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3 National Forms with Economic Content? Gosplan's Expertise on Territorializing the Soviet State, 1921–1930

1 Introduction

The most important principle of how to build up the territorial units [*oblasti*] is the development of the industry and the exploitation of resources [. . .]. The nationality question somehow impedes the whole thing and demands a revision of the borders. [Officially,] the national¹ principle should be fundamental, but after a certain time our work will demonstrate the necessity of an economic foundation.²

With these words, Mikhail Vladimirskiy opened the discussion at the first meeting of the Territorial Section within the State Planning Commission (Gosplan).³ Vladimirskiy was an expert in administrative issues. However, such a radical approach raised questions. Gleb Krzhizhanovskiy – head of Gosplan – attended this meeting and asked what to do with the already existing national-ethnographic entities within the Soviet state. Vladimirskiy answered bluntly: “From the economic point of view, a national entity as such is hardly rational. Perhaps, it will be possible to separate national and cultural entities from economic-based *rayony*.”⁴

1 The participants of the early Soviet discourse on nationality used the terms “ethnographic” (*etnograficheskii*), “national” (*natsional'nyi*), and “national-ethnographic” (*natsional'no-etnograficheskii*) often interchangeably. Also, the meaning of these terms seem more blurred than today. They could refer to language, culture, everyday life (*byt*), or the organization of the economy of a certain community.

2 Presentation of Mikhail Vladimirskiy at the Territorial Section of Gosplan, 26 May 1921, Russian State Archive for Economy (Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki, RGAE), fond (f.) 4372, opis' (op.) 15, delo (d.) 2, list (l.) 1.

3 The State General-Planning Commission was founded in 1921. Two years later, its name was simplified to State Planning Commission. Though the emergence of state planning institutions is crucial to understanding the early Soviet state, there are only a few (older) monographs on this subject: M. R. Beissinger, *Scientific Management, Socialist Discipline and Soviet Power*, London: Tauris, 1988; M. Ellman, *Socialist Planning*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014, 3rd edn; H. Haumann, *Beginn der Planwirtschaft: Elektrifizierung, Wirtschaftsplanung und gesellschaftliche Entwicklung Sowjetrusslands, 1917–1921*, Düsseldorf: Bertelsmann Universitätsverlag, 1974; A. Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR, 1917–1991*, London: Penguin Books, 1992.

4 Presentation of Mikhail Vladimirskiy at the Territorial Section of Gosplan, 26 May 1921, RGAE, f. 4372, op. 15, d. 2, l. 1.

To put it briefly, Vladimirskiy and Krzhizhanovskiy touched upon two conflicting political aims in the early Bolshevik policies. Shortly after the end of the Russian Civil War, the Soviet government had to manage the diverse territorial structure it inherited from the Russian Empire. The Bolshevik ideology was internationalist. Divisions following national-ethnographic lines were considered part of the bourgeois past – not as part of the future communist order. However, to this end, the Bolsheviks had to find a feasible way to organize and govern the Soviet space. Furthermore, in a longer revolutionary perspective this space should encompass the whole world. Two competing tendencies emerged within the state and party apparatus. On the one hand, Gosplan sought to order the Soviet space according to transnational economic characteristics. On the other hand, Lenin and other party leaders had proclaimed their commitment for national self-determination. Soviet activists in Ukraine as well as in the Caucasus and in Tatarstan were insisting on this promise.⁵

Historical research on the Soviet nationality policy has focused on the competition between the “centralists” around Joseph Stalin and the “federalists” around Lenin, with Stalin’s approach prevailing in the end.⁶ This focus on the party leadership is insightful; however, it conveys only a particular impression of a much broader debate on nationality, economy, and territoriality during the 1920s. Based on documents from different Russian archives,⁷ this chapter analyses the debate on territory within Gosplan and its impact on political practice in the early Soviet state. Though the experts from Gosplan did not succeed with their original ideas, their terminology highly influenced the Soviet debate on territorialization. In this chapter, I outline this debate until 1929, when Stalin called a halt to any more discussions. This analysis is of special relevance for understanding

5 J. Perović, *Der Nordkaukasus unter russischer Herrschaft: Geschichte einer Vielvölkerregion zwischen Rebellion und Anpassung*, Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 2015, pp. 344–345; S. Velychenko, *Painting Imperialism and Nationalism Red: The Ukrainian Marxist Critique of Russian Communist Rule in Ukraine, 1918–1925*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015, pp. 13–14.

6 S. Gerhard, *Nationalismus und Nationalitätenpolitik in der Sowjetunion: Von der totalitären Diktatur zur nachstalinistischen Gesellschaft*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 1986, pp. 34–40; J. Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–1923*, London: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999, pp. 175–212.

7 For this chapter, documents of the following institutions or commissions are of special interest: Administrative Commission at the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (Administrativnaya komissiya pri Prezidiuma vs Rossiyskogo tsentral'nogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta, VTsIK) (1921–1938) in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Rossiyskoy Federatsii, GA RF), f. 5677; Commission for Territorialization (Komissiya po rayonirovaniyu SSSR) at the All-Union Central Executive Committee (TsIK) (1924–1928): GA RF, f. 6892; the Commission, later Section for Territorialization, at Gosplan (1921–1930) (*Sektsiya po rayonirovaniyu*) (1921–1932): RGAE, f. 4372, op. 15; Konstantin Yegorov’s personal files: RGAE, fond 634; shorthand notes of meetings at the Institute of Soviet Construction (sovetskoe stroitel'stvo) (1926–1928): Archive of the Russian Academy of Science (Arkhiv Rossiyskoy Akademii Nauk, ARAN), fond 350, op. 2.

the contemporary structures of the former Soviet space as many territorial units created in the 1920s existed until 1991, when the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) broke apart. First, I define my methodological approach and my terminology to sketch the main lines of this debate and its impact. Second, I identify the challenges the Soviet state faced regarding the territorial issue at the beginning of the 1920s and what the experts of that time saw as possible answers. I also investigate the career trajectories of three experts of particular influence: Mikhail Vladimirov (1874–1951), Ivan Aleksandrov (1875–1936), and Konstantin Yegorov (1897–1982). Then, I examine the impact of this expert debate on the practical implementation on the ground as well as examples of subverting or adapting the new order by regional and local actors. Finally, I consider the cessation of all territorial debates after Stalin implemented his policy for industrialization at any price.

