Conclusion

In November 1917 it was far from settled that the Soviet state would adopt a nationalized federal structure. In the years that followed, the Bolshevik government created different tools for governing party and state. In the margins, particularly in Ukraine, the South Caucasus, and Central Asia, the revolutionary government had to deal with a nationally mobilized, non-Russian-speaking population. Together they made up almost half of Soviet citizens. Thus the Bolsheviks had to find pragmatic solutions for including these politicized masses.

The Austromarxist raionirovanie concept lost much of its initial support, whereas national forms of administrative-territorial structuring provided a valuable nexus for korenizatsiia—namely, cadre promotion and popular mobilization. Raionirovanie lacked this mobilizing effect; even worse, from Moscow's perspective, its implementation created an administrative mess. As a result, in practice, the national approach turned out to be the most convenient way of managing diversity. In a subliminal process, most of the party and state functionaries—Gosplan expert Konstantin Yegorov is but one example—adapted to this pragmatism.

National-ethnographic structures became the foundation of the new federative state. This created not only a plethora of challenges but also opportunities. Studying these territorialization processes offers a

standpoint to understand the USSR's place in global history.[1] The Bolsheviks identified the structural problems of nationalist movements, minority representation, and detachment of the margins from the center. Most of them soon realized that the nationality question would not miraculously fade away. Their vanguard party had to manage it thoroughly. Beginning with day-to-day improvisations, they then transformed their growing experience into a pragmatic tool to govern their supranational realm. This was a unique contribution of the Bolshevik revolution to global history. It served as example for ethnographically heterogeneous, modernizing states like China, Ethiopia, India, Indonesia, or Yugoslavia.

The creation of borders—the delineation of who and what should be inside or outside—reveals asymmetries of power at work. The Soviet realization of national self-determination was to be based on territory and linked with a set of privileges, such as additional funding and direct access to Moscow. In the early 1920s an ethno-territorial hierarchy developed, starting with the rural soviets and moving up the ladder of territorial entities to raiony, oblasti, autonomous republics, and the virtually sovereign union republics. Questions of drawing borders, border revision, and maintenance were the subject of heated debates as issues of resource distribution, careers, and privileges increasingly came to be seen as interconnected.

Even though the status of autonomous entities within the RSFSR and the structure of the USSR changed over time, the basic framework of Soviet territorial thinking that developed in the 1920s would last until 1991. Numerous autonomous oblasti and republics continue to exist in the Russian Federation, the successor state of the RSFSR, to this day. Even though smaller national entities, such as the national raiony and national rural soviets, were abolished in the late 1930s, larger national entities managed to survive this shift. On Stalin's orders the more than two hundred Soviet nationalities (*narodnosti*) of the 1920s were replaced with a set of "about sixty nations" (*natsii*). The minor national entities lost institutional support, the remaining major ones could profit from this Stalinist logic, as each of them had the privilege of a distinct territory and administration within the USSR.[2] These national entities were even able to enhance and strengthen their institutional standing over time. The union republics would eventually possess all the attributes of independent states.[3] The Bolshevik government would dismantle larger national entities only under extraordinary circumstances, as happened with the Volga German ASSR in 1941 or the Checheno-Ingush ASSR

in 1944. Their dissolution was part of a wave of collective repression directed against nationalities suspected of collaboration with the German enemy during the Second World War.

Up until the constitutional reform of 1936, the hierarchy of national entities within the Soviet framework appeared to be in flux. In the South Caucasus, opposition to the very existence of the ZSFSR never ended. The Georgian party and to a certain extent its Azerbaijani counterpart were never happy with the Transcaucasian Federation, which they saw as dominated by Armenians.[4] The reform provided them with a window of opportunity to dissolve the ZSFSR.

Then, on 6 December 1936, the new Stalinist constitution went into effect. In it the Soviet leadership not only promised equal rights for all of its citizens (including previously ostracized priests or kulaks), but it also enlarged the number of union republics. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia obtained this most privileged status with its extra funding and direct access to Moscow. The basic framework that would endure until 1991 had been established. Stalin, the *spiritus rector* behind the new constitution, also provided three conditions for achieving union republic status. First, he stressed that the titular nationality must have a compact majority within its territory. Second, the republic must have a population of more than one million people in order to create a proper state administration. Third, Stalin insisted that a union republic had to border on non-Soviet territory. This final point appeared peculiar, but Stalin explained:

> Of course, we do not have any republics that want to leave the USSR, but as any union republic has the right to leave the USSR, we must make sure that this right does not become a dead letter. Let us take, for example, the Bashkir or the Tatar republics. Can we allow these autonomous republics to gain union republic status? Could they logically and virtually claim to leave the USSR? No, they cannot. Why? Because they are surrounded on all sides by Soviet republics and oblasti. In fact, they have nowhere to go. . . . This is why such republics cannot join the ranks of the union republics.[5]

Stalin was extremely sensitive about formalities as they were a power tool in themselves. As we have seen, Lenin viewed the slogan for national self-determination as a necessary antidote to the emergence of "real" secessionist movements. In 1936 Stalin laid out his three criteria post factum. Between 1922 and 1936 the status of a union republic was

granted to polities such as Belarus or Azerbaijan that had had experience with formal independence during the Civil War—no matter how short—or existed on the periphery of the Soviet state, such as Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, or Kyrgyzstan. Mongolia, though de facto part of the Soviet empire, remained formally independent as a people's republic.

In the 1920s not only the hierarchies but also the very shapes of the national entities under Bolshevik rule were in flux. Even when the party formally prioritized national-ethnographic criteria over economic ones in 1922, the outcome was far from finalized. Between 1923 and 1930 the party leadership delegated national-territorial issues to numerous commissions and subcommittees. Regional party activists, political leaders, and experts had to convene and find workable solutions. The All-Union Politburo did not want to get involved in the details, but it did reserve for itself the right to approve or reject solutions. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia almost all of the territories experienced some kind of large-scale revision. Everywhere the Soviet government looked, it faced problems similar to those at the Paris Peace Conference when two sides claimed the same territory. For the Bolsheviks the task was even more challenging, as they could neither distinguish between winner and loser nations, nor could they accept plebiscites. Even if the Bolsheviks relied on mass support in a rhetorical sense, they refrained from any larger mobilization of the public in this sensitive matter. A mobilized public could easily slip beyond their control. Thus cadres who had to follow the party discipline were tasked with revising and implementing new borders.

Drawing on imperial Russian expertise, the Bolshevik government was able to develop a set of powerful tools for describing and prescribing Soviet space. Building on the GOELRO project for the electrification of the European territories, Gosplan's proposal for raionirovanie spread throughout the Soviet state and underwent regional adaptations. Initially, considerations of energy efficiency provided a rough framework, but soon other factors came into play: regional geography, chains of production, and exigencies of governance. As a concept, raionirovanie would have offered an alternative to national-ethnographic structuring. This failed due to resistance from the margins and its lack of any mobilizing effect.

Although raionirovanie was not realized as originally conceived, Gosplan did establish viable concepts for analyzing and discussing Soviet space. The formation of ethnonational territories combined with korenizatsiia provided a power tool that proved efficient in mobilizing

the population. Taken together, raionirovanie and korenizatsiia offered a set of seemingly scientific answers to overcome challenges of a "backward" population. As Cherviakov wrote in his report to the Politburo in 1924, the resulting outcomes could provide a showcase for the Soviet Union's affirmative nationality policies.[6] However, such showcasing alone was no decisive argument in the debate and was openly neglected when the party leadership considered other factors more important. For state and party leaders, the Piedmont Principle may have sounded nice on paper, but it had negligible impact on practical decisions.

During the 1920s Gosplan was particularly involved in collecting information on the Soviet space. At the same time, its experts were debating a comprehensive reform and drafting plans to promote economic growth. Gosplan, its expertise, and its five-year plans would prove very effective tools in Stalin's hands after 1929. Experts such as Konstantin Yegorov, who had been remarkably active in Gosplan's first years, were fired or reassigned in the early 1930s. Moreover, the regional solutions for raionirovanie, which had involved so many different voices, were scrapped in 1930. From Moscow's perspective, the different adaptations of raionirovanie led to administrative chaos.

