lost of about two million Kazakhs during the forced sedentarization of the nomadic Kazakhs in the early Stalin period], the influx of settlers

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<sup>32</sup> Ronald Grigor Suny, “Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia,”

to till the so-called Virgin Lands [in the late 1950s] that resulted in this unfortunate state of affairs.”<sup>34</sup> In this late Soviet and post-Soviet construction of the recent past all agency passed from the Kazakhs to the “Soviet system,” and Kazakhs were rendered victims of a brutal and alien state. The moment of independence just a year earlier has essentially jumpstarted a new era in Kazakh history that was starkly contrasted to the dark experience of the Soviet period. With statehood would come the revival of the national culture and the reversal of the Russification that had been imposed by the Soviet regime. Yet the experience of ordinary Kazakhs included more than memories of oppression and Russification. The modernizing project of the Soviet government had had profoundly transformative effects on the republic, many of which were judged positive by ordinary Kazakhs.

In contrast to other southern Soviet republics, where the national languages dominated over Russian, in Kazakhstan the Russian language was overwhelmingly the language of urban Kazakhs -- not to mention the more than fifty percent of the population that was not Kazakh. Although the government and party apparatus had been ethnically Kazakhized from the 1960s, that elite, as well as the great bulk of the educated population, preferred Russian to Kazakh both in their official and daily lives. Since the urban centers of Kazakhstan had largely been Russian, Kazakhs moving into towns quickly adapted to the dominant language. About 40 percent of Kazakhs could not express themselves in their “mother tongue” and some three-quarters of urban Kazakhs used Russian rather than Kazakh in everyday conversations. Kazakh had a low status among non-Kazakhs, and few bothered to learn the language, whereas Russian was understood by Kazakhs to be the medium for social advancement.

At the same time the affirmative-action policies of the Soviet government promoted Kazakhs into positions of influence, gave them preferential treatment in admissions to higher

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*International Security*, XXIV, 3 (Winter 1999/2000), pp. 139-178.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 159-162, 171-173.

<sup>34</sup> Bhavna Dave, “Politics of Language Revival: National Identity and State Building in Kazakhstan (Ph.D. diss, Syracuse University, 1996), p. 3.

education (which were almost entirely in Russian), turned them from nomads into urban settlers. Under the long tenure of Kazakh party chief Dinmukhammed Kunaev (1959-1962, 1964-1986), Kazakhs became the dominant nationality in the state and party, but political success required cultural competence in the ways of Soviet life, most importantly knowledge of Russian. Russification was rampant, and yet full assimilation did not occur. The very structures of nationality policy and understandings of ethnicity maintained, even reinforced, distinctions between nationalities, both ascribed and experienced. The strong sense that ethnicity was deeply rooted in the human personality remained common sense in everyday Soviet life. “I like to speak in Russian,” one of Dave’s informants reported. “Yet I am a Kazakh at heart and will never think of myself as anything else. I love Abai as much as I love Pushkin, even though I have never read him in Kazakh.”<sup>35</sup> Her primordial idea of Kazakhness contrasts vividly with the equally essentialist notion of those Kazakh nationalists who insisted “net iazyka, net natsii!” (“no language, no nation”). The sense that ethnicity was real and deeply rooted coexisted with the anxiety that nationality could be eroded if efforts were not made, particularly by the state, to shore up the bases of national culture.

Before the Soviet period Kazakh collective identity had been based on its nomadic life. Indeed, the term ‘Kazakh’ meant nomad, and Kazakhs (called Kyrgyz in tsarist times) distinguished themselves from other Central Asians who lived a sedentary life.<sup>36</sup> The nomads most strongly identified with their genealogical linkages, either the tribal confederation (zhuz) or smaller groups (ru or taipa), rather than with any notion of “nation.” A Kazakh intelligentsia promoted literacy in Kazakh before the revolution, published a newspaper, Qazaq, that reached 8000 subscribers, and in 1906 formed a patriotic organization, Alash, that came to prominence in the revolutionary years. But nationalism among the literati should not be equated with mass

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>36</sup> Martha Brill Olcott, The Kazakhs (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1987; 1995), p. 18; Dave, “Politics of Language Revival,” p. 125. For an account of earlier uses of the word “Kazak,” see Zeki

allegiance to an idea of the nation. The Soviet state's "nativization" programs of the 1920s and 1930s assisted the development of a standardized literary language that was employed in official institutions. Kazakh membership in the Kazakhstan Communist party grew from 8 to 38 percent in four years (1924-1928), but these developments pale before the disaster of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Led by the non-Kazakh F. I. Goloshchekin, the party carried out a "small October" to transform the Kazakh way of life and eliminate traditional social relations. The state authorities ordered the collectivization of Kazakh herds and compelled the nomads to settle on the land. The herdsmen resisted by slaughtering their livestock. Hundreds of thousands fled to China, and in the chaos of collectivization over 40 percent of the Kazakh population was lost. The demographic catastrophe was later compounded by Kazakh losses in World War II and the influx of Slavic and other settlers in the late 1950s during the Virgin Lands campaign. Kazakhs became a minority in their own republic.

At the same time imperial modernization created a new Kazakh society: party and state officials, intellectuals with privileged access to state-subsidized institutions, and a working class tied to state industry. Upwardly mobile Kazakhs imbibed many of the values of Soviet modernization, even as they complained about the excesses of Stalinism and the failure of the system to meet its own standards of justice, equality, and material well-being. In the view of nationalists modern Soviet Kazakhs resembled the mankurts of Chingiz Aitmatov's novel, The Day Lasts a Hundred Years, deracinated, denationalized amnesiacs without a sense of the past. Like other Central Asians, Kazakhs did not participate in dissident or nationalist movements before 1989 – the sole exception being the street protests of December 1986 against the installation of a Russian as head of the Kazakh party. By the time glasnost' and perestroika was opening up the "blank spots" of Kazakh history, the removal of Kunaev and his replacement by a

Russian from outside the republic violated the deep feeling that Kazakhstan ought to be governed by the titular nationality.