2 Terminology and Methods

I use the term *territory* as the basis for the following analysis. In line with current discussions concerning spatial history, I understand *territory* to be a product of social interaction like *space*. Whereas space itself is something diffuse and vague (like Eastern Europe),⁸ territory is something clearly defined by recognized borders for the involved actors (like a football pitch). *Territorialization* is the result of social processes that create territory within a certain space. Thus, structures of power and their asymmetries receive a geographic shape. As a result of such processes, *borders* define what or who is inside and what or who is outside a certain territory. This means that examining territorializations always implies considering structures of power.⁹ Within the federal Soviet state, borders had crucial social, political, and

8 F. B. Schenk, "Eastern Europe", in: D. Miškova and B. Trencsényi (eds.), *European Regions and Boundaries: A Conceptual History*, New York: Berghahn Books, 2017, pp. 188–209.

9 Ch. S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era", *The American Historical Review* 105 (2000) 3, p. 808; H. Lefebvre, *La production de l'espace*, Paris: Anthropos, 2000, pp. 35–57; K. Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik*, München: Carl Hanser Verlag, 2003, p. 393; D. Delaney, *Territory: A Short Introduction*, Malden: Blackwell, 2005, p. 16; N. Baron, "New Spatial Histories of 20th Century Russia and the Soviet Union. Exploring the Terrain", *Kritika* 9 (2008) 2, pp. 433–447; D. Newman, "Boundaries", in: J. Agnew, K. Mitchell, and G. Toal (eds.), *A Companion to Political Geography*, Malden: Blackwell, 2008, pp. 123–137; A. Paasi, "Territory", in: *ibid.*, pp. 109–122; M. Middell and K. Naumann, "Global History and the Spatial Turn: From the Impact of Area Studies to the Studies of Critical Junctures of Globalization", *Journal of Global History* 5 (2010), pp. 149–179; S. Marung and K. Naumann (eds.), *Vergessene Vielfalt. Territorialität und Internationalisierung in Ostmitteleuropa seit der Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck &

economic effects, including taxation, language, and education as well as career opportunities.¹⁰

After this short methodological outline, I define the actors – Gosplan’s experts – and clarify the terminology they used in their debate. For my analysis, I will use the term *experts* to describe people who were acknowledged by their peers and whom the Soviet government asked and paid for policy advice. With their *expertise*, they could influence and shape as well as channel the whole debate. Their terminology for territoriality was a contested subject and thereby still in flux. The two main terms were *razmezhevanie* (delimitation) and *rayonirovanie* (territorialization).¹¹ Whereas *razmezhevanie* was applied to the formation of national-ethnographic borders, *rayonirovanie* was applied to the formation of economic and administrative territories. The term *rayon* itself, from where *rayonirovanie* is derived, was highly ambiguous and confusing.¹² It could signify not only the largest economic entity within the GOELRO (State Commission for Electrification of Russia) project, but also the smallest administrative entity above the rural soviets within the projected, new regional administration.¹³ In this new framework, the territorial structure of the Russian Empire, which divided the space into a top-down structure from *guberniya* (province) to *uezd* (pre-reform county) to *volost’* (shire), would be replaced by new territorial entities: *oblast’* (territory), *okrug* (post-reform county), *rayon* (district), and *sel’sovet* (rural soviet).¹⁴

Ruprecht, 2014, pp. 14–16; B. von Hirschhausen et al. (eds.), *Phantomgrenzen. Räume und Akteure in der Zeit neu denken*, Göttingen: Wallstein, 2015, pp. 9–10; A. Laba, *Die Grenze im Blick. Der Ostgrendendiskurs der Weimarer Republik*, Marburg: Verlag des Herder-Instituts, 2019, pp. 19–27; T. Tohidipur, “Grenzen im Spiegel des Rechts”, in: D. Gerst, M. Klessmann, and H. Krämer (eds.), *Grenzforschung. Handbuch für Wissenschaft und Studium*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2021, pp. 297–315.

¹⁰ This chapter will not deal with the practical effects of the delimitation and the meaning of the borders in people’s everyday life. For further reading, see S. Rindlisbacher “The Territorial Challenge in the Early Soviet State”, in: S. von Löwis and B. Eschment (eds.), *Post-Soviet Borders: A Kaleidoscope of Shifting Lives and Lands*, New York: Routledge, 2023, pp. 51–66.

¹¹ *Zonation* or *regionalization* is the literal translation of the Russian term *rayonirovanie*; however, *territorialization* can better express what was at stake during the debates on territory.

¹² Shorthand note of the first session of the Commission for Territorialization (Komissiya po rayonirovaniyu SSSR) at the All-Union Central Executive Committee (TsIK), 14 November 1925: GA RF, f. 6892, op. 1, d. 40, ll. 10–11.

¹³ Presentation of Mikhail Vladimirskiy at the Institute of Soviet Construction, 13 February 1928: ARAN, f. 350, op. 2, d. 250, ll. 14–15.

