Introduction

> They tell us that Russia is falling apart and is fracturing into separate republics, but we have nothing to fear. However, as many separate republics there may be, we will not be afraid. For us, it is not important where a state border runs, but that the union of the workers of all nations is preserved for the struggle against the bourgeois of any nation whatsoever.
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> —Vladimir Lenin [Ul'ianov], 1917

> When it comes to the historical destiny of Russia and its peoples, Lenin's principles of state development were not just a mistake; they were worse than a mistake, as the saying goes. This became patently clear after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991.
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> —Vladimir Putin, 2022

In the settlement of Milove/Chertkovo, divided between Ukraine and Russia, the border caused difficulties in inhabitants' everyday lives. It mostly followed the railroad tracks and crossed right through the railway station. The local market on the Ukrainian side attracted many people, and for a while, the Ukrainian authorities were able to collect all the local market taxes. Subsequently, the Russian authorities lowered the taxes on their side to attract customers and sellers. The first party secretary in Starobil's'k District (*okruha*), where Milove was located, complained to his superiors that the bazaar had moved next to the railroad tracks and led to a lot of border—and by default track—crossings. "One day, an accident occurred when a steam engine hit somebody. The legs of the body were found on our side, while the head fell on the side of the North Caucasus [in Russia]. Engulfed by a huge crowd, our [Ukrainian police] and the police forces from the North Caucasus plunged into an argument. They were arguing over responsibility for writing the report and taking care of the body."[1]

This border incident, which happened in 1926, shows how, under Soviet rule, territorial issues mattered to different bureaucratic entities as well as to customers and sellers at the local bazaar. Ukraine and the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR) were not only struggling over the location of the bazaar but also over the question of who would eventually control the railway station. It goes without saying that both sides tried to revise the republican border in their favor.

In principle, borders between Soviet republics could be crossed without much ado, yet problems nonetheless arose as soon as economic assets were involved.[2] These borders divided tax systems, official languages, and access to state property and institutions. Furthermore, they had an impact on career opportunities. Population groups previously assumed to be indifferent to nationalism began to adopt national frames as a strategy for defending daily interests.[3]

The authorities of Ukraine and the RSFSR as well as the party and state leadership in Moscow were aware of such border troubles. After the foundation of the Soviet Union in 1922, committees and commissions were tasked with establishing and revising borders between member republics: they were supposed to preclude such situations as in Milove/Chertkovo and ease the day-to-day functioning of local administrations. With some notable exceptions, these Soviet politicians and experts as well as engaged local citizens found viable solutions. National borders were, in their majority, defined in the 1920s and the beginning of the 1930s, and in 1991 the Soviet Union would break apart along these lines.

Territory and statehood in the post-Soviet space seem more uncertain than ever. Since 2022 Russia has been trying to revise borders that date back to the early days of the Soviet state. The Russian president has condemned Bolshevik nationality policies as a historical mistake.[4] This book shows not only why Lenin and his Bolshevik government embraced the nationality question, but also why and how they institutionalized it as a viable means of governance.[5] The making of national borders can be used as a lens through which to examine the Bolsheviks' fundamental shift from proletarian internationalism to ethnonational federalism sui generis. Creating, revising, and maintaining national territories proved to be a viable tool for structuring the Soviet state and managing its linguistic, economic, and cultural diversity.[6] In creating official maps, the communist government addressed the nationality question with borders in "red." Many state structures were initially improvised. The developing Soviet order was a product of trial and error.

The Soviet ruling elite of dedicated party cadres governed a heterogeneous realm. Marxism-Leninism served as a foundation for the stated mission to end the exploitative economic system and establish a universal, just, and rational order where humankind could realize its potential to the fullest extent.[7] Intending to expand the Soviet state until this new type of civilization would encompass the whole globe, the Bolsheviks established and maintained the instruments necessary to pursue such a mission—the internationalist cadre party, the Red Army, and the state bureaucracy.[8]

This universalist civilizational mission as well as the large heterogeneous territory the Bolsheviks ruled provide the core criteria of what can be understood as "imperial."[9] Whereas "nation-states" are ideally defined as homogeneous in linguistical and cultural matters, "empires" are defined by their social heterogeneity.[10] The perspective of "new imperial history" viewed large asks about the practices of managing conflicting interests that ensue from social heterogeneity and asymmetries of power.[11] Questions of belonging, administration, or territoriality—as they surfaced in Milove/Chertkovo—provide starting points for further analysis.[12]