Independence in 1991 radically changed the political salience of nationality and nationalism. Overnight a radical status reversal turned the ethnic Kazakhs from a subordinate people in a multinational empire into the “state-bearing” nation in a new state, while the former “elder brother,” the “Russians” (actually Russian-speaking peoples) of Kazakhstan found themselves no longer living in their Soviet homeland but a beached diaspora in a new, potentially foreign state. The Communist party chief, Nursultan Nazarbaev, easily converted to national leader, even as he resisted the call of independent nationalists for a more vigorous nationalizing program. He argued that Kazakhstan now required energetic state intervention in the cultural sphere, particularly in the development of the language of the titular nationality, to foster the consolidation of nationhood. In a major policy statement in the fall of 1993, he asked, “...to what can we turn if the previous [socialist] tenets have proven bankrupt?” And he answered, to cultural traditions, to one’s historical cultural roots, which “enable a person to ‘keep his bearings’ and adapt his way of life to the impetuous changes of the modern world.”<sup>37</sup> Kazakhness, Kazakh language and traditions now took on a new value, one that contrasted markedly with the marginalization of Kazakh culture in late Soviet times.

At first it appeared that ethnicity and ethnonationalism would be the easy fallback position of state builders in the post-Soviet republics. Yet Kazakhstan, like a number of other post-Soviet states, experimented with an ethnically-inflected variant of civic nationhood. The Kazakh government maneuvered between the legacy of Soviet internationalism and an emerging ethnonationalism. As Edward Schatz notes, “If internationalism had a Russian face in the Soviet period, given the privileged position accorded Russians throughout the republics, the weak post-

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<sup>37</sup> N. Nazarbaev, *Ideological Consolidation of Society as an Essential Prerequisite to Kazakstan’s Progress* (Almaty: Daewir, 1994), p. 40; cited in R. Stuart DeLorme, “Mother Tongue, Mother’s Touch: Kazakhstan Government and School Construction of Identity and Language Planning Metaphors,” (Ph.D. diss, University of Pennsylvania, 1999), p. 100.

Soviet state in Kazakhstan turned Soviet-style internationalism on its head by offering a normatively appealing discourse to its non-titular population and a diffuse and ill-defined set of privileges to titular Kazakhs.”<sup>38</sup> Employing a kind of reformed Soviet internationalism, former party boss Nazarbaev proposed a Eurasian identity for Kazakhstan, linking Russians and Kazakhs into a single category. Kazakhstan was seen as a crossroads of civilizations, with legal protection for all peoples in a non-ethnic state. “But, just as Soviet-era internationalism ultimately had a Russian face (holding a privileged position for ethnic Russians in the evolutionary march toward the ‘bright future’), post-Soviet Kazakhstani state ideology had a Kazakh face, singling out Kazakhs for linguistic, demographic, political and cultural redress.”<sup>39</sup>

In the discourse of the nation culture is the source of political power. The right to rule belongs to the people/nation that is imagined as coherent, bounded, and conscious of its position as the foundation of the state’s legitimacy. Specific territories are understood to “belong” to particular nations that either currently occupy those territories or have prior historical claims. Soviet state practices spent much time and energy connecting specific peoples to specific territories, primordializing the nationalities of the USSR by employing anthropologists and historians to establish the original moment of ethnogenesis. Appearance of the ethnonym in travelers’ accounts or other sources was often enough to conclude that a nation existed. For the Kazakhs it was eventually settled that the “nation” was formed in the mid-fifteenth century.<sup>40</sup> But when they were freed from the restraints imposed by the imperial metropole, post-Soviet Kazakh scholars extended Kazakh continuity even deeper into the past. “According to several informants in the Institute of History and Ethnography, the institute’s director, a powerful ally of the president, issued an instruction (instruktazh) to researchers to find the roots of Kazakh statehood

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<sup>38</sup> Edward Schatz, “The Politics of Multiple Identities: Lineage and Ethnicity in Kazakhstan,” Europe-Asia Studies, LII, 3 (2000), p. 491.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 492.

<sup>40</sup> “The consensus is that the Kazakh people or Kazakh nation was formed in the mid-fifteenth century when Janibek (Dzhanibek) and Kirai (Girei), sons of Barak Khan of the White Horde of the Mongol Empire, broke away from Abul’l Khayr (Abulkair), khan of the Uzbeks.” (Olcott, The Kazakhs, p. 3)

in the Sak period (the first millennium BC). This was a clear departure from established historiography that located such statehood in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>41</sup> One scholar attempted to incorporate Chinggis Khan and his empire into the Kazakh past in order to show that the Kazakh were “a more ancient and historically well-known people than the Mongols.”<sup>42</sup> The efforts of historians, as well as ethnographic expeditions sponsored by the state, aimed at ethnicizing the past of Kazakhstan, erasing its more multi-ethnic features, and establishing an ethnic Kazakh claim to territory. The experiences of pre-Kazakh Turkic tribes were assimilated into a Kazakh narrative.<sup>43</sup> The cultural activists found ancient heroes, called for preservation of monuments, and organized excavations.

In a rerun of the original korenizatsiia program of the 1920s, the independent state promoted Kazakh media, higher education in Kazakh, greater Kazakhization of the state apparatus, and repatriation of diaspora Kazakhs. Kazakh would be the state language, and Kazakh-language education would be stressed. The Kazakh state was imagined as a caring, kind mother; Kazakhs were envisioned as a generous, hospitable people who opened their arms to other peoples. Kazakhstan, then, where Kazakhs were the first among equals, was a place where many nationalities could coexist. While the Kazakh national anthem proclaimed how the Kazakhs had suffered “on the anvil of fate, from hell itself,” and the state emblem emphasized the antiquity and indigenosity of the ethnic Kazakhs, the successive drafts of the constitution (1993, 1995) moved in an internationalist direction. The preamble to the second constitution was boldly inclusive of all peoples of the republic. Its first sentence reads, “We, the people of Kazakhstan, united by a common historical fate...” A later article stated even more clearly: “No part of the people...can appropriate to themselves the sole right to exercise state power.”<sup>44</sup> The winning design for the state flag was certainly symbolic of Kazakh ethnic dominance – a sky blue

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., p. 496.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 496-498.

