Chapter 1

The Leninian Moment

Making the Soviet State

> Russia is a prison house of nations not only because the tsarist government has a belligerent-feudal character . . . but also because the Polish and other bourgeoisies have sacrificed national freedom and democracy [*demokratizm*] in general for the interests of capitalist expansion.
>
> —Vladimir Lenin, 1915

"It is not possible to establish the projected new state border according to the principle of nationality. To satisfy one part of the population means an unsatisfactory decision for the other part of the population."[1] This is how Sergei Vvedenskii concluded an expert opinion on border revisions between Soviet Ukraine and Soviet Russia in 1924. Acting as an expert for Gosplan, the state's economic planning agency, he summed up the fundamental problem that had been troubling the eastern part of Europe, particularly since the end of the First World War.[2] Once national belonging was supposed to define statehood and territory, conflicts were inevitable, as ethnographically and linguistically homogeneous regions are rare. Regions rich in diversity present a particular challenge to political leaders who base their policy for a new universal order on slogans of national self-determination. The Bolsheviks closely followed the debates at the Paris Peace Conference. However, they refrained from approaches developed there, such as ideas of "cultural superiority," minority rights, or referenda in contested areas. When structuring the early Soviet state, they deliberately opted for alternatives such as raionirovanie. Minority issues were addressed by unique form of compartmentalization.

National Self-Determination—a Challenging Promise

It is rather surprising that the Bolsheviks, as outspoken Marxists and thereby proletarian internationalists, adopted a stance on the nationality question that did not aim for indifference but for categorization. Before the Great War, Josef Stalin, became engaged in the debate on nationality and helped to define the Bolshevik mainstream approach on this matter. In 1913 he was a minor activist in underground circles. Nevertheless, while in Viennese exile, he entered the debate over so-called Austromarxist approaches.

In Vienna Austrian social democrats—Otto Bauer, Max Adler, and Karl Renner among others—tried to mitigate the nationality issues within the Habsburg Empire. State institutions were expected to counteract centrifugal tendencies arising from national movements by creating new paths to unity in a diverse polity. In a context of imperial compromises, these Austromarxists claimed that national and economic conflicts should be solved by means of personal autonomy. Diverse communities should live on the same territory, but they should have access to autonomous education and separate cultural institutions. Such ideas propagated territorial inclusion instead of division.[3] Under such circumstances, Bauer concluded that socialism would eventually emerge from the working class itself. National self-determination was not a contradiction to class consciousness but its useful supplement.[4]

Stalin rejected such considerations, at least superficially. In his famous article on "Marxism and the Nationality Question," he linked the concept of nationality with that of territoriality. In response to the Austromarxist position, he produced a set of prerequisites for defining a group of people as a nationality (*natsiia*). To do so, they had to share a common language, culture, economic way of life, *and* territory.[5] In essence, he thus pivoted the Bolshevik stance in nationality policies toward approaches of territorial division instead of inclusion. Refusing inclusive approaches such as those proposed by the Jewish Bund, Stalin took arguments from opponents of Austromarxism, namely from Czech and Polish social democrats.[6] Consciously or not, Stalin shared his essentialist perception of nationality with Bauer as the latter considered it as a biological as well as a cultural phenomenon.[7] Moreover, they both highlighted a politically advantageous connection between class consciousness and nationality.

The leader of the Bolshevik Party, Vladimir Lenin, adopted this idea of national categorization when he soon after reflected on national

self-determination. However, his conception was theoretical. He never intended to contribute to its realization.[8] In his view, the formal right to secession and independence in a socialist state would preclude national oppression. In contrast to Austromarxists like Bauer as well as his Menshevik rivals, Lenin was convinced that the popular masses, the proletariat, would never gain appropriate class consciousness on their own. They had to be instructed by a vanguard party.[9]

Lenin also insisted on another principle: in a future socialist republic, there would be no compulsory state language. Even if he agreed that there had to be a lingua franca, no one would be forced to learn it, because compulsion would lead only to rejection, resistance, and ultimately secessionism. Every community could conduct schooling and local administration in its own language, and a common, universal language would be taught solely as an elective.[10] The "leader of the global proletariat" would stick to this principle until his very last conscious moments.[11]

The Bolsheviks did not act in an intellectual vacuum. During the First World War, all sides began to sympathize with the idea of basing the postwar order in Europe on the principle of nation-states. Germany, for instance, recreated a Polish statehood in 1916 to mobilize Polish nationalism for its war effort.[12] US President Woodrow Wilson presented a new order for Europe in his Fourteen Points in January 1918. Whereas Wilson was not clear about the fate of Austria-Hungary, his vision would lead multinational empires to yield to liberal, democratic, and independent nation-states.[13] After the Entente's victory, such ideas would have a tremendous impact on the 1919–1920 peace negotiations in Paris. Manela Erez coined the trope of the "Wilsonian moment" when analyzing the global impact of these negotiations.