In comparison to failed traditionalist, universalist empires such as the Ottoman Empire or China under the Qing dynasty, the Soviet state was inspired by a progressivist, rationalist mission, grounded in the European tradition of enlightenment. The Soviets shared this regard for the Enlightenment with the United States, their mightiest competitor on a global scale after the Second World War. In contrast to their American rivals, the Bolsheviks assumed that state and party institutions had to direct social development. Instead of an "invisible hand" of the market, an avant-garde elite were to realize this new social order with scientific precision.[13]

This Bolshevik political project ultimately failed, but its legacy continues to trouble the current world. Its way of nation building and border making is one of its most prominent legacies. After the Civil War, the Bolsheviks had to deal with the challenges of political, economic, and cultural heterogeneity. They had to find answers to what they perceived as economic backwardness, low cultural development, and national secessionism, and they developed a strategy that Francine Hirsch has described as "state sponsored evolutionism."[14] In searching for and implementing feasible solutions to conflicting interests, they had to adapt their universalist ideology to achieve—like the overseas empires of that time—higher-ranking goals of developing a "backward" economy.[15] In general, these solutions found and implemented in the 1920s were

rationally elaborated and could improve exigencies of governance. This provided tantalizing opportunities. By creating, revising, and maintaining national-territorial entities, the Soviet state efficiently institutionalized its power and secured its reign over the margins.

Paul Werth has proposed that studying borders and their evolution allows us to "elucidate the place of Russia and the USSR in the wider world."[16] This book is a further step in that direction. The Bolsheviks' teleological presuppositions, their dialectical materialism, and all related intricate discussions had only a moderate impact on policy making in the different regions. The ban on factions, the ideal of party discipline, and the failure to perform it in practice are only examples of this gap between plan and reality.[17] The Bolsheviks developed a territorial structure according to the principles of "national self-determination," economic dependencies, and exigencies of governance. These principles were often in conflict with each other, and the politicians and experts involved had to find feasible settlements.[18]

We can contextualize these settlements from two different perspectives. On one hand, we can see them in a line with the internal reorganization of the European overseas empires in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the other, we can connect them with the new ordering of Central and Southeastern Europe in the aftermath of the First World War.

All rising empires extend their outside borders, but by sheer necessity they must also create an internal structure. After the "Scramble for Africa" in the late nineteenth century, the European colonial powers, the French and British in particular, had to structure the administration of their new realms.[19] Whereas the borders between empires were defined at the green table in Berlin in 1885—such as those of today's Democratic Republic of the Congo—the territories within a given empire were compartmentalized differently. For instance, the borders French authorities drew between Algeria and Tunisia or those of Niger have political relevance up to the present day.[20]

Such intra-imperial borders share certain similarities with those drawn between Soviet republics as particular commissions were installed and tasked with finding feasible solutions. In the African colonial context, their creation was far from arbitrary and often involved expertise in ethnography, geography, and economy, but the colonialized populations and their representatives were excluded from the decision-making process. However, deliberate involvement of local representatives in the ruling elites and at the very center sets the Soviet cases

clearly apart from those in colonial Africa.[21] The deliberate cooptation of natives—as long as they promised not to be anti-communist—into the field of power serves as a crucial argument against the use of the term "colonial" in the Soviet context.[22] This is not simple formalism, as excluding regional and local elites from the higher echelons of power appears to be a major driver for emancipatory movements in colonized societies.[23] Today some researchers expand the term "colonial" to define a "fundamental matrix of power, operating through the control of four interrelated domains: economy, authority or governmentality, gender and sexuality, and production of knowledge and subjectivity."[24] However, such a far-reaching approach encompasses every asymmetrical relationship—including, for instance, that between urban and rural communities—and is thus barely helpful as an analytical category.

In modern colonial empires such as the British, Spanish, Portuguese, Belgian, or Dutch, the colonialized were deliberately "othered" and *by law* excluded from the field of power. Moreover, the metropole considered itself culturally superior and opened the colonized economies up to imperial exploitation.[25] For the early Soviet case, these two basic criteria are questionable. All people living on Soviet soil shared the same citizenship. The center in Moscow subscribed at least to the ideal of developing all regions equally and not exploiting one region for the sake of another. Moreover, as Terry Martin has shown in his *Affirmative Action Empire*, "backwardness" even became a valuable asset for regional activists when including and binding them within the state and party structures.[26]

In addition to similarities to intra-imperial structuring, the Bolsheviks' claim for "national self-determination" resembles the restructuring of Central and Southeastern Europe at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919–1920. Here the victorious powers took that slogan as a guiding theme for the new order. In Paris, the victorious powers developed a set of tools for reshaping Europe after the horrors of the First World War. The nation-state was perceived as the new ideal, while minorities had to be protected by special legislation. In defining borders, the Entente diplomats considered whether a certain nation was among the winners, like Poland, or the vanquished, like Hungary. Furthermore, they talked about aspects of cultural superiority and geostrategy. Finally, they also discussed and organized plebiscites in contested areas.[27]

The Bolsheviks refused to adopt the categories used by the Paris delegates because they could neither distinguish between victorious and vanquished nationalities nor refer to aspects of cultural superiority.