<sup>44</sup> DeLorme, “Mother Tongue, Mother’s Touch,” pp. 87-89, 94-95.

background, a golden sun, and a woven Kazakh design. But the sun could be understood as inclusive in a way that the Islamic crescents of the Azerbaijani, Turkmen, and Uzbek flags could not.<sup>45</sup>

While Kazakh nationalists expressed their anxiety about the loss of their language in the Kazakh-language press, the Russian-language media waxed nostalgic about the defunct Soviet Union. “Hankering for the unitary Soviet State is expressed openly,” writes Pål Kolstø, and indirectly one may infer that the editors do not accept the legitimacy of the Republic of Kazakhstan.”<sup>46</sup> For Russians – and even many Kazakhs – Russian language maintained its prestige, and Russian speakers “still consider it absurd for any Russian to go out of his or her way to learn the titular language of Kazakhstan.”<sup>47</sup> As Nazarbaev set out on the road of nation-making, he was faced, not only by Kazakh nationalists dedicated to Kazakh cultural dominance in the new state, not only by the threat of massive Russian out-migration with the consequent loss of skilled labor, but also by a general indifference to the project of nationalizing the country. Dave found that in the early 1990s “most Kazakhs remain as apathetic to the nationalizing state as they were indifferent to the communist ideology. Soviet-style internationalism is in fact closer to their life experience than is the ongoing ethnicization of personal identities and the public sphere by a nationalizing state.”<sup>48</sup>

Nazarbaev’s nationality policy, pulled as it was between ethnic and civic conceptions of the nation, nevertheless allowed for stable and tolerant relations within the bi-cultural population of Kazakhstan. Priority was to be given to reviving Kazakh ethnic culture “because it cannot be

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., pp. 83-84. One scholar argues that an official document, “Concept for the Forming of a State identity of the Republic of Kazakhstan,” (May 1996) signaled “a retreat from the studious ethnic neutrality of the 1995 constitution.” [Pål Kolstø, “Anticipating Demographic Superiority: Kazakh Thinking on Integration and Nation Building,” *Europe-Asia Studies*, L, 1 (1998), p. 58]

<sup>46</sup> Pål Kolstø, “Anticipating Demographic Superiority,” p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> David D. Laitin, *Identity in Formation: The Russian-Speaking Populations in the Near Abroad* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 156.

<sup>48</sup> Dave, “Politics of Language Revival,” p. 229.

sufficiently developed in a true sense in any other place than Kazakhstan.”<sup>49</sup> While colonial victimization was to be redressed, the government supported the consolidation of both ethnic identities and supranational state identities in a multicultural setting. However, state builders and nation makers were not the only ones engaged in identity construction. Just as the state was promoting Eurasian, Kazakhstani, and Kazakh ethnic identities, a renewed pride in lineage identities (the ru and zhuz-based genealogies) emphasized sub-national affiliations.<sup>50</sup> While it remains unclear how in its search for nationhood Kazakhstan will be able to construct ethnic, supra-ethnic, and sub-national identities or how these identities will intersect, reinforce or undermine one another, what is most evident after a decade of post-Soviet “transition” is that moderate state officials have made strategic choices to promote an inclusive civic identity that best guarantees peaceful relations among its multiethnic population. Prudence and balance, presumably to foster a sense of commitment to a new, just, caring nation, is aimed to keep radical nationalists at bay and Russian-speakers from leaving the country.<sup>51</sup>

### **Armenia**

A people with a long written tradition (dating from the fifth century AD), with a past that includes numerous polities, dynasties, and continuous institutions (like the national church), Armenians enjoy a rich repertoire of symbols, legends, and historical accounts with which to construct a modern national consciousness. In sharp contrast to Kazakhstan Armenia was the most ethnically homogeneous of the Soviet union republics, with a high level of literacy in the Armenian language, and no real challenge to its ethnic dominance of its own republic. Armenians, however, were plagued by a sense of national danger. The republic was the smallest in the USSR in territory. Frequent migration from the republic, the loss of national sentiments

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<sup>49</sup> From the pamphlet issued by the Kazakhstan Republic President’s Office, Kazakstan Respublikasy aelewmettik-maedenij damuwynyng tuzhyrymdasy/Kontseptsiiia sotsiokulturnogo razvitiia respublikii Kazakhstana [Concept of Sociocultural Development in the Republic of Kazakhstan] (Almaty: Kazakstan, 1993), pp. 8-9; cited in DeLorme, ‘Mother Tongue, Mother’s Touch,’ p. 107.

<sup>50</sup> Schatz, “The Politics of Multiple Identities,” pp. 498-502.

among the diaspora, as well as the affinity for Russian-language education of much of the elite contributed to a presentiment that what a genocide early in the twentieth century had not accomplished might occur in a more gradual manner – a so-called “white genocide” through acculturation and assimilation. Through the modern period the historical territory of Armenia had been denuded of Armenians by successive Turkish governments (most fiercely in the genocidal massacres and deportations of 1915), and the existing state of Soviet Armenia represented only a tiny fraction of a once vast homeland. Not only were the lands now occupied by Turkey gone, but two formerly Armenian areas, Nakhichevan and Karabakh, were in the neighboring republic of Azerbaijan. Though Azerbaijanis were as secularized as Armenians after seventy years of Soviet power, many Armenians linked them as Turks and Muslims with the Anatolian Turks who had devastated historic Armenia. The sense of national danger apparent in the first public demonstrations in late 1987, aimed to close down a nuclear power plant and a synthetic rubber factory, exploded early the next year in a more militant political movement that called for unification of Karabakh with the Armenian republic. Demonstrations were met with a pogrom of Armenians in the Azerbaijani industrial town of Sumgait, and the anxiety about annihilation and genocide became palpable.