However, Erez, together with Larry Wolff and Leonard V. Smith, have stressed that Wilson's calls for national self-determination had to compete with Lenin's. Both were similar in their influence on postwar Europe.[14] Even though their views on European and global politics mutually excluded each other, they nonetheless shared the same anti-imperialist slogans such as the need to put an end to "secret diplomacy."[15] Yet despite numerous works about the impact this "Wilsonian moment" had on Central and Southeastern Europe, there are few comprehensive studies on its "Leninian" counterpart.[16] This is even more surprising because the Bolsheviks faced challenges similar to those of the delegates in Paris.

Despite the similar wording, an ideological abyss separated Wilson's and Lenin's ideas of national self-determination. Wilson's concept was grounded in a liberal order where different nations would organically govern themselves and would take part in a global regime under a league of nations. However, Wilson restricted this self-determination to "civilized" nations, deliberately excluding non-European, colonized communities. In contrast to Wilson, Lenin promised self-determination to all communities without discrimination, notwithstanding their level of social development, but he expected that ideologically firm activists would lead them toward the communist future.

In Paris, mostly at the Quai d'Orsay, the victorious allied powers met in January 1919 for months of negotiations over how to redraw the borders of Central and Southeastern Europe after the collapse of the Habsburg, Ottoman, and Romanov empires. Nation-states were to replace the old imperial order, and the Bolshevik revolution had to be contained. The representatives of new states met with those of the established Entente powers.[17] Together, they expected to found a new order in Europe along the lines of Wilson's Fourteen Points.[18] The statesmen arrived with a host of ethnographers, geographers, and economists, who provided expertise about one party or another party to the discussion.[19] The hierarchy was more or less set, as the Big Four (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Italy) could dictate their terms to Austria, Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, Bulgaria, and in particular Germany. Because Central and Southeastern Europe constituted a rag rug in ethnographic terms, establishing state borders proved extremely difficult. Every possible outcome produced new majorities and minorities.[20]

The decision makers in Paris had two basic tools: on one hand, preferential and discriminatory treatment and, on the other, regional plebiscites. The division of countries into winner and vanquished nations served as the basis for preference and discrimination. Whereas Hungarian politicians and their experts had little reason to believe their claims would receive a fair hearing vis-à-vis the Western allies, Romanian or Polish delegates and their aides could be sure that the Big Four would pay attention to their concerns.[21] In ambiguous cases, the victorious powers organized plebiscites, as they did in Schleswig, Upper Silesia, or Carinthia. Although the framework of such referenda was often designed to favor one side, the Entente powers as a rule respected the outcome of such popular votes.[22] Furthermore, the Big Four deliberately dismissed population resettlements. The new nation-states had

to provide legal protection to minority populations, guaranteed by the peace treaties and then by the League of Nations.[23]

In Paris, problems arose when plebiscites or the system of winners and losers could not provide an answer. This was the case in Istria and Dalmatia—which Italy and the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes both claimed—or in the Polish-Czechoslovak border region around Teschen. In the case of Burgenland, the delegates in Paris had to decide which vanquished nation should be awarded this territory: Austria or Hungary. Even though the order created during the Paris conference appeared highly unsatisfactory to certain parts of the population, the framework of the delegates' deliberations appeared transparent.[24]

The February Revolution in Petrograd and the fall of Nicholas II led not only to a spring of the soviets but also to a spring of national movements in the margins of the Russian Empire. With the rupture of central authority after March 1917, regional forces gained momentum. These included the Ukrainian movement with its institutionalization in the form of the Central Rada, the Belarusian movement in the west, the Ozakom in the South Caucasus, the Alash movement in the Kazakh steppe, and the Jadids in Central Asia. Although a party rooted in a class-based ideology, the Bolsheviks had to make at least some conceptual offers to the non-Russian population. When aspiring for state power, their party showed a great deal of political pragmatism, at least in words.[25]

In November 1917, after the Bolsheviks had seized state power, the new government proclaimed national self-determination one of its core policies.[26] What this meant in practice, however, had by no means been resolved. Moreover, leading party members such as Gleb Krzhizhanovskii, Martin Latsis, and Nikolai Bukharin subjected the entire notion to constant fire on ideological grounds. They argued that national divisions would be detrimental to a future socialist state.[27] Their "internationalist" approach may have been appropriate for debates among comrades, but it would prove counterproductive to winning over potential allies in a civil war.