¹⁴ For more details, see S. Rindlisbacher, “The Reorganisation of Local Administration in Soviet Ukraine. The Example of Karl-Liebknecht Raion, 1924–1929”, in: F. Grelka and S. Rindlisbacher (eds.), “*Our Work with the Masses Is Not Worth a Kopeck . . .*” A Document Collection on German and Polish Rural Soviets in Ukraine during the NEP, 1923–1929, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2021, pp. 47–64.

3 New Territorial Conceptions

The first moves of the Bolshevik regime created territorial turmoil. On 31 January 1918 (new style), the Soviet of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) decreed that the provincial soviets were allowed to change the administrative borders on their own as long as they informed the central authorities about these changes.¹⁵ This led to unprecedented administrative chaos. As the Red Army was gaining the upper hand on every front, the territorial issue became urgent. From the perspective of governability, this situation could not continue.¹⁶ In the meantime, the economy of the Soviet state was ailing. The regulation of the economy during War Communism had proved to be extremely inefficient. Nevertheless, the party still tried to establish a new kind of planned economy.¹⁷ In Lenin's eyes, the German war economy during the First World War was the guiding model for the future Soviet state.¹⁸ However, in 1921 even the most dogmatic supporter of War Communism had to realize that the collection of statistical data and a rational territorial structure appeared as pre-conditions to govern such a planned economy. Against this background, the Soviet government curtailed more and more elements of local autonomy. This is why locals could no longer decide after 1920 on their territorial structures; every change had to be approved by the centre in Moscow.¹⁹

The Bolsheviks were in desperate need of data to govern the space they conquered. Thus, the revolutionary state tried to reactivate existing and later produce new geographic, economic, demographic, and ethnographic expertise. As Francine Hirsch shows in her book on *Empire of Nations*, the Bolsheviks could rely on experts who had made careers in the Tsarist Empire.²⁰ On the one hand, the Academy of Sciences was transformed from an imperial institution into a Soviet one. On the other hand, the government founded new institutions to create a practical (*tselesoobraznyi*) order, like the Supreme Soviet of National Economy (VSNKh), which was trying to organize the economy during the Civil War and in turn ultimately failed. This is also why many committees and commissions after 1921 were considered

15 Decree of the Sovnarkom, 18 January 1918: GA RF, f. 5677, op. 4, d. 1, l. 2.

16 GA RF, f. 5677, op. 4, d. 1, ll. 36, 41, 50, 61, 123, 132.

17 N. Bucharin and Ye. Preobrazhenskiy, *Azbuka kommunizma* [The ABC of Communism], Petrograd 1920.

18 V. Lenin [Ulyanov], "O 'levom' rebyachestve i o melkoburzhnaznosti" ["Left-Wing" Childishness and the Petit Bourgeois Mentality], in: *Polnoe sobranie sochineniy*, vol. 36, 5th edn, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1969, p. 301.

19 Circular from the AC, 12 January 1921: GA RF, f. 5677, op. 4, d. 1, ll. 52–60.

20 F. Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005, pp. 21–24.

ineffective and were dissolved or downgraded, with employees being fired.²¹ However, at the same time, the regime used the most convenient method to solve the challenges being faced: it simply created new bureaucratic structures, where people who seemed better qualified were hired. For instance, from 1920 onwards, an Administrative Commission (AC) of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) collected data about the Soviet space. The commission's main assignment was developing a plan for the future territorial structure.

Due to the general lack of qualified experts, the young and victorious Soviet state offered opportunities, particularly for people with a revolutionary record. Mikhail Vladimirskiy had such a comet-like career. He had been working in clandestine, radical networks since the 1890s, where he became an active Bolshevik and was several times arrested by the tsarist police. Due to this personal history, he received top positions in the Soviet state. In 1919, he wrote a book on the Soviet local administration.²² Between 1919 and 1922, he was deputy commissar for internal affairs of the RSFSR and the chairman of the AC, and in this function, he met Ivan Aleksandrov. The latter was already an experienced engineer as the revolution shook Russia in 1917. His technical skills, deep knowledge of the different parts of the Russian Empire, and longing to modernize the country made him an ideal expert to be hired by the Soviet administration.²³ From 1920 onwards, he was engaged with the plan to provide the European part of Russia with electricity: the project of the State Commission for Electrification of Russia (GOELRO).²⁴ In order to implement such a large-scale project, Aleksandrov proposed reorganizing the European territory of the former Russian Empire according to rational economic criteria. In particular, the need for electrification would define the structure of the new large-scale *rayony*.²⁵

21 M. Hildermeier, *Geschichte der Sowjetunion 1917–1991. Entstehung und Niedergang des ersten sozialistischen Staates*, Munich: C. H. Beck, 1998, p. 236; Nove, *Economic History*, pp. 82–83; 93–95.

22 M. Vladimirskiy: *Organizatsiya Sovetskoy vlasti na mestakh* [Creation of Soviet Order on the Ground], Moscow: Gosizdat, 1919.

23 Biography of Ivan Aleksandrov in S. Vavilov, *Lyudi russkoy nauki, Ocherki o vydayushchikhsya deyatelyakh estestvoznaniya i tekhniki* [People of the Russian Science. Sketches of distinguished representatives in natural sciences and technology], Moscow/Leningrad 1948, <http://84.237.19.2:8081/hoe/personalia/alexandrov.pdf> (accessed 30 January 2018).

24 G. Krzhizhanovskiy, *Ob elektrifikatsii* [On Electrification], Moscow: Gosizdat, 1921; Gosudarstvennaya Komissiya po elektrifikatsii Rossii (ed.), *Plan elektrifikatsii RSFSR: Vvedenie k dokladu 8-mu S"ezdu sovetov* [Plan to Electrify the RSFSR. Introduction to the Report for the 8th Soviet Congress], Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe tekhnicheskoe izdatelstvo, 1920.

25 I. Aleksandrov, *Ekonomicheskoe rayonirovanie Rossii* [Economic Rayonirovanie of Russia], Moscow: Gosplan, 1921, p. 11–15.