Among Armenians the themes that through repetition constitute the deep weave of tradition include the antiquity of the people, its indigenous and continuous occupation of the “homeland,” the unique and significant role of Armenians in history (the first Christian nation, defenders of Christianity at the frontiers of Islam), and a constant struggle for survival and freedom. History is told as an epic, complete with heroes and martyrs, great sacrifices and persistence, treacherous enemies and unfaithful friends. As they tell their story, Armenians have been betrayed repeatedly, abandoned by great powers, invaded by uncivilized barbarians, and yet have survived. Often without a state of their own, Armenians have managed to remain constant

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<sup>51</sup> For a pessimistic assessment of the possibility of maintaining the civic national balance in Kazakhstan,

to their ideals, thanks to the continuity of the national church. In one form or another these narrative elements can be found in the earliest Armenian texts – in the historical accounts by Agathangelos, Eghishe, and Movses Khorenatsi. They were revived in the early modern period by the Catholic Mekhitarist fathers of Venice and Vienna, who reconstituted Armenian history on the basis of the classical authors. The narrative was then popularized, particularly in the nineteenth century, in poems, plays, novels, and spread through the periodic press and the burgeoning school system established by Armenians in the Ottoman and tsarist empires and in the diaspora.<sup>52</sup> The clerical establishment was eventually forced to give way to a more radical secular intelligentsia, the precursors of a revolutionary elite at the turn of the twentieth century. But history ruptured abruptly in 1915 (and again for many in 1920), first with the Ottoman genocide of Armenians and then with the Sovietization of the tiny Armenian republic. For most Armenians the recovery of an independent statehood in 1991 meant the revival of the nation, despite the catastrophic economic and social collapse experienced by independent Armenia.<sup>53</sup>

The story of Soviet Armenia parallels in interesting ways the formation of the state of Israel: a part of the ancient “homeland” was reconstituted as a national state to which dispersed Armenians could return under the protection of a great power. Besides Soviet programs of “nativization” and the cultural nationalization of Armenia, the territory of the republic was demographically Armenized with the in-migration of Armenians and the sometimes involuntary deportation of Azerbaijanis. On several occasions Stalin’s government moved traditionally Muslim peoples out of Armenia, in some cases exchanging populations with Armenians deported from Nakhichevan. Once the conflict over Karabakh became violent, in 1988-1989, hundreds of

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see Laitin, *Identity in Formation*, pp. 359-360.

<sup>52</sup> For a subtle statement of the textual continuity of the Armenian tradition, see Khachig Tololyan, “Textual Nation: Poetry and Nationalism in Armenian Political Culture,” in Ronald Grigor Suny and Michael D. Kennedy (eds.), *Intellectuals and the Articulation of the Nation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), pp. 79-102.

<sup>53</sup> For accounts of Armenian history by Armenians, see George A. Bournoutian, *A History of the Armenian People*, 2 vols. (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1993-94); Richard G. Hovannisian (ed.), *The*

thousands of Azerbaijanis left Armenia for Azerbaijan. Migration of Armenians in the opposite direction accelerated after the January 1990 violence against Armenians in Baku, the capital of Azerbaijan. By the 1990s independent Armenia had become essentially a mono-ethnic state, while at the same time occupying lands of its neighbor, Azerbaijan.

Armenian nationalist thought has a long and complex historical evolution from the late eighteenth century recovery of history with the Mekhitarist historian Mikael Chamchian through the efforts to vernacularize the written language in the nineteenth century to the organic theorists of the nation in the twentieth century. Political scientist Razmik Panossian has isolated a central romantic strand in Armenian nationalist expression that he sees running from the writer Levon Shant (1869-1951) through the emigré activist Edik Hovhannisian to post-Soviet Armenian theorists.<sup>54</sup> In this vision the Armenian nation is an historical constant, held together by blood, territory, religion, language, and history. As Shant put it, the individual cut off from the nation is like “a word outside a sentence; it has no role; and it has and does not have meaning. In order to receive a role and a certain meaning, to be able to express its real meaning and inner nuance, it must be woven into a sentence.”<sup>55</sup> More mystically, Hovhannisian declares, “Not only the living, but also the dead speak in the national will. The past speaks, as well as the puzzling future.”<sup>56</sup> Taking on the modernist, constructivist approach, Hamlet Gevorgian of the Armenian Academy of Sciences retorts, “What ‘re-creation’ of historical memory is it possible to talk about in the case of a people who has continuously maintained and visited for sixteen centuries the memorial

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Armenian People from Ancient to Modern Times, 2 vols. (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997); Suny, Looking Toward Ararat.

<sup>54</sup> Razmik Panossian, “The Evolution of Multilocal National Identity and the Contemporary Politics of Nationalism: Armenia and its Diaspora,” (Ph.D. diss, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2000), pp. 37-39. On Shant, see Kevork B. Bardakjian, A Reference Guide to Modern Armenian Literature, 1500-1920 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2000), pp. 195-197, 484-486.

<sup>55</sup> Levon Shant, Azgutiune himk martkayin enkerutian [Nationality as the Basis of Human Society] (first published in 1922-1923; reprinted in Erevan: n.p., 1999), p. 54; cited in Panossian, “The Evolution of Multilocal National Identity,” p. 37.