With the dramatic failure of the Baku Commune and the problems of ethnic tensions in Soviet Central Asia the Bolsheviks learned the hard way to comprehensively address the issue of nationality.[28] As a result, "internationalist," class-based political ideas began to lose much of their appeal. This does not mean, however, that the advocates of affirmative nationality policies had closed ranks in unanimity. Most issues in this regard remained open to debate. Should national

self-determination mean formal independence or just some sort of cultural autonomy? What was the function of the Bolshevik Party within this new framework? The party and state leadership had to find answers to what they considered as the nationality question (*natsional'nyi vopros*). Thus they had to formulate and revise "nationality policies" in a set of administrative, propagandistic, and cultural measures. In the wake of the October Revolution in 1917, Stalin became commissar for nationality affairs, and his essentialist conceptions began to influence the new order. During the Russian Civil War, the Bolsheviks succeeded in keeping large parts of the shattered Russian Empire together.[29]

As noted, Lenin viewed the formal right of national self-determination and rejection of a compulsory state language as preconditions for cooperation among people of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In the first years after the Bolshevik coup, the structure of the Soviet empire remained a work-in-progress, subject to constant change day in and day out. In practice, too, party leaders showed a great deal of flexibility in their dealings with regional actors. This became apparent in the evolution of the institutional framework of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic (RSFSR).

When dealing with national-ethnographic issues, leading Bolsheviks relied exclusively on their own activists, politicians, and experts. In stark contrast to the expertise on hand in Paris, the Communist Party directed the production of knowledge in the Soviet state. Even though not all Soviet experts had to be party members, they were expected to think within a technocratic framework that did not contradict the Bolsheviks' teleological weltanschauung.[30] They rejected out of hand any ideologically wayward approaches or "deviations" submitted by experts and intellectuals. "Philosophy steamers" bound for the West in 1922 were the most spectacular expression of the Bolsheviks' rejection of expertise that failed to conform.[31] As mentioned above, the Bolsheviks could not distinguish between winning and losing nations as the delegates in Paris had. Of course, they could differentiate between "oppressing," "advanced" and "oppressed," "backward" nations, and they did reject "Great Russian chauvinism," but in practice, such categories proved to be of little help. In principle, the party considered all nationalities equal.[32]

Ideally, a territory would be associated with only one nationality.[33] All of the other population segments would count as minorities. These minorities could form an autonomous subunit only if they lived compactly in one area, because minority rights were—with a few

exceptions—associated with a given territory. Thus decisions to attach certain territories to one or another national unit could give rise to secondary issues.

From the start, the RSFSR was an awkward federal republic. To analyze the formation and evolution of its intricate structure would require a separate book.[34] Here it is possible only to provide a general outline so that readers have necessary background information for the chapters that follow. Due in particular to Lenin's constant exhortations, the party accepted that "Great Russian chauvinism" posed the greatest danger to cohesion within the Bolshevik power structure. In the early Soviet state, Russians were considered the only fully developed nationality with their own proletariat and bourgeoisie.[35]

Borrowing a metaphor from Iosif Vareikis, one of those dedicated party activists, Yuri Slezkine has described the structure of the Soviet state as a communal apartment. There all of the families have separate rooms according to their size, and they all share common spaces such as the kitchen, corridors, and bathrooms.[36] Drawing on this metaphor, it was possible to designate each separate Soviet territory by the name of a nationality. Because the party promoted all of the previously "oppressed" nationalities in their historical development, each and every one of them was expected to get its own territory. Any space that was not claimed by a nationality was left undesignated. Within the Soviet framework, this space was simply called the RSFSR. As members of the developed nationality, Russians were denied party support and thus had nothing to claim in their name. The RSFSR occupied the large space in the middle of Slezkine's communal apartment as well as shared rooms such as the kitchen and the bathroom. But even if this metaphor may seem insightful for us today, it is nonetheless a description post factum. We must turn it upside down to better understand the making of Soviet nationality policies.

In January 1918, the Bolshevik government declared Soviet Russia (i.e., the territory of the former Russian Empire without Finland) to be a federation of "free nations," but it was unclear how this federative form would be filled in terms of content.[37] Once this great expanse descended into civil war, Bolshevik territory was in a state of constant flux. Political entities, such as the Lithuanian-Belarusian Socialist Soviet Republic (Litbel) or the Donetsk-Krivoi Rog Soviet Republic, split off from the RSFSR, enjoyed a fleeting moment in the sun, and then disappeared as quickly as they had appeared. Other national entities, such as the Volga German Workers' Commune (Trudovaia kommuna

nemtsev Povolzh'ia) or the Bashkir Republic in the Urals, proved more stable. Over time, however, such political concessions led to the creation of a certain routine and the establishment of patterns for dealing with the nationality question. Thus the initial Soviet state was made up of improvisations that over time crystallized into long-term institutions. In retrospect, Lenin saw the beginning of his government as a work-in-progress. He expressed this with a bon mot that he ascribed to Napoleon—"*on s'engage, et puis on voit*" (first we engage [in a battle] and then . . . we will see [what happens]).[38]

Lara Douds has analyzed this structural crystallization in much greater detail. The party, in particular the Politburo, achieved its dominance over state affairs only after 1919. The centralized party structure was, like the heterogeneous Soviet state, the result of a formation process that unfolded under the harsh conditions of civil war and economic crisis.[39] Douds argues that the Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), the nominal head of the RSFSR, and the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom)—that is, the government—began to lose the political initiative after Yakov Sverdlov died in early 1919 and Lenin fell ill in 1921.[40] However, state institutions, particularly the TsIKs in the union republics, maintained at least some agency during the 1920s.