In the AC, Aleksandrov and Vladimirskiy also met the young, dedicated expert Konstantin Yegorov. After three years of studying, Yegorov left the university in 1918 because the Bolshevik government provided him with new opportunities. He began working with the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) from 1919 onwards, where he dealt with the organization of Soviet power in its local framework. Soon after, the NKVD appointed him as secretary of the newly established AC. There, he was responsible for the formation of autonomous republics and *oblasti* within the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) and the reformation of *gubernii* and *uezdy*.²⁶

Revolutionary enthusiasm was one of the driving forces for young activists like Yegorov. On 24 January 1921, the AC undertook the task to develop within two months a new territorial administrative order for the RSFSR.²⁷ It is no wonder that the commission failed, but its failure was, at the same time, the starting point for a more comprehensive approach to solve the territorial question. Yegorov could make a mark as a dedicated expert in territorial issues. Because Aleksandrov and Vladimirskiy had been granted senior staff positions within Gosplan, they appointed Yegorov to this newly founded institution. He later became one of the most visible junior members within the Territorial Section.

The party leadership had to learn that there was no quick solution for the territorial issues on the ground or for planning and governing the economy at large. In February 1921, the Bolshevik government introduced a New Economic Policy, later known as NEP, as well as created Gosplan. During the NEP, the Bolsheviks formally abandoned the socialist policies applied during War Communism and reintroduced a restricted legal framework for free trade and private entrepreneurship. The party kept only the “commanding heights”, like large-scale industry and foreign trade.²⁸ The party leaders had come to realize that it was impossible to organize the economy without any basic infrastructure and without any basic statistical data. This is why Lenin's government put a lot of effort into the GOELRO project. As already mentioned, it was Gosplan's first big undertaking to implement this project, with the goal of providing every village in the European part with electricity. Following Aleksandrov's ideas, Gosplan developed a scheme where the Soviet space was divided into territories that allowed local resources to be exploited for the production of electricity. Aleksandrov expected

²⁶ Konstantin Yegorov's Short professional autobiography, 15 November 1954: RGAE, f. 634, op. 1, d. 41, l. 1.

²⁷ Circular from the AC, 24 January 1921: GA RF, f. 5677, op. 4, d. 1, l. 61.

²⁸ Nove, *Economic History*, pp. 78–81.

that this structure, based on territory that was demarcated according to energy needs, would act as the foundation for all future territorial and economic order.²⁹ In Aleksandrov's plan, every large-scale *rayon* had a centre that should provide the best possible development of the productive forces of a certain region.³⁰ The VTsIK and the Sovnarkom, the highest state institutions in the RSFSR, directly encouraged the intense debates in Gosplan's Territorial Section. In the Territorial Section, experts from different fields – geographers, engineers, statisticians, and economists – had to collect, evaluate, and discuss all available data. However, despite the official attention by the government and party, they still had to compete with experts from the VSNKh and the Central Statistical Administration (TsSU).

Based on the electrification plan, Gosplan proposed a non-national-ethnographic solution to the territorial turmoil the Soviet government was facing (see Figures 1 and 2). It promoted the idea to replace territories based on diversity with rationally designed large-scale *rayony*. A closer look at the maps shows that all the words about rationality and economy appeared in some cases as marketing trick. For instance, the Central Black Earth territory proposed by Gosplan simply merged the Kursk, Voronezh, Orel, and Tambov *gubernii* from imperial times (number 11 within Figure 2). Only in some cases did Gosplan's plan clearly cut old imperial structures into two or more parts, like with the Odessa or Saratov *gubernii*.³¹ However, neither the proponents nor the adversaries of the *rayonirovanie* insisted on this fact – they all silenced these borrowings from imperial schemes.

Gosplan's economic approach to territoriality was highly contested, resulting in structures that did not coincide with the rational planning. Accordingly, the Bolshevik government also created ad hoc national-ethnographic republics within the RSFSR, for example the Tatar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Furthermore, the fate of the formally independent Soviet republics like Ukraine, Armenia, and Georgia had not yet been clearly solved. Hence, the map of the Soviet state at the beginning of the 1920s was confusing at best. According to Gosplan, Ukraine had to be divided into two parts, whereas all republics of the South Caucasus were merged with the North Caucasus. Such plans met regional resistance. Representatives from Ukraine

29 I. Aleksandrov, *Elektrifikatsiya i transport* [Electrification and transport], Rostov-na-Donu 1921, p. 4.

30 Presentation of Konstantin Yegorov at the Institute of Soviet Construction, 15 May 1926: ARAN, f. 350, op. 2, d. 74, l. 14; ARAN, f. 350, op. 2, d. 250, l. 15.