<sup>56</sup> E. Hovhannisian, Azgain kaghakakanutian pilisopaiutiune [The Philosophy of National Politics] (Beirut: Hamazgaini Vahe Setian Tparan, 1979), pp. 166-167; cited in Panossian, “The Evolution of Multilocal National Identity,” p. 38.

of the inventor of its alphabet, and whose main cathedral at Holy Ejmiatzin has been operating continuously for seventeen centuries....”<sup>57</sup> The antiquity and continuity of the Armenian essence is both a rejection of the denial of the reality of the nation repeated by both Marxists and modernists, as well as an implicit statement of the superiority of Armenian claims to territory and authenticity to those of more-recently constructed “nations” like the Turks and Azerbaijanis.

While from one angle historical writing in Soviet Armenia can be seen as part of a general marxisant narrative of progress upward from class and imperial oppression to socialist liberation, in the post-Stalin years scholars promoted an insistent national thematic. Occasionally the regime would discipline the bolder voices, but Soviet Armenian historians waged an effective guerrilla war against denationalization of their history. The story of the republic of Armenia was told as a story of ethnic Armenians, with the Azerbaijanis and Kurds largely left out, just as the histories of neighboring republics were reproduced as narratives of the titular nationalities.<sup>58</sup> Because the first “civilization” on the territory of the Soviet Union was considered to have been the Urartian, located in historic Armenia, the ancient roots of Armenian history were planted in the first millennium BC. Urartian sites and objects of material culture featured prominently in museums, and late in the Soviet period Erevantsis celebrated the 2700 anniversary of the founding of their city (originally the Urartian Erebuni or Arin Berd). Although the link between Urartu and Armenians took hold in the popular mind, most scholars believe Urartu to have been a distinct pre-Armenian culture and language and, following Herodotus, argue that the original proto-Armenians were probably a Thraco-Phryian branch of the Indo-European speaking tribes. Nevertheless, a revisionist school of historians in the 1980s proposed that rather than migrants into the region, Armenians were the aboriginal inhabitants, identified with the region Hayasa in northern Armenia. For them Armenians have lived continuously on the

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<sup>57</sup> H. A. Gevorgian, *Azg, azgain petutiun, azgain mshakuit* [Nation, National State, National Culture] (Simferopol: Amena, 1997); cited in Panossian, “The Evolution of Multilocal National Identity,” p. 38.

<sup>58</sup> Mark Saroyan, *Minorities, Mullahs, and Modernity: Reshaping Community in the Former Soviet Union* (Berkeley: International and Area Studies, University of California, Berkeley, 1997), pp. 176-178.

Armenian plateau since the fourth millennium BC, and Urartu was an Armenian state. A rather esoteric controversy over ethnogenesis soon became a weapon in the cultural wars with Azerbaijan, as Azerbaijani scholars tried to establish a pre-Turkic (earlier than the 11<sup>th</sup> century) origin for their nation.<sup>59</sup>

The nationalist thrust of Soviet Armenian historiography extended into a fierce critique of foreign historians who attempted to question sacred assumptions in the canonical version of Armenian history. The holder of the chair in Armenian studies at Harvard University, Robert Thomson, had the temerity to assert that Movses Khorenatsi, whom Armenian historians had claimed as a fifth century author, was actually an eighth century writer with a clear political agenda that served his dynastic master. But he went on to call him “an audacious, and mendacious, faker.” “A mystifier of the first order,” Movses “quotes sources at second hand as if he had read the original; he invents archives to lend the credence of the written word to oral tradition or to his own inventions; he rewrites Armenian history in a completely fictitious manner, as in his adaptations of Josephus.... Whoever Mo[v]ses was, he was not only learned but clever. His protestations of strict methodology were intended to deceive, to divert critical attention, and to encourage acceptance of his own tendentious narrative.”<sup>60</sup> Soviet Armenian scholars bitterly attacked Thomson’s dating of Khorenatsi and his characterization of the author.<sup>61</sup> In a sense a foreigner had tampered with the soul of the nation.

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<sup>59</sup> Stepan H. Astourian, “In Search of their Forefathers: National identity and the Historiography and Politics of Armenian and Azerbaijani Ethnogeneses,” in Donald V. Schwartz and Razmik Panossian (eds.), Nationalism and History: The Politics of Nation building in Post-Soviet Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia (Toronto: University of Toronto, Centre for Russian and East European Studies, 1994), pp. 41-94; James Russell, “The Formation of the Armenian Nation,” in Hovannisian, The Armenian People, From Ancient to Modern Times, I, pp. 19-36. On the politics of ethnogenesis, see Victor A. Shnirelman, Who Gets the Past? Competition for Ancestors among Non-Russian Intellectuals in Russia (Washington, D. C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996).

<sup>60</sup> Robert Thomson (trans. and comm.), Moses Khorenats'i (Moses of Khoren), History of the Armenians (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. 58, 56.

<sup>61</sup> For a moderate take on this controversy, see Levon Ter-Petrosian, “Movses Khorenatsi ‘Haiots patmutian’ Tomsoni targmanutian grakhosutiune,” Patma-banasirakan handes, no. 1 (1980), pp. ; for a more tendentious account, see Armen Aivazian, Haiastani patmutian lusabanume amerikian patmagrutian mech: Knnakan tesutiun [The History of Armenia as Presented in American Historiography] (Erevan: Artagers, 1998), pp.122-155.

A young historian in post-Soviet Armenia, Armen Aivazian, begins his critical review of American historiography on his country by declaring, “Armenian history is the inviolable strategic reserve [pashar] of Armenia.”<sup>62</sup> His views, hailed by his countrymen, provide a window into the particular form of historical reconstruction of Armenian identity and historical imagination that dominates post-Soviet Armenian historiography.<sup>63</sup> His tone is militant and polemical, for his self-appointed task is to defend Armenia from its historiographical enemies. “From the point of view of Armenia’s national (internal, civil, and foreign, international) security,” he tells his readers, “in its consequences Western pseudo-Armenology is more harmful and dangerous than Turkish-Azerbaijani historiographical falsification because this is the real basis of the propaganda carried out on an international scale against the interests of Armenia and is also a constituent part of that propaganda.”<sup>64</sup>

His focus in the first part of the book is on my collection of essays, Looking Toward Ararat (1993), in which, he claims, “can be found the best expressions of the arguments for American ‘Armenology’s’ anti-scientific and strongly politicized position and essence.”<sup>65</sup> The argument of Looking Toward Ararat is that “Armenian essentialism has reinforced exclusiveness, ethnic isolation, and divisiveness within the [Armenian] community.”<sup>66</sup> In its place I propose “a more open understanding of nationality, one determined equally by historical experiences and traditions and by the subjective will to be a member of a nation. A distinction is drawn between a national essence or spirit, features that do not stand up to historical analysis, and a national tradition, a cluster of beliefs, practices, symbols, and shared values that have passed from

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<sup>62</sup> Aivazian, Haiastani patmutian lusabanume amerikian patmagrutian mech, p. 8.