The first basic distinctive feature in Soviet federalism, one that would endure until 1991, came in response to the question whether a given entity should be considered legally separate from RSFSR structures. In 1918 Soviet Ukraine, the Provisional Polish Revolutionary Committee, and Soviet Finland were clearly excluded. Only in the first case were the Bolsheviks able to maintain their dominance. The other former western parts of the Russian Empire succeeded in suppressing domestic revolutionary efforts, expelling the Red Army with German and Entente support, and creating internationally recognized independent states.

The first constitution of the RSFSR, adopted on 10 June 1918, formally granted the possibility of creating territorial entities with autonomous status.[41] However, amid the state decay, mutinous armies, foreign interventions, and secession movements in the border regions, the Soviet government was engaged in a daily struggle for its political survival. Despite the criticism from Nikolai Bukharin and others, the government felt an affirmative national policy afforded them an advantage in fighting the White Army.[42] In the border regions, it helped them turn the imperial Whites' Russian nationalism against them.

Creating New Rooms in the Soviet Apartment

The People's Commissariat for Nationality Affairs (Narkomnats) was *the* instrument of power for addressing nationality issues and organizing support from the non-Russian population. There each significant non-Russian nationality had its own commissariat or department. In turn, each of those departments had to mobilize its national elites for the Soviet cause and at the same time represent those elites vis-à-vis the government in Moscow. This dual function often led to conflict and confusion, but it also enabled the establishment of the first autonomous territories within the RSFSR. As time went on, these national bureaucracies, once installed, would continue to call for more funding and provide arguments for their continued existence.[43] According to experts within Narkomnats, the creation of each national territory would be determined by numbers and statistics.[44] However, this soon proved problematic, as the experts and politicians found they lacked reliable statistical data. This scarcity of reliable information would continue to disrupt the Soviet Union's abilities to govern until the 1926 census.[45]

The first entities to gain "autonomous" status within the RSFSR in 1918 paved the way for a broad spectrum of what the term could mean in practice. The Turkestan Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (Turkestanskaia avtonomnaia sotsialisticheskaia sovetskaia respublika, TASSR) and the Volga German Workers' Commune were among the first. They were explicitly designated parts of the RSFSR, unlike Litbel. The political rights of these territorial entities depended on circumstances. In 1918 and 1919 the TASSR was largely cut off from the other territories controlled by the Bolsheviks. Regional activists had to rely on their own means. Russian and Ukrainian settlers dominated Turkestan's soviets, and their political actions often discriminated against the indigenous Muslim population. Unsurprisingly, this triggered local resistance to Soviet power, which in turn contributed to the emergence of insurgents labeled as Basmachi.[46] The party and state leadership in Moscow tried to counter the dominance of the Slavic settlers by lending support to Muslim activists. The resulting close alliance with local progressively minded activists such as the Jadids—initially a designation for Muslim educational reformers—would ultimately help to shape Moscow's Central Asia policies from late 1919 until the mid-1930s.[47] While regional party and state activists in Turkestan enjoyed broad agency, the Germans in the Volga Commune remained under the close supervision of Moscow. In practice, Volga German institutions initially

gained little more than the right to appeal to the government in Moscow without intermediaries.[48]

Bashkiria provides an example of the Bolsheviks' pragmatism with national representatives who were ideologically opposed to the Communist Party. In this case, the Bolsheviks were able to turn the Russian nationalism of White Admiral Aleksandr Kolchak against himself. Kolchak's forces included a sizable contingent of Bashkir troops, but repeated humiliations at the hands of Russians within the ranks had alienated these Bashkirs. The Bolsheviks exploited their grievances and convinced the latter to change their allegiance. They promised their leader Akhmet-Zaki Validov Bashkir self-rule within Soviet Russia. Thus, in 1919, the Bashkirs came to help the Red Army gain the upper hand against Kolchak in western Siberia. Even though later conflicts between Validov and the Soviet government were almost preprogrammed and eventually led to a parting of ways in 1920, the Bashkir example provided a viable blueprint for the national autonomies that would soon flourish within the RSFSR.[49]