31 Map of the territorial units proposed by Gosplan, 6 January 1925: GA RF, f. 6829, op. 1, d. 49, ll. 5–6.

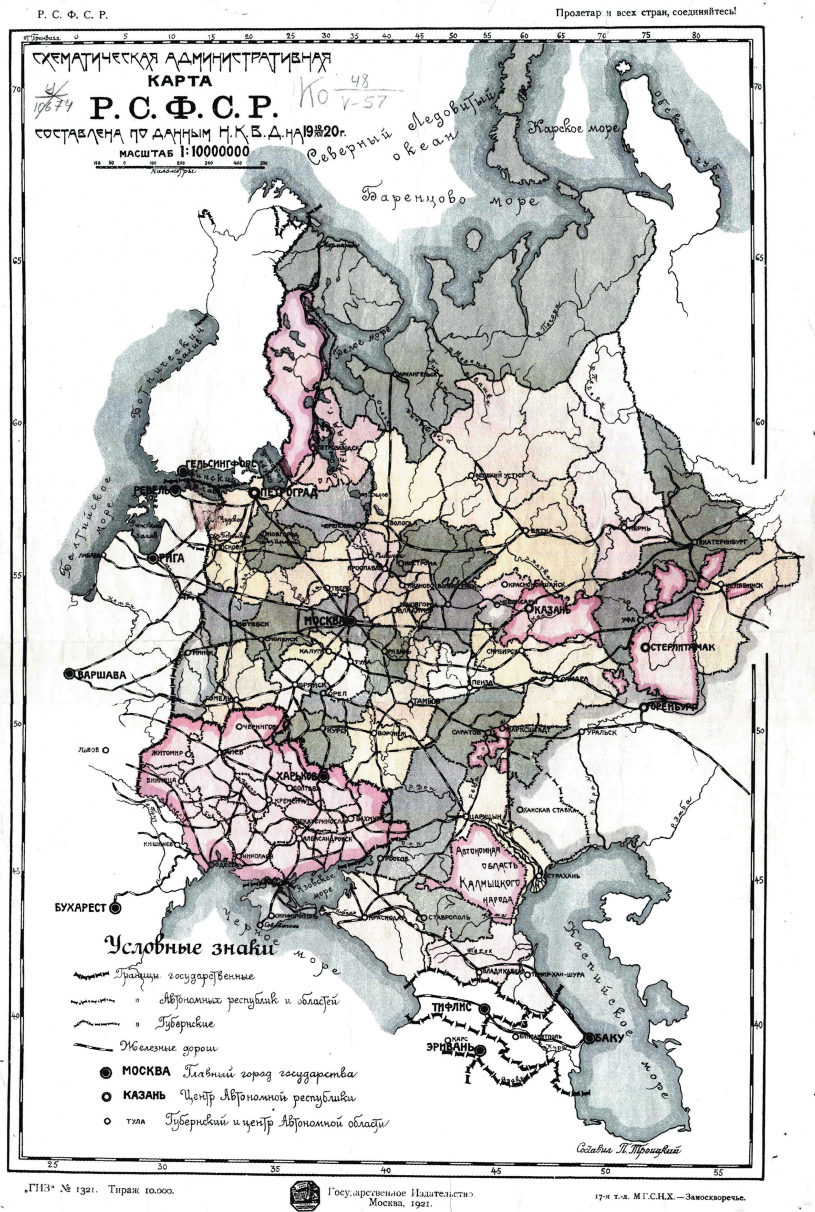


Figure 1: Administrative Map of the RSFSR According to the NKVD, 10 December 1920.



Figure 2: Map of the 13 *rayony* for the GOELRO Project (redrawn from a Gosplan map, November 1921: RGAE, f. 634, op. 1, d. 7, l. 48).

Legend of the economic territories:

1. North-west territory; 2. North-east territory; 3. West territory; 4. Central territory; 5. Vetluzhsk-Viatsk territory; 6. Ural territory; 7. Central Volga territory; 8. South-west territory; 9. South mining territory; 10. East territory; 11. Central Black Earth territory; 12. Ural-Embinsk territory; 13. Caucasus territory

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and Georgia successfully protested in Moscow against plans to dissolve national-ethnographically based territorial entities.³²

Despite such setbacks, Gosplan's Territorial Section collected more and more statistical material and supervised the territorial rearrangement during the following years, first within the RSFSR and then for the whole Soviet state. The Ural became an experimental ground for the new, scientific way of territorial order. The experts planned to create the Ural *oblast'* according to economic reasons exclusively. In this case, it was the metallurgical industry. The *rayonirovanie* started here at the beginning of 1923 and came to an end in March 1924. This newly formed *oblast'* encompassed about 1,450,000 square *versta* (1,300,000 square kilometres) and had little more than 6 million inhabitants. In reducing the number of administrative units – mostly two old *volosti* becoming one new small-scale *rayon* – the state could, in principle, save huge sums for salaries. The whole heavy industry came under the roof of one big trust that should supervise production in a rational way. Needless to say, the Ural *oblast'* was not realized according to Gosplan's ideas. The Bashkir Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, a national-ethnographic entity within the RSFSR, did not intend to join the Ural *oblast'* as expected. In the end, the planners had to find a compromise and respect existing autonomous ethno-national entities.³³

In general, Gosplan's experts intended to draw the new territorial entities according to the population size and in relation to an economic and administrative centre. The overwhelming goal was to create a more efficient administration and to manage and mobilize all regional potential. Gosplan initially took a top-down approach to all planning; as a result, the regional elites could not take part in the process of decision-making. Though Gosplan's experts tried to distance themselves from the territorial planning under the old regime, their attitude towards the people on the ground remained in principle the same. Before 1917, the division within *gubernii*, *uezdy*, and *volosti* followed strategic and fiscal reasons: a certain number of people should live in these territories, with the military residing in the central town and being able to reach them all in a certain time. Under Soviet rule, these aspects remained valid (as shown above), but they were silenced within the whole debate. The only difference, which was clearly highlighted by all experts, was that the economic issues played a minor role before 1917. In the new framework, the

32 P. Alampiev, *Ekonomicheskoe rayonirovanie SSSR* [Economic Rayonirovanie of the USSR], vol. 1, Moscow: Gosplanizdat, 1959, pp. 108–130.