<sup>63</sup> Panossian reports that “one review in the respected Patma-banasirakan handes went so far as saying ‘the American authors mentioned in Aivazian’s book not only are pro-Turkish in their thinking, *but directly take its false formulations*, explicitly defend them and *act as the lawyers* [of this approach].” [“The Evolution of Multilocal National Identity,” p. 133, n. 317]

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>66</sup> Suny, Looking Toward Ararat, p. 5.

generation to generation in constantly modified and reinterpreted forms.”<sup>67</sup> Reducing Armenianness to a “cluster of beliefs,” etc., is truly offensive to Aivazian, who puts forth a biological theory of the Armenians. A people formed definitively in the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, the Armenians share common genetic features that make them recognizable through time and around the globe. Although migrations and invasions have brought Armenians in contact with other peoples, he argues, their high rates of endogamy have preserved their essential biological features. Rather than distinguished primarily by culture or traditions, Armenians are biologically distinct. The primordial base of the nation is rooted in its genetic makeup, which is then reflected in its cultural production. Nation is not a choice but a given.

This hardening of the material base of the nation, which may lead to a search for the “Armenian gene,” is in part connected to the post-Communist reaction against the efforts of Soviet Marxism to reduce the nation to a transitory stage in human history. Even as Soviet ethnology primordialized nations through the study of ethnogenesis, it also proclaimed the present and future merging of nationalities into new forms of interethnic community, like the purported sovetskii narod (Soviet people) that they claimed was emerging within the USSR. But from Aivazian’s own language it appears that there is a genuine anxiety about Armenia’s present and future. Genocidal Turks and their Azerbaijani brethren lurk within the text. Constructivism, along with Western textual criticism, deceives by its own superficial “objectivity,” and what appears to be benign scholarship is in fact naïve or malevolent service to the enemy at a time of national danger.

A number of Western anthropologists studying post-Soviet Armenia and the diaspora have explored the responses of Armenians to the insecurities of the late twentieth century. Their research has contributed a more dynamic picture of identity construction through time and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

space.<sup>68</sup> In a remarkable piece of research based on extensive field work in Armenia during the worst period of material and spiritual devastation (1989-1994), historical anthropologist Stephanie Platz turned to the study of identity because “of its ubiquity and its power in shaping knowledge, experience and interactions in politics and in practice in daily life.”<sup>69</sup> She demonstrates that Armenians in the early post-Soviet years lived not “in a state of ordered disorder, but rather, that their subjective efforts to order their own experiences and actions illuminates the tenacious character of Armenian identity.”<sup>70</sup> Haiutiun (Armenianness) was everywhere: in personal relations, in bargaining at the market, in bureaucratic inefficiency, in the tastiness of the fruit. In the chaos of a collapsing economy, blockade by neighboring states, and the early stages of the war over Karabakh, Armenians found meaning and motive for their actions through their national identity, their dependence on family and kin ties, reliance on readings of historical experience, and a strong sense that authentic Armenian virtues would get them through the current difficulties. Even as social relations broke down under the strains of life without heat and light, a memory of a more authentic Armenia remained. Platz’s Armenian informants repeatedly referred to the “time before” (araj) when Armenia was normal, people kind and hospitable to one another, when they had everything (amen ich kar), when the country was disciplined (kargukanon kar) and life guaranteed (garantia kar).<sup>71</sup> The nostalgia for the times lost, for a recent “golden age,” was clearly a memory for a imagined, reconceived past but one that had been familiar, where life had been more predictable.

But rather than stemming from uncontested fixed characteristics, Armenian identity was fraught with ambivalence and could be employed with positive and negative meanings.

“[R]elations of identity are not static,” writes Platz, “but are spatially and temporally contingent

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<sup>68</sup> See, for example, Anny Balakian, Armenian-Americans: From Being to Feeling Armenian (New Brunswick, NJ, and London: Transaction Publications, 1994); and Susan Paul Patti, Faith in History: Armenians Rebuilding Community (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>70</sup> Stephanie Platz, “Pasts and Futures: Space, History, and Armenian Identity, 1988-1994” (Ph.D. diss, University of Chicago, 1996), p. 8.

and subject to reimagination. And while elites may construct and mobilize ethnonational ideologies and sentiments, they do so by virtue of spatiotemporally situated processes of identification which are reified, and which, in their objective form, may enable history to go backwards and the future to impinge on the present.”<sup>72</sup> So powerful are these identities that contingent events like the earthquake of December 7, 1988, are “absorbed into a single historical narrative, which included massacres, genocide, environmental pollution, ethnic violence and state domination.”<sup>73</sup> And even a marginal movement of UFO enthusiasts interpreted the arrival of extraterrestrials through the prism of Armenian national history. “Through the representation of history, Armenians resisted rupture and regression, by constructing a national space-time through social memory. In the face of adversity, hayut’yun itself, propagated through discourse as a perpetual ideal, enabled Armenians to locate themselves in historical time and national space.”<sup>74</sup>