Toward the end of the Civil War, the state and party leadership saw the support of oppressed Muslims as a means of promoting revolution in Asia and the Middle East, a possible opportunity to make up for the failures in the West.[50] The Congress of the Peoples of the East, held in Baku in September 1920, produced a landmark change in Bolshevik politics. Instead of the proletariat of the industrialized West, the peoples of the colonialized East were expected to continue the World Revolution. Hence the communist movement gained a decisively anti-colonialist turn and the Soviet approaches of how to deal with modernization of "backward" society would be discussed in liberation movements all over the world.[51]

Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev, who between 1918 and 1923 headed the Muslim Commissariat (Muskom) at Narkomnats, was particularly active in promoting such emancipatory ideas. Originally from Ufa Guberniia, Sultan-Galiev had joined the Bolsheviks in 1917 and agitated on their behalf for the unity of all Turkic speakers in the former Russian Empire. With Lenin's explicit support, he was able to sidestep party discipline in efforts to mobilize the Muslim population for the Soviet cause. Such inclusive ideas were hardly awkward, as the Soviet administration initially considered the term "Muslim" an ethnonym for non-Christian indigenous populations of Eastern Europe, Siberia, Central Asia, and the South Caucasus. The same applied with respect to the term "Jewish," which could refer to an ethnicity as well as a religious affiliation.

This is why Narkomnats had branches like Muskom. Official differentiation of the "Muslim" population along linguistic, economic, and cultural lines was just getting underway.[52]

The creation of a joint Tatar-Bashkir Autonomous Republic was Sultan-Galiev's pet project in 1918 and 1919. However, this political undertaking failed to materialize due to two contradictory factors. On one hand, the members of the Bashkir government that already existed opposed the project, seeing in it a threat to their own political privileges.[53] On the other, from the Bolsheviks' point of view, national belonging was supposed to be nothing more than a means of mobilizing the non-Russian peoples. That is to say, for the Bolsheviks, the emancipation of the Muslim population was a means, not an end. There was a crucial dividing line between the Bolshevik leadership and activists such as Sultan-Galiev. Despite this, activists at Narkomnats continued to advocate ideas that ran contrary to those of the Communist Party's mainstream: for example, discussing Austromarxist approaches of personal autonomy and national inclusion in the commissariat's own periodical *Zhizn' natsional'nostei* (Life of the Nationalities).[54]

At the same time, the fundamental opposition to nationally defined polities within the Bolshevik realm did not by any means simply fade away. Mikhail Vladimirskii, deputy head of the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD RSFSR), promoted a class-based restructuring of Soviet space. He therefore planned to strengthen the proletarian centers—that is, towns with a working-class majority. These loyal centers would guarantee implementation of Soviet policies within the different regions.[55] Other party activists took up such ideas and developed them further. In 1921, Timofei Sapronov not only planned to strengthen these proletarian centers, but he also called for expanding the competences of the gubernii. In other words, he wanted the imperial-era gubernii to form the backbone of the Soviet federal structure.[56]

Despite such rival approaches, the distinction between autonomous oblasti and republics became increasingly common within the growing federal system of the RSFSR—something that would last until 1991. Even though there were no precise rules governing which nationality could gain what status, smaller and more "backward" nationalities tended to receive oblast status, while larger ones achieved that of a republic. The differences between these two levels were considerable. Autonomous republics, such as Bashkiria, had their own

commissariats and could act independently in certain areas, such as education. Autonomous oblasti, such as Komi, initially had no more administrative power than any other guberniia of the RSFSR. The sole exception was that an autonomous oblast did have direct access to the central government in Moscow. Both kinds of autonomy, however, included particular policies in cadre recruitment, education, and implementation of official languages.[57] Hence, within the emerging federalist framework, national-territorial status came with a set of privileges. The Twelfth Party Congress would go on to institutionalize them in 1923.

The coexistence of a centralizing party and a federalizing state seems at first glance counterintuitive, but they must be seen in their dialectical relationship. The RSFSR took a federal form in order to preempt secessionist movements and mobilize the entire population. This goal could be realized only if representatives of state and party institutions could speak the languages of all their citizens throughout the Bolshevik realm. However, the party, particularly the secretariat of the Central Committee, strictly supervised the promotion of national cadres. The Eighth Party Congress in 1919 formally stated that they were bound to the party discipline—that is, orders from the Central Committee in Moscow.[58] The form of the autonomous state institutions was federal, but the party decided the content, meaning which people received key positions. Stalin, first as commissar of nationality affairs and then as general secretary of the Central Committee, quickly learned how to make use of these instruments of power.[59]

To keep a tight rein on the chains of command, the Central Committee formed regional sections and sent plenipotentiaries wherever and whenever it needed them. The Kavbiuro was expected to supervise all party activists in the North and South Caucasus regions, the Turkbiuro those in Turkestan. Not only could these party institutions overrule decisions made by state institutions, but their scope of action also crossed existing state borders. The Kavbiuro at one point had to supervise the North Caucasus, which lay within the RSFSR, as well as the formally independent South Caucasian Soviet republics. The Turkbiuro had to deal with the TASSR and then also with the formally independent entities of Khorezm and Bukhara.[60] Later, these regional sections were renamed but continued to act as the main intermediaries between Moscow and functionaries in the different regions. It is not surprising that these conduits were where internal party conflicts became visible and regional policies were made.