33 K. Yegorov, *Rayonirovanie SSSR: Sbornik materialov po rayonirovaniyu s 1917 po 1925 god* [Rayonirovanie of the USSR. A Collection of Studies on Rayonirovanie from 1917 to 1925], Moscow/Leningrad: Planovoe khozyaystvo, pp. 116–119; History of *rayonirovanie* by K. Yegorov (fragment), written in 1959: RGAE, f. 634, op. 1, d. 5, l. 425.

administration and the rational economic planning within a certain territory were meant to mobilize all the productive resources.³⁴

4 Regional Adaptations of Gosplan's Territorial Conceptions

The Bolsheviks created the Soviet Union on 30 December 1922 as a federal state, but the number of constituent entities and their hierarchy remained unsettled. Initially, there were only four union subjects: the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic, the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, the RSFSR, and the Transcaucasian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic. With the decision to establish a federal union, the party leadership granted concessions to the peripheries, thereby allowing regional actors to reformulate the debated territorial ideas according to their own concerns.

Ukrainian experts opposed the idea to divide “their” republic. Invited to give a speech in front of the Territorial Section in Moscow, the president of the Ukrainian territorial commission, Ivan Cherliunkachevich, decisively renounced the idea to divide Ukraine into two parts. According to him, this would eventually split the Russian-speaking proletariat in the eastern part from the Ukrainian-speaking peasants in the western part. In his plan, the Ukrainian economy should be organized by a single centre while introducing an rationalized territorial order.³⁵ From 1923 to 1925, the old imperial administrative structures in Ukraine were completely dissolved and replaced by what the Ukrainian planners considered to be rational and feasible in the Ukrainian space. Although Ukraine was remodelled, it did not disappear as an “ethno-national” republic with its defined borders.³⁶

Georgia as well opposed the propositions from Moscow. Regional experts such as a man named Gegechkori – though thankful for the brotherly advice from his comrades in Moscow – outlined home-grown schemes for territorialization:

³⁴ Presentation of I. Murugov on “Theory and Practise of Rayonirovanie”, 28 March 1927: ARAN, f. 350, op. 2, d. 191, l. 2–6.

³⁵ Ivan Cherliunkachevich's report at the Territorial Section with Gosplan in Moscow, 25 December 1923: GA RF, f. 6892, op. 1, d. 7, l. 2.

³⁶ Ya. Vermenych and O. Androshchuk, *Zminy administratyvno-terytorial'noho ustroyu Ukraïny XX–XXI. st.* [Changes in the Administrative-Territorial Order of Ukraine in the 20th and 21st Century], Kiev: NAN Ukraïny, 2014.

The Russian example could not convince us in every detail. This is why we have not simply copied it. We reduced its rough frame, its scale a little. We only took the principle and the baselines of the construction in the other parts of the [Soviet] Union.³⁷

During this debate about how to reorganize the Soviet space, the local actors saw the chance to revise the borders of their territory according to their own interests. Hereby, Gosplan's local experts adapted economic arguments from the centre in Moscow and merged them with regional interests. The goal of these local elites was to enhance their own territory's productive forces, even at the expense of the neighbouring Soviet territory.³⁸

Vasily Khronin, from Gosplan's branch in the North Caucasus, is a good example for such a "regionalist" expert within the RSFSR. In his function at regional Gosplan, he claimed parts of east Ukraine, specifically the port of Taganrog. His main argument was that the majority of Taganrog is Russian and is the only deepwater port for the whole North Caucasus region. Supporting this argument, the party and state institutions of the North Caucasus started a propaganda campaign. In a caricature published in the local newspaper *Sovetskiy yug* (Soviet South), this claim was personified: the weak old man Taganrog would profit from unification with the economically potent North Caucasus region (see Figure 3).

Ukrainian representatives protested in vain against claims and threatening propaganda from the North Caucasus region. They drew attention to the Ukrainian-speaking population in the surroundings of the town and the role the port of Taganrog played in the industry in Donbas.³⁹ However, the party leadership in Moscow decided to attach Taganrog to the North Caucasus, to the RSFSR.⁴⁰ Thus, such claims – those of the North Caucasus – could be achieved by attaching them to Gosplan's ideas for reorganization.

37 A. Gegechkori's Expertise on *rayonirovanie* in Georgia, 8 October 1924: GA RF, f. 5677, op. 5, d. 487, l. 30. In the following years, the Georgian experts proposed a twofold administrative framework of *okruga* and *temi* instead of Gosplan's fourfold framework (*oblast'*, *okrug*, *rayon*, *sel'sovet*): V. Ordzhonikidze, *Temi SSR Gruzii. Ikh ekonomicheskie i finansovye vozmozhnosti* [The Temi of the Georgian SSR. Their economic and financial Potentials], Tiflis 1926, pp. VIII–IX.

38 Nikolai Eyzmont, first Secretary of the South East Region, to the NKVD RSFSR, 14 April 1923: GA RF, f. 5677, op. 4, d. 393, l. 1.

39 Presidium of UkrGosplan, Protocol, 22 May 1923: GA RF, f. 5677, op. 4, d. 393, l. 18.

40 Politburo of the All-Russian Communist Party, protocol, 12 July 1924: Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (Rossiyskiy Gosudarstvennyy Arkhiv Sotsial'no-Politicheskoy Istorii, hereafter RGASPI), f. 17, op. 3, d. 448, l. 5.



Figure 3: Pro-Russian caricature (*Sovetskiy yug*, 27 July 1924, p. 3).

Explanation of texts attached to the caricature:

Rejuvenation

About the question of how to unify Taganrog with the South-East [Region of the RSFSR].

On the bottle: Extract: Trade and industry of the South-East

On the old man's shirt: Taganrog

Comrade Khronin [chairman of the regional Gosplan]: Look, we will make you young again. With us, you will be the strongest youngster.

This was, in turn, also the starting point for Ukrainian politicians and economists to claim “compensations” in the north. In the border region between Russia and Ukraine, the national-ethnographic belonging was blurred and fragmented.⁴¹ Statistics were also not conclusive. However, Ivan Cherliunkachevich wrote a memorandum for the Ukrainian government, where he claimed considerable parts of the border region from Russia: around 40,000 square kilometres – that is to say, about the size of the Netherlands – with about 2.5 million inhabitants. This

⁴¹ V. Kravchenko, *The Ukrainian-Russian Borderland: History versus Geography*, Montreal: McGill, 2022.