They would also not risk mobilizing the population for plebiscites. Even worse, their dialectical categories (bourgeoisie/proletariat, oppressive/oppressed, and instinctive/rational) were of no practical use. Of course, the politicians and experts involved established categories for "efficient" solutions to territorial issues such as nationality, economy, or exigencies of governance.[28] They understood their decisions were being closely observed abroad, especially in Eastern Europe. The practical results would showcase Soviet policy making in general and thus had the potential to attract or repel populations beyond the Bolshevik realm.[29] Terry Martin condensed this approach in his famous idea of the "Piedmont Principle."[30] Studying bordering practices allows us to explore how the Soviet state evolved as a "work-in-progress" while the Bolsheviks discussed and evaluated different tools of power.[31]

Research on Soviet nationality policies has undergone a decisive shift in the last forty years. Political scientists and historians such as Robert Conquest, Olaf Caroe, and Hélène Carrère d'Encausse once suspected the Bolsheviks of using the slogan of "self-determination" to simply play the Soviet nationalities against one another; some post-Soviet historians, such as Rahim Masov or Arslan Koichiev, have continued to adhere to such narratives.[32] Kate Brown later suspected some sort of "gerrymandering" during the creation of Soviet national territories.[33] Since the opening of the archives in almost all of the post-Soviet republics, hundreds of academic works have appeared to challenge this one-sided approach.

Revisionist historians including Jeremy Smith, Ronald G. Suny, and Gerhard Simon have detached themselves from simplistic assumptions. They have explored such questions as how Soviet nationality policies culminated in *korenizatsiia* (indigenization).[34] In particular, Terry Martin, Francine Hirsch, and Juliette Cadiot have revealed the mechanisms of how the realization of national narratives was closely linked to the promotion of national languages and the all-union census of 1926.[35] Hirsch even speaks of a process of "double assimilation," as the party's intention behind all the affirmative policies was to Sovietize the population by nationalizing culture and language.[36] However, these revisionist scholars could not explain why the Bolsheviks ultimately embraced the concept of nationality and tied it to territoriality, despite having an alternative concept in the drawer. Hirsch and Martin emphasize that multiple actors were engaged, and both historians point primarily to the meso-level—the agency of regional officials and experts—but not to the micro level in the margins. Here I show how the creation,

revision, and maintenance of national territories offered a viable tool to perform and institutionalize state power—a solution much more pragmatic than the alternative "Austromarxist" concept of *raionirovanie* (commonly translated as "regionalization").

There is no shortage of insightful regional studies on Soviet external and internal border making. Studies on the evolution of the Soviet Union's external borders depict the intricate interplay between modernizing state authorities and local strategies of subversion.[37] Those on internal border making all point to the broad agency of regional party and state actors. Here politicians and experts relied on national and economic rationales as well as exigencies of governance in solving territorial issues. The latter all focus on a particular case—be it Uzbekistan, Karelia, or Bessarabia.[38] By default, these analyses do not compare the territories they study with other regions of the Soviet state. Their regional foci show an imbalance: Central Asia has attracted the most attention, in part because of the intricate nature of the borders established there. Except for works published in the languages of the republics concerned, there are few, if any, studies of how national-territorial questions in the South Caucasus or the western part of the union were resolved.[39] However, a comparison of how the party and state managed issues of national diversity in the core regions of Soviet federalism—Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia—provides insights not only into their policy making but also into the roots of current territorial conflicts.[40] In addition, such a comparison underlines the particularly problematic position of the South Caucasus region within the Soviet state.

Two particular issues concerning the creation of the Soviet empire are still disputed. The first is whether experts had any impact on early policy making. Whereas Francine Hirsch and Juliette Cadiot have highlighted the experts' influence, Adeeb Khalid has contended that Bolshevik politicians often chose to ignore them.[41] My comparison of the three core regions of Soviet federalism offers a more inclusive and intricate approach that demonstrates contradictions in policy. Soviet ethnographic and economic experts enjoyed greater agency in the decision-making process in Eastern Europe than in the South Caucasus or Central Asia.