Adding a New Floor to the Soviet Building

In 1921 and 1922, as the Bolsheviks were asserting their control over large swaths of the former Russian Empire, they began to develop, with far greater precision, the still improvised structure of their new state. In the eyes of the Moscow leadership, the Soviet republics outside the RSFSR were constantly causing problems. Even though their cadres were bound to the Communist Party, they kept acting like politicians from independent states. This was particularly true when they tried to establish formal relations with other states, as the Georgian or Bukharan governments did in 1921 and 1922. Moscow saw its authority challenged by such moves and intervened.[61] However, this further damaged Moscow's already weak reputation in the margins, as such interventions strengthened the impression of foreign rule. The Bolshevik leadership thus searched for other forms that would best fit their needs.

In this urgent matter, Stalin proved to be the right man at the right place. After the Civil War, he made his mark as a diligent administrator within the party apparatus. It is no wonder that, in September 1922, he came to head a Central Committee commission to overhaul the Soviet state's structure. This commission decided to include all of the still formally independent parts of the Soviet realm into the RSFSR. Dmytro Manuïl's'kyi, the first secretary of the Ukrainian party, was a particularly energetic supporter of Ukraine's entry into the framework of the RSFSR. In his opinion, direct subordination to Moscow's rule would overcome the factional divides among Ukrainian communists.[62]

Now Stalin had to sell this idea to Lenin, who was still recovering from his first stroke. In his report, Stalin again emphasized that the current situation had led to administrative chaos. The party had two options: grant these Soviet republics either "real independence" or "real unification." Of course, this was rhetorical posturing, because the first option was hardly realistic from the party's point of view. Stalin depicted the goal of the whole discussion quite bluntly: "[we must] replace fictitious independence with the real autonomy of a republic in the sense of language, culture, justice, internal affairs, agriculture, and so on."[63] He went even farther: "We are now experiencing such a pace of development that we cannot ignore the form, law, and constitution, when the young generation of communists in the border regions refuses to understand the game of independence as a game [*molodoe pokolenie kommunistov na okrainakh igru v nezavisimost' otkazhetsia ponimat' kak igru*]. They persistently take the word 'independence' at face value,

and they persistently demand that we act according to the letter of the republics' constitutions."[64]

While agreeing with the general framework of the project, Lenin proposed changing the form slightly. All of the Soviet republics together with the RSFSR should form a new kind of union state—the Union of Soviet Republics of Europe and Asia. Lenin detested the idea of endowing Ukraine and Georgia with the same level of "autonomy" as Tatarstan or Bashkiria. In a letter to Lev Kamenev, who was also a member of the commission, he made his thinking quite clear: "It is important that we do not provide oxygen to the 'independists,' that we do not destroy their *independence* but create a *new floor*, a federation of equal republics."[65] This new floor would have its own Sovnarkom and its own TsIK. "Russia" would no longer appear in the state's name. The Central Committee commission would go on to include Lenin's suggestion in its draft.

In October 1922, the party leadership was more or less in agreement as to how to proceed with constitutional reform, but sudden resistance from their comrades in Tiflis (today Tbilisi) led to a crisis that later became known as the "Georgian affair." Rivalries between the Zakkraikom (the successor to the Kavbiuro) and Georgian party leaders lay at the source of this matter. Relations between Sergo Ordzhonikidze, head of the Zakkraikom, and his Georgian comrades had turned sour, as they were not playing the "game" according to Ordzhonikidze's expectations. For example, in 1921, they opposed giving up an independent Georgian currency.[66] The Georgian Bolsheviks agreed in principle to enter into a closer union with other parts of the Soviet state, but they asked for more time and protested the Zakkraikom's constant interference in their internal affairs.[67] Ordzhonikidze's impulsive and undiplomatic character did not ease the situation. Things began to get out of hand when the Zakkraikom demanded that the Georgian leadership join the new union state by means of a Transcaucasian Federation (ZSFSR). Most Georgian communists rejected the idea that Georgia was not an automatic member of the proposed union but only in the form of a federation with Armenia and Azerbaijan. They saw themselves as marginalized. Subsequently, in November 1922, a majority of the Georgian Central Committee resigned in protest. This scandal drew the attention of Moscow, prompting the Central Committee there to send a commission to Tiflis to investigate. The party leadership was eager to introduce the new state order as soon as possible. Thus the

commission's conclusions backed the Zakkraikom and criticized the Georgian comrades for their behavior.[68]