Figure 4: The Formation of the Russo-Ukrainian Border between 1919 and 1928.

claim was also related to the sugar industry of this border region. Accordingly, sugar production should be united in a single republic – in Ukraine (see the green dotted lines in Figure 4).⁴²

The representatives of the RSFSR completely refused such claims because they saw their own production chains in danger, for instance the cooking oil industry. Nevertheless, they invited Konstantin Yegorov to the decision-making sessions. Yegorov underlined his expertise, but he also took a clearly anti-Ukrainian stance as he concluded: “If I should answer the question: is it – from the political point of view – rational [*tselesoobrazno*] to attach the Kursk and Voronezh *gubernii* to Ukraine? [In this case, I say] no.”⁴³ Having such an expert background, the representatives of the RSFSR succeeded. In the end, the party leadership followed the standpoint of the RSFSR, as they feared that Ukraine could become economically too powerful. In the end, Ukraine got only minor “compensations” for the

⁴² Ivan Cherliunkachevich’s memorandum to the Ukrainian Sovnarkom, 24 August 1924: GA RF, f. 6892, op. 1, d. 13, ll. 3–21.

⁴³ Shorthand note of the sixth session of the Russo-Ukrainian border commission, 28 November 1924: GA RF, f. 6892, op. 1, d. 20, l. 21.

“losses” in the east. Territories of 6,000 square kilometres with about 300,000 people – predominantly Ukrainian speaking – were transferred in 1926 from Russia to Ukraine (see the yellow territories in Figure 4). These territories were economically also closely related to Ukraine by means of transport or trade.⁴⁴

After these border changes between the RSFSR and Ukraine had become public, several representatives of local administrations and from villages tried to get involved in the actual implementation. These local activists, that is to say, men on the ground, stepped in to regulate the territorialization processes according to their own interests and sent petitions and pleas to the commission. Their efforts provide insight into how the borders were established on a micro level.

The village Znob’ belonged to these 6,000 square kilometres to be transferred from Russia to Ukraine (see Figure 4). In the eyes of the authorities, the intertwined borders in this region would be rectified. Furthermore, the streets between Znob’ and the neighbouring Ukraine were better developed. However, the village protested against this plan. In March 1926, the head of the rural soviet, Danechkin, sent a letter to the VTsIK, complaining about the reorganization of the border. He explained the reasons why the village should stay within the RSFSR. First, he claimed that the people had no ties to Ukraine. They are all “100 per cent Great Russians” (*velikorusy*). Next, he underlined that the forestry industry, not agriculture, provided the primary livelihood for the peasants. Given that the forests were to remain under the RSFSR, the peasants feared losing the right of tenancy.⁴⁵

Adapting economic arguments, Znob’ succeeded. The village remained within the RSFSR, creating an overlapping of borders until today. There are about 20 more examples of villages in similar situations that changed the territorial order on their own initiative. However, they had to argue in line with the dominant discourse.⁴⁶

5 The End of the Debate

The responses from the regional elites and the locals brought about a change of ideas among the territorial experts. Between 1926 and 1929, Yegorov, Vladimirskiy, and others regularly organized discussions at the Institute of Soviet Construction,

44 S. Rindlisbacher, “Contested Lines. The Russo-Ukrainian Border, 1917–1929”, in: O. Palko and C. Ardeleanu (eds.), *Making Ukraine: Negotiating, Contesting and Drawing the Borders in the Twentieth Century*, Montreal: McGill, 2022, pp. 189–209.

45 Danechkin to the VTsIK, 15 March 1926: GA RF, f. 3316, op. 17, d. 720, l. 12.

46 For more details, see S. Rindlisbacher, “From Space to Territory. Negotiating the Russo-Ukrainian Border, 1919–1928”, *Revolutionary Russia* 31 (2018) 1, pp. 86–106.

where they were reformulating ideas of how to handle the diversity of the Soviet state. Yegorov had to admit that Gosplan's experts had been too eager with their ideas of territorial homogeneity. He now concluded that the economic and national-ethnographic aspects had to be considered as equals. His colleagues agreed.⁴⁷ Thus, a certain compromise had to be found between both aspects. The challenge the experts now faced was to find an efficient scientific way to remedy the differences.

In 1928, Vladimirskiy, who had been so supportive for an administrative division based on electricity production, now openly questioned ideas he had so eagerly promoted.⁴⁸ Hence, Vladimirskiy's statements reflected a crucial political shift at the end of the 1920s. Now, the territorial structure was neither perceived as an economic nor a national-ethnographic whole, but rather as an intermediate between the centre in Moscow and the locals. The state and its institutions were to be means, in the hands of the party, to implement the industrialization according to the five-year plan.⁴⁹

With Stalin's rise, Gosplan reached the apogee of its institutional power. Stalin wanted to catch up with the advanced capitalist states in the West within only ten years.⁵⁰ With the idea of a five-year plan, Gosplan offered the new leader what he desperately needed: a blueprint for fast economic growth.⁵¹ Thus, with Stalin's blessing, Gosplan became an almighty planning body in the early 1930s. Its competitors were either dissolved, like the Supreme Soviet of National Economy, or attached Gosplan, like the Central Statistical Administration. Further, Gosplan played an important role in undermining the NEP and the decision for a forced collectivization of the agricultural sector.⁵²

With this fixation on fast industrialization, the debates on territorial issues appeared as an obstacle. At the beginning of the 1930s, the debate over borders and border regulation was ceased, and expert committees were dissolved. Territorial experiments and the deliberation over rational organization of territory itself ended abruptly. For Stalin and his supporters, all territorial structure was

47 ARAN, f. 350, op. 2, d. 74, l. 7.

48 ARAN, f. 350, op. 2, d. 250, l. 18.

49 ARAN, f. 350, op. 2, d. 250, l. 20/21; On Gosplan's role in the first five-year plan, see Nove, *Economic History*, pp. 142–143.