The second issue revolves around whether the Bolsheviks "artificially" created national territories. Christian Teichmann has asserted that the party leadership under Stalin invented nationalisms and nations where none had existed before, whereas Adeeb Khalid and Gero

Fedtke have countered that such nationalisms grew out of an authentic response of progressivist indigenous elites to the challenges of modernization.[42] I show that nationalism was nowhere a foreign idea. However, in the most contentious case, that of Central Asia, the party leadership began to support one faction of indigenous communists, which promoted a strict national delimitation, and to ignore the one that favored alternative, federalist approaches.

In the 1920s Soviet institutions on various levels put a lot of effort and money into solving the problem of territoriality and adopted its product as a valuable power tool. Their debates were not staged by the party leadership, nor was any universal blueprint employed. Party directives provided a rough discursive framework. Some Soviet territorial solutions may seem awkward: for example, the profusion of enclaves in the Fergana Valley, where several Uzbek and Tajik villages and even small towns are surrounded by Kyrgyz territory, whereas some Kyrgyz villages are completely encapsuled by Uzbek territory. These border-making processes and the rationales behind them are not absurd but grounded in certain rationales. Some early Soviet politicians and experts considered nationality a necessary but transient phenomenon in history, and initially, they thought it would fade away like the state itself.[43] Within the first decade of Soviet rule, this initial assumption changed. The state and party leadership realized that national entities and their maintenance eased the performance and institutionalization of party and state.[44]

Contrary to previous assumptions, Stalin was not the driving force behind the demarcation of borders, but he was the one who brought an end to the seemingly boundless debates over territoriality. He then used the institutionalized national-territorial structure as one of his power tools. "National deviations"—that is, questioning the national-territorial status quo—appeared to him as particularly harmful to the all-encompassing modernization policy, as they diverted resources and attention from the main objective.

To tackle the complexity of the Soviet order, I use the term "territory" as a basic concept. Like time, space is a fundamental category of human perception, and by these two categories humans relate to themselves and others. Perceptions of space are by-products of social interaction. Territory is logically derived from space. Whereas space as a general term is diffuse and vague (like the term "Eastern Europe"), territory is clearly defined by recognized (or contested) boundaries for the actors involved.[45] Territorialization is the result of epistemological

processes that create a territory within a space whereupon structures of power receive a seemingly fixed geographic shape. As a result, borders define what or who is inside and outside a territory, providing the frames for official responsibilities. In cases of bad border drawing, this can lead to conflicts like the one in Milove/Chertkovo. Hence looking at territorialization always means examining political practices, power structures, and their asymmetries.[46]

Such an understanding of territory provides a viable conceptual link to the "new imperial history." Soviet politicians and experts solved functional problems and simultaneously identified them as pragmatic ways to institutionalize their power. Analyzing such political practices shows that the early Soviet state was more than simply a "façade federation" or "pseudo federation."[47] Even though the Bolshevik party structure was authoritarian, territorialization not only involved party elites but included regional experts as well, and they even offered windows of opportunity for local agency. They thus included the margins—that is, regional and local activists—into the imperial power structures.

The ideas of natural and artificial borders dominated the older literature. In the last five decades, this essentialist perception has successfully been called into question. It is almost superfluous to state that all political borders, national ones included, are human-made.[48] Soviet functionaries projected borders mainly on physical markers that facilitated the economic exploitation of a certain area. In the RSFSR-Ukrainian borderland this was local use of fields and pastures, with the option to adapt the republican border if land use among neighboring villages changed. In the South Caucasus mountain ridges helped to define republican borders; in Central Asia the dividing line would be set between steppe and irrigated oases. In barely inhabited steppe or desert regions around the Aral Sea republican borders were simply drawn with a ruler on the map.

The terms "central," "regional," and "local" serve to distinguish macro, meso, and micro perspectives. Central stands for the party and state leadership in Moscow and its experts; they shared the greater vision of constructing socialism in a backward country. Territorialization meant for them first and foremost finding a convenient structure to advance modernization. At the regional level—that is to say, at the level of the union republics, such as Ukraine, or the greater regions (oblasti or gubernii) of the RSFSR, such as the Urals or the North Caucasus—things already looked different. Regional functionaries and their experts also propagated the construction of socialism, of course, but they

justified it in terms of meeting regional or national demands, such as Ukrainization or promoting certain sectors of their production base. At the local level, the lowest and smallest of the three, the demarcation of borders between republics affected land use among neighboring villages. There peasants feared that they might lose access to the fields, pastures, and forests that they had previously used if they happened to be on the "wrong" side of an envisioned boundary. Thus they began to link basic needs for subsistence with national frames.[49]