The "Georgian affair" would have remained a footnote, if Lenin had not then intervened in favor of the Georgian Bolsheviks. As Jeremy Smith shows in detail, the affair was not so much a struggle between Lenin and Stalin on the issue of "centralism" versus "autonomism"—something Richard Pipes, Gerhard Simon, and to some extent Stephen Blank previously highlighted—but rather an issue of manners within the party.[69] In the course of events, Lenin learned of Ordzhonikidze's erratic and even brutal behavior when dealing with other party members. Brutality toward the enemy was nothing unusual for Bolsheviks, but it was not the way to treat dissenting comrades (yet). Lenin viewed Ordzhonikidze's behavior not as an isolated incident but as a symptom of "Great Russian chauvinism."[70] However, his intercession on behalf of the Georgian comrades came to naught. A second severe stroke on 15–16 December disabled him from performing any further duties of office. Moreover, other party leaders, Stalin in particular, obstructed his effort to remedy the situation. Thus the Soviet Union came into being on 30 December 1922. Even though Lenin's vision of a federal state beyond Russia prevailed, Stalin could fit its institutions to tighten his own power position.[71]

To analyze the Soviet Union in action, Jeremy Smith also provides an important distinction between the form of the state and the party's national policy. The forms, the institutions, nationalism, and economic considerations were different layers within the game of power all the party activists had to learn how to play. Despite flowery slogans of "independence," "self-determination," or later "socialist construction," they all had (in theory) to adhere to party discipline and maintain political unity, once the Tenth Party Congress in 1921 formally enacted a ban on internal factions. National policies were aimed at winning over populations and mobilizing them for the Soviet project. Within this game, "Great Russian chauvinism" endangered the realization of the party's tactics toward the non-Russian people—that is, nationality policies—whereas "national deviation" by non-Russian party members posed a threat to party discipline, the very essence of Bolshevik power.[72] From the party's point of view, Ordzhonikidze had upset the implementation of certain policies in the South Caucasus, whereas the Georgian communists put Bolshevik rule as such in jeopardy.

The Twelfth Party Congress: Carrot and Stick for National Activists

The Russian Communist Party tried to institutionalize the way it managed the problems that arose from the nationality question. At its Twelfth Congress in April 1923, it adopted a comprehensive program to deal with the non-Russian nationalities. The delegates at this congress again condemned "Great Russian chauvinism" as "oppressive" and "imperialist," and they introduced a set of measures designed to promote "non-imperial," "backward" nationalities such as the Ukrainians, Tatars, or Kirgiz.[73] These policies were later called korenizatsiia. Tied to a titular territory, they were to guarantee the mobilization of the "backward" population for the Soviet project. Institutionalized promotion of previously "oppressed" nationalities in state and party offices lay at the very core. Depending on the territory in question, it could take specific designations such as *Ukrainization*, *Belarusification*, or *Uzbekization*.[74]

Despite the condemnation of "Great Russian chauvinism" and the institutionalization of korenizatsiia, it did not take the party leadership long to provide a demonstration of what would happen if someone failed to play the game. Immediately after the Twelfth Party Congress, they made an example of the well-known Muslim activist Mirsaid Sultan-Galiev. Among the numerous faults party officials would find, chief among them was the fact that Sultan-Galiev had previously promoted the idea of forming a single Soviet republic that would include all the Turkic peoples of the Soviet state, and he was a vocal opponent of all manifestations of "Great Russian chauvinism." In May 1923 the Central Committee of the RKP(b) accused him of having organized a conspiracy against Soviet power. Subsequently, he was arrested and expelled from the party. In the years to come, "sultangalievism" would serve as a synonym for national deviation.[75]

The Twelfth Party Congress made Stalin a visible member of the party leadership. He was able to present himself as Lenin's most dedicated pupil and thus he strengthened his powerbase, while his opponents Leon Trotsky and Grigorii Zinov'ev lost some of their influence. As commissar of nationality affairs as well as general secretary of the Central Committee, Stalin was in charge of recruiting and promoting national cadres. He would make extensive use of this bureaucratic power.[76]

After the Sultan-Galiev affair, the party organized a convention with regional national activists in June 1923. The new rules of the game

should be publicly performed. Stalin, as representative of the Politburo, gave the concluding speech after the discussions. Whereas he praised the Georgian and Armenian comrades for their successes, he severely criticized the Ukrainian and Turkestani communists as they had failed to mobilize larger parts of the population.[77] This is why he repeated the urgent need for "affirmative" policies: "it is necessary to create favorable conditions in order to attract local people to the party and promote them into executive positions, even if they are of less educated and possibly less proletarian nationalities [*menee kul'turnykh i mozhet byt' menee proletarskikh natsional'nostei*]."[78]