The three regional case studies examined here reveal that Soviet leaders and experts discussed each case individually. In practice we can observe three ways in which the Bolsheviks dealt with national-territorial disputes. The first was quite simple and thus the one commissions resorted to most often: giving preference to one side and discriminating against the other. For the most part, this is what happened during the revision of the Russian-Ukrainian border. However, commissions also practiced two other ways of regulating national-territorial issues. The second way was much more intricate. A commission could take seemingly complex economic and cultural boundaries and declare them to be national borders, as was done in parts of the Fergana Valley. The third way was to not make any in-depth decision at all. This was the most unsatisfying solution, leaving a national-territorial issue in limbo. This was the approach taken in Milove/Chertkovo, in Ohybne/Borisovka, in the Sokh Valley, and with a large part of the border between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

The agency of the officials tasked with solving national-territorial issues differed from region to region. In the South Caucasus and Central Asia, they enjoyed considerable freedom in their search for feasible solutions, but not so in the case between the RSFSR and Ukraine. The mood within the Cherviakov Commission was tense, and the split

between the RSFSR and the Ukrainian delegation was quickly exposed. The commission's recommendations were then rejected by the Politburo. Most Ukrainian territorial claims were dismissed in favor of the RSFSR. The representatives of the regions of the RSFSR, in this case the North Caucasus Krai, had particular influence on the decision making in Moscow. Nonetheless, the party and state functionaries were able to find a common border.

In Central Asia the delimitation process served as a means to teach regional party cadres how to act within the party hierarchy. Even though the negotiations were turbulent and confusing for the European party activists, they also saw these sessions as an educational tool. The Europeans gave their indigenous comrades the opportunity to voice their views and explained how the decision-making process would operate and what it meant to adhere to the party line. Nationalism was certainly not "artificially" introduced into Central Asia. Some indigenous Bolsheviks had already adopted these ideas and saw national delimitation as an opportunity to increase their own powerbase. But among them also emerged a faction that fiercely opposed national delimitation in favor of a federal structuring combined with raionirovanie. Delimitation and the discussion of it by indigenous communists appear to have been crucial tools for institutionalizing Soviet power in Central Asia.

Whereas the Sredazbiuro and the Cherviakov Commission succeeded in paving the path for an encompassing territorial revision, the Territorial Commission at the ZakTsIK failed to do the same. It did not have the backing necessary to produce a coherent plan and lost itself in a plethora of patchwork solutions. Leading party members, such as Ordzhonikidze or later Mamiia Orakhelashvili, refused to get directly involved. Even though representatives of the republics participated in negotiations, the implementation of the agreements reached often came to naught due to opposition from one side that saw its interests at risk—for example, the 1927 Armenian-Azerbaijani agreement on Bashkend and Alagelliar.

The Zakkraikom did not prevent local actors from undermining a coherent revision. It hoped to remain above the fray in a region steeped in national antagonisms. The price of this restraint was the failure to establish a clearly defined territorial order. Nonetheless, the interaction between state and party functionaries and the population on an everyday basis—that is, the very process of searching for a border—provided opportunities to perform state authority in the margins, as happened,

for instance, in Shinikh Airum or in the case of Firid Memed Ali-Ogly's orchard.

Experts enjoyed considerable influence in the Russian-Ukrainian border revision but somewhat less in the South Caucasus. In Central Asia experts served as mere consultants, while indigenous communists, who were believed to know "their" region better, made the fundamental decisions. In the case of the RSFSR and Ukraine, as well as Central Asia, regional politicians and experts were able to reach and implement agreements, tense quarrels notwithstanding. Even though most of the politicians, activists, and experts involved were not happy with these results, they nonetheless accepted the compromises reached.

The party favored certain sides in deciding border issues such as the RSFSR vis-à-vis Ukraine in Eastern Europe and Uzbekistan in Central Asia. Moscow's preferences mostly emphasized economic reasons or exigencies of governance. However, one should not simply assume that "less favored republics" regularly fell victim to deliberate discrimination or that the Bolshevik leaders always sided with their "favorites." Despite its tendency to support the RSFSR or Uzbekistan, Moscow could promote the interests of others on minor issues, as it did with the UkrSSR in Miropol'e/Myropillia or Kyrgyzstan in Suliukta or Uch-Kurgan. In Eastern Europe and Central Asia poorly solved disputes, such as those over Milove/Chertkovo, were the exception, not the rule. Moreover, if both republics opposed a certain directive by the Politburo, as happened with Putivl' Uezd, the party leadership could be convinced to revise its decision.

The example of Putivl' Volost indicates that not every border area was contested. As this volost was an economically underdeveloped entity with high deficit spending, the RSFSR was not eager to "keep" it, and the Ukrainian side was not eager to "obtain" it. Republican representatives were looking not simply to enlarge "their" territory but to gain more valuable economic assets, as the North Caucasus Krai did with the areas around Tahanrih/Taganrog and Shakhty.