From this micro perspective, the modes of demarcating borders under Soviet rule were comparable to considerations unfolding in Central and Southeastern Europe at the same time. Several studies offer valuable insights. Laura Di Fiore depicts the dialectical interaction between state institutions and local populations when borders were defined and implemented and concludes that the "actual act of mapping [borders] had a performative power, since it did not merely reproduce what was real, having also the capacity to create it."[50] Relying on documents from post-World War I boundary commissions, Peter Haslinger and Catherine Gibson have provided case studies of such local mobilizations in the Hungarian-Czechoslovak and the Estonian-Latvian borderlands.[51] In a study focusing on Western Europe, Jacobo García-Álvarez and Paloma Puente-Lozano further elaborate that such border commissions act by default as arbiters between different groups, contexts, and levels of power.[52] These commissions thus have the potential to settle local conflicts and thus perform state power over the margins.

The general perspective of this book is synchronic, focusing on the 1920s and early 1930s. Krista A. Goff's *Nested Nationalism: Making and Unmaking Nations in the South Caucasus* analyzes the recursive interplay of state-sponsored promotion and discrimination and the long-term effects on national identities, focusing on the example of Soviet Azerbaijan. There the policies implemented by the Azerbaijani government led eventually to the marginalization of dispersed communities such as the Talysh.[53] Internal Soviet border making had a decisive impact on minorities. In a long-term perspective, these decisions contributed to the marginalization of herders migrating between summer and winter pastures divided by republican borders in the South Caucasus and in Central Asia. This aspect will be problematized, but its comprehensive analysis remains a topic for further research.

To discuss Soviet efforts to resolve territorial issues, I start chapter 1 with the ambiguous slogan of "national self-determination." In contrast to Woodrow Wilson, who considered the nation-state a

fundamental building block for a liberal international order, Lenin saw in this slogan a useful antidote to national secessionism within a unitary socialist state. In 1917 it was not yet clear what this slogan could mean in practice. The RSFSR thus became an experimental field with trial and error in national-ethnographic and economic territorialization. Chapter 2 then tracks the subsequent institutional competition between supporters of national self-determination and the "Austromarxist" concept of raionirovanie. Experts at Gosplan promoted an administrative-territorial structure following economic considerations because they saw non-territorial solutions for the nationality question as most apt for the Soviet state. During the 1920s this alternative lost more and more support because ethnonational structuring had much greater practical success in mobilizing party cadres and the masses.

In the main three chapters, I analyze and compare regional case studies of regulating national border issues. I begin chapter 3 with the process of determining and revising the RSFSR-Ukrainian border, where the party leadership kept a tight control over the decision making and where the Piedmont Principle had little effect on the result. The decision makers even feared to mobilize the population too much. In chapter 4, in contrast, the delimitation of Central Asia in 1924, directed by party functionaries, had a key effect in mobilizing first political elites and then the population for the Soviet project. Whereas in chapters 3 and 4 the party leadership played a major role in directing how territorialization would proceed, chapter 5 shows how Moscow deliberately kept itself out of the border revision in the South Caucasus. The state and party were well aware of the tensions among the three Transcaucasian republics and avoided taking sides. They thus tasked regional politicians with searching for solutions. However, one side or the other often obstructed their implementation. In the end, large parts of the borders, especially those between Armenia and Azerbaijan, remained badly defined. This made the South Caucasus the odd region out within the Soviet federal system.

After 1929, the Stalinization of party and state led to a fundamental change in decision making and documentation. Whereas there are several bookshelves of archival documents on territorial questions in the 1920s, there is an acute scarcity of such materials after Stalin's rise to power. Most top-down orders were given orally and remained undocumented. Chapter 6 puts the transfer of Crimea in 1954 in this context and deconstructs the still popular myth of Crimea as simply

being "Nikita Khrushchev's gift" to Ukraine. Gifts were no category of Soviet policy making. Throughout Soviet history, the once-established considerations of economic dependencies, nationality, and exigencies of governance remained the pivot of territorial thinking.

Within the first decade of the Soviet state, nationality became a pragmatic tool in everyday policy. Nationalized institutions did a good job of exerting Soviet power in non-Russian regions. Other than the party, which had relatively few members, and the Red Army, these institutions provided viable conduits between the population and the imperial center in Moscow. As the first decade gave way to the second, a decisive majority of Soviet state and party functionaries realized this potential and thus began to make it a core policy. This book tells the story of this slow, almost subliminal shift.