For a people living in a republic that is nearly 100 percent Armenian, in which nationality is inscribed both in official documents and everyday practices, the idea that national identity can be selected is far-fetched. Ethnic homogeneity and Soviet legacies within Armenia preclude the kind of multiculturalist imaginary ubiquitous in the United States or Western Europe, or, indeed, the multinational empires of Armenia’s past. But Armenians are a nation divided between those who live in the independent republic and those living in the diaspora, where conditions of choice, preservation, and acculturation are a daily matter. One anthropologist speaks of Armenian-American identity as “symbolic ethnicity,” a cultural practice in which “the use of visible

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., p. 142.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 256. Professor Platz was herself subjected to extensive criticism, much of it based on innuenda and misinformation, after being appointed Alex Manoogian Assistant Professor of Modern Armenian History at the University of Michigan by diaspora Armenians. Her work on ufologists was said to be inappropriate for Armenian studies and her credentials as a scholar were questioned because she did not know grabar, the classical Armenian language of the Middle Ages. [See the letter from James Russell, Mashtots Professor of Armenian Studies at Harvard University, The Armenian Mirror-Spectator, February 27, 1999, p. 14]

symbols satisfies their need for belonging.”<sup>75</sup> Here ethnicity is a voluntary affiliation, a selected sense of commonality and continuity. What could be taken for granted in Erevan must be made visible – perhaps by the wearing of a tee shirt or marching in a demonstration – in Los Angeles. The Armenian Genocide of 1915, in many ways one of the most potent sources of twentieth-century Armenian identity, appears to resonate far more loudly in the Armenian diaspora communities than in the republic itself and has become the perpetual sign of Armenian victimhood. Diaspora newspapers and journals constantly refer to the campaigns of the Turkish government and its supporters to deny that the events of 1915 qualify as a genocide.<sup>76</sup> The sense that Armenians could be extinguished as a people engages many of them in a continual effort to remind non-Armenians of the particular suffering of Armenians. Both in Armenia and the diaspora histories are being constructed as part of the effort to give content to Armenian identity, though in most cases they rely on a narrative of constancy and continuity from prehistorical to present times.

### **Why Primordialism?**

The disjuncture between the constructivist convictions of nationalism theorists and the nationalists’ belief in firm, real, essential characteristics of nations is not easily resolved by a simple exposure of the processes by which national histories and group distinctions are constructed. Primordial identity construction cannot be reduced to a mistake, a self-deception, or false consciousness. Rather theorists need to appreciate the important work that primordialism and essentialism perform. Committed as I am to social constructivism, I am reminded, nevertheless, of the feeling of hurt and confusion when in Erevan I was “denationalized,” called

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<sup>75</sup> Anny Balakian, *Armenian-Americans*, p. 44. The term “symbolic ethnicity” comes from Herbert Gans, “Symbolic Ethnicity: The Future of Ethnic Groups and Cultures in America, in Gans (ed.), *On the Making of Americans: Essays in honor of David Riesman* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979), pp. 193-220.

<sup>76</sup> The Genocide has itself become an event so sacred that efforts by a few Armenian scholars to deviate from the accepted accounts of Turkish atrocities, to attempt to explain motivation for the massive deportations and massacres, or question the timing of the decision to eliminate the Armenians leads to accusations of (at best) incompetence and (at worst) of “accepting the Turkish version.”

at the same time a traitor and an odár. Why would someone convinced that identities are constructed feel so deeply that something deep inside had been violated? And that he had been placed in danger in precisely the place he expected to feel at home?

Identification with the nation need not entail a move to primordialism, though, I hope to show, there is a selective affinity between nation, essentialism, and primordialism. National identity is an act of subscription to a continuous community with a past and a future, a shared destiny. Yael Tamir, the theorist of liberal nationalism, claims that national membership, “unlike membership in a gender, class, or region, thus enables an individual to find a place not only in the world in which he or she lives, but also in an uninterrupted chain of being. Nationhood promotes fraternity both among fellow members and across generations. It endows human action with meaning that endures over time, thus carrying a promise of immortality.”<sup>77</sup> When they work, nations must feel like a community with powerful subjective identifications of individuals with the whole. While nations to some extent depend on free individual choice, as Margaret Canovan notes, “that choice is nevertheless experienced as a destiny transcending individuality; it turns political institutions into a kind of extended family inheritance, although the kinship ties in question are highly metaphorical.”<sup>78</sup> Nation works most powerfully precisely when people are unaware that they have made contingent choices and feel that they are acting in accord with a natural order. Calculation is suppressed and feelings are heightened.

Like the idea of family, so the nation form provides clear boundaries of a community within which social goods can be properly distributed. In social science the very process of constituting a political community in the form of a nation has been seen as a necessity for democratic politics. Democracies in particular require a clearly defined, bounded population that

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<sup>77</sup> Yael Tamir, “The Enigma of Nationalism,” *World Politics*, XLVII (April 1995), p. 437.

<sup>78</sup> Margaret Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory* (Cheltenham, UK, and Brookfield, US: Edward Elgar, 1996), p. 69.

then has the right to be represented.<sup>79</sup> Nation is a convenient and powerful form of identification that speaks precisely to these conditions. “Democratic discourse,” writes Canovan, “requires not only trust and common sympathies but the capacity to act as a collective people, to undertake commitments and to acquire obligations.”<sup>80</sup> While nationalism (because of its affiliations with revolution and the Left) was suspect in the minds of many Western policymakers during the first great decolonization after World War II, political analysts were even more troubled by tribalism and social fragmentation than they were with efforts of nationalists to construct new, coherent communities on the model of Western nations. Political integration of localities or tribes into coherent nations was part of the project of modernization, the prerequisite to democratization, lauded by its theorists.<sup>81</sup>

As sensible as the fluidity of constructivism is for theorists, in the actual world of group identifications and distinctions, a belief in sharp and relatively fixed distinctions between groups and predictable harmonies and homogeneities within groups gives a person an easy and reliable map of a complex and changing world. This kind of mental map provides a degree of predictability in an insecure world; it allows expectations of comfort with some and danger from others; and it permits different forms of treatment of those one considers like oneself from those who are considered different. In worse cases it licenses treatment of “others” in ways that one would not treat one’s own. As the Armenian case demonstrates, essentialist articulations of identity are more intense paradoxically when identities seem to be threatened. Even though immutable identities should be the least threatened, as if unconvinced by their own rhetoric primordialist nationalists fear the loss of identity and seek actively to intervene to save it. And they attempt to save it precisely by shoring up the internal harmonies within the nation and

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<sup>79</sup> See the now classic article, Dankwart A. Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Towards a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics*, II (1970), pp. 337-363.