50 I. Stalin [Dzhugashvili], "O zadachakh khozyaystvennikov" [On the Problems of the Economists], in: *Sochineniya*, vol. 13, Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1954, p. 39.

51 *Problemy rekonstruktsii narodnogo khozyaystva SSSR na pyatiletie. Pyatiletniy perspektivnyy plan na 5 s-ezde gosplanov* [The Problems of the Reform of the National Economy of the USSR within Five Years. The Five-Year Plan at the 5th Congress of Gosplan], Moskau: Planovoe khozyaystvo, 1929.

52 Ellman, *Socialist Planning*, pp. 9–10.

meant to transmit orders from the centre. This was the primary idea guiding the territorial remodelling in the early 1930s: within the RSFSR, the *okruga* were abolished; a few *oblasti* now governed a multitude of *rayony*.⁵³ Although the national-ethnographic entities and republics as such were able to exist, they were now under Moscow's strict supervision. Defending "national interests" could now lead to immediate repression, as the Ukrainian political elite had experienced during the Kuban' and Skrypnik affairs.⁵⁴

In the Stalinist Gosplan, there was no more space for experts like Yegorov, Vladimirskiy, and Aleksandrov. They lost their jobs and their influence within decision-making processes. However, they did not fall victim to the waves of Stalinist repression in the 1930s. Yegorov received a leading position in the rubber industry in Moscow.⁵⁵ Vladimirskiy became the deputy people's commissar for healthcare in 1930, and after 1934, he worked in the Moscow committee of the Communist Party. Aleksandrov was sent to the Volga region to supervise and implement irrigation projects and the construction of hydroelectric power plants.

However, anyone trying to initiate a new debate over territorial issues had to fear repression. The party and state institutions kept adapting administrative units due to changing economic or political needs, but the basic structure of *rayony* and *oblasti* and, naturally, the national-ethnographic entities (autonomous *oblasti*, republics, and union republics) endured until 1991.

6 Conclusion

At the beginning of the 1920s, the Bolshevik government realized that it would not be able to govern the new Soviet state as well as the economy, people, and space without a well-developed plan based on accurate statistical data and a well-elaborated territorial structure. Moreover, the revolutionary regime faced a dilemma: should it order the Soviet space according to economic or national-

53 O. Shul'gina, *Administrativno-territorial'noe delenie Rossii v XX veke. Istoriko geograficheskiy aspekt* [The Administrative-Territorial Division of Russia in the 20th Century. A Historical-Geographical View], Diss., Moscow 2005, pp. 226–234; P. Zaytsev, "Pochemu uprazdniaetsya okruzhnoe zveno v sisteme sovetskogo apparata" [Why Are the Okrug Abolished in the System of the Soviet Apparatus], in: *Ot okruga k rayonu. Sbornik statey i offitsial'nykh materialov* [From the Okrug to the Rayon. A Collection of Official Documents], Moscow: Vlast' Sovetov, 1930, pp. 35–36.

54 T. Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, pp. 291–302 and 345–356.

55 RGAE, f. 634, op. 1, d. 41, l. 2.

ethnographic principles? The problem in resolving this dilemma was that these principles were often mutually exclusive.

Simultaneously with the introduction of the NEP, Gosplan was founded. There, in the Territorial Section, well-paid experts collected and discussed data with the goal of managing the diversity of the Soviet space. Thus, Gosplan's experts propagated a new territorial scheme for the implementation of the GOELRO project. Their original model divided the Soviet space into homogenous large-scale *rayony* that should be energetically self-sufficient. Even if they did not make it explicit, Gosplan's experts used the imperial *guberniya* borders as the main blueprints to design their large-scale *rayony*.

In a mid-term perspective, regional experts from Ukraine or Georgia overruled these transnational economic concepts or they adapted them for local interests like Vasiliy Khronin did for the North Caucasus. Nevertheless, the forms developed by Gosplan highly influenced the general direction of the debate. At the same time, experts like Konstantin Yegorov and Mikhail Vladimirskiy, refined their own plans. As many participants from the national-ethnographic entities adopted the economic terminology provided by Gosplan, the experts in Moscow also began to include national-ethnographic arguments. Referring to Stalin's famous statement that the Soviet state should be national in form but socialist in content,⁵⁶ one can argue that the territorialization debate became, in the end, national in form but economic in content, as the examples of Taganrog or Znob' demonstrate.

In a longer perspective, the idea of a strong central institution – Gosplan – that should govern the economy gained popularity. The national-ethnographic territories and union republics established in the 1920s and 1930s were only dissolved or downgraded in exceptional cases, for example with the Volga German Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic or the Karelo-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic. Notwithstanding such changes, the borders drawn in the 1920s endured until 1991, with the nationality question becoming one of the main factors that led to the dissolution of the USSR.⁵⁷ From this point of view, the debate during the 1920s fundamentally shaped what would become international borders between the post-Soviet states after 1991.

56 I. Stalin [Dzhugashvili], "O politicheskikh zadachakh universiteta narodov vostoka. Rech' na sobranii studentov KUTV, 18 maya 1925 g." [On the Political Challenges of the University of the Peoples of the East. Speech during the Student Assembly of the KUTV, 18 May 1925], in: *Sochine-niya*, Vol. 7, Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoy literatury, 1952, p. 137.

57 See, for instance, G. Derluguian, *Bourdieu's Secret Admirer in the Caucasus: A World-System Biography*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 166–218.