The new constitution of the USSR was still in the making, but Stalin underlined the necessity for a centralized command structure. The union republics should not have their own foreign policies because this would create disunity and waste precious state funds in parallel structures. Vis-à-vis the still formally independent republics of Khorezm and Bukhara, he urged the necessity of purges in their party and state administrations before they could join the Soviet Union. The right to join had "to be earned."[79] This was more than a euphemistic wording. Through these purges, Bukharan and Khorezmian politicians eventually lost much of their agency and became increasingly forced into the multilayered game of power.[80]

In drafting this new constitution of the new union state, party leaders also had to determine how border revisions between Soviet republics were to be addressed. A commission of the All-Union TsIK raised such issues in mid-April 1923. Among the commission's members were numerous figures who would later play important roles in resolving territorial issues: Mykhailo Poloz and Mykola Skrypnyk of Ukraine, Saak Ter-Gabrielian of Armenia, Avel' Yenukidze, secretary of the TsIK and VTsIK, and finally General Secretary Stalin himself. After discussing the possibility of border revisions between union republics, this commission decided that all republics affected by any revision, as well as the All-Union TsIK, had to approve such territorial changes. Hence every republic had to give formal consent to changes in its territorial structure.[81] If necessary, they could be forced to consent by party discipline. The party and state leadership would take on the role of arbiter if necessary.[82]

In 1923 and 1924 the framework of the game was taking shape. If possible, every nationality on Soviet territory would receive an autonomous territorial unit that would bear its name. When a nationality formed a coherent majority within the territory of another nationality,

then the state administration would create a national sub-entity. In the 1920s and early 1930s all kinds of territories bearing the name of a nationality kept popping up throughout the Soviet space. Even the smallest nationalities could form autonomous raiony (districts) and rural soviets. On paper, the administration of such a unit was to function in its national language.[83] The matryoshka, the nesting doll, can serve as a metaphor: the Ukrainian Republic contained in its territory a Moldovan Autonomous Socialist Soviet Republic (MASSR). Further down, within the MASSR, was a German rural soviet in Glikstal' (Glückstal). In this way, a German rural soviet could be part of a Moldovan entity, which was itself part of a Ukrainian entity, which was, of course, part of the union state.[84]

Even though Austromarxist approaches of cultural autonomy and national inclusion were not that popular within the party, in certain cases, there was no alternative. Examples are the short-lived Mountain Republic and the much more enduring Dagestani Republic in the North Caucasus. There the ethnic composition appeared too diverse to form national units. Thus the Soviet administration gave such ethnically diverse territories a collective autonomous form.[85]

After Lenin's death in 1924, "Marxism-Leninism" would become the guiding ideology within the Communist Party. "Leninism" as an amendment to "Marxism" stood for radical political pragmatism. Political problems like the nationality question would not miraculously fade away; they had to be managed by a chosen vanguard party. Its members had to thoroughly engineer and supervise social development.

Even though the smaller national rural soviets and raiony fell victim to Stalinist rationalizations at the end of the 1930s, the larger administrative units would remain until 1991.[86] This "party state" was built on conflicting ideas of universalistic socialism and particularistic nationalism. Their synthesis was at the core of the Soviet polity.[87] Nationality, cadre selection, and territorialization merged into a pragmatic way of institutionalizing Soviet power.

As a result of this expansive set of autonomous oblasti and republics, as well as the creation of the USSR, Narkomnats itself became redundant. Since 1917, it had been an intermediary between different nationalities within the RSFSR and the state leadership. Now these nationalities had defined autonomous territories and institutionalized access to Moscow. Despite resistance from its activists, the Soviet leadership dissolved Narkomnats on 9 April 1924.[88]

In the emerging federal system, the RSFSR remained the odd one out. The danger of "Great Russian chauvinism" seemed to be formally banned, but in the years that followed, new union institutions grew to become the Siamese twins of their RSFSR equivalents. Many of the RSFSR's institutions were identical with those of the union or were filled with the same party cadres.[89] For instance, Mikhail Kalinin was simultaneously chairman of the TsIK and the VTsIK; Avel' Yenukidze was his secretary at the TsIK as well as at the VTsIK.

Despite all the territorial diversity and conflicts of interests that existed at the outset of the 1920s, party and state functionaries knew all too well that the Politburo of the Communist Party had ultimate authority in political decisions. However, the Politburo was limited in its capacities. It could not regulate every detail within a territory that stretched across one-sixth of the planet's landmass.[90] In the 1920s political leaders like Lenin and Trotsky or later Stalin could not simply materialize a certain idea with the snap of their fingers. Administrative structuring according to national-ethnographic criteria or the rival concept of raionirovanie offered practical solutions to the existing challenges. Mid-level politicians and experts had then to settle disputes arising from such territorial issues. Their agency grew when the decisions of the Politburo and the Central Committee left room for interpretation, when the center intentionally declined to provide detailed instructions, or when it simply delegated problem management to subordinate levels.