<sup>80</sup> Canovan, *Nationhood and Political Theory*, p. 44.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, Clifford Geertz, *Old Societies and New States* (1963); David Apter, *Ghana in Transition* (1963, 1971); J. S. Coleman, *Nigeria* (1958); Reinhard Bendix, *Nation-building and Citizenship* (1977).

policing the boundaries of national identity, sharpening the distinctions between those within and those without.

But the need for meaning, mental maps, or effective boundaries and collective commitments for polities only partially explains the power of the nation form and the turn toward primordialism. National identity, like others, is seldom purely about what is convenient or rational. Group or personal identities may be strategic starting points from which people act but they are also emotionally generated. Identities are most often a complex combination of reason and affect, learning and experience from a variety of sources. Subjectively experienced, they are a starting point for people's strategic choices. People may act rationally to realize their preferences, but those preferences are intimately tied to the identities that people have constructed or that have been constituted for them.

National identities are saturated with emotions that have been created through teaching, repetition, and daily reproduction until they become common sense. The very rhetoric of nationalism reveals its affective base. Armenians speak constantly of betrayal, either by traitors within (like my ancient namesake Vasak Siuni who "betrayed" the martyr Vartan Mamikonian in 451 C. E.!) or by foreign powers or by their own, treacherous imperial overlords. Their history is replete with invasions and massacres, of near disappearances, culminating in the Genocide of the early twentieth century. Yet they have survived! These tropes – betrayal, treachery, threats from others, and survival – are embedded in familiar emotions – anxiety, fear, insecurity, and pride. Even in the Kazakh case the constructivist policy of the government must deal with the anxieties of cultural loss, the need for national pride, and the insecurity of a formerly colonized people coexisting with their recent colonizers. For Tamir the need for the nation involves a perception of shared fate that becomes an answer to the neurosis, alienation, and meaninglessness of modern

times. Here again is emotion. The dread of personal oblivion, the need for redemption, salvation, eternity are all answered in the nation.<sup>82</sup>

The nation need not have been primordialized historically, and yet over time it was, until primordial ethnations became the dominant template for nations. If not in the first generation of nation-formation (the new revolutionary nations of France and the Americas), then certainly in the second and subsequent generations, the nation came to represent a primordial community that passes continuously through time. The category “nation,” like those of class and race, acquired its own style of imagination, increasingly over time about deep, essential differences between nations and fixed, continuous cores within them – whether such distinctions or harmonies existed or not. Certain “objective” criteria of nation – language most importantly – provided the clear markers of boundaries, inclusion and exclusion. As Etienne Balibar puts it, “The illusion is twofold. It consists in believing that the generations which succeed one another over centuries on a reasonably stable territory, under a reasonably univocal designation, have handed down to each other an invariant substance. And it consists in believing that the process of development from which we select aspects retrospectively, so as to see ourselves as the culmination of that process, was the only one possible, that is, it represented a destiny.”<sup>83</sup>

National identity construction has most powerfully been about a single, unitary identity, not a multiplicity of self-understandings, embedded in a long history and attached to a specific territory. The power of that identity lay within the discourse of the nation, which justified both territorial possession and statehood to those with prior and exclusive claims, based on language, culture, or race. In a world of competitors for territory and political power, primordialism was a practical, even necessary, solution to the difficulty of establishing such prior or exclusive claims.

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<sup>82</sup> The study of emotions and nationalism is just getting underway. See, for example, Roger Petersen, “Emotions and Nationalist Violence,” unpublished paper delivered at Nations and Nationalism Workshop, University of Chicago, March 28, 2001, which will become part of his forthcoming book *Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century*, to be published by Cambridge University Press.

Since prenatal ethnic and religious communities do not map neatly with modern nations, and nations themselves are inherently unstable categories, primordialism and essentialism do the hard work of reifying the nation. Identities might be fluid but in the real world of politics the players act as if they are immutable, both for strategic reasons and emotional satisfaction.

If the irony of Soviet nationality development was that an anti-nationalist state helped create nations within it, the irony of post-Soviet states is that their determined efforts at creating national histories and identities are resolutely carried on as if a real past can be recovered, as if a continuous, unbroken existence of a coherent nation has come down through time. What is not recognized in the rush to nationhood is just how much work by intellectuals, activists, and state administrators goes into the forging of new nations. Nationalists often strive to get history “right.” In their ‘objectivist’ reading of the past – showing the past as ‘it actually was’ they set themselves up as representing the only true account. This pretension to an untroubled authenticity of a single reading is a powerful claim to the legitimacy of the nation and particular claims to territory and statehood. But it does not come without costs. If the nation is real, ancient, and continuous, then in its own view (and in the discourse of the nation more generally), its claims to sovereignty is unique, uncontested, and not to be shared. The road is open to exclusivist, homogeneous nations that in our ethnically mixed, fluid, changing world require desperate policies of deportation and ethnic cleansing to secure. Constructivists propose a more open view of national history in which human actions and interventions have made the world the way it is today. If the lines between peoples are blurred and shifting, if many possible claimants to a particular piece of the world’s real estate are allowed, then we can conceive of political communities in the future that permit cohabitation with shared sovereignties in a “national” space.

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<sup>83</sup> Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology,” from Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities (London: Verso, 1991), p. 86.