Problems often arose when the exact separating lines had to be defined. Field commissions were tasked with marking the borders on the ground. On a local scale the newly established boundaries were expected to conform to patterns of local land use. Exchanges of land between border villages would ideally result in a corresponding adjustment of the republican border in question. People otherwise considered indifferent to nationality began to use such concepts as a strategy for

defending daily interests.[7] In several cases such as Znob' or Shinikh Airum, local interest groups could successfully reverse projected borders from above.

Challenges with field surveying and local struggles over fields, pastures, and woods were ubiquitous in the early Soviet state. We can track them in the border region between Ukraine and the RSFSR, in Central Asia as well as in the South Caucasus. However, in no other region did such struggles overlap with cultural, religious, and economic dichotomies as they did between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Nonetheless, there, too, functionaries and experts helped to integrate (and separate) the population into state structures.

For the first thirteen years or so of Soviet rule, we have plenty of documents that allow detailed insights into territorialization processes such as the bronze bell episode in Putivl'. After the Cultural Revolution, decision making most often happened orally rather than on paper. Nonetheless, archival documents together with various sources such as memoirs and contemporary press reports allow us to reconstruct the decision making that led to the rare border revisions after 1929. Localizing the transfer of Crimea in 1954 in a larger context of territorial revisions reveals that the factors of Soviet territorial thinking remained the same. "Gifts" provided no category for decision making, whereas economic efficiency, national affiliation, and exigencies of governance did. These three categories were not well defined, and they could contradict each other. Between 1917 and 1991 they competed for supremacy. Party leaders and experts could shift emphasis, but together these categories defined what was seen as politically possible. As border revisions were closely tied to changes in the local power structure and privileges, resistance against such plans grew over time. This was one of the key reasons why only a few borders were revised after 1953 and why subsequent initiatives like the one in Nagorno-Karabakh kept running up against a brick wall in Moscow.

In the South Caucasus politicians and experts were far from solving national-territorial disputes. These would become liabilities after 1991. Today the de facto border between Armenia and Azerbaijan consists literally of minefields.[8] If both sides are ever to make peace, they will have to reach an agreement on a common border, but in doing so, they will be unable to rely on a coherent Soviet-era precursor. Hence there is de jure no clearly defined border between them. This absence, however, is not a trap that Stalin, Ordzhonikidze, or Beriia put in place to keep

the republics of the South Caucasus in check or to haunt later generations. Researchers such as Alexander Morrison and Madeleine Reeves have complained that such myths surrounding the Soviet borders are nonetheless "remarkably persistent."[9]

The Soviet Union is gone for good, but its federal skeleton is still present in the current international order. At first, post-Soviet governments were reluctant to touch its bones. Even though Armenia de facto controlled parts of Nagorno-Karabakh, it had refrained from annexing it and insisted on the fiction of a separate Artsakh state. Even though there were populist initiatives to alter the existing borders in the 1990s in Crimea, in northern Kazakhstan, in the Georgian Akhalkali Province, or in the Fergana Valley, they were explicitly not adopted by the incumbent governments. The statesmen opted to respect the status quo. In the case of Crimea, Gwendolyn Sasse concluded in 2007 that such revisionist claims were "confined to the political margins."[10]

Some of the original motivations that lay behind the creation of certain borders have, of course, ceased to exist. For example, the nonsedentary share of the population in the South Caucasus and Central Asia is now close to zero. As the creators of these borders paid attention to formalities as well as regional economic and social dependencies, the borders of the member republics functioned in the post-Soviet context rather well. In this respect, the countries that emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union at first had much in common with the countries of Africa. There the postcolonial political elites (apart from Morocco) recognized the states and borders as staked out by the European powers.

Then, in 2008, Russia widened the existing cracks when it recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. In Central Asia all five nation-states still formally adhere to the Soviet framework—skirmishes and small wars notwithstanding. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan do not call into question the numerous complex enclaves of the Fergana Valley. All post-Soviet governments, Russia included, thought that doing so would be far too risky.

Over the last decade the post-Soviet order has increasingly resembled Europe in the interwar period, when revisionist powers allowed the Versailles order to collapse. In 2014 Russia deliberately opened Pandora's Box when it annexed Crimea. Now, new aspiring imperial powers are trying to revise the existing order, creating an extremely dangerous and volatile situation in international politics. The structure itself is at

stake. All fifteen successor republics might formulate reasonable territorial claims, be it Kyrgyzstan in the Sokh Valley, Armenia in Nagorno-Karabakh, or Russia and Ukraine alongside the intricate border dividing Milove/Chertkovo. But is it worth risking long-term stability for such short-term gains?